

the pioneer

www.dailypioneer.com

Published From: VIJAYAWADA HYDERABAD DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL RAIPUR CHANDIGARH BHUBANESWAR RANCHI DEHRADUN



Need to expand trade between India, Armenia:
Murmu

GOVT LAUNCHES
RS 1,000-CR CREDIT GUARANTEE SCHEME

Upendra's 'lifelong dream' gets fulfilled with Rajnikanth's
COOLIE

QUOTE OF THE DAY
The pioneer
There was a feeling of insecurity when the new government took charge in Andhra Pradesh. However, that ended after the floods in Amaravati. Investors are now afraid of investing in Amaravati and everyone is now coming to Telangana. Hyderabad real estate prices have not fallen. In fact, it has increased in the last three months
- Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy, Minister, Telangana

DON'T MISS...

Expedite solar scheme loans: DC

The NTR District Collector, Dr G Lakshminisha, has emphasised the crucial role of banks in the effective implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, a scheme aimed at providing financial assistance to families for installing solar panels. He urged banks to speed up the processing of loan applications to ensure the timely adoption of renewable energy solutions. A coordination meeting was held on Monday at the Pingali Venkaiah Meeting Hall in the Collectorate, Vijayawada, where the...

-PAGE: 3

Min inspects paddy purchase process

Minister for Civil Supplies Nadendra Manohar inspected the paddy purchase process and interacted with farmers on Monday. Accompanied by MLAs Chirri Balaram and P. Dharma Raju, Minister Manohar visited the agriculture fields at Pattiseema village in Polavaram mandal, where he observed the paddy produce. He also spoke to the farmers and listened to their concerns. The Minister instructed officials to take immediate steps to resolve the issues faced by...

-PAGE: 4

BJP likely to place bets on fresh faces

The BJP candidates' list for the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls, expected around last week of this month, is likely to have a significant number of fresh faces, party leaders said on Monday. The ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has announced its candidates on all the 70 constituencies for the polls due to be held in February next year. The Congress too has announced 21 candidates so far. The final round of meetings on candidates selection by the national leadership is yet to take place. These meetings...

-PAGE: 5

Jasprit Bumrah defends Indian team

Jasprit Bumrah on Monday defended the struggling Indian team in Australia and played down talk of additional pressure on him, saying it's a side in transition and given his experience, it's his "job" to shoulder extra responsibility. Having taken a seemingly erroneous call of bowling first in the third Test at the Gabba here, India conceded a huge first-innings total of 445 despite Bumrah returning 6/76. In response, the visitors ...

-SPORTS



TABLA WIZARD ZAKIR HUSSAIN NO MORE

Dies in US hospital due to idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain died in a hospital in San Francisco, US, his family said on Monday. He was 73. Hussain died from complications arising out of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, the family said in a statement. He had been in hospital for the past two weeks and was shifted to the intensive care unit (ICU) after his condition deteriorated. Hussain's sister Khurshid Aulia

said he passed away "very peacefully". "He passed away very peacefully after the ventilation machine was switched off. This was 4 pm San Francisco time," she said. Regarded as the greatest tabla player of his generation, Hussain survived by his wife Antonia Minnecola, and their daughters -- Anisa Qureshi and Isabella Qureshi. Born on March 9, 1951, he was the son of legendary tabla master Ustad Alla Rakha. **Continued on Page 2**

Deeply saddened: Naidu

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has expressed his condolences over the death of Tabla Maestro Zakir Hussain. In a message, the Chief Minister said, "I am deeply saddened by the passing of Tabla Maestro Zakir Hussain, a towering figure in Indian classical music."

Music missed a beat

Nation mourns Zakir's demise

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, English guitarist John McLaughlin, renowned flautist Hariprasad Chaurasia and other personalities from different walks of life paid rich tributes to Zakir Hussain, remembering the percussionist as the 'King' of tabla, a one-of-a-kind musician, and one of the most loved artists

around the world. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he is "deeply saddened" by Hussain's passing. "He will be remembered as a true genius who revolutionised the world of Indian classical music. He also brought the tabla to the global stage, captivating millions with his unparalleled rhythm. **Continued on Page 2**

CM VISITS POLAVARAM SITE

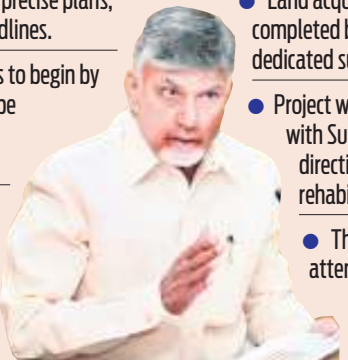
Project to be ready by 2026

NEED TO RECOGNISE PROJECT AS 'ICONIC VENTURE' STRESSED

PNS ■ POLAVARAM

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has announced that the Polavaram project will be completed by October 2026. He made this declaration during a review meeting on the project during his second visit to the site. Emphasising the need for the project to be recognised as an iconic venture, Chief Minister Naidu directed officials on Monday to expedite the project's completion on a war footing. Accompanied by his Cabinet colleagues, officials, and representatives from allied companies, Naidu visited the Polavaram project site and chaired a meeting in the conference hall. He issued clear instructions to the concerned officers, stressing that work should be carried out at a rapid pace, with initial tasks and timelines clearly defined. The Chief Minister urged officials to work more efficiently and with a realistic perspective to meet the set targets. He also advised the Irrigation wing and Megha's representatives to address technical issues promptly and prepare precise plans for timely completion of the works. Naidu stated that the next meeting would primarily focus on reviewing the project's progress and the implementation of the plans. He underscored the importance of identifying technical aspects and ensuring milestones are achieved. He further stressed that work on the diaphragm wall and the Earth-cum-Rock-Fill (ECRF) dam should be undertaken simultaneously. Officials informed the Chief Minister that the ECRF gap-1 works would begin by December 24 and be completed by February 26. He

- He directed officials to expedite the project on a war footing.
- Emphasis on addressing technical issues, preparing precise plans, and meeting deadlines.
- ECRF gap-1 works to begin by December 24, to be completed by February 26.
- Gap-2 works to be finished by December 27.
- Plans for interlinking



- Left and Right canals and completing material shifting and trial run within set timelines.
- Land acquisition to be completed by June 26, with dedicated supervision.
- Project works to comply with Supreme Court directions on rehabilitation.
- The review meeting attended by key ministers, MPs, and local MLAs.

power would be provided for land acquisition and that a dedicated officer would be appointed for supervision. He insisted that all land acquisition and related works be completed by June 26. The Chief Minister also urged that proposals for granting permissions be sent in accordance with norms and prioritised to ensure swift completion of the works. Naidu clarified that the project works must strictly adhere to the Supreme Court's directions, particularly in regard to rehabilitation and related matters. Special Chief Secretary G. Sai Prasad provided a detailed update on the progress of the project and other related issues. The meeting was attended by Minister for Water Resources Nimmala Ramanaidu, Minister for Housing, Information and Public Relations Kolusu Parthasarathi, Minister for Civil Supplies Nadendra Manohar, Eluru MP Putta Mahesh Kumar, and local MLAs Chirri Bal Raju, Miriyala Sirisha Devi, Maddipati Venkat Raju, Battula Balaramakrishna, Pitani Satyanarayana, Chintamaneni Prabhakar, Kamineni Srinivas, Kolikapudi Srinivasa Rao, among others.

AMARAVATI DEVELOPMENT

AP govt approves Rs 24,276 cr budget

Capital project to be completed in 3 years: Narayana

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In a crucial meeting of the 43rd Capital Region Development Authority (CRDA) Authority, chaired by Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, the Andhra Pradesh government has approved a budget of Rs 24,276 crore for the construction of trunk roads, layouts, and iconic buildings for Amaravati, the State's new capital city. Minister for Municipal Administration and Urban Development, P Narayana, announced the approval during a press conference held at the State secretariat in Amaravati on Monday. He highlighted that a total of Rs 45,249.24 crore has been sanctioned across the last four CRDA meetings for various development works in Amaravati. The Minister provided details of key infrastructure projects, including the construction of the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly, which will span 103 acres. The Assembly building will cover 11.22 lakh square feet and stand 250 metres high. Minister Narayana also mentioned that on non-Assembly session days, the public will have access to the building, offering



Narayana assured that tendering for the projects would commence by next Monday, to complete as many tenders as possible by the end of the month. He further assured that all pending tenders would be finalised by the end of January.

them a view of the capital city. Plans for the High Court building were also revealed, with the structure set to cover 20.32 lakh square feet over 42 acres. The building will rise 55 metres high and consist of eight floors, at a projected cost of Rs 1,048 crore. **Continued on Page 2**

Woman kills 2 brothers for father's job benefits

PNS ■ NEKARIKALLU

A 28-year-old woman allegedly murdered her two brothers over fears that they might claim their deceased father's employment benefits and assets, a police official said on Monday. Palnadu district Superintendent of Police K Srinivasa Rao stated that Krishnaveni, from Nekarikallu village, allegedly strangled her elder brother Gopi Krishna (32), a police constable, and her younger brother (26) after intoxicating them. "The sister killed both her brothers. Her father was a teacher, and she feared that her brothers would take control of his retirement benefits, house, and land," Rao said. Krishnaveni reportedly told the police that she killed her younger brother on November 26 and her elder brother on December 10. On both occasions, she got them drunk and then strangled them with her chunni (scarf). According to the police, she disposed of their bodies in a local canal, using a two-wheeler to transport them with the help of her cousins.

Minor girl gives her kidnappers the slip

PNS ■ GUNTUR

In a dramatic turn of events, a 12-year-old girl managed to escape from kidnappers, and the police reunited her with her family after registering a case. According to the police, the girl lives with her parents in Vengal Rao Nagar, Guntur. On Monday, some miscreants approached the girl while she was alone at home, claiming that her mother had been injured in a road accident. They told her they would take her to the hospital in their car. Trusting their words, the girl got into the vehicle. However, the kidnappers drove her to Vijayawada, where they stopped near the bus station to have food. **Continued on Page 2**

Supply chain for seeds, fertilisers to be strengthened: Agri Minister Atchan

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Kinjarapu Atchannaidu, Minister for Agriculture, Horticulture, Cooperative, Marketing, Animal Husbandry, Dairy Development, and Fisheries, has directed officials to ensure an uninterrupted supply of seeds and fertilisers across the state. He emphasised the need for detailed annual reports on seed and fertilizer requirements, customised to the crops cultivated in each region, to be prepared by Ministers, MLAs, district collectors, and concerned officials. During a review meeting held on Monday at the Secretariat with senior officials from AP Seeds, Marked,



Agriculture Minister Atchannaidu chairs a review meeting with State-level officials at the Secretariat in Velagapudi on Monday.

and AP Warehousing Corporation, the Minister outlined several measures to strengthen agricultural support for farmers. The Minister instructed officials to prioritise the distribution of high-quality seeds through AP Seeds at subsidised rates and expedite the establishment of a Mega Seed Park to enhance seed production. Utilising all 750 acres of seed production fields across 16 locations in the state was highlighted as a critical goal. **Continued on Page 2**

Prez Murmu to attend AIIMS M'giri's 1st convocation today

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

President of India Droupadi Murmu will participate as the chief guest at the first convocation of AIIMS Mangalagiri. The event will also be attended by Andhra Pradesh Governor S. Abdul Nazeer, Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu, Union Minister of State for Ayush and Ministry of Health & Family Welfare Prataprao Jadhav, Minister of Health and Family Welfare Satya Kumar Yadav, and Minister of Human Resources Development, IT, Electronics & Communication Nara Lokesh, who will serve as Guests of Honour, announced Dr. K. Vamsi Krishna Reddy, spokesperson, and Dr.

P.K. Sankaran, Chairperson, on Monday.

The programme will commence at noon on Tuesday at the AIIMS Mangalagiri Auditorium and conclude at 1:30 PM. During the event, President Murmu will present gold medals to award-winning students and deliver the Convocation address. A total of 49 MBBS students and 4 Post-Doctoral Certificate course students will receive their degrees. The ceremony will be attended by various officials from the Government of India and the Government of Andhra Pradesh, esteemed members of the AIIMS Mangalagiri Institute Body, faculty, students, staff, and parents of the graduating students.



Speculation rife over Nagababu's portfolio

C PRADEEP KUMAR cpk007@gmail.com ■ VIJAYAWADA

Political activity in Andhra Pradesh is buzzing with discussions about the likely inclusion of Konidela Nagababu, the brother of Jana Sena leader and Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan, in the State Cabinet. Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has confirmed that Nagababu will be appointed as a Cabinet Minister, though the specific ministry he will be assigned remains a topic of speculation. CM Naidu and Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan on Monday held an important meeting to discuss Nagababu's ministerial post, along with other decisions regarding the filling of nominated positions in the Cabinet. The Andhra Pradesh Cabinet currently has 24 ministers, and with room for one more position, many believe Nagababu will occupy it. The decision to include him in the Cabinet was reportedly made at the request of his brother, Pawan Kalyan.



Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and his deputy Pawan Kalyan held talks on Monday over Nagababu's Cabinet portfolio

Paladugu takes charge as SEEDAP CEO

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Paladugu Narayana Swamy assumed office as CEO of the Society for Employment Generation and Enterprise Development in Andhra Pradesh (SEEDAP) on Monday at the NTR Administrative Building, Vijayawada. He expressed gratitude to Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and HR Minister Nara Lokesh for the opportunity. Swamy pledged to focus on skill development and rural youth employment. Previously, he served in various excise roles. He aims to enhance SEEDAP's initiatives for the State's growth.

NTR dist CP inspects steps for Bhavani Deeksha relinquishment

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

NTR District Police Commissioner S.V. Rajasekhara Babu inspected the arrangements at the Sri Durga Malleswara Swamy Varla Devasthanam atop Indrakeeladri in Vijayawada for the upcoming Bhavani Deeksha Relinquishment. The event is scheduled to take place from December 21 to December 25, with an estimated participation of over 5 lakh devotees.

The Durga Temple authorities are focusing on ensuring a safe and comfortable experience for all participants in this significant spiritual event. Special holding points are being set up to manage crowds effectively, and enhanced facilities are being provided at the tonsuring centres for devotees observing traditions. Engineering teams are working round the clock to complete infrastructure improvements.



During his visit, the Commissioner, along with Temple Executive Officer K.S. Rama Rao, visited key areas such as Seethammavari Padalu, the Tonsuring Centre, and various holding points designated for crowd management. Engineering officials briefed

the team on the status of ongoing arrangements.

Speaking on the occasion, Commissioner Rajasekhara Babu emphasised the need for seamless coordination among various departments to ensure the event's success. He stated, "Elaborate arrangements are

being made to cater to the needs of the devotees, including safety, crowd management, and basic amenities." Temple Executive Engineers K.V.S. Koteswara Rao and T. Vyakunta Rao, along with other officials, accompanied the Commissioner during the inspection.

Naidu's corruption, a curse on Polavaram

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Former Minister Ambati Rambabu has launched a scathing attack on TDP Chief N. Chandrababu Naidu, accusing him of being the main cause behind the delays and damages to the Polavaram project. Speaking to the media here on Monday, Ambati exposed what he claimed were Chandrababu's lies, corruption, and inefficiency, which had turned the ambitious project into a symbol of mismanagement and deceit.

Ambati accused Chandrababu of spreading falsehoods during his visit to Polavaram, labelling it a desperate attempt to mislead the public. He dismissed Chandrababu's claim of completing 72 per cent of the project during his tenure as baseless and stated that the so-called progress was nothing but an illusion created through fake milestones and propaganda.

"Chandrababu compromised on project quality and timelines by agreeing to outdated 2013-14 rates just to

Ambati accused Chandrababu of spreading falsehoods during his visit to Polavaram, labelling it a desperate attempt to mislead the public. He dismissed Chandrababu's claim of completing 72 per cent of the project during his tenure as baseless and stated that the so-called progress was nothing but an illusion created through fake milestones and propaganda.



pocket commissions, ultimately stalling the project and causing long-term damage," he alleged.

The former minister also pointed out Chandrababu's negligence, particularly in the construction of the diaphragm wall. He said that Chandrababu failed to divert the Godavari river flow before building the wall, which led to its collapse during floods. Ambati stated that even international experts had confirmed this critical error, which not only delayed the project but also imposed an additional financial burden of Rs 900 crore on the state to reconstruct the wall.

Ambati further accused

Chandrababu of misappropriating Rs 12,150 crore sanctioned by the central government for Polavaram. "Instead of utilising these funds for the project, Chandrababu misappropriated them, leaving the project in disarray. His inefficiency turned Polavaram into his personal ATM, as even Prime Minister Modi had once remarked," Ambati stated.

Highlighting a new conspiracy, Ambati accused Chandrababu of colluding with the central government to reduce the height of Polavaram from the originally planned 45.72 metres to 41.15 metres. He alleged that this was a deliberate move to avoid the Rs

30,000 crore rehabilitation and resettlement costs for displaced families. "If the height is reduced, Polavaram will become a mere barrage, depriving Andhra Pradesh of its promised benefits. Chandrababu is directly supporting this betrayal," he said.

Ambati also criticised Chandrababu for stalling central government approvals during the TDP-BJP alliance. "It was Jagan Mohan Reddy's determination that secured the release of Rs 12,150 crore from the central government. Chandrababu's attempts to block these efforts for political reasons were shameful," he added.

Statue of Gauthu Latchanna unveiled

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The statue of Sardar Gauthu Latchanna, a prominent leader who championed social justice, was unveiled in the Nuzvid constituency in a ceremony attended by leaders from various political parties. TDP senior leader and RTC Chairman Konakalla Narayana Rao, Palasa MLA Gauthu Shireesha, and several prominent members of the Gowda community were present at the event.

State Minister for Housing, Information, and Public Relations, Kolu Parthasarathy, addressed the media on Monday at the TDP office in Autonagar, Vijayawada, clarifying that the event was non-political. He noted that YSRCP leader Jogi Ramesh also attended, and he had participated on the invitation of Gowda community leaders, with numerous public representatives joining the occasion.

Minister Parthasarathy expressed his gratitude to Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and Education Minister Nara Lokesh for their support and affirmed his loyalty to the TDP, pledging not to engage in activities detrimental to the party. He also extended apologies for not attending the event earlier.

Minor girl...

Continued from Page 1

Sensing something was amiss, the girl spotted an unlocked door and jumped out of the car.

She made her way to the bus station and told the RTC staff that some miscreants had brought her to Vijayawada. The RTC staff immediately alerted the police. By the time the police arrived, the kidnappers had fled, leaving the car behind.

The police then handed over the girl to her family and seized the vehicle. They also reviewed CCTV footage and launched a search operation to apprehend the kidnappers.

TODAY ALMANAC

Month & Paksham: Krishna Paksha

Tithi: Dec 16 12:27 PM to Dec 17 10:56 AM

Dwitiya: Dec 17 10:56 AM to Dec 18 10:06 AM

Tritiya: Dec 18 10:06 AM to Dec 19 12:58 AM

Nakshatram: Punarvasu: Dec 17 01:13 AM to Dec 18 12:44 AM

Pushya: Dec 18 12:44 AM to Dec 19 12:58 AM

Rahukalam: 2:56 PM to 4:19 PM

Yamagandam: 9:27 AM to 10:50 AM

Varjyam: 08:48 AM to 10:25 AM

Gulika: 12:12 PM to 1:34 PM

Amritakalam: 10:23 PM to 11:57 PM

Vijijit Muhurtham: 11:50 AM to 12:34 PM

VIJAYAWADA WEATHER

Forecast: Mostly Cloudy

Temp: 31°C

Humidity: 54%

Sunrise: 6:29 AM

Sunset: 5:38 PM

Updated: December 16, 2024 5:00 PM

Red sanders smuggling rampant during TDP term: YSRCP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) has accused the coalition government of failing to curb red sanders smuggling, alleging that such activities were rampant during the Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) tenure, unlike during YS Jagan Mohan Reddy's rule.

Addressing the media, YSRCP official spokesperson Putta Sivasankar Reddy stated that under the current government, there are no check-posts, raids, or actions against smugglers. In contrast, during Jagan Mohan Reddy's term, stringent measures were in place, including the invocation of the Preventive Detention (PD)



Act against violators.

Reddy highlighted that during the tenure of former Forest Minister Peddireddi Ramachandra Reddy, 24 forest rangers were identified and equipped with adequate resources to ensure effective monitoring. The seized red sanders were auctioned, generating significant revenue for

the State, he added.

In a scathing remark, Reddy alleged that under Chandrababu Naidu's leadership, smugglers operated under the guise of TDP workers and transported red sanders using Heritage vehicles. He further claimed that smuggled logs were found in Naidu's native village, and a

TDP leader from Kurnool profited heavily from the illegal trade. According to Reddy, the leader even produced a film with the proceeds and married the film's heroine, who later became his accomplice.

Reddy accused the coalition government of using media stories to divert public attention from its shortcomings and demanded that Forest Minister Pawan Kalyan clarify the steps taken to curb red sanders smuggling.

"Data shows that red sanders smuggling was rampant during the TDP regime and was effectively contained under YS Jagan Mohan Reddy's leadership," he concluded.

Coalition govt acting vindictively: YSRCP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) has strongly condemned what it termed as undemocratic and vindictive actions by the coalition government.

Addressing the media on Monday, former MLA Bhumana Karunakar Reddy alleged that the government attempted to demolish the River View Resort at Sri Kalahasti under false pretexts, despite the resort having valid permissions.

Senior YSRCP leader and former MLA Madhusudhan Reddy reportedly intervened to



prevent the demolition, but the government allegedly retaliated by filing fabricated cases against him, accusing him of obstructing officials.

Terming the incident as part of a larger agenda to suppress

opposition voices, Karunakar Reddy claimed that the government is unfairly targeting YSRCP leaders who oppose its policies.

He added that lawyers had provided clear evidence supporting the resort's permissions, thereby exposing the government's baseless accusations.

"We stand firmly with Madhusudhan Reddy and all those resisting such undemocratic acts. The party remains committed to fighting for justice and safeguarding the democratic rights of the people of the State," Reddy asserted.

TTD to release March 2025 'Arjita Seva' tickets tomorrow

PNS ■ TIRUMALA

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) will release the March 2025 quota of 'Arjita Seva' tickets on December 18 at 10 am through its online portal. The release includes tickets for 'sevas' such as 'Suprabhatam', 'Tomala', 'Archana', and 'Astadalam'.

Devotees can register for these 'sevas' between December 18 and 20. Those who receive the tickets will be required to make payments

from December 20 to December 22, before 12 noon.

In addition, tickets for other 'Arjita Sevas', including 'Kalyanotsavam', 'Unjal Seva', 'Arjita Brahmotsavam', and 'Sahasra Deepalankara Seva', will be made available at 10 am on December 21. Virtual 'seva' tickets and darshan slots will be released on the same day at 3 pm. TTD will also release tokens for 'Anga-Pradakshinam' at 10 am, SRIVANI tickets at 11 am, and tickets for physically challenged and senior citizens at 3

pm on December 23.

On December 24, the Rs. 300 Special Entry Darshan tickets will be released at 10 am, followed by accommodation bookings for Tirumala and Tirupati at 3 pm.

The Srivari Seva Voluntary Service online quota will be made available on December 27. Devotees are advised to book their 'Arjita Sevas', darshan, and accommodation tickets exclusively through the TTD website at <https://ttdevasthanams.ap.gov.in>.

Mohan Babu's statement yet to be recorded: Hyd CP Sudheer Babu

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

There was no delay in arresting actor Mohan Babu and an investigation regarding the three FIRs connected to disputes in the family of actor Manchu Mohan Babu is underway, Rachakonda Police Commissioner G. Sudheer Babu said.

Addressing the media on Monday, the Commissioner said that Mohan Babu's statement is yet to be record-

ed as the actor has approached the High Court and has an order until December 24 to appear before the police.

"We had issued notices to him earlier. We will issue another notice seeking his appearance before investigation officials and approach the High Court if we can proceed before December 24," Sudheer said.

Responding to Mohan Babu's hospital visit to meet



the TV journalist who was injured in his attack and trav-

elling to Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh while claiming that he had medical problems, the Commissioner said, "I do not want to read between the lines. The visit was personal and the police will go by rules."

Regarding weapons, Sudheer said that Mohan Babu has no weapons in Rachakonda police limits and whatever he has in another place he was told to hand over.

Tabla wizard Zakir Hussain no...

Continued from Page 1

The family said in its statement, "He leaves behind an extraordinary legacy cherished by countless music lovers around the globe, with an influence that will resonate for generations to come."

In a career spanning six decades, Hussain worked with several renowned international and Indian artists but it was his 1973 project with English guitarist John McLaughlin, violinist L Shankar and percussionist TH 'Vikku' Vinayakram that brought together Indian classical music and elements of jazz in a hitherto-unknown fusion.

Starting at the age of seven, he went on to collaborate with virtually all of India's iconic performers, including Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Shivkumar Sharma, in his career.

His groundbreaking work with Western musicians such as Yo-Yo Ma, Charles Lloyd, Bela Fleck, Edgar Meyer, Mickey Hart and George Harrison brought Indian classical music to an international audience, cementing his status as a global cultural ambassador.

Hussain received four Grammy Awards in his career, including three at the 66th awards ceremony earlier this year.

The percussionist, one of India's most celebrated classical musicians, received the Padma Shri in 1988, Padma Bhushan in 2002, and the Padma Vibhushan in 2023.

Music missed a beat...

Continued from Page 1

Through this, he seamlessly blended Indian classical traditions with global music, thus becoming an icon of cultural unity.

"His iconic performances and soulful compositions will contribute to inspire generations of musicians and music lovers alike. My heartfelt condolences to his family, friends and the global music community," the PM wrote on X.

McLaughlin, Hussain's bandmate of the Grammy-winning group Shakti, posted a picture of himself performing with the tabla maestro on Instagram.

"The King, in whose hands Rhythm became Magic, has left us... RIP my dearest Zakir. We will meet again," he wrote.

Chaurasia, who collaborated with Hussain for a number of musical projects, including 1999's live album "Remembering Shakti", is yet to come to terms with the musician's death.

Composer and Shakti member Shankar Mahadevan said Hussain's passing is a "big loss" for him.

"I cannot express it in words, but there never will be a musician of this calibre and the tabla is never going to sound like this," Mahadevan said.

In an X post, American banjo player Bela Fleck said, "Very sad to lose one of the great ones...Zakir...we love you."

Fleck, who worked with Hussain on this year's Grammy-winning albums "Pashto" and "As We Speak", also shared

a series of pictures with him on social media.

Sarod virtuoso Amjad Ali Khan said he was speechless and heartbroken.

Hussain was "an inspiration and a towering personality" who elevated tabla to global acclaim, said music maestro AR Rahman.

Besides being regarded as the greatest tabla player of his generation, Hussain also starred in films such as Merchant Ivory production "Heat and Dust", "The Perfect Murder" and "Saaz", opposite Shabana Azmi.

Veteran screenwriter-lyricist Javed Akhtar, who penned the lyrics of the 1997 film "Saaz", said world music missed a beat forever the day Hussain died.

"A great musician a great man a great friend Zakir saheb has left us. We tend to use this word rather casually and carelessly but here is someone who in its real meaning can be called a musical GENIUS (sic)" Akhtar posted on X.

Classical vocalist Wasefuddin Dagar remembered the tabla virtuoso as a source of inspiration. "It's an irreparable loss... He was the most famous Indian musician world over," Dagar said.

In an X post, Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar called Hussain "a treasure for our country's musical heritage."

"Maestro forever," wrote Kareena Kapoor Khan on Instagram Stories. Kamal Haasan shared a picture of himself with Hussain playing the tabla on social media.

AP govt approves Rs 24,276 cr...

Continued from Page 1

Additionally, the Government Administrative (GAD) building will span 17.03 lakh square feet over 47 floors, alongside five towers totalling 68.88 lakh square feet, with a combined cost of Rs 4,688 crore.

The development of major roads as part of the Land Pooling Scheme (LPS) infrastructure will receive Rs 9,699 crore, covering 579.5 kilometres. Of this, Rs 7,794 crore will be allocated for trunk roads, while Rs 318 crore will be set

aside for Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) works.

Minister Narayana assured that tendering for the projects would commence by next Monday, to complete as many tenders as possible by the end of the month. He further assured that all pending tenders would be finalised by the end of January. Despite challenges, he emphasised that Amaravati's construction will be completed within three years, positioning the capital as one of the top five cities in the world.

The Minister also criticised

the previous government for allegedly attempting to tarnish the current administration's reputation. He accused them of causing significant damage to the Amaravati project, which had led to a rise in construction costs. Narayana pointed out a 41% increase in tower construction costs and a 28% rise in costs for the High Court building.

Regarding land pooling in the 29 villages, the Minister assured that all necessary measures would be taken, ensuring full justice for the farmers of Amaravati.

Supply chain for seeds, fertilisers to be...

Continued from Page 1

He also stressed promoting the cultivation and consumption of small grains and cereals, supported by subsidies at the seed stage. Additionally, he directed the provision of green manure fertiliser seeds on subsidy to improve soil fertility and crop quality. He added that awareness on government subsidies will be promoted through the 'Polam Pilustondi' programme.

Marked officials were instructed to ensure fertilisers are available to farmers. Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS), and Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs) at the village level. Strict action was mandated to curb black marketing and inflated pricing of fertilisers.

The Minister announced a 35% subsidy on

renting godowns for farmers and FPOs to store produce until they obtain remunerative prices. He also directed the full utilisation of Warehousing Corporation godowns, along with necessary repairs and recruitment to ensure smooth functioning.

Special measures were proposed to develop the Warehousing Corporation's infrastructure and manpower to meet the growing demands of the agricultural sector. These initiatives aim to bolster the supply chain, safeguard farmers' interests, and enhance crop yields across the state, he stated.

The meeting was attended by Agriculture Department Principal Secretary Budithi Rajasekhara, Director Dr S Dilli Rao, Marked MD Manjeer Jilani Saman, Warehousing Corporation MD Suresh Kumar, and other senior officials.

Training programme on 'disaster risk reduction' begins

■ Home Minister stresses importance of preparedness and resource allocation in disaster-prone areas

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Home and Disaster Management Vangalapudi Anitha inaugurated a three-day training programme on 'Disaster Risk Reduction in Andhra Pradesh' at the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), South Campus, at Kondapavuluru of Gannavaram mandal in Krishna district on Monday. The event has been organised by NIDM South Campus, in collaboration with the Andhra Pradesh State Disaster Management Authority (APSDMA). Minister Anitha also planted saplings on the campus.

The training programme aims to strengthen disaster risk reduction efforts across Andhra Pradesh by fostering collaboration between national and State-level authorities. The goals are: building capacity among key stakeholders in disaster



Home Minister Vangalapudi Anitha visiting the National Institute of Disaster Management, South Campus, at Kondapavuluru on Monday



Home Minister Vangalapudi Anitha planting a sapling at the National Institute of Disaster Management, South Campus at Kondapavuluru on Monday



Home Minister Vangalapudi Anitha and Revenue, Lands and Disaster Management Special Chief Secretary RP Sisodia attending the inauguration of a training programme at the NIDM South Campus at Kondapavuluru on Monday

management and promoting innovative and resource-efficient strategies to mitigate disaster impacts.

Fifty-five participants attended the training programme representing the

Women and Child Welfare Department (WD&CD), Samagra Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), Education, Roads and Building (R&B), Water Resources Department (WRD), Medical & Health, Municipal

Administration & Urban Development (MA&UD), Fire, Police and APSDMA departments.

In her keynote address, Minister Anitha shared her experiences in handling the

Budameru floods, highlighting the challenges posed by the lack of adequate boats during such crises. Also, she stressed the importance of preparedness and resource allocation in disaster-prone areas.

Revenue, Lands and Disaster Management Department Special Chief Secretary RP Sisodia delivered the inaugural address. He outlined the State's proactive measures in disaster management and emphasised the need for robust frameworks and coordination to tackle emergencies. He elaborated on how innovative strategies and better inter-agency cooperation could mitigate disaster impacts, particularly in vulnerable regions.

NIDM South Campus Joint Director PS Reddy underscored the significance of platforms like this in enhancing disaster management capacity. He stressed the role of NIDM in fostering knowledge-sharing and capacity-building initiatives. NIDM Executive Director Rajendra Ratnoo and South Campus CCDRR Centre representative Dr Balu I participated in the programme.

'Srinivasa Kalyanam' performed in a festive mood

PNS ■ DOKIPARRU/GUDLAVALLERU

Sri Venkateswara Swamy's special celestial wedding was held at the Sri Bhoo Samatha Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple in Dokiparru Mahakshetram on Monday, in a festive mood.

Just like every year, the special Kalyanam of the deity was celebrated by Kommareddy Bapireddy and Vijayabhaskaramma. They both sat on the pedestal and performed the Kalyanam of lord Srinivasa. Vedic scholars explained the significance of Venkateswara Kalyanam amid the chanting of mantras, including the good meanings that come with it.

The Mahakshetram was decorated with flowers to officiate the marriage of Sri Venkateswara. Vedic scholars said that those who do not have daughters consider goddesses Lakshmi and Padmavati as their own and perform Sri Srinivasa Kalyanam according to the Divyashree Vaikhanasa Bhagavachchastra path.

Before the marriage of Sri Venkateswara, the Vedic scholars performed a special bath for the deities. On Monday morning, after the Nitya Archana and Tomala service, the ceremonial idols were brought to the Snapana Mandapam and anointed with milk, yoghurt, honey and spices, and then performed Chakrasnam in the specially decorated conch on the temple premises. Vedic scholars say that



after bathing and visiting the conch after performing the Srivari Chakrasnam, one gets the power of a hundred horsemen if one sprinkles water on the conch. They said that if Swami bathes in their Pushkarini every day, the result will be the same as the holy bath during the river pushkarams.

The founding trustees of the temple P. V. Krishna Reddy, Sudha Reddy, P. V. Subbareddy, Sumalata, P. Virareddy, Vijayalakshmi, Kommareddy Bapireddy, Vijaya Bhaskaramma P. Nagireddy, Prasanna couple, their family members and a large number of devotees were present.

NTR Collector urges banks to expedite loan processing

SOLAR SCHEME

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The NTR District Collector, Dr G Lakshmisha, has emphasised the crucial role of banks in the effective implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, a scheme aimed at providing financial assistance to families for installing solar panels. He urged banks to speed up the processing of loan applications to ensure the timely adoption of renewable energy solutions.

A coordination meeting was held on Monday at the Pingali Venkaiah Meeting Hall in the Collectorate, Vijayawada, where the implementation of the Surya Ghar scheme was discussed in detail with bankers.

Collector Lakshmisha highlighted that the scheme would subsidise the installation of solar panels on residential rooftops, significantly reducing electricity bills. He noted that the scheme would not only benefit the current generation but also ensure a sustainable future for the coming generations. He also stressed the importance of reducing reliance on fossil fuels and promoting renewable energy as part of a collective social responsibility.

Under the scheme, a 3 KW solar panel, valued at Rs 2 lakh, would be installed with a subsidy of Rs 78,000. The beneficiary would contribute Rs 20,000, with the remain-



ing balance available as a bank loan at a low interest rate of seven per cent. This arrangement, the Collector explained, would save approximately Rs 32,000 annually in electricity bills.

Furthermore, the surplus solar power generated could be sold back to the grid at Rs 2.09 per unit, providing an additional income for the beneficiaries. The scheme is open to homeowners with an electricity connection, and applica-

tions can be submitted online via www.pmsuryaghar.gov.in. Awareness campaigns about the scheme have already reached self-help group women, village and ward secretariat employees, and staff from various departments.

Collector Lakshmisha requested that banks simplify their procedures to address the expected surge in applications. He urged the financial institutions to play a key role in ensuring that NTR district remains

a leader in the implementation of this initiative. He also reiterated that as part of the Swarnandhra @ 2047 vision, each sector must aim for a 15 per cent annual growth, with a special focus on promoting renewable energy sources.

Electricity Department SE A Muralimohan, Nodal Officer M Bhaskar, LDM K Priyanka, DRDA PD K Srinivasa Rao, DPO P Lavanyakumari, and others were present at the meeting.

AU gears up for transformation ahead of centenary celebrations

■ Minister Lokesh unveils vision to elevate varsity to international standards with alumni's support

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Andhra University (AU) is poised for a significant overhaul as it gears up for its centenary celebrations in 2026. Minister for Human Resource Development and IT and Electronics, Nara Lokesh, has announced an ambitious agenda to elevate the institution to global standards. "The centenary of Andhra University is not just a milestone; it's an opportunity to elevate the institution to global standards," stated Lokesh. "Our vision is to bring together the brightest minds from

AU's alumni network to contribute to the university's development." The proposed advisory board will serve as a crucial link between the university and its extensive alumni network, estimated at two to three lakh graduates, many of whom hold influential positions worldwide. This initiative, conceived after discussions with Grandhi Mallikarjuna Rao, chairman of GMR Group and founder of the AU Alumni Association, aims to institutionalise alumni's participation in the university's growth.

"This board will not only provide



strategic guidance, but also foster a sense of ownership among the alumni," said a senior university official. "Their involvement is critical to AU's advancement on the global stage."

The board will comprise the alumni, officials from the Higher Education Department, and AU representatives, mirroring the structure of similar boards at leading national

and international universities. Lokesh indicated that a follow-up meeting with AU officials and key alumni is imminent to finalise the board's structure and objectives.

Lokesh indicated that a follow-up meeting with AU officials and key alumni is imminent to finalise the board's structure and objectives. Added to the anticipation, Lokesh teased another significant development for AU. "We are planning something extraordinary that will have a lasting impact on the university and its students. Details will be revealed soon," he said.

AP team visits Kolar to explore Tata Digital Nerve Centre's impact on healthcare

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA/KOLAR

A high-level delegation from Andhra Pradesh, led by Nara Lokesh, Minister of Information Technology, Electronics & Communications, and Human Resource Development, visited Kolar to explore the transformative role of Tata Digital Nerve Centre (DiNC) in enhancing primary and secondary healthcare. The delegation also included Satya Kumar Yadav, Minister of Health, Family Welfare, and CM Saikhan Varma, CEO of the Andhra Pradesh Economic Development Board.

During the visit, Nara Lokesh emphasised the importance of adopting innovative healthcare models to improve public health systems in Andhra Pradesh. The delegation was briefed by Girish Krishnamurthy, Managing Director and CEO of Tata Digital, who led them through DiNC's advancements in healthcare. The walkthrough highlighted DiNC's impact on government health programmes, including Reproductive and Child Health, Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) management, and Mental Health coordination.

The delegation observed live demonstrations of DiNC's capabilities in real-time patient tracking, continuous care coordination, and enhanced service delivery. Key highlights included its role in managing high-risk pregnancies, chronic diseases, and mental health conditions, demonstrating its ability to streamline healthcare delivery effectively.

At the Primary Healthcare Centre (PHC) in Vemgal, the delegation witnessed how DiNC facilitates efficient patient visits, referral processes, and maternal healthcare coordination. The team interacted with the Administrative Medical Officer, who shared

THIS VISIT UNDERSCORES ANDHRA PRADESH'S COMMITMENT TO LEVERAGING CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGY TO TRANSFORM PUBLIC HEALTHCARE. INSPIRED BY KOLAR'S SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF DiNC, THE INSIGHTS GAINED FROM THE VISIT WILL PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN DEVELOPING ADVANCED, TECH-ENABLED HEALTHCARE INITIATIVES IN ANDHRA PRADESH, AIMED AT IMPROVING HEALTHCARE ACCESS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE.

improvements in patient compliance, antenatal care, and the implementation of initiatives like Lamaze sessions for pregnant women. The visit to the Health and Wellness Centre in Shettihalli highlighted the seamless coordination between sub-centres and PHCs, showcasing the empowerment of ASHAs and CHOs with digital tools. The dignitaries observed NCD screenings, doctor consultations at sub-centres, and immunisation tracking systems in action.

This visit underscores Andhra Pradesh's commitment to leveraging cutting-edge technology to transform public healthcare. Inspired by Kolar's successful implementation of DiNC, the insights gained from the visit will play a crucial role in developing advanced, tech-enabled healthcare initiatives in Andhra Pradesh, aimed at improving healthcare access and outcomes for the people of the State.

Vijayawada Division holds Pension Adalat

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Vijayawada Division of the South-Central Railway conducted the Pension Adalat-2024 at the Railway Divisional Auditorium, Vijayawada, on Monday. P E Edwin, Additional Divisional Railway Manager (Infrastructure), was the chief guest.

Addressing the pensioners, ADRM P.E. Edwin said that the objective of holding Pension Adalat is mainly the redressal of grievances related to pension, family pension, gratuity, settlement dues, etc. He also urged the pensioners to approach the Personnel and Accounts Officers for redressal of their grievances on any working day without waiting for the next Pension Adalat. The ADRM advised the staff of the Personnel and Accounts Department to put systems in place for quick grievance redressal and stressed that "no pensioner must leave the office without a smiling face".

Expedite steps for reservoir inauguration: VMC Commissioner

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Vijayawada Municipal Corporation (VMC) Commissioner HM Dhyanchandra has instructed officials to expedite preparations for inaugurating the newly constructed Drinking Water Reservoir at Bhavanipuram. The reservoir, with a storage capacity of 1,500 kilolitres, is expected to address the city's water needs effectively.

Commissioner Dhyanchandra on Monday conducted inspections in the VMC 40th Division, covering the reservoir, Lorry Stand, RTC Workshop Road, and other locations. During his visit, he reviewed the reservoir's progress with water section officials and issued necessary directives for its inauguration.

He also inspected the outfall drain in the area and noted its poor maintenance. The engineering department was instructed to close the drain to prevent public inconvenience. The Commissioner emphasised that all measures must ensure the city's residents face no hardships.

VMC 40th Division Corporator Y Anjaneya Reddy, Executive Engineer Venkateswara Reddy, Sanitary Supervisor

Siva Ramprasad, and others accompanied the Commissioner during the inspection. In line with Commissioner Dhyanchandra's directives, joint inspections were conducted by senior officials from the Engineering, Public Health, and Town Planning departments. Additional Commissioner (Projects) Dr D Chandrashekar, Chief Engineer R Srinath, In-charge Medical Health Officer Dr Suresh Babu, and Executive Engineer Samrajyam participated in these inspections.

The team visited areas around Loyola College in the 4th Division and assessed public concerns on the ground. The Commissioner directed department heads to conduct daily joint inspections, ensuring coordination among teams to resolve issues efficiently.

He also instructed Executive Engineers, Assistant Medical Health Officers, and Assistant City Planners in each circle to work alongside Sanitation, Amenities, and Planning Secretaries at the Secretariat level. These joint efforts aim to identify and address public grievances promptly, enhancing the city's infrastructure and services.





Minister Manohar inspects paddy purchase process

PNS ■ ELURU

Minister for Civil Supplies Nadendra Manohar inspected the paddy purchase process and interacted with farmers on Monday.

Accompanied by MLAs Chirri Balaraju and P. Dharmaraju, Minister Manohar visited the agriculture fields at Pattiseema village in Polavaram mandal, where he observed the paddy produce. He also spoke to the farmers and listened to their concerns.

The Minister instructed officials to take immediate steps to resolve the issues faced by farmers in selling their paddy. He assured the farmers that measures had been taken to ensure smooth procurement of their produce without any obstacles. "The money is being credited to the farmers' accounts within 24 hours of purchasing the paddy," Minister Manohar informed them.

THE MINISTER INSTRUCTED OFFICIALS TO TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS TO RESOLVE THE ISSUES FACED BY FARMERS IN SELLING THEIR PADDY. HE ASSURED THE FARMERS THAT MEASURES HAD BEEN TAKEN TO ENSURE SMOOTH PROCUREMENT OF THEIR PRODUCE WITHOUT ANY OBSTACLES.



Collector stresses energy conservation

PNS ■ BHIMAVARAM

West Godavari District Collector Chadalavada Nagarani has underscored the importance of conserving energy to secure a bright future for the next generations.

The Collector on Monday flagged off an awareness rally to mark the 'National Energy Conservation Week', observed from December 14 to 20 across the district. The rally, starting at Prakasam Chowk, passed through PP Road and concluded at the Electricity Circle Office.

Speaking on the occasion, the Collector highlighted the growing demand for electricity in the country and stressed the importance of using energy efficiently to prevent future electricity shortages. She noted that both the Central and State Governments are actively

GROWING DEMAND FOR ELECTRICITY IN THE COUNTRY AND STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF USING ENERGY EFFICIENTLY TO PREVENT FUTURE ELECTRICITY SHORTAGES.

promoting non-conventional energy sources, particularly solar energy, to achieve this goal.

She emphasised the urgent need to significantly reduce electricity consumption and advocated for increased usage of solar energy in agricultural and domestic sectors. "Saving one unit of electricity reduces the burden of producing two units. Everyone should switch off electrical appliances and gadgets when not in use," she urged.

The Collector also highlighted the advantages of using LED lights over conventional ones for energy savings. She administered an energy conservation pledge to the participants.

Among those present at the programme were SE Alapati Raghunath Babu, Executive Engineers, Divisional Engineers, and Assistant Engineers.

MSME units to create jobs, says Minister Savitha



PNS ■ ANANTAPUR

Minister for BC & EBC Welfare S Savitha has affirmed that MSME units are being established across the State to generate employment, with the government aiming to create 20 lakh jobs over the next five years. Minister Savitha, along with Minister for MSME and NRI Empowerment Kondapalli Srinivas, reviewed the progress of MSME establishment in Penukonda on Monday.

Speaking on the occasion, Minister Savitha stated that Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu had set a goal

of creating 20 lakh jobs, particularly to benefit the youth. She emphasised that efforts were underway to extend loans for self-employment ventures, and MSME units would be set up to facilitate this.

"Plans are being implemented to ensure that every household has an entrepreneur. Rayalaseema is being developed as an industrial hub, with Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu and Nara Lokesh working tirelessly for this cause," she added. Highlighting the achievements of the government, Savitha said that Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu had become a brand for the state, attracting many industrialists to invest, recognising his administrative acumen. She pointed out that the Kia industry, established in Penukonda, is providing employment to thousands, and that more MSMEs would soon be set up in the district to further boost job opportunities for the youth.

Minister Savitha also launched a strong critique of former Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, accusing the YSRCP government of pushing the state into debt. "Jagan Mohan Reddy has ruined the financial system of the state," she said. Minister Kondapalli Srinivas added that MSME units are being set up across the state to create employment opportunities for the youth, tailored to the specific needs of different districts.

Six red sanders logs seized, one smuggler held

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

The Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force (RSASTF) seized six red sanders logs and apprehended one smuggler during an operation in the forest area near Jandrapet FBO. Speaking to the media on Monday, DSP G Balireddy stated that the task force team, led by RI Chiranjeevi and RSI Y Viswanath, conducted a combing operation in the Mekala Kona forest. The team noticed a group of individuals moving suspiciously in the area. On seeing the task force personnel approach, the smugglers abandoned the red sander logs and attempted to flee. However, the team managed to catch one of them after a chase. The seized logs were transported to the Tirupati Task Force police station. A case has been registered, and the arrested smuggler was produced before the court.

Pithapuram CHC to be upgraded as 100-bed hospital

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The State government has issued a Government Order 156 to upgrade the Community Health Centre (CHC) in Pithapuram as a 100-bed hospital. Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Panchayat Raj K Pawan Kalyan, who was elected to the Legislative Assembly from Pithapuram constituency, has assured degradation of the Community Health Centre as a 100-bed hospital.

A release here on Monday said that the Government on Monday issued GO 156 to upgrade the Community Health Centre as a 100-bed hospital. Additional medical facilities will be provided in the new 100-bed hospital. The Government has also released Rs 38.32 crore to provide medical equipment, and set up operation theatres, special wards and other medical facilities in the 100-bed GGH, coming up in Pithapuram town.

Furthermore, 66 additional doctors and para-medical staff will be appointed in the 100-bed GGH. Key departments like General Surgery, ENT, ophthalmology, orthopaedics, pathology, dental, and radiology will be coming to Pithapuram Hospital. It is stated that within six months of assurance, the community health centre is being upgraded as a 100-bed hospital.

Sribharat outlines AP's development vision in Parl

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

During his address in the Parliament on Monday, MP M Sribharat expressed his gratitude for the Union Government's allocation of Rs 15,000 crore in the 2024-25 budget for Andhra Pradesh's capital development, which will support key projects like the Polavaram irrigation initiative and industrial nodes at Koppurthy and Orvakal. "Under the visionary leadership of our Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, we have successfully relaunched construction efforts for our mega-capital city," Sribharat stated. "This plan aims to complete key roads within a year and major capital buildings by 2028. We are closely monitoring these projects to ensure they stay on track."

Focusing on the Polavaram project, vital for agricultural development, Sribharat reiterated the March 2028 completion target, acknowledging past delays and cost escalations. "To develop our capital effectively, we estimate that around Rs 60,000 crore will be necessary. Therefore, additional support from the Centre will be essential to overcome these



hurdles," he explained.

Sribharat also commended the Union Government's allocation of Rs 1,650 crore from the contingency fund to revitalise Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL). "As of December 14, two of the three blast furnaces are operational, exceeding their rated capacities—this is a promising sign for the future of our steel plant," he proudly announced. He emphasised the need for timely salary payments for RINL's workforce, adding, "The infusion of funds has allowed us to restart an additional blast furnace that had been inactive for several months, and we hope for continued progress."

Turning to the footwear industry, Sribharat advocated for increased research and development. "During my recent interaction with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, I emphasised the urgent need for increased research in the footwear sector," he said, stressing the lack of an Indian sizing system and urging separate funding under the Footwear, Leather and Accessories Development Programme (FLADDP).

Path to 'model city': Collector calls for strategic approach

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

District Collector M.N. Harendhira Prasad has emphasised the need for a strategic and dedicated approach to elevate Visakhapatnam into a model city. Speaking at a meeting held at the Collectorate Meeting Hall on Monday evening, he stressed that public satisfaction should be the ultimate measure of success. "Our focus should be on making Visakhapatnam a symbol of progress and efficiency. Every action we take must be aimed at meeting the expectations of the people," he stated.

The meeting focused on key takeaways from the second phase of the Collectors' Conference held in Vijayawada on December 11 and 12. Recognising Visakhapatnam's growing importance as a host for national and international



events, the Collector stressed the need for meticulous planning. "The reputation of our city depends on how well we prepare and execute our plans. Let's work towards making Visakhapatnam not just beautiful but globally

admired," he said.

The Collector also highlighted tourism development as a key area of focus, urging officials to encourage new projects such as hotels and resorts. "Tourism is a key driver for our growth. We must encourage new projects and extend full support to investors in this sector," he remarked.

To achieve the target of 15 per cent growth, the Collector directed officials to ensure timely distribution of pensions, home delivery of ration supplies, and transparent implementation of the free sand policy. He also emphasised the importance of achieving standards comparable to private institutions in the education and healthcare sectors.

GVMC Commissioner P Sampath Kumar, CPO Srinivasa Rao, and other district-level officers attended the meeting. The Collector's

B.Pharma student drowns in irrigation tank



PNS ■ GUNTUR

A third-year B Pharma student drowned in an irrigation tank at Bhimanenivaripalem village in Medikonduru mandal on Monday, as a third-year B.Pharma student drowned in an irrigation tank.

The deceased, identified as Mulupudi Ranjit (20), was studying at KC Reddy Pharmacy College. According to the police, the motor at the college hostel had malfunctioned, and Ranjit, along with a mechanic, entered the tank to repair it. Unfortunately, he slipped and drowned. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) personnel later retrieved his body from the tank.

Angered by the incident, Ranjit's parents, relatives, and fellow students staged a 'dharna' on the road, blaming the college management for negligence. They demanded justice for the bereaved family. Ranjit hailed from Mulapadu village in Tenali mandal. The police registered a case and shifted the body to the GGH for postmortem. The protest caused a massive traffic jam, with vehicles stranded on both sides of the Medikonduru-Tenali road for over one kilometre.

Student and cleaner drown in water pit

PNS ■ NARASARAOPET

A tragic incident unfolded at Pulipadu village in Gurazala mandal on Monday, where a fifth-class student and a school bus cleaner drowned in a water pit on an agricultural field.

According to the police, the mishap occurred when a bus belonging to Sri Chaitanya School was ferrying students to the school. After travelling some distance, the bus halted due to an overheated radiator. The driver instructed the bus cleaner, Koteswara Rao (35), to fetch water from a nearby water pit.

Rao took Subash (11), one of the students, to assist him. While attempting to draw water, Subash slipped into the pit and began



drowning. In an attempt to rescue him, Koteswara Rao also entered the pit but tragically, both lost their lives.

The grieving parents have held the bus driver responsible for the

incident. The bodies were retrieved and sent to the Government General Hospital (GGH) for postmortem. The police have registered a case and are investigating the matter.

APSP cop ends life by jumping before moving train



PNS ■ ELURU

An APSP constable allegedly took his own life by jumping in front of a moving train here on Monday.

The deceased, identified as Parameswarapu Mahubabu, was a constable with the APSP Third Battalion in Kakinada. He was a resident of Ramakrishnauram in Eluru.

Police said that a suicide note was found in his shirt pocket, and they suspect family disputes may have led to his tragic decision. A case has been registered, and the body has been sent to the Government General Hospital (GGH) for post-mortem.

Hyd real estate prices didn't crash, says Ponguleti

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Hyderabad real estate industry has not crashed. In fact, real estate prices have increased in the last three months, Housing Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy said.

He said that there was a feeling of insecurity when a new government was formed in Andhra Pradesh. However, that feeling disappeared after the floods in Amaravati. Investors are now afraid of investing in Amaravati and they are coming to Telangana now, the Minister said during a chit-chat with journalists in the Assembly lobby on Monday. He said the revenue from stamps and registrations has increased compared to the last three years and that things will settle down in the next two or three years. There is no ill will against the Congress Government, he added.

The Minister said the government will give Rs 12,000 to poor people who have no land. The government is thinking of releasing Rs 1000 crore for this scheme and about 15 lakh families will benefit. He said the government will give Rythu Bharosa to farm-

ers on Sankranthi and that the government is trying to pay Aasara pensions.

He said that there is no meaning in moving a privilege motion against Finance Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka. Corporations under the government are unable to earn a single rupee on their own, he said and added that it is a fact that the BRS Government ran up debts amounting to Rs 7 lakh crore. However, the same BRS is now trying to blame the Congress Government, he said. He asked BRS leaders to make the loan transactions of government corporations public. KTR should know that the loans taken by corporations would also be included in the government account, he said.

The BRS is creating unwanted hoo-ha in the House only to prevent a debate, he said and that it would be good if BRSLP leader K. Chandrasekhar Rao came to the Assembly. Ponguleti said that there is now no fear of HYDRAA although people had some fear in the beginning. The people now know about HYDRAA now, he said.

ACROSS THE STATES

Three-pronged strategy adopted to root out Naxals: Amit Shah



Youtuber held for alleged pond explosion

A social media influencer was arrested for allegedly causing an explosion using sodium in an agricultural pond in the district, police said on Monday. N M Prathap, also known as Drone Prathap, was arrested on Friday evening after police received a video of the incident that he had uploaded to his YouTube channel, they said. The video, which went viral on social media platforms, showed the explosion occurring at Sree Rayara Brundavana farm in Janakaloti, Madhugiri taluk. However, when questioned, 27-year-old Prathap claimed that it was a science experiment performed as part of a promotional video for his YouTube channel. He later deleted the video, a senior police officer said. Based on the video, a case was registered against Prathap under relevant sections of the Explosive Substances Act and Section 288 (negligent conduct with respect to explosive substance) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the officer said.

PNS ■ JAGDALPUR (CHHATTISGARH)

A comprehensive three-pronged strategy is being adopted by the government to free all Naxal-affected areas in the country from the menace, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Monday.

Paying tributes here to all those who laid down their lives fighting Naxalism, Shah said as part of this strategy, first, those who are willing to renounce violence and ready to return to the mainstream are being welcomed.

Secondly, he said, efforts are being intensified to apprehend those who refuse to abandon the path of violence. "Lastly, strict action will be taken against individuals intent on harming others, ensuring they face the full force of justice," he added. The home minister emphasised that this menace must be completely uprooted

Underscoring the government's unwavering resolve to restore peace in Chhattisgarh and other Naxal-affected states, Shah said the achievements of the past year in combating Naxalism in Chhattisgarh are unprecedented



to prevent further loss of innocent lives.

Underscoring the government's unwavering resolve to restore peace in Chhattisgarh and other Naxal-affected states, Shah said the achievements of the past year in combating Naxalism in Chhattisgarh are

unprecedented. Never before has such a vast area been liberated from Naxal influence in a single year nor have such significant numbers of Naxalites surrendered, been neutralised or arrested, he said. Within a year, 287 Naxalites were neutralised, approximately 1,000

were arrested and 837 surrendered in Chhattisgarh, he added. Shah commended the Chhattisgarh government for executing a highly effective and well-coordinated strategy in this effort.

He acknowledged the commendable teamwork of

Chhattisgarh Police and central security forces who have launched a robust operation guided by a clear and focused plan. The home minister also commended the Chhattisgarh government for establishing a memorial to honour the 1,399 martyrs who made the supreme sacrifice in the struggle against Naxalism.

He said this memorial would not only pay tributes to these heroes but also inspire future generations.

Shah highlighted that the current Chhattisgarh government, since its formation last year, has been steadfast in its commitment to eradicate Naxalism. Expressing optimism about the future, he assured that after March 31, 2026, not a single drop of blood will be shed in the name of Naxalism on the sacred land of Maa Danteshwari (Bastar in Chhattisgarh).

He highlighted that the

Chhattisgarh government has devised a phased plan to accelerate development in areas previously affected by Naxalism. This plan focuses on the welfare of villages and the upliftment of the affected communities, he said. Shah emphasised that these initiatives are being implemented with the strong support and cooperation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has approved the construction of 15,000 houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana in the Naxal-affected regions.

Additionally, efforts are underway to achieve 100 per cent saturation of government welfare schemes in every village, ensuring priority assistance to families impacted by Naxal violence, he said.

Shah said the campaign for a Naxal-free India, led by Prime Minister Modi, is gaining significant support from the affected families.



Properties of drug peddlers attached in J-K

Authorities on Monday attached two residential houses belonging to alleged drug peddlers in Kupwara district of Jammu and Kashmir, a police spokesperson said. "Police in Kupwara have attached two residential properties belonging to drug peddlers in the border area of Karnah under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act," the police spokesperson said. He said it is the first time that such stringent action has been taken under the NDPS Act in this region. "One of the properties attached is located in Pingla Haridal and belongs to Riyaz Ahmad Shah," he said. The second property, located in Chitterkote Karnah, belongs to Jahangir Ahmad Khan, the spokesperson said. "The combined market value of these properties is estimated to be approximately 40 lakhs," the spokesperson added.



Freed from begging, children take part in sports

Two-day sports meet commenced at the Raj Bhavan on Monday for children from Lucknow, Ayodhya and Kushinagar who have been freed from begging, the governor's house said. Organised under the 'From Begging to Education' campaign being run by Umeed Sanstha, an NGO, the event saw the participation of 455 children from Lucknow, 80 from Ayodhya, and 18 from Kushinagar on the first day on Monday. The competitions included athletics events, kho-kho, kabaddi and tug-of-war, among others, the Raj Bhavan said in a statement. Inaugurating the event, Uttar Pradesh Social Welfare Minister Asim Arun sought everyone's co-operation to eradicate begging from the society, saying his department is trying to connect people associated with begging with the mainstream by implementing the Smile Project of the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in Kushinagar and Ayodhya districts through Umeed Sanstha.

ATROCITIES AGAINST HINDUS IN BANGLA Cong MPs stage protest in Parliament premises

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Several Congress MPs led by Priyanka Gandhi Vadra staged a protest in the Parliament premises on Monday, demanding justice for Hindus facing atrocities in Bangladesh and the alleged removal of a photo of Pakistan surrendering to India from the Army headquarters.

Priyanka Gandhi said she had given a notice to talk about Vijay Diwas in the Lok Sabha. The Wayanad MP claimed that after initial approval, she was allegedly told that she could not talk on it as the government would.

"Till then, they did not remember and I guess then they gave a chance to Nishikant Dubey who raised the issue and said something. Then I spoke. I was raising only two issues. First, I wanted to pay tributes to all the martyred soldiers and the people who stood by the Army," she told reporters in the Parliament premises. "I also wanted to remember Indira Gandhi because of her ability to act decisively. Under her leadership, we fought the war and won," she said.

Priyanka Gandhi also raised the issue of atrocities against minorities in Bangladesh.



"The fight that we had fought (in 1971) was about principles, for democracy, against the atrocities that were being committed. These principles made India great. Our independence struggle was also based on these principles. We were alone at that time.

"She (Indira Gandhi) travelled across the globe, saying this atrocity must be stopped. Nobody stood up but our country did. Indira ji did, our army did and our people stood up," she said. The Congress MP asserted that she wanted to say atrocities were being committed against minorities in Bangladesh. "Our government should raise its voice, speak with the Bangladesh government and ensure their security," Priyanka Gandhi also raised

the issue of the alleged removal of a photograph of Pakistan surrendering to India from the Army headquarters.

"In that picture, there is Field Marshall Sam Manekshaw, Lt Gen JS Aurora... they are being insulted today. Why is politics being played over it?" she posed. The Congress MPs also walked out of the Lok Sabha, saying Priyanka Gandhi was not allowed to raise the 'Vijay Diwas' issue in the House.

"Today, we walked out of the Lok Sabha because our leader Priyanka Gandhi was not allowed to raise the 'Vijay Diwas' issue and the matter related to the photographs (of the 1971 war victory) in the Army chief's lounge being removed.

Six newly elected Rajya Sabha MPs take oath



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Six newly elected Rajya Sabha MPs, including former National Commission for Women chairperson Rekha Sharma and industrialist Sana Sathish Babu, took oath as members of the Upper House of Parliament on Monday.

BJP's Sharma and Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) Babu were elected opposed to the Rajya Sabha from Haryana and Andhra Pradesh respectively last week. TDP's Beeda Mastan Rao and BJP's Ryaga Krishnaiah were also among those who took oath on Monday. Both of them were elected opposed from Andhra Pradesh. BJP's Sujet Kumar and TMC's Ritabrata Banerjee, who was elected from West Bengal, also took oath.

The newly elected MPs signed the members' register and greeted Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar.



Need to expand trade between India, Armenia: Murmu

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Recalling centuries-old cultural linkage between India and Armenia, President Droupadi Murmu said on Monday that there is a need to expand bilateral trade between the two countries.

During a meeting with a parliamentary delegation from Armenia, she noted the close cooperation between the two countries at global multilateral fora and appreciated Armenia's membership of the International Solar Alliance and its participation in all three Voice of Global South Summits. The delegation, led by Alen Simonyan, the president of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, called on Murmu at Rashtrapati Bhavan here.

Welcoming the delegates, the President recalled the centuries-old cultural linkages

between India and Armenia and the multifaceted contemporary relationship based on shared values of democracy, according to an official statement. Murmu expressed India's willingness to continue contributing to capacity building and skill development in Armenia through "our various development partnership programmes", it said.

She also highlighted the need to expand bilateral trade and enhance both physical and financial connectivity between the two countries, according to the statement issued by the President's office.

President Murmu noted that regular parliamentary dialogue plays an important role in enhancing understanding of each other's systems of governance and laws, and said this visit by the Armenian parliamentary delegation would "further strengthen our bilateral ties".

Cong amended Constitution to help "family, dynasty": Sitharaman

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In a no-holds-barred attack on the Congress in the Rajya Sabha, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday accused the grand old party of carrying out major amendments to the Constitution "brazenly to help the family and the dynasty".

She also alleged that it was "anti-woman" for failing to get the women's reservation bill passed when it was in power.

Initiating the discussion on the 'Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India' in the Rajya Sabha, the senior BJP leader said the economic policies of the previous Congress governments for about 50 years did not strengthen



India's economy and restricted growth. She noted that the living document the Constitution has faced many amendments in the last seven decades.

In her nearly 80-minute speech, she mentioned various amendments to the Constitution during the era of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, which were aimed at strengthening the "family" and failed on the other tests of economic and social good besides constitutional spirit and processes.

DELHI ASSEMBLY POLLS

BJP likely to place bets on fresh faces

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP candidates' list for the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls, expected around last week of this month, is likely to have a significant number of fresh faces, party leaders said on Monday.

The ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has announced its candidates on all the 70 constituencies for the polls due to be held in February next year. The Congress too has announced 21 candidates so far. "The final round of meetings on candidates selection by the national leadership is yet to take place. These meetings will be held after the



Parliament session concludes on December 20," said a top functionary in Delhi BJP, adding the party may release the lists from the last week of this month.

The BJP leaders said the

process for candidates' selection was in an advanced stage and three probables on each constituency were already shortlisted. "This time chances are that the party will place bets on fresh faces, including

women and youngsters, who have strong ground connect and reach among the people in the constituencies although they have yet not contested the elections," said another senior Delhi BJP leader.

Those experienced party leaders, who have lost the elections twice or more may not be lucky this time and a lot of scrutiny of those who lost in close contests in the previous polls is likely to happen this time, he added.

"Winnability will be the prime factor with top leaders taking the final call with inputs from authentic feedback mechanisms like surveys and reports from the ground," he said.

72% of urban wastewater flows into water bodies: Report

"Wastewater reuse can be a key part of the strategy to address these concerns and promote water circularity and sustainability." "In fact, there is an opportunity for turning wastewater into water again and this is what our report's title 'Waste to Worth'—is referring to," Narain added

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A meagre 28 per cent of the urban wastewater and sewage generated in India undergoes treatment while the rest flows directly into rivers, lakes and land, according to a report by the think tank Centre for Science and Environment.

India's urban water crisis could ease if all the wastewater is treated and reused, the report released here on Monday said. Rajiv Kumar Mital, Director General of the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCNG), said, "Using and disposing of treated water

without harnessing its potential means we are losing out on utilising an important resource. The challenge is to scale up and ensure that the work we do in this sector is impactful."

Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) Director General Sunita Narain said India faces significant water scarcity challenges due to rapid urbanisation, industrial growth, population expansion and, most importantly, climate change.

"Wastewater reuse can be a key part of the strategy to address these concerns and promote water circularity and sustain-

ability." "In fact, there is an opportunity for turning wastewater into water again and this is what our report's title -- Waste to Worth -- is referring to," Narain added. The Jal Shakti Ministry has mandated that cities must recycle and reuse at least 20 per cent of the water they consume.

Subrata Chakraborty, senior programme manager, water programme, CSE, said, "This is in line with the belief that promoting a circular economy is essential for achieving a sustainable and climate-resilient future and for managing the ever-growing demand for freshwater."





www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

Economy slowing down

India, celebrated as the fastest-growing economy in the world, is showing signs of slowdown

India is facing a pivotal moment as it navigates a notable slowdown. Between July and September 2024, the country's GDP growth rate fell to 5.4 per cent, its lowest in seven quarters and well below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) forecast of 7 per cent. While this growth rate remains enviable compared to developed economies, it highlights significant structural challenges that could impede India's long-term economic ambitions. The implications of this slowdown are multifaceted. A decline in consumer demand and muted private investment have curtailed economic momentum. Sales of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) have dropped, wage bills of publicly traded firms have shrunk, and urban spending has softened. In November alone, car sales plunged by 14 per cent, underscoring the waning strength of urban consumption. Rising inflation adds another layer of complexity. In October 2024, inflation surged to 6.2 per cent, exceeding the RBI's target ceiling of 4 per cent. Escalating food prices, driven by climate disruptions and inefficiencies in supply chains, have inflated costs across sectors, further squeezing disposable incomes.



The slowdown has also placed pressure on India's exports, which account for just 2 per cent of global goods trade. A stronger dollar and rising tariffs have eroded the competitiveness of Indian products in international markets. Compounding the issue is stagnant job creation, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and small-scale industries. Collectively, these factors are eroding confidence in India's growth narrative, despite the government's optimistic outlook. The roots of this economic deceleration lie in several factors.

Demand weakness is a central issue. While rural demand remains relatively resilient thanks to a favourable monsoon, it alone cannot offset the broader slowdown. Restrictive monetary policies have further constrained growth. To combat inflation, the RBI has kept interest rates steady for two years, leading to high borrowing costs that discourage both business investment and consumer spending. Global and domestic challenges compound the problem. Slowing global demand and climate-related disruptions in agriculture have adversely affected exports and food production. Additionally, the RBI's interventions to stabilise the rupee by selling dollars have inadvertently tightened liquidity, slowing economic growth. A stronger rupee, while stabilising in some respects, makes Indian exports more expensive and less competitive internationally. Addressing these challenges requires targeted solutions. Boosting consumption through wage growth could be a key strategy. Policy measures that reduce bureaucratic hurdles, provide tax incentives, and simplify labour and land laws can unlock the potential of small and medium enterprises, which form the backbone of the economy. Tackling inflation and strengthening supply chains will also play a critical role in stabilising the economy.

PICTALK



An artist paints a wall at Lodhi Road area, in New Delhi

Overcoming fear to unlock limitless possibilities

Embracing the unknown is essential for innovation, resilience and realising our true potential

Humans possess four basic emotions – happiness, sadness, anger and fear. Each has a unique place in our lives and shapes much of our responses to situations. The unknown is probably one entity that invokes all four emotions and spurs us into action. However, it is the fear of what we project onto the unknown that often paralyzes us into inaction. Action is built into our psyche. We must necessarily move, even though we do not know the results of our endeavours. Instead of focusing on the happiness we will derive from success, we let this uncertainty bog us down. We procrastinate terrified of failure and refuse to take the next step. This is an all too familiar phenomenon that we encounter every day of our lives. As we start going up the professional ladder, many of us follow time-tested formulae, handed down to us by predecessors. We hesitate to make decisions contrary to the established norms, even though such decisions may result in sub-



stantial gains, within the framework of certain acceptable risks. All our efforts are guided by that one decision in 10 which did not click. We do not look at the nine that did. We forget that as a child we had no fears when we started exploring the universe around us. We fell, as we tried to get on our two feet, but were encouraged, or even forced, to keep trying till we mastered the art of walking; or for that matter everything. We also forget that we were not scared to take up a job after college, even though we knew nothing about the work we had to do. We learned from our mistakes. The worst was that we failed the first time, and the best

was that we succeeded eventually. Ah! The joy of success! We forget that humans evolved due to an inherent desire to explore the unknown, without a care for failure or success. New worlds were found, and new inventions and scientific discoveries were made. All because a few dared to venture into the unknown. We deny ourselves the endless new opportunities that each new day brings. It is not that we do not possess this spirit. It is just that generations of conditioning have made it dormant, till we are in a situation with our backs to the wall. Nowhere is it more in evidence, than in jugaad, the flexible approach to solve a problem innovatively when one has limited resources. In our personal lives, we are told to pursue our dreams but are often guided towards the more tried and safer options. We do not even try to think of the endless possibilities and the heights that society can reach if everyone is encouraged not to fear the failure of the unknown, but

to think about success, and is free to follow his or her heart! This is the contradiction that most of us from the earlier generation, specifically from the middle class, face when teaching the young. Fortunately for our race, the young of today are better prepared for the unknown with the availability of much better sources of information which were also created by a few who dared to dream. We should teach the young to step out in the rain without an umbrella and get drenched. Let the sky be the roof. They should not regret that they might have led a better life if they had not feared the unknown. Esmeralda Santiago sums it up so well. "How can you know what you are capable of, if you do not embrace the unknown?" (The writer is an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator and strategy consultant. He conducts workshops on creative writing for young adults and corporate executives. The views expressed are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

South Asia: Two decades of turmoil

December marks two pivotal anniversaries — Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Kandhar Hijacking — that changed South Asia's geopolitics



SANTHOSH MATHEW

December marks two pivotal anniversaries that significantly influenced South Asia's geopolitical landscape: 45 years since the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan and 25 years since the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 from Kathmandu to Kandahar. Despite occurring two decades apart, these events underscore the fragility of South Asia and the profound influence of external powers and non-state actors in shaping the region's trajectory.

On December 24, 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to support the struggling communist regime in Kabul, led by Babrak Karmal. This intervention, ostensibly aimed at stabilising Afghanistan, set off a decade-long occupation and transformed the country into one of the Cold War's fiercest battlegrounds. The repercussions extended far beyond Afghanistan, triggering global, regional and internal upheavals that persist to this day. The Soviet invasion catalysed a chain of events that hastened the disintegration of the Soviet Union and radicalised South Asia. The mujahideen-fighters armed and financed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other allies became a formidable force against the Soviets. This external patronage laid the groundwork for militant extremism, which would later engulf the region. The Soviet intervention underscored Afghanistan's strategic importance as the fulcrum of great power politics. Pakistan emerged as a critical player, acting as a frontline state in the anti-Soviet effort.

Two decades later, on December 24, 1999, South Asia faced another defining moment when Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 was hijacked en route from Kathmandu to Delhi. Five armed men commandeered the aircraft, eventually forcing it to land in Kandahar, then under Taliban control. What ensued was a week-long standoff that exposed the vulnerabilities of regional counter-terrorism strategies and marked a turning point in how nations approached security and terrorism.



The Kandahar hijacking exposed the evolving nexus between terrorism and geopolitics in South Asia. The Taliban's willingness to shelter the hijackers highlighted its transition into a state sponsor of terrorism. For India, this incident was a stark reminder of the threats posed by cross-border terrorism, often enabled by Pakistan's support for extremist proxies in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The release of Masood Azhar not only emboldened groups like JeM but also underscored the growing influence of non-state actors in undermining regional stability. Although the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking may seem unrelated, they are deeply interconnected in shaping South Asia's trajectory. The destabilisation of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation created fertile ground for militancy, enabling the rise of networks that facilitated events like the Kandahar hijacking. Pakistan's role as a key US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war and as a sanctuary for groups like JeM has perpetuated instability in the region. Its support for extremist proxies has strained relations with India and exacerbated internal security challenges.

Addressing South Asia's fractured security landscape requires collective action. Countries in the region must transcend historical animosities to combat terrorism and address shared challenges like extremism and socio-economic disparities. Both the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking highlight the need



ADDRESSING SOUTH ASIA'S FRACTURED SECURITY LANDSCAPE REQUIRES COLLECTIVE ACTION. COUNTRIES IN THE REGION MUST TRANSCEND HISTORICAL ANIMOSITIES TO COMBAT TERRORISM AND ADDRESS SHARED CHALLENGES LIKE EXTREMISM AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

Both events marked the ascendancy of non-state actors in South Asia's security dynamics. The mujahideen's success against the Soviets emboldened militant groups across the region, while the Kandahar hijacking demonstrated their ability to exploit state vulnerabilities for political gains. The Kandahar episode underscored the inadequacy of India's counter-terrorism infrastructure at the time. It led to significant reforms, including the establishment of specialised counter-terrorism units like the National Security Guard (NSG) and the strengthening of aviation security protocols. Pakistan's dual role in these episodes—as a US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war and as a sanctuary for groups like JeM—has perpetuated instability in the region. Its support for extremist proxies has strained relations with India and exacerbated internal security challenges. Addressing South Asia's fractured security landscape requires collective action. Countries in the region must transcend historical animosities to combat terrorism and address shared challenges like extremism and socio-economic disparities. Both the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking highlight the need

for strong democratic institutions and accountable governance. Weak states are particularly susceptible to external manipulation and internal subversion, further destabilising the region. The lessons from these pivotal episodes remain crucial as South Asia navigates the 21st century. The radicalisation fueling terrorism often stems from socio-economic deprivation. Investments in education, healthcare, and employment can help counter extremist ideologies. Strengthened regional cooperation and robust international partnerships are essential to addressing the complex interplay of geopolitics and terrorism. Much like the Grand Trunk Road connecting distant regions and histories, these events remind us of the intersecting paths of interventionism and terrorism in shaping modern South Asia. They were not mere crises but turning points that redefined the region's political, social, and economic trajectories. As South Asia confronts new challenges, the enduring lessons of these anniversaries emphasize the importance of resilience, cooperation, and proactive governance in securing a stable future. (The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DEBATE ON CONSTITUTION

Madam — The two-day debate on the Constitution, which began on 13th December, has seen heated discussion on the historical and contemporary significance of the Constitution. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh initiated the debate, emphasising the collective efforts behind the creation of the Constitution. Though he accused Congress and Indira Gandhi for imposing an emergency and supersession of Supreme Court judges to charge Congress with violating constitutional principles, he lauded the progressive and transformative nature of the Constitution that allows individuals from humble backgrounds to rise to the highest positions of power in India. The newly elected MP, Priyanka Gandhi, an articulate and combative speaker, accused the government of undermining the constitutional promises of social, economic and political justice over the past decade. Without mentioning the name of Jawaharlal Nehru, she lauded his contribution in creating so many public sector as well as government firms. She also warned the present government that his role in the freedom struggle and Independent India could never be erased from Indian history. Concluding the debate, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the role of women members of the constituent Assembly in making the Indian Constitution. He also hailed Indian democracy and reminded the journey of the Constitution. P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

INDIA'S GDP RISES

Madam — Forbes India estimates India's GDP to be \$3.94 trillion in 2024. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said India rose to the 11th largest economy in the world in seven decades of independence, but in just the last decade, India has risen to the 5th largest economy while addressing a gathering at the Jaipur Exhibition and Convention Centre after the inauguration of the Rising Rajasthan Global Investment Summit 2024. He attributed this growth

Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain passes away



The four-time Grammy Award winner, Indian tabla maestro and an innovative music fusion creator, Zakir Hussain is no more with us. The silence on his tabla is a huge loss for Hindustani classical music and jazz fusion. Zakir was truly an indelible gem in the world of music. The list of his national and international accolades is really long, as he had always made India proud with his tireless contribution in

taking Hindustani classical music to collaborate and fuse with world music. Like his father, Ustad Alha Rakha, Zakir always attempted to proceed to the legacy footprint of his father. His tabla virtuoso legacy had been curated in the golden letters in the history of Indian music because of his glorious contribution to music. Taking an Indian, 18th-century membranophone percussion instrument (tabla) to the world stage is truly an incredible achievement, and history will credit this legendary maestro, Zakir Hussain, for his pertinacious contribution towards Hindustani classical music. He will always stay alive in our hearts and continue to inspire the upcoming generations of music and instrument lovers. Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

to the exceptional efficiency of his government. Nevertheless, the story would be incomplete without a mention of the economic growth across different regions. Southern states, which occupy 19.34 per cent of India's land area and 20.76 per cent of its population, contributed about 30.5 per cent of the GDP. Western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, which together occupy 15.32 per cent of India's land area and 14.27 per cent of its population, added another 21.4 per cent. On the contrary, the NDA-BJP-ruled states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which cover 34.09 per cent of the area and have 38.95 per cent of the population, together contributed only 22.4 per cent to the GDP. This is despite the fact that the five BJP states received a significantly higher share of funds from the central divisible revenue pool. They received a 45.29 per cent share, whereas the five southern states got only 15.81 per cent. Further, according to the IMF World Economic Outlook

(October 2024), India is currently ranked 144th among 194 economies in terms of GDP (nominal) per capita at \$2698 at current prices. This suggests that the standard of living and quality of life in much of India improved at a snail's pace, even though the economy expanded rapidly. Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

PM MODI SLAMS CONGRESS

Madam — Modi lambasted the first parivar as the killers of the constitution during the debate on the constitution in parliament. Right from Nehru's letter in 1951 to the state CM's, Indira's emergency, Rajiv's dealing with the Shah Bano case, and Rahul's tearing of an ordinance, Modi spoke the truth. It is a big blow to the Congress since they were at fault in their earlier tenure. It should introspect. Secondly, Modi has drawn up an 11-point Sankalp like the 20-point programme of Indira Gandhi. N R Ramachandran | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE

As remote work redefine workplaces, businesses are increasingly turning to employee monitoring



SHAINY SHARMA

In the modern workplace, the rise of remote and hybrid work has led to significant shifts in how businesses operate, manage and monitor their employees. Among the most controversial developments is the growing use of tattleware or brassware, the common nicknames of software applications that monitor employees' activities during work hours.

With the advent of normalised remote work, employer surveillance of workers has accelerated. Today, such tools can track a wide range of data, including keystrokes, mouse movements, screenshots, and even video or audio feeds from an employee's device. Not only this, but the much-advanced systems may also use artificial intelligence to analyse patterns, flag unproductive behaviour, or even detect potential security breaches. Employers claim these tools provide valuable insights into work habits, protect sensitive data, and improve overall efficiency. It allows businesses to track productivity metrics thereby ensuring that the employees meet deadlines and work efficiently, especially in remote setups where physical supervision is absent.

Also, such surveillance tools help prevent data breaches or intellectual property theft by monitoring unauthorised activities. Moreover, these wares provide evidence in disputes about working hours or performance, thereby offering an objective record of employee activity. When implemented transparently and ethically, these tools even foster accountability and help underperforming employees improve. Despite the above-mentioned benefits, the use of tattleware raises significant ethical concerns wherein the most



common one talked about is privacy. Employees believe that privacy is a fundamental right, and excessive surveillance can infringe upon it. A survey conducted recently found that nearly 78 per cent of employers use monitoring software to track employee performance or online activity.

When employees are monitored constantly, they often feel dehumanised, as though they are untrusted or reduced to mere data points resulting in eroding trust between employers and their teams, making it harder to foster collaboration and loyalty. Additionally, the psychological impact often leads them to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Employees may feel pressured to overwork or engage in performative productivity - appearing busy rather than genuinely contributing. Over time, this can harm creativity, innovation, and overall job satisfaction. Not only this, but the use of tattleware has also resulted in legal challenges, including claims of unpaid wages for work performed away from computers or intrusion upon privacy. Some employers face allegations of unfair labour practices if monitoring interferes with protected activities, such as union organising? To adhere to the challenges posed by tattleware, businesses must strive to balance productivity goals with respect for employees' rights. As rightly said transparency is the key to success.

Only when employees are informed about them being monitored, the necessities for the use of such tattleware or how the data will be used can help build trust and foster a sense of shared responsibility. As businesses navigate the complexities of remote and hybrid work, they must adopt a thoughtful and balanced approach to workplace monitoring. Only by prioritising transparency, fairness, and respect for individual rights, companies and business organisations can create an environment that values both productivity and human dignity.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Call for fast-tracking WTO agricultural negotiations



UTTAM GUPTA

In a recent WTO meeting, India urges prioritisation of issues, including a permanent solution for public stockholding and special safeguard mechanism



In a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) held in Geneva on December 4, 2024, India insisted that negotiations on unresolved/previously mandated issues in agriculture, including a permanent solution to public stockholding, special safeguard mechanism (SSM) and elimination of trade-distorting cotton subsidies by rich countries etc, be 'prioritised' and 'fast-tracked' by treating them as standalone issues instead of clubbing them with other issues.

The US, on the other hand, criticised the prioritisation of certain issues over others, stating that this was the primary cause of the longstanding stalemate in agriculture. India also rejected a new proposal presented by Guyana to advance agricultural negotiations ahead of the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) tentatively scheduled to take place in Cameroon in 2026) by adopting a so-called 'non-traditional approach based on convergence'. India reiterated that any facilitator-led process should be 'consensus-based' and respect WTO's multilateral principles. It emphasised on Text-based negotiation (TBN). TBN refers to the process of working up the text of an agreement that all parties are willing to accept and sign. Negotiating parties may begin with a draft text prepared by the Chair of the particular committee dealing with the subject.

The draft is based on discussions amongst the member countries and is fine-tuned till all the nations are in agreement with it. This is in sharp contrast to a convergence-based approach that involves superimposition of non-multilateral trade regimes on the multilateral trading system (MTS). The theorists dealing with international trade in particular, WTO-related issues describe it as a process of 'gradually aligning different trade regimes, in particular preferential trade agreements (PTAs) and the MTS. Others define convergence as requiring 'greater coherence between trade rules and policies, norms and standards in other areas of international cooperation'. Shorn of jargon, this is a well-orchestrated attempt by the developed countries - the US, the European

Union (EU), the UK, Australia, etc (they exercise disproportionately greater influence during actual confabulations at the WTO, set the agenda of meetings, float proposals more often through small countries such as Guyana and get away with what they want) to scuttle the standard practice of taking decisions by consensus where every member country has an equal voice.

Therefore, India has rejected this approach, rightly so. But, what happens to India's demand for 'prioritising' and 'fast-tracking' negotiations? In a meeting of the CoA held on October 2, 2023, in Geneva, the EU agreed to consider India's demand for a permanent solution to the public stock-holding (PSH) program for food security. Accordingly, India had urged WTO members to start TBN on the issue as soon as possible and get this deliberated at the WTO MC-13 slated to be held in Abu Dhabi from February 26-29, 2024. But, that was not to be. The Ministerial Conference ended in a deadlock. On the issue of finding a permanent solution to the (PSH) for food security, India's stance was vehemently opposed by the USA/EU. Earlier attempts by India also met with the same fate. At the Trade Policy Review (TPR) meeting held at WTO in January 2021, India insisted that the three issues should be taken up on a priority basis at the MC-12. But, in that Ministerial Conference held in Geneva on June 12-17, 2022, the issues were not even put on the table. The deadlock has existed for more than two decades despite India taking up these issues at WTO under what has come to be known as the Doha Development Agenda (DDA). Developed countries had junked DDA at MC-10 held in Nairobi (2015). On the most contentious issue of a permanent solution for PSH, a ray of hope emerged when in the WTO-General Council (GC) meeting in Geneva (July 31, 2014),

India insisted on a time-bound action plan on the subject matter to be executed before the end of 2014 co-terminus with approval of Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) - an area of great interest to developed countries. This was a good strategic move but it was abandoned mid-stream. In December 2014, even as the developed countries got away with the TFA, the developing countries got an "extension of the peace clause till a permanent solution was found." Put simply, India had literally surrendered its right to secure a permanent solution; that it was "Ok" with "the benefit of peace clause."

What is the peace clause?

To understand this, let us look at the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) of the WTO. Under it, a developing country cannot give aggregate measurement support (AMS) - an acronym for subsidies - over 10 per cent of the value of its farm production. The AMS includes "product-specific" subsidies and "non-product specific" subsidies on agricultural inputs such as fertilisers, seed, irrigation and power. The "product-specific" subsidy is the excess of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) paid to farmers over the External Reference Price (ERP) multiplied by the quantum of agri-produce. Whereas the MSP is taken for the relevant year, say, 2023-24, the ERP is the average of the global price prevailing during 1986-88 fixed in rupee terms. If the subsidy given by a developing country exceeds 10 per cent, it will be treated as a violation of its WTO commitment. This has been a major worry as India could face action in a situation of AMS exceeding the 10 per cent threshold. In this backdrop, the MC-9 in Bali (2013) had agreed to a "peace clause" under which "if a developing country gives AMS in excess of 10 per cent, no member will challenge this until 2017, when the WTO would look for a permanent

solution to address their food security concerns." It came with several riders such as submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not "trade distorting." Besides, programs implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the 'peace clause'. In December 2014, the WTO-GC modified the above decision to provide for "extension of the peace clause till a permanent solution was found". Unfortunately, India concurred with this modification. This took away the sanctity of the 2017 deadline by which time members were to find a permanent solution as per the MC-9 mandate.

A decade since then, India is still looking for a solution! In regard to SSM - it allows members to temporarily raise tariffs beyond the "bound levels" (this is the maximum permissible duty that a member country can impose under a bound rate agreement) to counter surges in import or price drops. The 2015 MC-10 in Nairobi recognized that developing countries will have the right to take recourse to SSM as envisaged under the Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration. That was at MC - 6 (December 2005).

Since then, it has been almost two decades. Even now, these countries can't take recourse to SSM. They haven't also been able to prompt developed countries to eliminate their cotton subsidies. To conclude, despite the deft handling of negotiations at the WTO and representing the majority of the developing countries (India leads about 80 countries - the G33 including India, African, Caribbean and Pacific countries or ACP) so far, India hasn't succeeded in securing the intended outcomes. Given the intransigence of developed countries and their clout at WTO, there is little hope from the MC - 14.

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



THE DRAFT IS BASED ON DISCUSSIONS AMONGST THE MEMBER COUNTRIES AND IS FINE-TUNED TILL ALL THE NATIONS ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH IT. THIS IS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO A CONVERGENCE-BASED APPROACH THAT INVOLVES SUPERIMPOSITION OF NON-MULTILATERAL TRADE

Persisting Central Information Commission vacancies challenge transparency claims

Eight vacancies of Information Commissioners undermine the cause of transparency and accountability

Recently on December 10, Dr. Jitendra Singh, MoS (Personnel, Public Grievances and Pension) made a pitch for Vikashit Bharat, 2047 while addressing the 16th Annual Convention of Central Information Commission at Bharat Mandapam in Pragati Maidan. Ironically, it was the last date allowed by the Supreme Court for the central government to file a status report on the eight posts of Information Commissioners lying vacant out of a total of ten in the Central Information Commission (CIC) for the last year. It might be remembered in October 2023 Anjali Bharadwaj had brought to the notice of the Supreme Court that whereas seven posts were already lying vacant in the



PRIYADARSHI DUTTA

CIC, four incumbents were due to retire within a week. Sadly, the situation has worsened over the last year, notwithstanding the government's claim to transparency and accountability. At present, there are two Information Commissioners viz. Anandi Ramalingam and Vinod Kumar Tiwari in addition to Chief Information Commissioner viz. Heeralal

Samariya. As per the Pending Cases Report available on the website of CIC, there were a total of 3134 cases - comprising 2310 second appeals and 824 direct complaints with the Commission as of November 1, 2023.

A year later on November 1, 2024, the total number of pendency has risen to 20,437 - comprising 17,717 second appeals and 2,720 direct complaints. At the time of writing this piece, the total pendency clocked 22,957. This figure is not quite a compliment to the government's alleged commitment to transparency and accountability. A recent RTI application filed by Commodore Lokesh Batra (Retd) elicited the reply that 161 applications were received for filling eight vacancies in

CIC in response to the DoPT's advertisement dated August 14, 2024. Under Section 12(3) of the RTI Act, 2005 the appointments are to be made by a committee chaired by the Prime Minister, and comprising the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha and another Union minister nominated by the Prime Minister. Filling these positions before the 16th Annual Convention on the RTI would have been a favourable gesture.

However, the government did not prioritize the task. A second appeal from this columnist filed on September 13, 2023, is indicated at no 18162 in the list of pendency. The matter was transferred to IC Vinod Kumar Tiwari, after IC Ms. Saroj Punhani retired on November 11, 2023. The high



amount of pendency incentivizes the CPIOs/ Appellate Authorities in the ministries/departments to display a cavalier attitude towards applications filed under the RTI Act, 2005. This columnist, however, was able to obtain the information through a fresh application. The Appellate Authority within the division, who in an IAS officer colluded with the CPIO,

in one of his decisions he stated that the reason for denying information was that the file was under submission with the Joint Secretary.

The columnist filed a third application under the RTI Act, 2005 asking the CPIO whether the Joint Secretary has been 'exempted' from the obligation to provide information under the RTI Act, 2005. If the Joint Secretary had been 'exempted', the CPIO must produce the necessary official order, and further inform who else in the ministry had been similarly 'exempted'. Any claim that a Joint Secretary has been 'exempted' from the obligation to provide information would have become controversial for the government. It could have sullied the service record of the

officer attracting a minor if not major penalty for disregarding a Parliamentary statute. The RTI Act, 2005 provides no authority-wise 'exemption'. Exemption under Section 8 of the Act applies only to certain well-defined matters based on merit like security/diplomatic/trade secrets, matters expressly forbidden by court from publication, or cabinet papers etc. This time the CPIO quickly provided the information. The episode, however, underscores a few grievous lapses. First, had the Central Information Commission (CIC) been working at full strength, the second appeal would have been decided within a few months, and the delinquent CPIO might have to pay the monetary penalty for denying information.

Second, it underscores that Appellate Authorities, who are part of the department, actually help the CPIOs to suppress the information, where it is in their interest. Instead of this obligation, they can manipulate the CPIOs in other matters. The high amount of pendency in CIC could be attributed to the devious behaviour of the Appellate Authorities. The RTI Act, 2005 should have provision to penalize not just the CPIO but also the First Appellate Authority if the Information Commissioner declares him/her guilty of deliberate suppression of information.

(The writer is an author and an independent researcher based in New Delhi. The views expressed are his personal)

IN BRIEF



'73 lakh smart meters installed across country'

Around 73 lakh smart prepaid meters have been installed across the country till November, according to the official data which also showed 'nil' installations in 11 states and two Union Territories. As per the data shared in the Parliament on Monday, around 73 lakh smart prepaid meters have been installed till November 29 in various states under the RDSS scheme. Around 25 crore smart prepaid metres are to be installed by March 2025 under the Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS), launched in July 2021, at an outlay of Rs 3.3 lakh crore. Around 19.79 crore smart meters have been sanctioned and 72.97 lakh devices installed in various states as on November 29, Minister of State for Power Shripad Naik said in a reply to Rajya Sabha. As per the data shared by the minister, smart meter installations were 'nil' in states like Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Rajasthan and Punjab against the sanctioned number of devices in these states at 3 crore, 5.47 lakh, 1.42 crore and 87.84 lakh, respectively.



India's exports contract to USD 32.11 bn

India's merchandise exports in November dipped by 4.85 per cent to USD 32.11 billion against USD 33.75 billion a year ago, according to government data released on Monday. Imports increased by 27 per cent to USD 69.95 billion in November compared to USD 55.06 billion in the year-ago month. The trade deficit, or the gap between imports and exports, widened to USD 37.84 billion during the month under review. India's merchandise exports had increased by 17.25 per cent to USD 39.2 billion in October this year. During April-November this fiscal, exports increased by 2.17 per cent to USD 284.31 billion and imports by 8.35 per cent to USD 486.73 billion.



Laxmi Dental gets Sebi's go ahead to float IPO

Dental products company Laxmi Dental Ltd has received Sebi's go-ahead to raise funds through an initial public offering (IPO), an update with the markets regulator showed on Monday. The proposed IPO is a combination of a fresh issue of equity shares worth Rs 150 crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of 1.28 crore shares by promoters and other shareholders, according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP). As a part of the OFS, investor OrbilMed Asia II Mauritius Ltd will offload shares of the IPO-bound company. Besides, the company may consider raising Rs 30 crore in a pre-IPO placement round. If such placement is completed, the fresh issue size will be reduced. As per the update, Laxmi Dental, which filed preliminary IPO papers with Sebi in September, obtained its observation on December 12. In Sebi's parlance, obtaining observation means its go-ahead to float the public issue. Going by the draft papers, proceeds from the fresh issue will be kept aside for investment in subsidiary Bizdent Devices, purchase of new machinery for the company, payment of debt and for general corporate purposes.

US lauds India's 'bold goals' for renewable energy

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Like the resilience of a palm tree that grows notwithstanding the "strongest storm" and "biggest wind", the India-US relationship will continue to thrive and benefit the world, US Ambassador Eric Garcetti said on Monday.

In an address at an event, the envoy specifically lauded India's "bold goals" for renewable energy and said it will emerge as the "shop floor" globally in the sector in the next 30 years.

"India's ambitious targets and policies are making it a leader in solar and wind capacity, not just for this country, but

to be able to manufacture at cost for the world -- the solar panels that we need, the electrolyzers that we want, the batteries that are critical," he said. "India will, mark my words, in the next 30 years, be the shop floor for the renewable energy revolution," he said.

The outgoing ambassador was speaking at the South Asia Women in Energy leadership summit hosted by the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF).

The ambassador narrated an episode of a hotel in Kerala requesting him to plant a coconut palm sapling at the end of his stay.

"And I said something, I said



how long will it be till the coconuts come from this tree and they said, well, it's about eight years."

In the larger context of India-US ties, he said: "May we each day, plant that coconut, may we each day, find a way to

make things a little bit better." "I'm confident that the US-India relationship is just like that planting, something that will continue to grow, something that will be resilient as we know the palm tree, the strongest storm can't knock it down, the biggest wind can't take it away."

"But that it will continue to provide not just for itself, but for the world around it, and that is our mission," he said.

Garcetti suggested he would deliver speeches covering "four Ps -- peace, prosperity, planet and people" on India-US relations before leaving New Delhi and the first one on Monday was focused on the planet.

The US ambassador is set to demit office ahead of the inauguration of the second tenure of Donald Trump as the US President on January 20 to facilitate the new administration to pick its choice.

"The central government here has set bold goals and I'm seeing India pour more into renewable energy than nearly any other country on the face of the earth. But it will come down to community work that we do," he said.

The ambassador also listed various initiatives between India and the US in the clean energy sector and said the partnership will continue to grow.



Godavari to invest Rs 130 cr for ethanol production

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Godavari Biorefineries on Monday announced a Rs 130-crore investment to enhance ethanol production.

The investment will be in a corn/grain-based distillery to further strengthen its ethanol production capabilities, the company said in a statement.

The Rs 130 crore investment will be done in a new 200 KLPD corn/grain-based distillery to add to its existing operations, enhancing flexibility through dual-feedstock capability, it said.

The new facility will be commissioned by March 2026, the statement said, adding that the capital expenditure will be financed through internal accruals and debt.

Samir Somaiya, its chairman and managing director, said the new capacity will complement the existing sugarcane-based operations.

"This will give us a dual-feedstock capability and will ensure more resilient ethanol production, even during climate-related disruptions, and position us to meet the growing demand under India's ethanol blending programme," he added.

The new facility will offer operational fungibility, enabling the use of alternative feedstocks such as maize to mitigate disruptions caused by factors like poor monsoons and policy changes, the statement said.

Gold slumps Rs 1,150 to Rs 78,350 per 10 gm Silver declines Rs 300

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices slumped for the second straight session by Rs 1,150 to Rs 78,350 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday on frantic selling by stockists and retailers, the All India Sarafa Association said. The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity closed at Rs 79,500 per 10 grams on Friday.

Silver also declined Rs 300 to Rs 92,500 per kg.

The white metal finished at Rs 92,800 per kg in the previous trading session. In the last two trading sessions, it had plummeted Rs 4,500 per kg.

The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity slipped Rs 1,150 to Rs 77,950 per 10 grams on Monday. Traders said the sentiment was downbeat largely with uncertainty over the implications of concerns about US

President-elect Donald Trump's economic policies that could act as a tailwind for the US dollar.

In futures trade on the MCX, gold contracts for February delivery rose Rs 143, or 0.19 per cent, to trade at Rs 77,279 per 10 grams.

During the day, the yellow metal hit an intra-day low of Rs 76,904 per 10 grams and a high of Rs 77,295 per 10 grams, respectively. "Gold traded within a volatile range, continuing last week's up-and-down swings as markets brace for a series of major economic events this week," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said.

Silver contracts for March delivery climbed Rs 319, or 0.35 per cent, to Rs 91,320 per kg on the commodities exchange.

POST HARVEST LOANS

Govt launches Rs 1,000-cr credit guarantee scheme

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union food minister Pralhad Joshi on Monday launched a Rs 1,000 crore credit guarantee scheme to help farmers easily access post-harvest loans by leveraging electronic warehouse receipts.

The scheme aims to reduce banks' reluctance to lend against electronic negotiable warehouse receipts (e-NWRs) issued by Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority (WDRA) registered repositories.

"We have provided a corpus fund of Rs 1,000 crore. The objective is to encourage banks to lend loans with a liberal approach," the minister said at the scheme's launch.

Food Secretary Sanjeev Chopra highlighted the signifi-



lakh crore over the next 10 years," Chopra said, emphasising that the target is achievable with coordinated efforts from the banking and warehousing sectors.

The secretary also stressed the need to streamline the e-Kisan Upaj Nidhi online platform, create awareness among farmers about pledge financing, review depository charges and increase warehouse registrations beyond the current 5,800.

B L Verma and Nimuben Jayantibhai Bambhaniya, who are ministers of state for food and consumer affairs, were present at the event. WDRA Chairperson Anita Praveen was also present.

The scheme aims to make agricultural financing more accessible and supportive of farmers' economic needs.

LIC's unclaimed maturity amounts at Rs 881 cr

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) has unclaimed maturity amounts of Rs 880.93 crore in 2023-24, Parliament was informed on Monday.

As many as 3,72,282 policyholders did not claim maturity benefits during FY2024, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary said in a written reply to the Lok Sabha.

During the previous year, he said, the amount worth Rs 815.04 crore belonging to 3,73,329 policyholders remained unclaimed.

As many as 10 death claims worth Rs 14 lakh remained unclaimed during 2023-24, he said.

In order to reduce the Unclaimed and Outstanding Claims, LIC has undertaken several measures, including

print media and digital media advertisement apart from radio jingles for policyholders to claim their due amounts.

Outstanding amounts lying in unclaimed accounts are settled in favour of respective policyholders or claimants upon receipt of claim request, he said.

Reminder letters are sent through ordinary/speed post as well as through email where available and also SMS are sent where mobile numbers are available, he said.

The claim settlement process is simplified and only valid NEFT is required to settle the claim, he said, adding that continuous follow-up is made with the policyholders through agents and development officers to comply with the requirement and claim the amounts.

In reply to another question,



As many as 3,72,282 policyholders did not claim maturity benefits during FY2024, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary said in a written reply to the Lok Sabha. During the previous year, he said, the amount worth Rs 815.04 crore belonging to 3,73,329 policyholders remained unclaimed

Chaudhary said the Foreign Exchange Reserves (FER) decreased by 2.63 per cent for the week ended November 15, 2024, against the previous week. However, in percentage terms, the highest decline till date in the last 20 years was observed in the week ended October 24, 2008, with FER declining by 5.65 per cent over the previous week, he said.

The value of the Indian Rupee (INR) is market-determined, with no target or specific level or band, he said.

Apart from capital flows (which include equity flows as well), the factors that influence the exchange rate of INR include movement in the dollar index, level of interest rates, movement in crude prices, current account deficit, etc, he said.

Further, it said, RBI intervenes in the forex market to curb undue volatility in INR.

There are 5,728 Non-Banking Finance Companies (NBFCs) and Asset Reconstruction Companies (ARCs) whose Certificate of Registration (CoR) has been cancelled by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) as on June 30, 2024, he said in another reply.

Air India revamps int'l network; to optimise flight schedules

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Air India will revamp its international network by deploying retrofitted A320 neo aircraft, erstwhile Vistara's A321 neo and B787-9 planes on certain routes as well as optimise schedules for flights from Delhi to Paris and Frankfurt.

The Tata Group-owned airline, which is undergoing an ambitious five-year transformation plan, will deploy its retrofitted A320 neos for all flights between Delhi and Bangkok from January 16, 2025. These planes will have fully refreshed interiors across economy, premium economy, and business classes, according to a release on



Monday.

Air India will also start a fourth daily flight between Delhi and Bangkok from January 1, 2025. Currently, it has three daily services on this route.

Further, the carrier will deploy erstwhile Vistara's A321 neos and B787-9s on certain routes.

Delhi-Frankfurt and Mumbai-Frankfurt services are

now operated with B787-9s while twice-a-day Mumbai-Singapore flight will be operated with A321 neos from January 1, 2025.

The release said from January 1, 2025, B787-9 will be deployed for a daily flight between Delhi and Singapore, and A321 neos will be operated for two daily flights on the same route.

As part of Tata Group consolidating its airline business, Air India has merged Vistara with itself and AIX Connect has been integrated with Air India Express.

From February 1, 2025, Air India will also optimise the schedule of its flights on the Delhi-Frankfurt and Delhi-Paris routes.

"The new flight times now offer both daytime and nighttime departures on each route in both directions, providing greater flexibility to travellers. Air India has also retimed its daily flights on the Delhi-Sydney and Delhi-Melbourne routes to enable seamless two-way connectivity between Europe and Australia or points in Southeast Asia via Delhi.

"This means travellers from London, Paris, and Frankfurt can now easily take one-stop connections to Sydney and Melbourne in Australia, and to points like Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Ho Chi Minh City in Southeast Asia via Delhi," the airline said in the release.

Markets decline amid weak global trends

Sensex falls 385 points



PNS ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty closed lower on Monday as investors turned cautious ahead of the US Fed interest rate decision amid weak global cues.

Besides, selling pressure in metal and IT counters amid a weak rupee and sluggish Chinese economic data hit investors' sentiment, traders said.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex declined 384.55 points or 0.47 per cent to settle at 81,748.57. During the day, it dropped 581.84 points or 0.70 per cent to 81,551.28.

The NSE Nifty lost by 100.05 points or 0.40 per cent to 24,668.25.

"Domestic equities took cues from Asian and European indices and ended negative, as

investors await the outcome of the US FOMC meeting on rate decision later this week.

"Although a rate cut is on the cards, there is a lack of confidence amongst the investors due to the sluggish Chinese economy and concerns ahead of Trump's decision on import tariffs on key economies," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. There is heightened action in the primary markets, with five IPO listings and seven new IPOs opening for subscription in this week, he added.

From the 30-share Sensex blue-chip pack, Titan, Adani Ports, UltraTech Cement, Tata Consultancy Services, NTPC, Bharti Airtel, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, Hindustan Unilever and JSW Steel were the biggest laggards.

Rs 16,000 cr capex needed to meet EV charging demand

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India needs capital expenditure to the tune of Rs 16,000 crore to meet the country's growing public charging demand for electric vehicles (EVs) and achieve the mission of over 30 per cent electrification by 2030, according to a report released on Monday.

The FICCI report on "Electric Vehicle Public Charging Infrastructure: 2030 Roadmap" reveals that the current financial

viability for public charging stations in India remains low with utilisation rates of less than 2 per cent, and to achieve profitability and scalability, "we need to aim for an 8-10 per cent utilisation by 2030".

"For instance, the current cost structure of electricity tariffs with fixed charges regardless of energy consumption combined with low utilisation at public charging stations is making it challenging to achieve break



even. States like UP, Delhi and Gujarat have no/low fixed tariffs but there are other states where fixed tariffs are high, thereby challenging the viability," FICCI said. The report called for action by key stakeholders, including policymakers, industry players, and government bodies, to enable India's transition towards clean energy and sustainability.

It also outlined five key challenges that need to be addressed to scale up public charging infra-

structure. These include limited financial viability; DISCOM or power-related issues; land-related issues; operational challenges; and standardisation and interoperability. The report further suggested standardising GST rates for EV charging services from 18 per cent to 5 per cent in line with taxation across the EV value chain. It also called for a shift from two-part tariff to single-part tariff with consistent pricing across states.



Ustad Zakir Hussain's little-known desire to run away, here's why!

With the departure of Ustad Zakir Hussain, the world says goodbye to a virtuoso who transformed the tabla and elevated Indian classical music to international acclaim. Amid the accolades flooding in for the maestro, a reflection on his own statements reveals a peek into the lesser-known challenges of his youth—such as a time when he thought about escaping from home.

In a frank 1998 interview with Simi Garewal, Zakir Hussain disclosed that his mother, Bavi Begum, had imagined a different future for him—one that did not involve the tabla. "At my time, when we were very young, music was still not considered to be something you can make a decent living at," he explained.

His mother, aware of the struggles tied to a musician's lifestyle, was determined to make sure her son focused on academics for a stable future. "She really tried hard to make sure that I studied and focused on being able to have something to fall back on," the maestro recounted.

However, Zakir's passion for music came with its own chal-

lenges. A deeply moving recollection from his youth illustrates his challenges. Disheartened by his mother's insistence on valuing education more than music, he schemed an escape. A woman employed in their home, whom he affectionately called Pujaran, unexpectedly became his trusted confidante in this scheme.

"I told her, 'You sing, I will play, we will make a living.' I packed my school bags and was ready to go," he reminisced. Ultimately, he stayed. "What I needed was there: my father, my teacher," he admitted, acknowledging the deep roots that bound him to his family and art.

From a young age, Zakir was keen to emulate his father, frequently taking daring actions to advance his own reputation. He remembered perusing letters meant for his father and playfully replying, "He is not available, but his son is good enough." However, his youthful enthusiasm occasionally led to disappointment. "Many times, I arrived at the train station and they passed me by. They expected someone older and there I was, sometimes in school shorts," he shared with a chuckle.

When Priyanka Chopra, Kareena Kapoor took pay cuts for Madhur Bhandarkar's films

Madhur Bhandarkar has primarily directed films focused on women throughout his career. Several films helmed by Madhur include *Fashion*, *Heroine*, *Chandni Bar*, among others. During an event in Mumbai, the director expressed his views on female-centric movies, salary and gender inequality in Bollywood, among other topics. Madhur, in a latest chat, disclosed how the Tabu-led *Chandni Bar* became a pivotal moment in his career. Bhandarkar also remembered that Priyanka Chopra and Kareena Kapoor reduced their charges for his movies. He reminisced and stated that people believed only he could create a film on a specific budget while they could not. The filmmaker noted that individuals were hesitant.

"I remember Kareena Kapoor, Tabu, Priyanka Chopra cutting their fees to do my films. Higher fees would add to budget constraints. It has been difficult. Even male actors should consider reducing their fees for a woman-centric film," said Madhur.

The director encouraged other filmmakers to create women-centered films. Madhur mentioned that individuals will continue to offer unsolicited advice, but it's important to follow one's own instincts. The director disclosed that his movie *Chandni Bar* was 'panned' by reviewers, who labelled it as gloomy.

During *Fashion*, people said it was better to watch



a fashion show than this film. These things shouldn't bog us down. Today, *Laapataa Ladies* is being talked about globally because its content was strong," he added.

During the same discussion, Madhur revealed why he encountered challenges in casting male actors for his films. The director disclosed that male performers were unwilling to participate in his films due to the emphasis on women

Aamir Khan completes filming for Sitaare Zameen Par, eyes post-production

Aamir Khan's *Sitaare Zameen Par* is one of the most anticipated movies of 2025. The movie was initially set to premiere in December, but it has now been postponed to 2025. Currently, as per the latest reports, the actor has completed filming by finalising the last segment of the movie in Film City, Mumbai.

A source has now revealed that Aamir Khan aimed to complete filming for *Sitaare Zameen Par* by December 15. The creators are now prepared to concentrate on the film's post-production.

"It was a day-long shoot that started at 2 pm and went on till night. Aamir wanted to make sure that the film was wrapped up on Sunday. With the shoot done, *Sitaare Zameen Par* has now reached the finish line. Aamir and Prasanna will now shift their focus to post-production, which will include extensive editing, visual effects and sound design," shares a source. For those unfamiliar, *Sitaare Zameen Par* is an authorized adaptation of the Spanish sports com-

edy, *Campeones* (2018). The movie serves as a spiritual continuation of *Taare Zameen Par*, released in 2007. The movie features Aamir Khan alongside Genelia Deshmukh and Darshheel Safary. It is helmed by RS Prasanna.

In addition to managing post-production, he aims to launch the film in the summer of 2025 and intends to hold focus-group screenings in February. The insider says, "Aamir is known for his meticulous approach to filmmaking and often runs focus-group screenings. This process is integral to his style of fine-tuning the narrative based on the audience's feedback." For those who don't know, Aamir has done this even before with films including *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar*.

BHAI FANS, REJOICE! SIKANDAR TEASER TO RELEASE ON DECEMBER 27

The announcement of Sajid Nadiadwala's *Sikandar*, directed by A.R. Murugadoss and starring Salman Khan, has created a buzz among audiences. This mega project has captivated attention since its reveal and the excitement among fans for its release is at its peak. Now, elevating the ever-rising fervor, producer Sajid Nadiadwala has announced an exciting gift for Salman Khan fans on his birthday—the release date of the teaser, set to drop on December 27, 2024.

Finally, the audience will get a glimpse of the much-awaited *Sikandar*, as producer Sajid Nadiadwala has revealed the teaser's release date. The teaser will serve as a special birthday gift for Salman Khan's fans. As one of the biggest superstars, Salman Khan enjoys a massive fan following eagerly anticipating his return to the big screen. With the teaser of his much-awaited film *Sikandar* dropping on his birthday, it promises to be nothing short of a celebration

for his fans. This announcement has further heightened the excitement to witness glimpses of *Sikandar* on this special occasion. Produced by Nadiadwala Grandson, *Sikandar*, directed by AR Murugadoss, stars Salman Khan and Rashmika Mandanna in lead roles. This action-packed entertainer guarantees an unparalleled cinematic experience, slated for the Eid 2025 weekend.



Utkarsh Sharma reflects on his bond with Nana Patekar while shooting Vanvaas

Bollywood star Utkarsh Sharma has shared heartfelt anecdotes about working alongside legendary actor Nana Patekar in a recent interview. The two share screen space in the highly anticipated film, *Vanvaas*, which is set to hit theatres on December 20.

In a recent interaction, Utkarsh opened up about his admiration for the 70-year-old star's professionalism and preparation. Dispelling common misconceptions about Patekar's reputation for being strict or a

disciplinarian, Utkarsh said, "He is very professional, first of all. There is this image that he might be strict or a disciplinarian, but he is not like that. He is 70-plus years old and still rehearses and prepares so much for the set. As a junior, you feel that you should step up your game."

Despite being a stalwart of Indian cinema, Patekar gave the young actor significant creative freedom during the making of *Vanvaas*. Utkarsh fondly recounted, "Sir was never strict with me. He always gave

me creative freedom. He told me to do whatever I wanted to do. On the first day, we had a shoot at Banaras Ghat and I definitely wanted to ask him what he was thinking about the scene. It was a very chaotic location—no cameras visible and the technical team was far away. Only sir and I were in the crowd." Reflecting on their unique working dynamic, Utkarsh continued, "I asked him what he was thinking about the scene, and he asked me what I was thinking. When I mentioned I was consid-

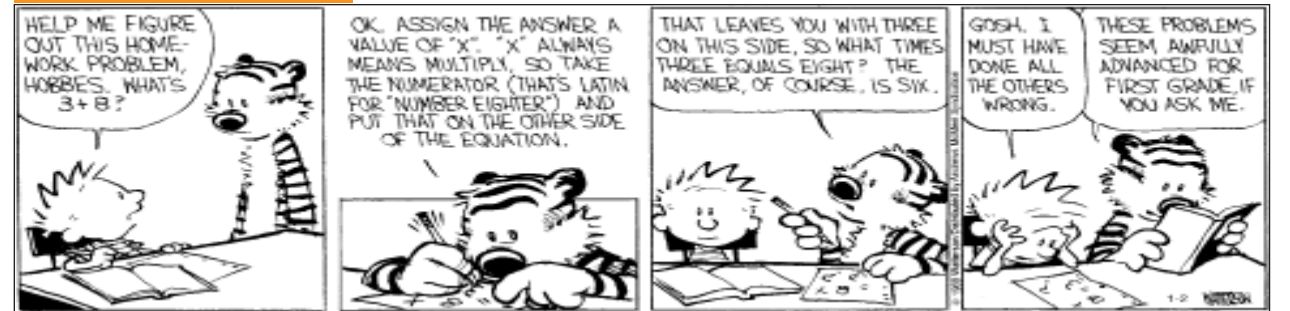
ering trying something specific, he encouraged me and said, 'Yes, definitely.' That one moment broke the boundary of junior and senior actors before we even started shooting." This camaraderie between the actors adds to the growing excitement for *Vanvaas*, which promises a gripping story and exceptional performances from both Utkarsh and Nana Patekar. Directed by Anil Sharma, *Vanvaas* is poised to showcase Utkarsh Sharma in a challenging role, cementing his place as one of Bollywood's rising stars.

FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



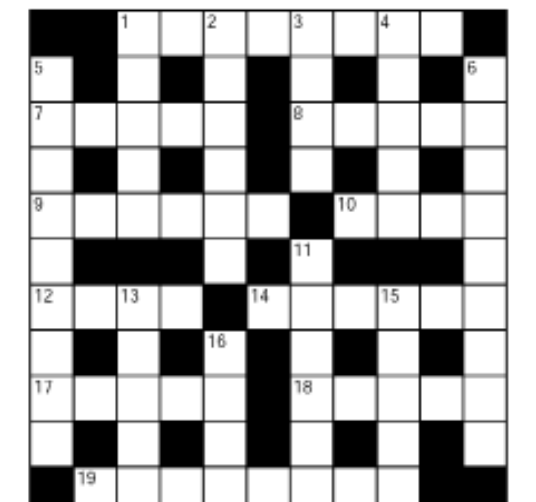
REALITY CHECK



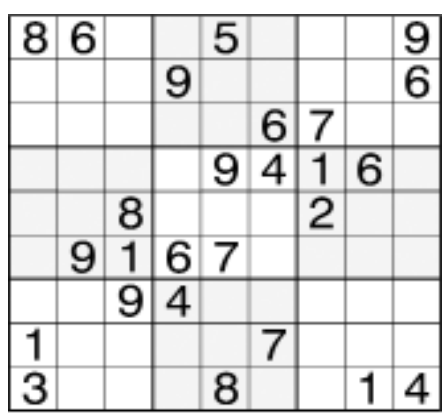
SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



SUDOKU



Yesterday's solution

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

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

- Wear these on the lower part of your body
- Furious
- A large spoon for serving food
- Grow flowers here
- The capital city of Italy
- A speed competition
- Gracful kind of dancing
- Opposite south
- One quarter of twenty-eight
- A writer of music
- A song for one
- Listen to music on this
- Used instead of butter
- Choosing
- Overtakes
- Goods carried on a ship
- A body organ
- Buy things here

DOWN

- A large striped wild cat
- We need this gas to live





Vijayawada

SHIFTING GEARS FROM 'CODES' TO 'ROADS'

TEJAL SINHA
tejal.sinha30@gmail.com

In a world where passions and professions often seem worlds apart, Michael Sylvester, aka SJ Michael, is a shining testament to the power of embracing multiple identities. By day, he harnesses his technical prowess as a Senior Systems and M365 Engineer, but as the weekend sun rises, he transforms into a free-spirited rider, fuelled by an insatiable thirst for adventure. "During weekdays, I'm an IT engineer and on weekends, as a rider," he says with a smile, perfectly encapsulating his dual identity. His fascination with bikes began early, but circumstances kept him from exploring it as a hobby. That changed dramatically when a friend invited him as a pillion for a breakfast ride organized by Royal Enfield—an event exclusively for their bikes. "That ride was an eye-opener for me. Experiencing the camaraderie among bikers and the thrill of the open road was something I'd never felt before," he recalls. From that moment, he knew biking would become an integral part of his life. His first ride was for a cause organised by Astar Hospital in Nampally. Initially a pillion rider, he eventually got to take control of the bike on the way back. "It was a disaster," he admits adding, "I struggled to balance and quickly realised my lack of fitness and riding skills. But instead of being discouraged, I felt a deep urge to improve." That challenging ride marked the beginning of his journey as a rider. Like many, Sylvester did face daily stresses and health challenges. "The demands of work would sometimes spill into weekends," he shares. "I turned to physical activity, fresh air and sunlight to relieve that stress. Biking became my way to escape and recharge." He also struggled with weight issues, due to which, he began going to the gym inconsistently and not seeing results. "I wasn't monitoring my health properly—my BMI, diet, or habits. I faced body shaming, bullying and I didn't like it." A pivotal moment came during a ride when he met a fellow biker who was also a certified trainer. "He listened to my goals and crafted a plan to help me lose weight and get fit. It wasn't an instant transformation, but a process. I learned to be patient and consistent." The journey took 240 days, during which Michael transformed from 116 kg to 92 kg. "It's still a work in progress, but I'm proud of how far I've come. My mantra is simple: If not now, then when?" A few years after that initial ride, his dream of owning a bike came true when his mother gifted him his first two-wheeler.

"That bike was incredibly special to me," he says, reflecting on the moment. "It wasn't just a mode of transport; it was the foundation of my biking journey." This heartfelt gift fuelled his passion and determination to develop his skills. He spent months mastering basic bike handling skills, practicing on local trails and gradually increasing the distance and difficulty of his rides. "Every ride was a lesson. From managing tricky terrain to understanding my own limits, those early days were all about learning and growing." About a year and a half into his biking journey, he joined a local biking community, a decision that profoundly impacted him. "Being part of a community introduced me to so much. New trails, techniques and people who shared the same passion. Every rider brought something unique to the group and I learned so much from them." The sense of belonging and shared enthusiasm for biking became a driving force in his journey. With his growing skills and confidence, he began exploring new trails and destinations. Each ride was a chance to discover diverse landscapes, meet new people and experience different biking styles. As Michael gained experience, he felt a strong desire to give back to the biking community. He began leading group rides, sharing his knowledge, and encouraging others to embrace the joy of riding. "There's nothing more rewarding than seeing someone else's excitement when they discover biking for the first time," he says. "It's a privilege to be part of that journey for others." Despite his achievements, his passion for biking remains as fresh as ever. He continues to attend skills clinics, workshops and conferences, constantly seeking to improve his riding, maintenance and safety knowledge. "Riding is a journey, not a destination," he emphasises. "There's always something new to learn, and that's what keeps it exciting." Michael's journey into biking was influenced by a combination of personal, environmental and psychological factors. "Health and fitness were a big motivator. I was looking for a new way to stay active and improve my overall well-being. Biking seemed perfect since it's low-impact and adaptable to different fitness levels." Beyond the physical benefits, biking became a form of stress relief. "During a stressful period in my life, biking helped me clear my mind and relax. It became my escape from the daily grind." Environmental influences also played a role. A friend, an avid biker, introduced him to the sport. "He lent me his bike, took me on my first ride and showed me the ropes. That support made all the difference," he recalls. Living near local trails made it even easier to explore biking and discover its joys. Psychologically, biking ignited Michael's sense of adventure. "I've

always loved trying new things and exploring new places. Biking offered a sense of freedom and challenge that I was looking for," he says. "The idea of setting goals and achieving milestones on my bike has been an incredible motivator." He credits his ability to overcome these challenges to preparation, mindfulness, and support. "Researching routes, planning ahead and keeping my bike in top condition minimise risks. Practicing mindfulness and taking care of my mental health help me stay focused. Connecting with other riders and sharing experiences is incredibly motivating. The encouragement from friends and family keeps me going." One of Michael's standout experiences was riding to the India Bike Week (IBW) with Hero. "This was my first ride to IBW and it was incredible. Hero covered the stay, entry parade, food and goodies, while we took care of our bikes and fuel. The camaraderie with fellow bikers and the challenges along the way made it unforgettable." Passing through the ghats was a highlight. "The roads were breathtaking and the quick breaks became impromptu photo sessions as people stopped to admire our bikes. At IBW, I saw everything from customised and vintage bikes to superbikes. The stalls, the energy, the sheer diversity—it was the best experience ever." He believes biking events like IBW are essential for the community. "They bring people together, creating opportunities for networking and building a sense of belonging. These events foster personal growth, offering workshops and challenges that push you to improve. They raise awareness about biking safety and infrastructure while encouraging a healthy lifestyle. For newcomers, these gatherings are a source of inspiration and for seasoned riders, they're a celebration of achievements." His story is a testament to the power of passion and perseverance. Whether it's navigating complex IT systems during the week or conquering challenging trails on weekends, he approaches life with the same dedication and enthusiasm. For Michael, the road ahead is endless and he's determined to ride every mile with purpose and joy.



Defying conventions and fueling his passions, Michael Sylvester's extraordinary journey is a powerful reminder that life is too short to choose just one path. In an exclusive conversation with *The Pioneer*, he opens up about his extraordinary journey of embracing dual passions, transforming his life by defying the odds and more

RISE OF THE DIGITAL ARREST

Beware of getting trapped in a digital dragnet!



It starts innocuously—an unexpected phone call. The voice on the other end is calm, authoritative and chillingly familiar: "We've intercepted your package in Mumbai. It contains prohibited substances. You are under arrest."

For countless individuals across India, this is not just a hypothetical scenario but a terrifying reality. Known as the 'digital arrest' scam, this evolving cybercrime targets an age of convenience where package deliveries are ubiquitous and vulnerabilities lie just beneath the surface of an unsuspecting populace.

In one such case, a Hyderabad resident lost nearly one crore rupees (10 million INR) to scammers who manipulated him into believing he was implicated in a drug-trafficking operation. The scam, which exploits both human psychology and digital impersonation, has now become so prevalent that Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed it during his *Mam Ki Baat* radio program.

Anatomy of a digital arrest

Fraud linked to courier services, particularly high-profile names like FedEx, initially began with simple calls. Victims were informed that their package contained contraband and were asked to travel to Mumbai or Delhi to resolve the matter. But as technology advanced, so did the audacity of these scams.

Today, scammers employ more sophisticated methods. Victims are coerced into participating in video calls, where a fabricated 'digital arrest' unfolds in real time. The setup often includes a professional backdrop with police logos and individuals in uniforms, creating a sense of

AS DIGITAL FRAUD ESCALATES, THE PIONEER LOOKS AT THE GROWING THREAT OF THE 'DIGITAL ARREST' SCAM, SPEAKING WITH EXPERTS ON ITS IMPACT AND PREVENTION

authenticity.

The scammers, using the guise of law enforcement, interrogate the victim, instilling fear and panic. Under duress, victims are often pressured into transferring large sums of money to 'clear their name' or settle the issue.

"Social engineering lies at the heart of this scam," explains Karnnika A. Seth, a Supreme Court advocate and cyberlaw expert. "By exploiting fear and leveraging fake law enforcement identities, these criminals dupe people into compliance."

For many, the concept of a digital arrest feels plausible—particularly for individuals already navigating a barrage of online transactions, package deliveries,

and courier services. The scam thrives on a single moment of doubt, a second of panic.

Praveen Kumar Tangella, a cyber expert, describes the modus operandi: "The scam specifically targets the business community—those frequently shipping goods or managing online sales. For instance, saree merchants and small-scale entrepreneurs have been prime victims."

The criminals count on two factors: ignorance of legal processes and the innate fear of authority. According to Tangella, the simplest preventive measure is rooted in common sense: "As per Indian law and the IPC (Indian Penal Code), there is no such thing as a digital arrest. Legal formalities cannot and will not be conducted over a video call."

He further advises victims to counter the scam by asserting that they will contact local police or visit the nearest station. "This alone will likely deter most scammers," he adds.

Behind the façade of uniforms and morphed logos lies a maze of criminality. "This is organized crime," Seth emphasises. "It involves cheating by personation, criminal intimidation and extortion."

Under Section 66C and Section 66D of the Information Technology Act, 2000, identity theft and cheating by personation are punishable by up to three years of imprisonment and fines. Meanwhile, extortion under the BNS Act carries a potential sentence of seven years. But the real weapon against such crimes, Seth argues, is awareness. "Educating people about cyber safety is imperative. We must empower individuals with knowledge

to protect themselves."

Having said that, the police is treating these crimes as any other digital financial fraud. "The police invokes the sections pertaining to cheating, forgery and criminal intimidation etc. In most of the cases the police is not able to make any headway in the investigation because most often the accused uses fake SIMS and fake bank accounts," accentuates Ashwin Reddy from Telangana court.

Escalating menace

The sheer scale of this scam has led to coordinated efforts by Indian authorities. Victims are encouraged to report incidents to the government's cybercrime helpline (1930) or online at cybercrime.gov.in. Law enforcement agencies, in partnership with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), are actively tracking and blacklisting numbers associated with such fraudulent activity.

However, challenges persist. These scammers are often part of transnational networks, making enforcement a daunting task. "It's a cat-and-mouse game," admits Tangella. "But every case reported is a step towards dismantling these operations."

Experts like Tangella and Seth agree that public vigilance is the most effective deterrent. "Verify any package-related claims. Ask yourself: Am I even expecting a delivery? Cross-check with courier services. And most importantly, never transfer money to strangers under duress," advises Tangella.

Seth echoes this sentiment, calling for a national effort to promote cyber literacy. "Creating awareness is not just a preventive measure—it's the need of the hour."

The digital arrest scam is emblematic of our times—a sinister confluence of technological sophistication and human gullibility. By targeting the cracks in a hyper-connected world, these scammers reveal a sobering truth: the weakest link in cybersecurity is often human trust.

As part of the ongoing initiative, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has successfully blocked over 6.69 lakh SIM cards and 1.32 lakh IMEIs associated with fraudulent activities like the digital arrest scam. Additionally, 1700 Skype IDs and 59,000 WhatsApp accounts linked to spoofed international calls have been blocked to prevent further deception. These measures, scammers continue to exploit victims by using technology such as fake video calls and morphed police logos, creating an illusion of a real 'digital arrest'.

As scams evolve, so must public awareness. In the words of Tangella: "The antidote to panic is knowledge. The more we understand the tactics of these fraudsters, the less power they hold over us."

SAY GOODBYE TO LIPSTICK SMUDGES

Lipsticks make a statement in every mood, fit and style. As it is embraced across nations and cultures, its worldwide market was valued at USD 17.49 billion this year and is likely to grow at a CAGR of 4.7% from 2025 to 2030. Akin to this swelling trend, in the current year, the Indian market generated a revenue of USD 572.2 million and is anticipated to extend to USD 858.0 million by 2030. These figures showcase the increasing global and local demand for lipsticks. In line with this, there has been a clear shift towards smudge-free lipsticks in the recent past. Nowadays, consumers desire products that offer a flawless, long-lasting finish, attributed to long work days and the growing influence of the 'selfie' culture. Meeting this demand, several smudge-proof lipstick brands owe their effectiveness to advanced silicone-based polymers or film-forming agents, which create a flexible and non-transferable layer that ensures the colour stays vibrant all day. To make the most of this trend, pairing the right products with expert tricks is essential, as it guarantees a smudge-free pout that meets aesthetic and practical desires. Let's dive deeper into it.

Exfoliate and hydrate

To begin with, the word for attaining flawless lips is a smooth base that sets the tone for an even look. Before applying any product to the lips, it is vital to exfoliate them and remove dead or dry skin. It can be done by using DIY lip scrubs containing honey and sugar. Besides, one must allow the scrub to settle down for a few minutes and then wipe it off with a clean, damp cloth.

Prime the lips

Just like the face, lips too need a primer to reduce their rough patches and dryness. Additionally, lip primers contribute to extending the wear time of lipsticks, creating an even barrier between the lip and the product. In case, one doesn't have a primer, a concealer or foundation can do the trick to smoothen the lips and lock the colour.

Apply lip liner

To keep the lipstick in place and reduce feathering, lining the lip is extremely vital. Lip liners define the lips and act as a base to prevent any unnatural damage. When picking a lip liner, one must go for a shade darker than the lip colour to create a defined base and crisp finish. This simple hack pre-

vents a washed-out appearance of the lips, in case the lipstick starts to fade out.

Pick the right lip formula

While creamy and satin lip shades are the top choice for many, they often transfer quickly. Thus, to achieve a fresh look, choosing a matte formula is the best bet. Not only do they stay in place but are designed for ultimate durability. Hence, shades with waterproof specifications and liquid matte qualities are highly recommended.

Layer the lip

To achieve a smudge-free look, layering the lip is an effective technique. One should start by putting a thin layer first using a lip brush. Then, gently blot the lips with a tissue to remove excess product. Afterwards, a thick second layer must be applied to lock the colour. Adding to this, a clear lip balm can be used as a sealant on the lipstick to create a light, non-sticky barrier that reduces transfer.

Once the lipstick is in place, one can place a tissue over the lips and then dust translucent powder over the tissue. This trick sets the lipstick without dulling its colour. Moreover, applying a small amount of makeup setting spray over the lips is the final seal for a transfer-proof finish.

Among a range of variants available in the market today, it is crucial to choose the right set of non-transfer lipsticks. These are instrumental in reducing the chances of colour fading, despite the activities one undertakes in the day.

Opt for high-quality

Stay away from oil

Oily foods are antagonists to smudge-free lipsticks since they break down their formulas. Hence, one must avoid indulging in excessively greasy foods, especially in social settings. Likewise, it may be worthwhile to carry a mini touch-up kit including blotting paper, lip liner and lip shade to maintain the overall look.

Undeniably, long-lasting, smudge-free lips are the ultimate confidence booster. With high-quality products and proven hacks, everyone can embrace the lip shades of their choice. In the end, a polished lip look is only a few thoughtful practices away, be it through a lip liner or a transfer-resistant formula.

(The author, Nitin Panjwani, is the Co-Founder, of Colors Queen.)



Powder through tissue

Jasprit Bumrah defends struggling Indian team in Australia

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Jasprit Bumrah on Monday defended the struggling Indian team in Australia and played down talk of additional pressure on him, saying it's a side in transition and given his experience, it's his "job" to shoulder extra responsibility. Having taken a seemingly erroneous call of bowling first in the third Test at the Gabba here, India conceded a huge first-innings total of 445 despite Bumrah returning 6/76. In response, the visitors were 51/4 on a rain-hit third day with questions being raised about batters' technique and the quality of bowling, save for Bumrah. "We don't, as a team, point fingers at each other and we don't want to get into that mindset where we are pointing fingers at each other that 'you should do this, you should do that,'" Bumrah told media after stumps when asked for his assessment of India's batting. "We, as a team, are going through a transition, new players are coming

here and it's not the easiest place to play cricket. Over here, it's a different atmosphere with this wicket being a different challenge so yeah, we are not looking at that." Bumrah, who leads the bowling chart in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy with 18 wickets so far, defended the Indian attack amid chatter that he is not getting adequate support from fellow bowlers. "As a bowling unit, as I said, we are in transition so it's my job to help the others. I have played a little more than them so I am trying to help them," said the owner of 191 Test wickets in just 43 Tests. "Everyone will learn through it, will get better and eventually will find different ways so this is the journey that you'll have to go through," he added. Bumrah rejected suggestions that India's poor first innings scores were putting more pressure on the bowlers and on him. "We have 11 players, it's not like that. I don't look at it that I have to do extra (work). As I said, we are a new team, a lot of new players have



come into the side. We have to be considerate and give them that cushion that they will learn from experience," he said. "Nobody is born with all the experiences, nobody is born with all the skills. You keep learning, you keep finding new ways (and) you keep learning about your own game," he continued. The Indian vice-captain said he has enjoyed the challenge of bowling on different pitches in Australia. "I always find different challenges very interesting. Because in the Test match that we played in Perth, the wicket was different. (At) Adelaide (with the pink ball) was different, the wicket behaved differently," he said. "Here it is a little different because the wicket is at a level and the run-up is low. In India we are not used to that," he explained. "Don't like whinging, don't take opinions seriously" Bumrah said his primary target on encountering a challenge is to tackle it instead of looking at

others to come up with the solutions. "I look at how do I solve it, what can I do in this scenario rather than whinging or complaining or looking at someone else or pointing fingers that I need this from this person," he said. Bumrah reiterated he wants to remain level-headed in dealing with success and failures and that he cannot carry the "baggage of expectations". "When I was a youngster, yes, maybe I used to take extra baggage of fans and opinions. But I don't take any opinions seriously," he said. "I look at myself. I look at answers what I have to do. I give it my absolute best. If I have given it my absolute best, I will accept the results. (But) I cannot carry someone else's energy or baggage that people are expecting me to do the heavy-lifting," he gave a peak into his mindset. "There will be days when I will not get wickets. Somebody else will do, so I will have to do a holding job," Bumrah added.



Marsh admits being nervous at gully, hails team's bowling on Day 3

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Australian all-rounder Mitchell Marsh on Monday conceded that fielding at gully makes him the "most nervous", particularly because of Cameron Green's excellent reputation in that position. Green is not playing in the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy owing to a spine injury, but Marsh has stepped into that role with some degree of comfort, underlined by his flying catch to dismiss India batter Shubman Gill on day three of the Third Test here. "Yeah, I think since I've come back into the Test team, fielding at gully is probably when I feel the most nervous because Green is likely to go down as one of the best ever. If you drop one there, you're always compared to him," Marsh said during the post-day press conference. Marsh's brilliant catch off left-arm quick Mitchell Starc led to Gill's dismissal for one as India ended Day 3 on a precarious 51 for four. "Any time I can do something like that -- I probably didn't even need to dive, to be fair -- but I thought it had a bit of a moment, and it is a fun team. It's a great team to be a part of. So, yeah, I like being there, but honestly, being at square leg is just as good." Marsh was happy to see the hosts scoring 445 in their first

innings. "I think when you get sent in and you make 450, it's always positive, and then I guess you earn the right to attack, especially early with the ball. Like I said before, now it's just about how do we try and take 20 wickets. We've got six more to get, and then we just assess from there." Asked if they would enforce the follow-on, he said: "I think we've got six wickets to take first, but we know that we've got to take 20 wickets to try and win this Test and I guess all the conversations and all the planning will be, how do we do that." "So, hopefully the weather holds off, and then tomorrow it's just about coming in, having a crack, and see where we get to." After their humiliating defeat in the opening Test in Perth, Australia have been able to get on top of the Indian batters. "I think we bowled really well. Today was no different, and we've been able to take wickets with the new ball, albeit the second innings in Perth. "Our bowling attack has some great bowlers, and they're attacking, they look to take wickets all the time, and hopefully that can continue." Premier batter Virat Kohli once again fell prey to his longstanding vulnerability outside the off-stump, chasing a delivery pitched wide and edging it to the wicketkeeper Alex Carey.

Mohammed Siraj bowling with a niggle

PTI ■ BRISBANE

India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah on Monday revealed that Mohammed Siraj has been bowling with a niggle and praised him for fighting through pain during the ongoing third Test against Australia here. Siraj claimed two wickets in his 23.2 overs in the first innings, and Bumrah, who once again emerged as the best bowler with figures of six for 76, credited his colleague for supporting the team despite the discomfort. "We (Siraj and I) have had conversations but this was the conversation he had with me before we came here (Brisbane). When we came here in Perth, as well as the last game, he looked in very good spirits," Bumrah told reporters after day three. "He was bowling well and he has picked up a fair few of the wickets. In this game, I will give him credit that he had a



little bit of a niggle but he still kept on bowling and still helped the team because he knew if he goes inside and he doesn't bowl, then that team will go under pressure. "So I think he has got a great attitude and he has got a fighter spirit that the team loves," he said. Siraj looked in discomfort as he clutched his hamstring after bowling the second ball of the 37th over of Australia's first innings. The physio was called onto the

field and Siraj then left the field as Akash Deep completed the over. The 30-year-old, however, returned to the field on Day 2 and ended up taking the wickets of Australia skipper Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon. "I personally love that as well, that he is up for a fight and he always gives it all for the team. So I think that is the biggest positive for any cricketer going forward. "That he gives it his absolute

best on the field. And even when he is not 100% fit, when he has got a niggle, he is still fighting for the team. So that is a great attitude." "Keep running in, keep having a smile on your face" Siraj has taken five and four wickets in the first two Tests in Perth and Adelaide but he has also been criticised for a lack of control over his lines and lengths, especially during the third Test, which allowed the Australian batters to get away early in their innings on Day 2. However, Bumrah has advised Siraj to just focus on the controllables. "Yes, in terms of wickets and all, some days you will bowl well, the wickets will come as I spoke to him before. And some days you will not bowl very well but the wickets will follow. So it's all money in the bank," Bumrah said. "That is the conversation that I have had with him. That you keep focusing on your stuff, things that you can control."



Gavaskar urges Virat Kohli to refrain from playing cover drive

PTI ■ BRISBANE

The legendary Sunil Gavaskar on Monday urged India superstar Virat Kohli to draw inspiration from Sachin Tendulkar's monumental 241 against Australia in Sydney in 2004 and refrain from playing cover drive in order to end his persistent struggle against deliveries outside off-stump. On a rain-marred third day of the ongoing Brisbane Test, Kohli copped yet another failure when Josh Hazlewood had him caught behind for 3 as a struggling India ended at 51 for 4 when the stumps were drawn. Gavaskar said Kohli, who has scores of 5, 100 not out, 7, 11 and 3 so far on this tour, need not look beyond "his hero" Tendulkar, who responded with an exceptional 436-ball 241 including 33 fours at the SCG when he too was going through a similar phase of getting caught behind during the Australia tour of 2003-04. Tendulkar's knock, for which he batted more than 10 hours, is widely considered as one of his best-ever as the legendary batter curbed his instinct to drive and scored the majority of his runs on the on-side. "He (Kohli) only needs to

look at his hero, Sachin Tendulkar. The way in which he (Tendulkar) had kept his patience and control on his off-side game, scoring those 241 runs at Sydney," Gavaskar told Star Sports. "He did not play any shot on the off-side, or at least in the cover (region) because before that he was getting dismissed while attempting to play in covers. "The shots that he played were pretty much straight or on the on-side," he added. Gavaskar said Kohli, who has been caught behind the wickets thrice on this tour, must look to defend every single delivery in the channel of the off-stump and find other scoring areas like Tendulkar did. "Similarly, he (Kohli) should keep a control on his mind and on his game. If the ball is on the off-stump, (he should think that) 'I would defend it. I would not try to score of it,'" Gavaskar said. The legendary batter said Kohli should trust his bottom-hand play more than going for his drives in order to banish his troubles. "He has such a wonderful bottom hand play, with that he can play in that area, straight or towards midwicket," Gavaskar said.

Isa Guha calls Bumrah a 'primate', apologises for her remark later

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Former England player and commentator Isa Guha, who referred to Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah as a "primate" during the third Test between India and Australia here, apologised for her racist remark on Monday. She said she was "deeply sorry" for choosing a wrong word to describe the India pacer's brilliant display with the ball. Guha made the comment in response to Brett Lee's praise of the Indian bowler after Bumrah dismissed both Australian openers on day two of the Test on Sunday. "Well, he's the MVP, isn't he? Most valuable primate, Jasprit Bumrah," Guha had said while commenting for Fox Cricket. "He is the one that's going to do all the talking for India, and why so much focus was on him in the buildup to this Test match, and whether he would be fit." The usage of the word "primate" by Guha caused a social media storm, as fans



admire greatly." Guha, who is of Indian heritage and has been in Fox Sports' broadcast team for several years, said there was no malice in her comments. "I'm an advocate for equality and someone who has spent their career thinking about inclusion and understanding in the game. "I was trying to frame the enormity of his achievement and I've chosen the wrong word. For that I am deeply sorry," she added. "As someone who is also ... of South Asian heritage, I hope people would recognise there was no other intention or malice there. I hope this doesn't overshadow what has been a great Test match so far and I look forward to seeing how it progresses. Once again, I am really sorry." Former India head coach Ravi Shastri, who sat next to Guha when she issued the apology, praised her for addressing the matter live on air. Former Australia wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist was also there.

Kane Williamson makes 156 as New Zealand sets a target of 658 for England

AP ■ HAMILTON

Kane Williamson made 156 as New Zealand amassed a lead of 657 runs before both England openers were dismissed to leave the hosts in a commanding position at the end of the third day of the third cricket test on Monday. To compound an already dismal day for the tourists, England captain Ben Stokes limped from the field with a recurrence of a hamstring injury. Williamson's 33rd test century was his seventh at Seddon Park and his fifth in consecutive tests on a home ground on which he averages more than 100. New Zealand finally was dismissed for 453 after leading by 204 on the first innings and in five overs before stumps England slumped to 18-2. Tim Southee bowled Ben Duckett (4) off an inside edge in the second over of the England innings as the

opener charged the veteran seamer who is playing his final test. Zac Crawley (5) was dismissed by Matt Henry for the sixth time in the series, trapped lbw one over before stumps. Jacob Bethell 9 not out and Joe Root had yet to score were at the crease at the close. "Whenever you take a wicket for New Zealand it's special," said Southee who now has 390 test wickets. "Playing for New Zealand has been such a big part of my life and it's been such an honor to do what I've been able to do. "Hopefully the next couple of days will be a good couple of days but an emotional couple of days too." Stokes was bowling the second ball of his 13th over when, on his follow-through, he clutched at the hamstring of his left leg. He immediately walked from the field with his hand covering the lower half of his face on which was etched both pain and distress. Stokes suffered a serious

injury to his left hamstring while playing in The Hundred in August for the Northern Superchargers against the Manchester Originals. He was on crutches for some time and forced to miss England's test series against Sri Lanka and the first test of the subsequent series against Pakistan. Ollie Pope took over the captaincy in Stokes' absence. During his six-hour innings, Williamson overtook South Africa's Graeme Smith to move up to 17th place on the list of leading test run-scorers six behind another South African, Hashim Amla. He shared partnerships on Monday of 107 with Rachin Ravindra (44) and 92 with Daryl Mitchell (60). His century came from 137 balls and his 150 from 196 balls, the third 50 from 59 runs as New Zealand stepped up its scoring towards an expected declaration. The entire first session on the third day was lost to rain and a damp outfield. Play



resumed at 1.30 with New Zealand 136-3, Williamson 50 not out and Ravindra 2. Williamson scored fluently throughout the day, hitting 14 fours and a six in his century.

He was typically powerful square of the wicket, particularly in his use of the cut shot. Ravindra was sometimes bogged down, at the start of the day when he added only a handful of runs in the first hour and later when he found his scoring options limited. At times England bowled to a 7-2 offside field which plugged some scoring zones. With wide gaps on the leg side, Ravindra tried to drag a ball from Matthew Potts outside his off stump through mid-wicket but edged it from the outside half of the bat to Brydon Carse at mid-off. Mitchell joined Williamson and batted with more urgency which seemed an indication of an impending declaration. He hit two sixes and seven fours in his 60 from 84 balls before holing out to Matthew Potts in the deep to give Jacob Bethell his first test wicket. New Zealand had a 500 run lead by 4.55pm on a day when play could go on until

7.30pm, under lights if necessary, because of the loss of the morning session. It led by 600 at 6.10pm but no declaration came. England took the second new ball after 93.4 overs when the lead was 604 and put in the hands of off-spinner Shoib Bashir who took 2-170, the most expensive bowling figures against New Zealand. Mitchell Santner took 16 runs from the first over bowled by Joe Root and was out in the same over for 49. That brought Southee to the crease for his final innings in his 107th and last test, needing two sixes to become the fourth player after Stokes, England coach and former New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum and Australian wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist to hit 100 sixes in tests. He was welcomed by a guard of honor of England players but made only 2 as the New Zealand innings ended with wicketkeeper Tom Blundell 44 not out.

Ajay Arasada finds his inspiration in Devi Sri Prasad

SURESH KAVIRAYANI
sureshkavirayani@gmail.com

The talented and young music director, Ajay Arasada, is on the rise. He began his musical journey as a keyboard player for Adivi Seshi's starrer *Goodachari* and post that, worked on a few films. However, Ajay worked independently for the film *Aay* and the latest web series *Vikkatakavi*. "Goodachari film director Srirachan Pakala is my childhood friend and he offered me the opportunity to contribute keyboard programming for his film," said Ajay Arasada. "Later, I worked on films like *Ksheera Sagara Mathanam*, *Nede Vidudala*, *Missing*, and *Sriranganeethulu*." He also worked on the web series *Save the Tigers* season one and two.

Born and brought up in Visakhapatnam, Ajay Arasada watched keenly as his aunt and sisters played the Veena. "I started liking music from my childhood, watching them. Initially, I wanted to learn the guitar, so I learned the basics for about two and a half months under Sharath Master," said Ajay. He completed his engineering degree from GITAM and then worked at TCS as a software programmer. "I quit my job and decided to focus on music," said Ajay.

While working at TCS from 2011 to 2018, Ajay worked simultaneously on short films. "This gave me some practice and improved my music skills," he said. During that time, he met director Pradeep of the *Jagannatakam* film. "He saw my work and offered me the opportunity to work on his film. That's how my



entry into films happened," said Ajay. Working on the recent hit *Aay* was a good experience, said Ajay. He met producer Bunny Vas at an event related to that film. Bunny Vas said he liked the music of the *Missing* film, composed by Ajay. "Initially, he asked me to compose only two songs, but after seeing my work, they were impressed and I was given the opportunity to compose music for the other songs and the background score," said Ajay about the *Aay* movie.

He said that giving the background score for a comedy movie like *Aay* was not a small task. "However, when the film became a hit, all the hard work felt worthwhile," said Ajay.

Ajay says that directors are his mentors. "They are my greatest mentors in learning music. Collaborating with them helps me explore and learn new dimensions of music," he said. Ajay's recent web series *Vikkatakavi* is doing well, and he is receiving praise for it. "I simply delivered the output that the director Pradeep needed for the series. Being a periodical series, it required a unique musical approach. As a technician, my priority is always to deliver the output the directors seek, regardless of the genre—be it a film or a series. I'm always ready to adapt and create music for any kind of project," said Ajay.

When asked about his inspiration, "I have great admiration for Devi Sri Prasad sir. He is truly an inspiration to me," said Ajay Arasada. Talking about his upcoming projects, he said he is working on *Three Roses Season 2*, along with two other web series for Aha. Additionally, discussions are ongoing for a few movie projects, he added.

Upendra's 'lifelong dream' gets fulfilled with Rajnikanth's *Coolie*

Kannada actor Upendra is well-known to the Telugu audience, having acted in numerous Telugu films. His last film was *S/O Satyamurthy*, where he starred alongside Allu Arjun and was directed by Trivikram Srinivas. "Allu Arjun is my favourite actor and I am a big fan of him," said Upendra. He also expressed his admiration for director Trivikram. The actor hasn't appeared in any Telugu films since then due to his busy schedule. "There have been a few scripts that came my way, but I was busy with my Kannada films, so I couldn't devote time to them," said Upendra.

Now, his film *Ul* is set to release on December 20. Upendra not only stars as the lead actor but also directed, provided the screenplay, and wrote the film. It's a science fiction action film and Upendra is confident about its success. "In our education system, we were taught 'A' for apple and 'B' for bat and we memorised them. However, they didn't provide additional information about 'A' or 'B', which limited our thinking capacity. If they had provided more information, our thinking would have been different. I wanted to convey a unique thought through my films," said Upendra about his film *Ul*. He added that the idea for this film aligns with his vision.

Upendra believes that the audience is the real star, and their thoughts surpass those of a filmmaker. "The audience is more connected to this film and they interact with it," said Upendra. Upendra's films are known for offering something unique compared to other movies. "The audience accepts and encourages my films, which is why I've been able to come up with innovative subjects," he said. He added that he

spent a year completing the script and another year finalising the look and character design. "For this film, we also erected special sets, and art director Sivakumar created a surreal world for this film," he said. He added that the sets appear strange at first glance, but upon closer inspection, the meaning behind them becomes clear. "But when you decode them later, you can understand the meaning behind them," said Upendra. The actor emphasised that he doesn't intend to convey any messages through his films. "Cinema is an entertainment medium and the audience visits the theater for that purpose alone. We need to incorporate commercial elements like songs, fights and good music, and this film has all those ingredients. I neither give nor take any messages; I try to convey the same in this film," said Upendra. Upendra is currently working with Superstar Rajnikanth on the film *Coolie*. "It's been a lifelong dream to work with Rajnikanth and it's a wonderful experience for me," said Upendra.



Prabhas suffers leg injury, misses Japan promotions

Darling actor Prabhas, who recently appeared in the hit movie *Kalki 2898 AD*, incurred an injury while filming. Directed by Nag Ashwin, the film attained remarkable success, earning more than Rs 1100 crore globally.

The filmmakers have confirmed that *Kalki 2898 AD* will be released in Japan on January 3 next year. To celebrate this event, promotional activities were organised in Japan, where Prabhas was anticipated to take part. Nonetheless, the actor

notified his fans that he cannot attend because of his injury.

In a heartfelt message, Prabhas shared: "I am deeply grateful for your love and support. I have long wished to meet my fans in Japan, but unfortunately, I sustained an injury to my leg during a film shoot, which prevents me from traveling to Japan. I kindly request your understanding in this matter."

Following this announcement, fans expressed their disappointment but also extended their well wishes for Prabhas' speedy recovery.



Vishwaksen's *Laila* promises romantic action-packed entertainer on February 14

Vishwaksen is set to wow audiences with his upcoming film *Laila*, where he takes on a unique dual role, showcasing his impressive range as an actor.

Directed by Ram Narayan and produced by Sahu Garapati under Shine Screens, *Laila* promises to be a captivating romantic action entertainer. The film's striking eye look has already generated buzz, with Vishwaksen embodying the character with undeniable charm. As the release date approaches, excitement is building.

Laila will hit screens worldwide on Valentine's Day, February 14, perfectly timed to coincide with the season of love.

The release date poster features

Vishwaksen in a stylish avatar, teasing his character's intriguing persona. The makers have also announced that the 'First Rose' (first look) will be unveiled on New Year's Day, 2025.

Vishwaksen's transformation into the woman character is a highlight of the film, marking the debut of Akanksha Sharma as the heroine. With a talented team behind the camera, including Vasudeva Murthy's screenplay, Richard Prasad's cinematography, Leon James' music and Brahma Kadali's art direction, *Laila* is poised to deliver a visually stunning cinematic experience. As the promotional activities gear up, fans can expect a thrilling ride in the lead-up to the film's release.

WHEN AMRITHA AIYER'S BRIEF DISAPPEARANCE GOT BACHCHALAMALLI TEAM WORRIED

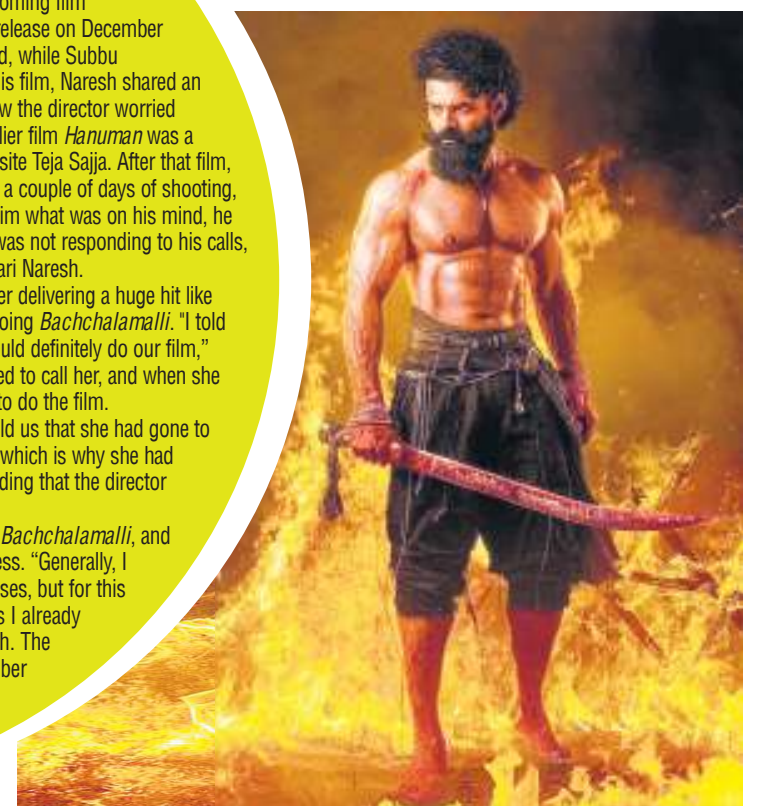
Allari Naresh is playing the lead in the upcoming film *Bachchalamalli*, which is scheduled to release on December 20. Amritha Aiyer stars as the female lead, while Subbu Mangadevi directs the film. Talking about this film, Naresh shared an interesting anecdote about the film and how the director worried about the female lead. Amritha Aiyer's earlier film *Hanuman* was a huge blockbuster, where she played opposite Teja Sajja. After that film, she signed on for *Bachchalamalli*. "After a couple of days of shooting, our director was worried. When I asked him what was on his mind, he said that the lead actress, Amritha Aiyer, was not responding to his calls, and her phone was switched off," said Allari Naresh.

He added that the director thought that after delivering a huge hit like *Hanuman*, she might not be interested in doing *Bachchalamalli*. "I told the director not to worry about it, as she would definitely do our film," Naresh recalled. However, the director still tried to call her, and when she didn't answer, he assumed she was not going to do the film.

"But after a few days, Amritha called back and told us that she had gone to the USA for the promotion of her *Hanuman* film, which is why she had switched off her phone," said Allari Naresh, adding that the director was relieved after she called back. Allari Naresh plays an intense role in *Bachchalamalli*, and he is confident about the film's success. "Generally, I feel tense before any of my film releases, but for this film's release, I feel a sense of joy, as I already sense its success," said Allari Naresh. The film is hitting the screens on December 20 and Ramesh Danda is producing it.



SDT Impresses with his warrior-like physique in *Sambarala Yetigattu*



Mega Supreme Hero Sai Durgha Tej is starring in his highly anticipated Pan-India project, *Sambarala Yetigattu*. The transformation Sai Durgha Tej has undergone for this film is leaving everyone amazed. Recently, the SYG Carnage released by global star Ram Charan, has been receiving an overwhelming response.

In the video, Sai Durgha Tej captivates audiences with his warrior-like physique. Sai Durgha Tej has dedicated himself to this role through a strict diet and rigorous

exercise regimen. His commitment to doing complete justice to both the intense action sequences and his character has been widely praised. It's clear that Sai Durgha Tej is set to create a major sensation with this film.

Produced by K Niranjan Reddy and Chaitanya Reddy under the Primeshow Entertainment banner, *Sambarala Yetigattu* marks Sai Durgha Tej's 18th film. The movie is directed by newcomer Rohit KP. SYG is scheduled to release in theatres on September 25, 2025.

Mohanlal as Kirata's first look from *Kannappa* is a visual treat

Vishnu Manchu's *Kannappa* is gearing up for an extraordinary launch in April 2025. The multi-stellar ensemble features strong cameos from actors within a distinct mythological storyline helmed by Mukesh Kumar Singh. Now, the creators revealed the initial glimpse of superstar Mohanlal, who will portray a significant cameo in the movie.

Taking to X (previously Twitter), the creators released the initial poster of Mohanlal as Kirata from *Kannappa*. The senior star achieved a striking tribal persona and his legendary role, representing both godliness and magnificence.

Along with it, the makers penned, "The wait is over! Behold the stunning full look of Lalettan, The Legend, Shri @Mohanlal, as 'Kirata' in #Kannappa. His dedication and brilliance illuminate this sacred tale of valor and devotion to life. Feel the divinity and grandeur unfold! #HarHarMahadev."

For the unversed, beside Mohanlal, other actors including Prabhas, Kajal Aggarwal and more are also supposed to portray special cameos in the film. However, the rest of their looks are yet to be unveiled by the makers, thereby keeping up with the excitement amongst the fans.

