

City Pioneer

the pioneer

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03



Saraswati Puja 2025

By Navarun Sangha

Venue

Navarun Sangha Club
February 3, (6 am)

Admissions Expo 2025

By Education Today

Venue

Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium
February 1 to 3, (9 am)

Hyderabad Premier Golf League

Venue

Hyderabad Golf Club (Coaching Center)
February 3, (10 am)

Inked Legacies, Linking Geographies

Art Exhibition By Deeksha Nath

Venue

Shrishti Art Gallery
Till February 9, (11 am)

Most wanted criminal Battula being quizzed

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

CCS of Madhapur Police have recovered 428 bullets during a raid at the residence of most-wanted criminal Battula Prabhakar, also known as Rahul Reddy, according to Madhapur DCP Dr G Vineeth. The police conducted searches based on information provided by Prabhakar and he is being interrogated. DCP Vineeth detailed the case of Prabhakar, a habitual offender from Chittoor district, who escaped police custody in March 2022 while being taken to Anakapalli court for a hearing.

Since then, he had been on the run. Last night, he was spotted near Prism Pub in Gachibowli, where he opened fire on a constable attempting to apprehend him.

Head Constable Venkatrami Reddy sustained a bullet injury to his leg. "We have arrested the accused and seized two pistols and 21 bullets from him. Since 2013, Prabhakar has been involved in crimes across five states, with nearly 80 cases registered against him - 11 in Telangana and 12 in Andhra Pradesh, making him a most-wanted criminal in both states.

He operated in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, mainly targeting educational institutions in remote areas to avoid high-risk house burglaries. Before committing a crime, he conducted reconnaissance and watched YouTube videos to learn how to evade the police.

While in jail, he developed a personal rivalry with another inmate and planned to kill him with a firearm purchased from Bihar with the help of his prison contacts. He had been using firearms for the past eight months.

WARASIGUDA CASE

Daughters perform mother's last rites with uncle's help

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Two daughters who had been living with their deceased mother in Warasiguda sought their uncle's help for the funeral and completed the rites on Sunday. They are now receiving counselling at the Sakhi Centre in Secunderabad.

The Warasiguda Police ruled out any foulplay in the mother's death. Station House Officer (SHO) R Saidulu told The Pioneer that the police intervened, persuading the uncle to take the responsibility, as no one else had come forward. The daughters also apologized for the past family disputes.

"There is no truth in blaming anyone for the woman's death. The daughters attempted suicide the day after their mother's passing and had self-inflicted cuts on their hands and neck.

Due to a family dispute three years ago, they had no contact with their uncle. We will provide them counselling and since they are educated, they can rebuild their lives," said Saidulu.

The preliminary post-mortem report indicated that the woman died of cardiac arrest.

A detailed report is expected within a week. The doctors said that she had constant complaints of pain in uterus, the police added.

RESTAURANTS IN JUBILEE HILLS ROAD No. 36

Expired products, littered fridge, cockroach infestation found

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Task Force Team of Telangana's Commissioner of Food Safety inspected restaurants in Jubilee Hills Road 36 and found multiple violations.

The Task Force Team inspected Poshnosh Lounge and Bar and found expired and misbranded Sichuan pepper, imported from Bangkok without importer details, which was seized. The establishment was operating with an expired license (20/12/2024).

Key documents such as water analysis reports, pest control records, FOSTAC certificates and employee medical records were missing. Refrigerators were not properly cleaned or defrosted. The kitchen floor lacked proper drainage for food waste and had an open entry without a window or insect-proof screen.

Food and non-food items, as well as vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, were stored together. Food items were placed directly on the ground. Industrial-use citric acid (1kg) was found in storage. Expired food items like soy sauce, papad packets, rasam powder, onion powder, cajun mix, mushrooms and packed methi were discarded. Split cashews were found infested with insects.

Later, The Task Force Team also inspected Kishkinda Kitchen (Kake di Hatti), and found that refrigerators were dirty and filled with food waste. Water analysis reports, FOSTAC certificates, and employee medical records were missing. Kitchen drains were clogged and food items were improperly stored. Spoiled vegetables, live cockroaches and rat feces indicated a pest infestation. Expired items, including juice, mushrooms, sunflower oil and packed mustard seeds were discarded. Food handlers were working without gloves. The Task Force Team stated that a notice will be issued and further action will be taken accordingly.



T-Consult hosts 2-day health network collaboration meet

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The two-day TConsult Integrated Health Network (TIHN) Collaboration Conclave 2025 was held at T-Hub, reaching out to 60 countries in 13 languages through TConsult AI. The event brought together top healthcare experts and industry leaders to advance integrated medicine and holistic healthcare solutions.

Renowned naturopathy expert Manthena Sathyanarayana Raju delivered a speech in Telugu, which was translated live into 13 languages by TConsult's AI, making his insights accessible world-wide. He shared health tips for professionals in demanding jobs and appreciated Chairman Sundeeep



T-Consult Chairman Sundeeep Makthala, along with renowned naturopathy expert Manthena Sathyanarayana at the T-Hub

Makthala's disciplined lifestyle of sprouts, yoga and early dinners.

Meanwhile, Sundeeep emphasised the importance of integrating Indian traditional health practices into global healthcare. He announced plans to collaborate with traditional medicine practitioners across

India to expand TIHN's reach. With its presence in 63 countries, TIHN aims to bridge modern medicine with traditional healing, boosting medical tourism and strengthening India's economy. The conclave marked a major step in creating an accessible and holistic healthcare ecosystem.

Stampede victim may be shifted for global treatment

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Film producer Bunny Vasu visited the Pushpa 2 stampede victim at KIMS Hospital on Sunday.

According to sources, as the child has not shown significant improvement, plans are being made to shift him abroad for advanced treatment.

The last health update on January 29 stated that the child's vital parameters remain stable, and he is on full nasogastric feeding, receiving physiotherapy and rehabilitation support.

Dr Chetan R Mundada and Dr Vishnu Tej Pudi reported that while his agitation episodes have reduced and he is more awake, he still does not recognise family members or show a consistent response to verbal stimuli.

Tree adoption, relocation gaining ground in city

DEEPIKA PASHAM
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■ HYDERABAD

A 100-year-old banyan tree in Shankarpally, Ranga Reddy district, was relocated two to three kilometers to a private property after an individual adopted it to prevent it from being cut down.

Despite having all its branches stripped nearly a decade ago, the tree had successfully regrown. This case highlights a growing trend where individuals are stepping forward to adopt and relocate old trees, spending nearly Rs 2 lakh on equipment and transportation to move them to safer locations.

The VATA Foundation, a Hyderabad-based non-profit organisation has been facilitating tree translocations for years and has been overwhelmed with requests from Telangana and beyond. The organisation has successfully completed translocations in Maharashtra, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Dehradun and Bhopal.

Speaking to The Pioneer, Uday Krishna Peddireddi, founder of the VATA Foundation, said, "The Shankarpally relocation was initiated after an individual who wanted to adopt the tree reached out to me for help."



The 100-year-old Banyan tree being translocated in Shankarpally

It's not just individuals who are coming forward - the Patny-Secunderabad Traffic Police have also requested the relocation of several trees. The request was forwarded to the Forest department and Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) and is now pending execution.

VATA Foundation receives nearly 15 calls per month from people interested in tree translocation. Since the process is accessible online,

many adopters are willing to hire JCBs and cranes to transport trees.

If the tree is large, only one can be transported at a time, and additional equipment is hired for the day, contributing to the Rs 2 lakh expense per relocation.

The foundation advises adopters to move trees within one to two kilometers for a better survival rate. The increasing interest in tree adoption is largely due to successful past

translocations, where relocated trees have continued to grow and thrive.

Looking ahead, VATA Foundation is working on a protocol document outlining specific relocation methods for different types of trees. The draft will soon be submitted to the National Wildlife Board and the Ministry of Environment, ensuring that future tree adopters can follow standardised methods for effective transplantation.

Advanced brain fitness tech unveiled to boost mental clarity



Students, medical professionals and corporate employees experiencing a live demonstration of the BrainTap device at the T-Hub on Sunday

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

BrainTap, a leading brain fitness company, unveiled advanced technology to boost mental clarity, reduce stress and enhance well-being across the country. During the launch at T-Hub on Sunday, students, medical professionals and corporate employees experienced a live demonstration of the device, which is fitted to the eyes and connects to the brain using rhythmic sounds and visuals for overall well-being. BrainTap features the Gamma wave (30-100Hz) for insight and peak focus, along with Beta and other waves at the needed frequencies to reduce stress and improve well-being. Dr Nawab Mir Nasir Ali Khan, Honorary Consul of the Republic of Kazakhstan, along with Ajay Mishra, IAS (Retd.), and other key officials attended the launch.

At the event, Founder & Co-CEO of BrainTap, USA, Dr Patrick Porter explained how the brain can be rewired through neural plasticity and pruning. He

emphasised the importance of exercising the brain as we age and adapting to the changing world. Dr Porter discussed the role of neurogenesis and neurochemical changes during recovery, as well as how the brain can recover from trauma, toxins and negative thoughts. He stressed the need to keep our brains healthy and highlighted BrainTap's mission to unlock the full potential of individuals by harnessing the power of brain fitness.

Dr Porter also mentioned that while several universities in India are still researching BrainTap, he highlighted that they have succeeded in proving the effectiveness of the technology.

Meanwhile, Board Director at BrainTap USA, Vishal Bajjal said that BrainTap seamlessly combines ancient Indian wellness practices with modern neuroscience. Inspired by Dhyana (meditation), Nada Yoga (sound healing), and Trataka (light therapy), BrainTap uses binaural beats, guided visualisation and photonic stimulation to activate the brain's natural healing states.

BC leaders demand 42% quota in local body polls

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The BC Caste Associations' Joint Forum has called on the Telangana government to immediately implement 42% reservations for BCs in local body elections as promised in the Kamareddy BC Declaration. During a round-table at the Somajiguda Press Club, BC leaders and caste association representatives criticized the government's delay and called for state-wide protests if their demands were not met.

Key demands include, local body elections should only occur after completing the caste survey. A special 15-day drive should finish the



incomplete caste survey. 50% of government-nominated chairman and director posts should go to BCs. Political parties should ensure 50% representation for BCs in district president positions and other key posts.

Former chairman of the BC Commission Dr

Vakulabharanam Krishna Mohan Rao warned the government against using the Supreme Court's verdict as an excuse to deny BCs their share. He urged the government to file a revision petition to uphold BC reservations and submit new caste survey data.



FIRST COLUMN

THE SCIENCE OF MUDRAS

Rooted in the five elements, the five pranas and the three doshas, mudras have therapeutic properties



RAVI VALLURI

Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita says, "There is nothing as sacred as knowledge." Knowledge can be acquired by the human mind through the 5 Ds—dedication, determination, dynamism, devotion and discipline and one H—Humility. The science of mudras, is intrinsically related to the esoteric knowledge of yoga and which can be further segregated into the five elements, the five life forces (or subtle forces of energy called the pranas) and the three doshas. The five elements are namely – Akash (ether or space), Vayu (air), Agni (fire), Jal (water) and Prithvi (earth); the five life forces or pranas are Prana, Udana, Samana, Apana and Vyana and the three doshas are Vata, Kapha and Pitta. Humans unconsciously practice mudras. For instance, the Namaste Mudra or a young child begins learning to walk with his thumbs raised which is called the Meru Dand Mudra. An infant even in a deep slumber, his index finger would involuntarily touch the thumb and the other three fingers are on the base of the palm (Chinmaya Mudra). The universe in its auto-mode conjures these processes to take place and we are oblivious to the occurrence. Some other mudras which need to be practised are:

- (a) Jnana mudra: This is performed to increase brain power, improve memory and for the removal of negative thoughts. Thereby one attains peace and bliss.
- (b) Prithvi mudra: This helps in balancing the five sense organs, improves blood circulation and enhances our energy levels. Practice of this mudra assists in increasing our alertness.
- (c) Apana mudra: This facilitates an improved elimination process, revitalising the digestive system, improving the gums and strengthening immunity.
- (d) Prana mudra: This mudra addresses the problem of fatigue; it also



provides essential vitamins to the body besides increasing stamina and vigour to the human body. It also helps in maintenance of the health of our eyes.

(e) Dhyana mudra: Essentially, this mudra helps in making us mindful and wakeful and we are at peace with ourselves. Over a period, we attain peace of mind.

(f) Shunya Vayu mudra: Practice of this mudra helps in combating problems of flatulence and gastric ailments. The gut houses our solar plexus, which is also referred to as the second brain. We need to take adequate care of our abdomen as most human ailments arise from this part of the body. Therefore, there is enormous merit in the adage, "Health is in your hands".

Sudarshan Kriya: The unique breathing technique of Sudarshan Kriya is the fulcrum of the Happiness Programme of the Art of Living. Su means proper, Darshan implies vision and Kriya is a purifying action. Through the actions of our breath, we appreciate a proper vision of who we are. It is momentous to understand that nature runs on a rhythm. For instance, the sun rises and sets at a particular time, similarly, seasons arrive and exit at predetermined times. Humans feel hungry or sleepy at certain times. Our emotions, feelings and thoughts are all cast in the symphony of rhythm. We are unable to distinguish between cacophony and symphony in this frenetic pace of life which is cannonaded by innumerable thoughts, continuous action and noise. When sounds are harmonised by the syllable of Soham, we can term it as magical music. Enlightenment is not accruing anything providential but harmonising our whole being rhythmically. During the breathing process participants feel varied sensations, emotions, tingling sensations, laughter, weeping among others. This wonderful knowledge and wisdom have triggered humaneness to blossom when every cell is energised.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Cornered in the wild: Trapped tigers spark conservation debate

As human encroachment, tourism and habitat fragmentation continue to blur the boundaries between nature and civilisation write **BKP Sinha and Arvind Kumar Jha**

A viral video capturing a distressing scene of a tigress and her cubs blocked by a throng of safari vehicles in Maharashtra's Umred Pauni Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary has recently stirred significant concern and legal action. The Bombay High Court has taken suo-motu cognizance of the incident. Soon after, the Supreme Court sought a uniform national policy for managing the country's tiger reserves. The harrowing sight of the tiger family, seemingly gripped by fear while navigating the available space, serves as a poignant metaphor for the troubling dynamics between humans and wildlife, whether inside a tiger reserve or not. Mankind's relentless drive to dominate and exploit nature has led to a disturbingly eroded sense of ecological sanity. Tigers, magnificent predators endowed with a formidable set of adaptations, have long been revered for their prowess. Their sharp teeth and claws, exceptional vision and hearing, flexible spines and explosive bursts of speed enable them to efficiently stalk and capture prey.



Their striped coats act as camouflage, making them elusive both as hunters and as well as prey. Tigers, being solitary creatures, are known to be fiercely territorial, marking their domains with scents, claw marks, and vocalisations. While frequent and close encounters with tigers may thrill tourists, these experiences come at a significant cost to the animals' well-being. Increased human presence not only exacerbates stress and vulnerability among these majestic creatures but also alters their natural behaviour. After several populist initiatives to regularise forest encroachments, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was legislated in 2006. It marked an era of mass-scale recognition of habitation, self-cultivation, and community forest resource rights. However, it has also resulted in new encroachments and a notable influx of human populations into forest areas increasing the proximity and chances of conflict between wildlife and humans.

The data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs shows that by November 2024, an overwhelming 4.35 million (85.7 per cent) out of 5.07 million claims under the FRA had been disposed of. Titles on forest rights in 33 million acres of forest land having been given, illegal occupation continues in the rejected cases which are 36.5 per cent in left-wing affected states and 60 per cent in others.

The absence of a final deadline for claim submission, ease of securing recommendations from Gram Sabhas that many times are not held, the prevalent use of the FRA as a political tool, and the quality of scrutiny at the authorities' levels have created an environment encouraging encroachers confident of regularisation. In Gujarat, 434 cases have been disposed of, and Maharashtra accepted 4,322 new individual forest rights claims in November while distributing 498 titles. Triggered by legislation, such a trend of ingress into wildlife habitats is unprecedented. There has been a significant surge in recognition of community forest resource rights (CFRR) after the FRA Rules were amended in 2012. Management rights of forests have been granted to communities by violating the eligibility conditions stipulated in sections 3(1)(i) and 4(3) of the FRA. Not sparing even tiger reserves and National Parks and Sanctuaries, such rights are granted, for example, in huge areas in Chhattisgarh in Dhamtari (5,544 ha), Achankmar and Sitanadi Udanti tiger reserves (12,527 ha), 60 per cent of Billigiri Wildlife Sanctuary in Karnataka, and the

Tansa Sanctuary in Maharashtra. Such actions do trigger a surge of human presence within wildlife habitats. As regards human casualties resulting from tiger attacks, they were recorded at 110 in 2022 and 82 in 2023. Data from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), however, sheds light on troubling trends in tiger mortality. In 2021 and 2022, tiger deaths within reserves exceeded those outside. However, this pattern reversed in 2023 and 2024, with more tiger fatalities occurring outside protected areas. As of January 2025, 17 tiger deaths have been reported, 12 of which occurred outside reserves. The conversion of spared areas into shared spaces impacts the behaviour of wildlife. Tigers are no exception.

They naturally respect territorial boundaries but get forced to venture into human habitations due to encroachment and habitat degradation. It does result in harm to locals, mostly accidental and out of hunger rather than retaliatory or revengeful. People, however, in contrast to their erstwhile prevalent spirit of tolerance and co-existence, mostly respond now through retaliation or out of vengeance resulting in the escalation of human-wildlife conflict.

In an unprecedented move, the Odisha state government issued an order in 2024 holding forest officials accountable for tiger deaths which has stirred conversations about the responsibilities and challenges faced by foresters in balancing conservation efforts with the rights and safety of people. The interaction between humans and wildlife species that are naturally active during the day (diurnal) or at dawn and dusk (crepuscular) face substantial behavioural changes when their activity patterns overlap with human activities. In the case of recreational activities in parks also, animals that typically forage or hunt during these times may alter their routines due to the presence of people, leading to stress and changes in feeding, mating, and territorial behaviours. Inside and near forests, light pollu-

tion, such as artificial lighting from streetlights, homes and recreational areas disrupts wildlife in numerous ways.

It can interfere with their natural movement patterns, making it difficult for animals to navigate their habitats, find food, or avoid predators. Light pollution can also impact predation, as predators might find it easier to spot prey, or conversely, prey might become disoriented and more vulnerable. Additionally, artificial lighting can affect reproductive behaviours, as many species rely on natural light cues for mating rituals and timing. The current approach of providing electricity etc. to interior forest habitations, seemingly beneficial for human populations, does pose a significant threat to long-term wildlife conservation. Along with this, large-scale proposals such as those recently announced in Telangana and Nagarhole (Coorg district) of Karnataka must consider their potential impact on human-wildlife conflict too.

Mitigating adverse impacts on wildlife necessitates more than merely avoiding times when human activities overlap with wildlife activities. Even if human disturbances occur outside of wildlife activity periods, the large-scale nature of such disturbances can still have a profound effect on wildlife. These disturbances often displace animals from their natural habitats, causing significant behavioural changes that can threaten even their survival. Instances from the area near Pench National Park in Maharashtra highlight the negative consequences of the changed behaviour of tigers. In one such case, a tiger in Parshiwni village attacked only tethered cattle, easy prey. During the necropsy of this tiger, excessive fat was found due to changes in its behaviour and diet. In the Ramtek area tigers have exhibited a concerning loss of territorial instincts indicating a breakdown in their natural order and social structure. Another tiger from the Kanhan region displayed unusual behaviour by regularly avoiding consuming its kill. Such avoidance

suggests, prima facie, a high level of stress and disturbance. Such instances are alarming as they simply indicate that the natural predator-prey dynamics and status of the health of the tiger population are compromised. Minimising disturbance to wildlife is paramount inside tiger reserves. However, with the current onslaught by humans and the pace of blurring of ecosystem boundaries, a more nuanced approach is necessary which requires a deeper understanding of the spatial and temporal dynamics of wildlife movement, recognition of the varying levels of sensitivity among different species, and consideration of a broader ecological context that includes fragmented landscapes, human settlements, and the impacts of climate change.

While the whole country is eagerly waiting for an early decision in the matter of Wildlife first and Ors Vs Union of India & Ors (109/2008) from the Supreme Court, the need for a national policy framework for not just tiger reserves but for all habitats cannot be overstated. It should be implemented by State Governments while duly considering the local contexts and the unique challenges faced by each region.

Evicting illegal encroachments on forest and wildlife habitats and relocating the genuine right-holders onto non-forest areas with adequate infrastructure should be the first step towards restoration of the ecological integrity of our natural systems. The impacts of climate change and natural disasters are no longer theoretical threats but stark realities. Recognizing the broader public interest in wildlife conservation and ecosystem sustainability, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, the National Tiger Conservation Authority, and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs must collaborate closely to develop and implement effective conservation strategies that address these challenges.

(The writer are former PCCFs, UP and Maharashtra; views expressed are personal)



IN AN UNPRECEDENTED MOVE, THE ODISHA STATE GOVERNMENT ISSUED AN ORDER IN 2024 HOLDING FOREST OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE FOR TIGER DEATHS WHICH HAS STIRRED CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY FORESTERS IN BALANCING CONSERVATION EFFORTS WITH THE RIGHTS AND SAFETY OF PEOPLE

Budget 2025 puts sustainability at the forefront, but execution holds the key

With substantial investments in renewable energy, climate-resilient agriculture and afforestation, the budget lays a strong foundation for a greener future

The Union Budget 2025 signals a decisive shift towards environmental sustainability, reinforcing India's commitment to a cleaner, greener future. With a strong focus on renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, afforestation, waste management and climate resilience, the government has intended to balance economic growth with ecological responsibility. Expanding solar, wind, and hydro energy, along with incentives for green hydrogen, is a welcome step toward reducing India's carbon footprint. The emphasis on electric vehicles (EVs) and battery storage solutions will further bolster the transition to clean energy, reducing



RAJ KUMAR SRIVASTAVA

dependence on fossil fuels. However, the challenge remains in efficient implementation and ensuring accessibility to these technologies, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. Agriculture, often at the crossroads of economic and environmental policies, has received a much-needed sus-

tainability boost. The PM Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana and Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses are moving in the right direction, ensuring climate-resilient farming and reducing excessive reliance on chemical fertilisers. However, agroforestry, regenerative farming and watershed management need further integration into mainstream agricultural policy to create a truly sustainable food system.

The budget's allocation for afforestation and biodiversity conservation reflects an increased understanding of the role that forests and ecosystems play in mitigating climate change. With the Compensatory Afforestation Fund

Management Authority (CAMPA) receiving enhanced support, there is hope that India's forests will be managed with greater transparency and scientific precision. However, urban greening and nature-based solutions in city planning deserve stronger commitments, given the growing challenges of urban heat islands and pollution.

The circular economy model gets a notable push with incentives for waste-to-energy projects, stricter plastic waste management, and extended producer responsibility (EPR) regulations. These are positive steps, but enforcement remains a crucial hurdle. Ensuring that industries comply with waste management norms and



moving towards a zero-waste economy will require robust monitoring and public participation. The budget's recognition of climate resilience, particu-

larly through disaster management investments and early warning systems, is a commendable effort. Coastal and flood-prone regions will benefit from increased fund-

ing for disaster-resistant infrastructure, but a long-term climate adaptation roadmap needs further detailing.

One of the most promising aspects of Budget 2025 is the expansion of India's Green Finance ecosystem. With tax incentives for Green Bonds and carbon trading markets, the government is encouraging private sector participation in sustainability efforts. However, ensuring that green investments translate into real environmental benefits will require stringent regulatory oversight and transparency.

While Budget 2025 takes significant strides in promoting environmental sustainability, its true success will be measured by execu-

tion, enforcement, and long-term commitment.

India has demonstrated political will in tackling climate change, but the challenge remains in aligning policy promises with on-the-ground realities. Sustainability is not just a budgetary allocation; it is a mindset shift. To truly achieve a green future, India needs a whole-of-society approach, where the government, private sector, and citizens work together to ensure that economic growth does not come at the cost of ecological wellbeing. With this budget, India has set the direction—what remains is the resolve to act decisively.

(The writer is a retired IFS officer; views are personal)

'WE DIDN'T WANT SKY FORCE FEEL LIKE 'BEEN THERE, SEEN THAT' VIBE'

TEJAL SINHA
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From a struggling artist juggling multiple roles to becoming one of the most sought-after screenwriters in the industry, Aamil Keeyan Khan's journey is a testament to perseverance, adaptability and an unrelenting passion for storytelling.

With films like Drishyam 2, Runway 34, Bholaa, Shaitaan, and Sky Force to his credit, he has mastered the art of keeping audiences at the edge of their seats. His work on Drishyam 2 even earned him the prestigious IIFA Award for Best Story (Adapted). In an exclusive chat with The Pioneer, Aamil delves into his approach to screenwriting, the art of suspense and his unexpected journey into the world of cinema.

Khan's journey into screenwriting was anything but conventional. In fact, he describes it as a "happy accident." Reflecting on his early days in Kolkata, he recalls how financial constraints led him to writing. "Back in Kolkata, I co-founded a theatre group with my friend Anshuman. We acted, produced, and managed the plays, but we barely had enough money to pay for the auditorium - hiring a writer was out of the question," he says. "The older plays felt dated in terms of language, so I was forced into writing simply because we couldn't afford a proper writer. Necessity is a great teacher, and that's where it all started."

However, Khan never saw himself as confined to one particular role. "All the guys I admire - Kishore Kumar, Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood - they've mastered multiple crafts," he says. But he also acknowledges the reality of surviving in the industry. "Let's be real: when the rent is due, you sell whatever sells. Desperation made me cook up ideas in the hopes that someone would buy them."

Determined to make a mark, Khan moved to Mumbai in 2016 and threw himself into the grind. "I was hustling from morning to midnight - auditioning as an actor during the day, building websites in the afternoon, doing stand-up comedy in the evening, and writing stories at night," he recalls.

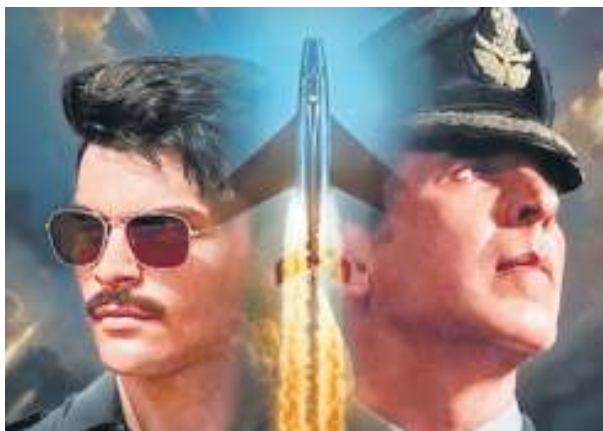
Interestingly, his first break in the industry wasn't in screenwriting but in editing. "Ironically, I didn't even start as a screenwriter. My first paid gig was in editing - I assisted cinematographer Sanjay F Gupta on his documentary, editing parts of it."

But storytelling eventually took over. "I started developing ideas, and in 2020, with Runway 34, let's just say... things finally took off," he says with a smile.

Discussing his approach to screenwriting, he emphasises that every film demands a unique treatment, but at its core, storytelling is always about emotion. "Every story boils down to what it makes the audience feel. The first step is to identify the core emotion of the film - fear, tension, excitement, hope - and then build everything around that."

Once that emotional foundation is in place, choosing the right genre to convey the story becomes crucial. "A thriller like Drishyam 2 is all about suspense and deception - keeping the audience guessing while making sure every reveal is satisfying. Runway 34, on the other hand, had elements of mystery and survival, so the storytelling had to create a sense of urgency and pressure while staying grounded in reality."

Screenwriting, he says, is also about when and how to reveal information. "In high-stakes stories, tension comes from what the audience knows versus what the characters know. The goal is to keep the audience leaning forward, making them active participants in the story. Whether it's a mind game like Drishyam 2 or a high-intensity drama like Runway 34, the challenge is the same - keeping people invested, right up to the final frame."



For Khan, his latest project, Sky Force wasn't just another war film - it was a story that needed to be told. "Some stories aren't just told; they demand to be told. Sky Force was one of them. For me, this wasn't a war film - it was a film about brotherhood. It's not the machine, but the man behind the machine that matters."

At the heart of the film lies the relationship between the officers, a dynamic that drives the narrative forward. With a filmography spanning thrillers, action, and drama, he has proven his ability to adapt to different storytelling styles. He believes the key to mastering different genres lies in understanding their rhythm. "Storytelling is all about rhythm. A thriller demands tension and precision, an action film needs momentum, and a drama thrives on emotion. The trick is to listen to the story - some need a slow burn, some need a ticking clock."

Rather than imposing a personal style on every film, he lets the genre dictate the tone. He also turns to classic films for inspiration, studying what makes them work. "Besides that, I have my go-to bibles in every genre - films that I revisit to understand what makes them work. It's not about copying but about learning the craft from the best and then finding my own way to figure that rhythm."

Given Khan's previous work on Runway 34, one might assume that he was well-prepared to write another aviation-based film. But Sky Force presented an entirely new challenge. "Having worked on Runway 34, which was also an aviation-based film, we thought we had some idea of what we were walking into... but boy oh boy, we couldn't have been more wrong," he admits. One of the biggest challenges was ensuring that the aerial action sequences felt fresh and engaging. "It was crucial that the scenes didn't give off a been there, seen that vibe," he explains. "To achieve that, we had to take all the technical information and present it in the simplest layman terms possible - so that when the action unfolded, when the dogfights happened, the audience knew what was going on."

One of the defining aspects of Khan's work is his ability to craft morally ambiguous characters that resonate with audiences. He believes that the most compelling stories force audiences to confront their own moral boundaries. "There's a good wolf and a bad wolf within all of us, and the most gripping stories explore that battle," he says. "The key is making the audience understand a character's choices, even if they don't agree with them. In Drishyam 2, the tension comes from making people root for someone who is technically guilty. In Shaitaan, it's about power and control. These stories resonate because they force the audience to ask, What would I do in their place? - and that's when

KNOWN FOR HIS WORK ON DRISHYAM 2, RUNWAY 34, BHOLOA AND SKY FORCE, AAMIL KEEYAN KHAN OPENS UP ABOUT HIS UNCONVENTIONAL JOURNEY, HIS UNIQUE APPROACH TO STORYTELLING, EMPHASIZING EMOTION, SUSPENSE AND MORE



storytelling becomes truly powerful."

Instead of chasing commercial success, Khan prioritizes storytelling that feels authentic to him. "I focus on whether the film works for me first. At least that way, I know there's one person who genuinely enjoys it. And if it feels right to me, I hope and pray it'll resonate with others too."

Writing for an established franchise like Drishyam 2 comes with immense pressure, but Khan's approach is refreshingly simple - he ignores the expectations. "By forgetting that it's part of an established franchise and focusing entirely on crafting a kick-ass narrative," he says. "The pressure of expectations can be distracting, so I try not to think about it."

Rather than being weighed down by the legacy of a previous film, he focuses on what makes the story compelling on its own.

When asked about the most difficult project he has worked on, Khan doesn't hesitate. "That's my next film," he says with a grin. "How did I overcome the creative hurdles? I haven't. Still figuring that one out."

While he remains tight-lipped about his upcoming projects, he hints at a diverse and exciting lineup. "All top secret!" he teases. "There are five feature films and two web series in the works, spanning thrillers, true stories, crime, action, drama, comedy, and, of course, horror." And as for what audiences can expect?

He keeps it simple. "The same thing as always - expect the unexpected."

Bhumi Pednekar brings 90s-style comedy back with Mere Husband Ki Biwi

Actor Bhumi Pednekar is excited to take on the comedy genre in her upcoming film Mere Husband Ki Biwi, a move she describes as a refreshing opportunity, especially considering comedy was a dominant genre in 1990s Hindi cinema. The film, directed by Mudassar Aziz, also stars Arjun Kapoor and Rakul Preet Singh, and delves into the quirks and complexities of romantic relationships.

At the trailer launch of the film, Pednekar shared her enthusiasm about stepping into a comedic role, a genre she feels is often overlooked for female actors. "I grew up watching films in this genre and was inspired by actresses like Karisma Kapoor and others who brought comedy to the forefront," Pednekar said. "I'm glad Mudassar sir gave me the opportunity to try my hand at comedy in two of his films, Pati Patni Aur Woh and Mere Husband Ki Biwi."

Pednekar expressed that it's rare for female actors to lead in comedy films, making this a significant chance for her to break new ground. "In this film, both female actors take on comedy in a way that was common in the 90s, where actresses would lead the comedic roles just like in the Number One series films," she added, referring to the iconic films of that era.

The film's focus on romantic relationships, paired with its comedic elements, sets the stage for an entertaining experience, with both Pednekar and Singh embracing their comedic roles.

During the conversation, Pednekar was asked about the common perception of rivalry between female actors. She firmly dismissed the idea of ego clashes and insecurities on set, especially between her and her co-star Rakul Preet Singh. "She is my sister. She's married to my best friend (Jacky Bhagnani), and now she has become one of my closest friends. This narrative that two heroines are insecure is not true—it must have been started by insecure men," Pednekar shared, emphasizing the strong bond she shares with Singh.

The film's producer, Vashu Bhagnani, along with Jacky Bhagnani and Deepshikha Deshmukh, brings Mere Husband Ki Biwi to the screen, promising a mix of humor and heart.

Set to release on February 21, the film will explore the humorous side of complex romantic dynamics, with Bhumi Pednekar, Arjun Kapoor, and Rakul Preet Singh taking center stage.

With the promise of a fun-filled, refreshing take on relationships, Mere Husband Ki Biwi is sure to be a treat for fans of comedy, offering both entertainment and the delightful chemistry between its lead actors.



Mahakumbh 2025 breaks tourism records!

The world gathers in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, for the magnificent Mahakumbh 2025, as the Ganges River's hallowed waters churn with excitement. India's rich cultural legacy is demonstrated by this age-old spiritual extravaganza, which takes place once every twelve years. The Mahakumbh, which unites devotees, tourists and explorers from all over the world like a celestial alignment, fosters a sense of wonder, spirituality and community. A parallel phenomenon is taking place as the celebrations rouse the banks of the Ganges: an extraordinary travel boom that is propelling India's tourism industry into the stratosphere. As India proudly presents its rich cultural tapestry to the globe, the stage is set for a monumental celebration that will not only revitalize the economy but also revive the soul!

Data from local companies, airlines and travel agencies indicates that the Mahakumbh is drawing record numbers of visitors, which is stimulating the economy and providing a big opportunity for the travel and tourist sector. With the government spending Rs 5,000 crore on tourism infrastructure, including enhancing roads, railways, airports and accommodation facilities to handle the surge of tourists, the event is anticipated to bring in Rs 40,000 crore in tourism revenue.

Demand for local services, like car rentals, is also rising; businesses like Savaari Car Rentals are observing an increase in reservations for private transportation due to its comfort and convenience. The government has increased infrastructure development to handle the influx, strengthening Prayagraj's roads, growing its airports and bolstering security measures! "The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 is not just a spiritual event; it is a huge driver of travel and tourism in India," says Gaurav Aggarwal, founder and CEO of Savaari Car Rentals. "We have witnessed a 21.4% increase in spiritual tourism this year, with an anticipated 42 million pilgrims. Travel demand has been directly impacted by this surge, particularly



in tier-2 and tier-3 towns. Off-the-beaten-path routes to Prayagraj, like those from Varanasi, Ayodhya and Lucknow, have seen a 35% increase in reservations over prior years."

Aggarwal continued, "We are dedicated to ensuring that this significant transition goes well by growing our fleet, hiring certified drivers and improving on-ground assistance. To meet the increasing demand for hassle-free, dependable and safe travel, we have expanded operations and improved connectivity along important pilgrimage routes. We are crucial to making Maha Kumbh 2025 a huge success for pilgrims and India's tourism industry by guaranteeing last-mile connectivity, even on less-travelled routes."

With a clear and ambitious goal for the future, Savaari Car Rentals hopes to solidify its position as the industry leader in the Indian vehicle rental sector. This vision is supported by an unwavering focus on technology and innovation, a dedication to strategic initiatives and a thorough comprehension of the changing dynamics of the market. Its path has been characterised by noteworthy accomplishments and turning points thus far, laying the groundwork for future expansion and prosperity. Fundamentally, the travel and tourism industry is experiencing a notable economic boom as a result of the Mahakumbh, which is expected to be a historic occasion that will underscore India's position as a global center of culture.

what's brewing?



The 9th edition of Run for Girl Child 2025 was organised in city on Sunday by Seva Bharathi Telangana to empower adolescent girl child. The run was started from Gachibowli Stadium, conducted in three categories, 21km, 10km and 5km, saw 11,000 participants from individuals, corporate families and students. IT Minister D Sridhar Babu presented mementos to the winners



PARTY

Photos by - SV Chary



Meghna



Sunila



Shalini



Supraja Rao



Ronak yar Khan



Avinash Agarwal



Rajeswara Rao



Divya



Sabita and Preeti



Priyanka

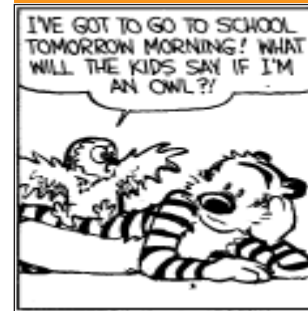
Kadari Art Gallery is thrilled to announce its upcoming group exhibition, "Four Voices, One Narrative: The Art of Seeing the Funny Side," featuring works by renowned artists Gurmeet Marwah, Mrinal Dey, Rajeswar Rao and S Nataraj. The exhibition opens with a special preview at the gallery's space in Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad. "Four Voices, One Narrative" alongside Avinash Agarwal's stand-up comedy act, serves as an invitation to laugh, unwind and rediscover the transformative power of humour in daily life. Through a clever mix of wit and irony, the showcased artworks present the absurdities and intricacies of human behaviour with a touch of humour and insight. The exhibition runs from January 31 to February 25 at Kadari Art Gallery, Road No. 14, Jubilee Hills

FUN

ARCHIE



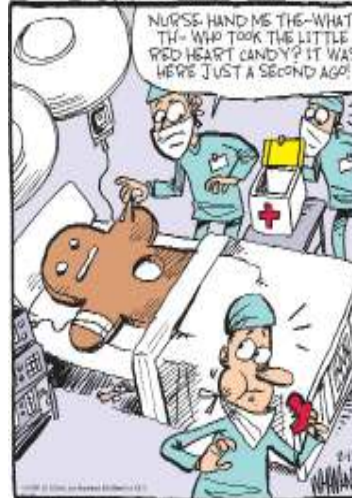
CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



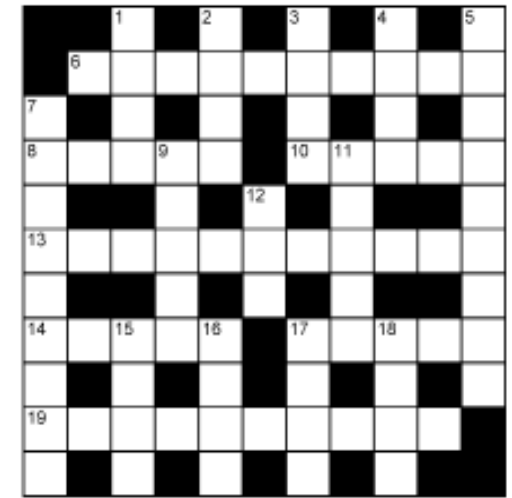
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



SUDOKU

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

Yesterday's solution

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

- 6 A large naval ship
- 8 Feeling very annoyed
- 10 A South American dance
- 13 A very wealthy person
- 14 Gets closer to
- 17 A soft type of hat
- 19 A grower of fruit trees

DOWN

- 1 Gun sound
- 2 Don't go
- 3 A strap for trousers
- 4 Skinny
- 5 The people you play against in a game
- 7 A court game played with rackets and a shuttlecock
- 9 A measuring stick

SOLUTION

S	A	T	U	R	N	B	I	T
E	G	G	O	N	D	R	I	T
A	C	I	E	F	U	N	I	L
T	O	B	A	B	E	V	E	R
L	U	L	A	B	V	E	R	E
P	E	A	L	T	S	O	T	R
C	H	E	S	S	O	T	T	E
N	E	A	L	T	E	N	N	I
I	L	T	T	E	R			
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It is not combinations, it is content for success: Dil Raju

Top producer Dil Raju made sensational comments about big budget and combination films. He also says that the collections which are showing these days are completely wrong and the percentage of success is very low. He spoke about so many issues related to the film industry at the distributor's gratitude meet...



SURESH KAVIRAYANI
sureshkavirayani@gmail.com

Top producer Dil Raju made sensational comments at the success meet of his film 'Sankranthiki Vasthunnam'. After a long time, the distributors attended meet to mark the success of a film and they are all very happy that they got profits because of 'Sankranthiki Vasthunnam'. "With this film's success, we learnt a lot of lessons. It is not com-

binations, it is the content that will give success," said Dil Raju. These comments from a top producer like Dil Raju means, it is sensational. These days many top producers rely more on combinations than the content.

Even Dil Raju's other film 'Game Changer' is a big combination of Ram Charan and director Shankar, which is one of the high budget films. It seems, Dil Raju put a lot of money on 'Game Changer', but the film was a big disas-

ter at the box-office and all the distributors and producer lost a lot of money. After the two days of 'Game Changer' release, 'Sankranthiki Vasthunnam' was released and the first show onwards the film got positive response and became a huge hit. Directed by Anil Ravipudi, the film has now joined the Rs 300 crore club, which is a record. "A Telugu cinema reaching Rs 300 crore club is definitely a miracle," said Anil Ravipudi at the same event.

Dil Raju also said that many films which are showing highest collections are not the actual figures. "When a film gets a breakeven for a distributor, it becomes a hit. But these days many distributors are losing money, at the same time, the makers release posters that it is a big success. Now, the industry has seen only 90 per cent flops, only 10 per cent success. But from the last 20 years, though there are a few flops and success, distributors continue their journey with us which we should thank them," said Dil Raju.

The producer said that he entered into the industry and saw a lot of success and failures too. "We believe in story and content, but in between we too see ups and down, also believe in combinations for the last four to five years. But now, we learnt our lessons," said Dil Raju. He added that he introduced many new talents to the industry. "We made some classics with newcomers and we always believe in content and now with 'Sankranthiki Vasthunnam', we are back to normal and definitely want to make films in the coming 10 years," said Dil Raju.

Senior actor Venkatesh is the lead actor in this film, while Aishwarya Rajesh and Meenakshi Chaudhary are the female leads. "Major credit goes to Venkatesh," said Anil Ravipudi and added that he has seen two miracles with this film in his life. "A regional cinema collected Rs 100 crore in just six days and also a regional cinema reached Rs 300 crore which I saw for the first time," said Anil Ravipudi, the director.

Dil Raju's brother and another producer Shirish said that these days, people are not giving value to distributors. "We started our production with distribution and now there is no respect for distributors. But now, Anil Ravipudi gets that respect and value due to the distributors with this success," said Shirish.

One of the distributors LVR said that these days many distributors are at loss, despite the film collections showing high. "In the last few years, no film made any profits for distributors. After many years, the distributors are in a happy position with 'Sankranthiki Vasthunnam'," said LVR.

After two years, Ajith is arriving with action

It's been more than two years, Ajith Kumar's film was released in Tamil and Telugu. Ajith is one of the popular stars in Tamil cinema and his films are also releasing in Telugu as he is known here. Recently, Ajith Kumar also participated in the car racing at Dubai and made India proud as he stands in the third position. Now, his film 'Vidaamuyarchi' is releasing on February 6, and at the same time it is releasing in Telugu as 'Pattudala' on the same date.

Magizh Thirumeni is the director, while it is produced by Subaskaran under Lyca Productions. The film has also completed the censor formalities and

has been certified U/A. The recently released trailer has taken the internet by storm, featuring Ajith Kumar in an intense action-packed role. Trisha Krishnan is playing the female lead; after a long time both are together for this film. Regina Cassandra is also there in another key role along with action King Arjun. The movie has already sold for a whopping price for Satellite and OTT, with Sun TV acquiring the satellite rights and Netflix bagging the OTT streaming rights.



DULQUER SALMAN'S NEW TELUGU FILM LAUNCHED

Malayalam superstar Dulquer Salmaan is now concentrating more on Telugu cinema. The actor is on cloud nine with his latest 'Lucky Bhaskar' becoming a big success in Telugu. Now, the actor's new film 'Akasamlo Oka Tara' was launched on Sunday in Hyderabad. Pavan Sadineni is the director, while the film is produced by Sandeep

Gunnam, son of popular producer and director Gunnam Gangaraju. The interesting part about this film is, two big production houses, Swapna Cinema and Geetha Arts owned by Swapna Dutt and Allu Aravind respectively, backed this film.

On Sunday at a simple ceremony, the muhurat was held in Hyderabad. Dulquer Salmaan with the success of 'Lucky

Bhaskar' is widening his business in Telugu. He is also popular in Tamil, Kannada and Hindi. So the makers are planning to release it in all other languages too.

On the other hand, director Pavan Sadineni is a successful director with his debut film 'Prema Ishq Kadal' and then made two other films and few web series also. His last web series 'Daya' is also a big suc-

cess on the OTT. Now, he got a big chance to direct Dulquer Salmaan for 'Akasamlo Oka Tara'. The regular shooting may start soon and the other cast and crew details will also be announced in the coming days.

No buzz for Vishwaksen's Laila

Vishwaksen, the young actor, is looking for a break with his upcoming film 'Laila'. He is also appearing as a woman in this film and it is touted to be a comedy. The film is slated for a February 14 release, on the occasion of Valentine's Day. Though the makers put on a

few events recently, there is no buzz about the film.

Ram Narayan is the director, while Akanksha Sharma is the female lead. Produced by Sahu Garapati, the film's teaser and two songs released recently, but still the film didn't get the buzz that they expected. Recently, another song from the film was

also unveiled. Music is composed by Leon James.

Vishwaksen's last two films 'Mechanic Rocky' and 'Gangs of Godavari' didn't do well at the box-office. The actor is now pinning hopes on this 'Laila' which he did hard work especially to appear as a woman. He is one talented

actor, but it seems, the actor needs a good break and compete with others. The latest song is going to be a major crowd-puller, according to the makers.

The screenplay for 'Laila' is written by Vasudeva Murthy, with Richard Prasad handling the cinematography.



Anirudh roped in for Nani and Odela film

Anirudh Ravichander is one of the few young music directors in demand in both Tamil and Telugu. The music director is now roped in for Nani and Odela combination film 'The Paradise'. Nani and Anirudh shared this news on their social media and it is their third collaboration. Earlier, Anirudh worked for Nani's 'Jersey' and 'Gang Leader'. "This one is special. My dear Nani and Odela," shared Anirudh in his social media page. "We are on our hat trick. This is an epic," says Nani in his social media page welcoming the music director.

Nani is currently shooting for the film 'Hit 3' and once after he completes this one, he is going to join Srikanth Odela for 'The Paradise'. Srikanth and Nani earlier worked for 'Dasara' which is a period action drama. Nani's performance in that film was critically acclaimed. As the title suggests, this film also has an action backdrop with entertainment, says a source.



Music director Thaman turns into lead actor

Music director S Thaman is all set to play the lead actor in a Tamil film, according to a source. The actor is going to share screen space with another actor Aharva in this Tamil film. Interestingly, Thaman made his debut as an actor in 'Boys' directed by none other than Shankar Shanmugham. After that, he appeared as a cameo in a couple of films, but he never was a lead actor.

Now, the source reveals that a Tamil director is all set to rope in Thaman as the lead actor in his film. Though Thaman is one of the top music directors in Down South, he is busy with multiple projects both Telugu and Tamil as music director. But in the meantime, he wanted to pursue his acting too, thus he accepted this role. "It's an interesting story and Thaman's role is very important in it, that's why he agreed to do it," said a source.

Thaman's recent film 'Daaku Maharaja' is a successful one and he is also nicknamed as Nandamuri Thaman. He is also working for a musical night for NTR Trust to raise funds for medical camps. He also met AP Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu recently.

Two-tier Test format likely before India's tour of England: Report

PTI ■ LONDON

When Australia face South Africa in the World Test Championship final, it will mark the end of the current format, which is set to be relaunched as a two-tier system ahead of India's tour of England later this summer. In a bid to create a "fairer competition", England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) chairman Richard Thompson, who is the head of the ICC's strategic growth committee, recently held talks with the apex body's chairman Jay Shah and the two will lead the plan. With just five months left for the next cycle to start with England hosting India at Headingley from June 20, Thompson acknowledged the urgency of the matter. "It is fully understood that the current structure does not work in the way it should and we need to find a fairer, better competition, but at

this stage no recommendations have been put forward," Thompson told Telegraph Sport. "We have five months to work on this, step back and look at what the structure should be going forward. The World Test Championship should be fairer and more competitive. It is going to change to ensure it always encourages the best teams to reach the final and encourages other nations that want to play Test cricket, to play Test cricket. "We will protect, grow and ensure the integrity of Test cricket because the format is crucial to the DNA of the game." The current model has drawn criticism for its inconsistencies. Teams do not play every other nation within the two-year cycle, and an excess of two-Test series has skewed standings. Political constraints mean India and Pakistan do not



face each other, impacting the integrity of the competition. Similarly, South Africa reached the final without playing Australia, though they will meet in the title clash at Lord's in June. Discussions will also explore the possibility of four-day Tests, as this could help boards schedule three-Test series around franchise leagues, the report has said. Notably, no three-Test series involving teams outside the "big three" of England, India, and Australia has taken place since 2019. However, the four-day Tests won't be there for marquee series such as the Ashes or matches between tier-one nations. The push for a two-tier system gained traction following Australia's blockbuster series against India, which set attendance records. The proposed model would see the top-tier nations play

each other more frequently, potentially sidelining other teams and series which has evoked negative responses from the legends of the game. West Indies great Clive Lloyd has been a strong critic of the system, saying it would be "disastrous for smaller teams". "All these countries have worked very hard to get there. We have been in ICC for nearly 100 years. We've a great history and now you're going to tell us, because of a monetary situation, this is how it's going to be," Lloyd had said. Sri Lanka's World Cup winning skipper Arjuna Ranatunga has also criticised the move, saying it would only benefit the three boards. "Sport isn't just about Pounds, Dollars and Rupees. Administrators must nurture and protect the game." Bangladesh batter Mominul Haque and England's former pacer Steven Finn have also criticised the move.

Hard to go past India, Australia in CT: Ponting

PTI ■ DUBAI

The legendary Ricky Ponting feels the quality of players and recent history make India and Australia the favourites to compete in the summit clash of the upcoming ICC Champions Trophy. The 50-over tournament will take place from February 19 to March 9 across three venues in Pakistan and one in Dubai. "It's hard to go past India and Australia again," Ponting told the ICC Review. "Just think about the quality of players in both countries right now, and you look back in recent history when these big finals and big ICC events have come around, and inevitably Australia and India are there somewhere," said the former Australia captain. India and Australia are the only teams to have won the Champions Trophy twice.



India secured the crown in 2013 and shared the trophy with Sri Lanka in 2002 after the final was washed out, while Australia clinched back-to-back titles in 2006 and 2009. Pakistan, the defending champions after winning the 2017 edition, will also pose a strong challenge, according to Ponting. "The other team that is playing some really good cricket at the moment is Pakistan," said Ponting, who won two ODI World Cups

and as many Champions Trophy titles as captain. "Their one-day cricket over the last little bit has been absolutely outstanding. We know they're not always the most predictable team in those big tournaments, but they seem like they've sorted things out a little bit." Pakistan won all the three ODI series they played last year, including a 2-1 comeback win in Australia and Zimbabwe, followed by a 3-0 whitewash of South Africa.

Pure cricketing miscalculation, says Ashwin on concussion substitution row

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former India spinner R Ashwin has questioned the use of concussion substitution during the fourth T20I against England, in which medium-pacer Harshit Rana replaced batting all-rounder Shivam Dube, calling it a case of "pure cricketing miscalculation." Dube, who had scored a half-century, was struck on the head by Jamie Overton off the penultimate delivery of India's innings. Head coach Gautam Gambhir then effectively used the concussion protocol to field Rana in place of Dube, who bowls at speeds in the early 120 km/h range. Rana, on debut, took 3 for 33, and India won the match by 15 runs, clinching the T20 series with a match to spare. "The game is done. India capture yet another series at home. T20I has been a real juggernaut of a win. But my first question is, did we forget it was an international game and played an IPL match?,"



Ashwin said on his hindi YouTube channel 'Ash ki baat'. "Because today all the discussion was on how Harshit Rana became Shivam Dube's concussion sub? I can understand it has happened in the past too. In Canberra, Yuzvendra Chahal replaced Ravindra Jadeja. "You can call poetic justice, or in fact poetic injustice. I don't understand it. At least earlier, Chahal replaced Jadeja. Here, Harshit Rana replaced Shivam Dube." The concussion protocol

allows a like-for-like replacement, and Rana, a tearaway quick, replaced medium pacer Dube, who is used as an 'impact player' for Chennai Super Kings in the IPL. England's captain Jos Buttler, unhappy with the decision, stated that his team was not consulted and would seek clarity from match referee Javagal Srinath on what exactly constituted a like-for-like replacement in concussion cases. Ashwin believes that

Ramandeep Singh would have been a more appropriate like-for-like replacement for Dube. "There is no role of the Indian or England team. If there is no one in the squad, then you can say that Harshit Rana can bat a bit and Shivam Dube can bowl a bit, that's why we brought him in. Like-for-like replacement Ramandeep Singh was sitting outside. I don't understand," said Ashwin. "This is a case of pure cricketing miscalculation, either on the part of the umpires or the part of the match referee or whoever be it. Ramandeep Singh was there, a batter who can ball a bit, like-for-like for Shivam Dube. Not for him. "Harshit Rana was chosen as the concussion substitute. I think people in charge should look into this. Today it happened against England and hurt, some day India might be hurt too." India will face England in the final ODI on Sunday.

Karnatak, Haryana play out a draw

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Ravichandran Smaran gave another reminder of his immense talent with an unbeaten hundred as Karnataka ended the Ranji Trophy season with a draw against Haryana in their Elite Group C match here on Sunday. However, Haryana have already qualified for the knockouts from the group, starting from February 8, along with Kerala. Haryana are also the group-toppers with 29 points from seven games and Kerala finished second with 28 points. Karnataka were fourth (20) behind Bengal (21) on the table. Starting from overnight 108 for 3 and 38 runs behind, Karnataka had some work to do to ensure that they would not end up with a defeat in their final league match. However, they lost Deydutt Padikkal (43), KL Shrijith (2) and Yashovardhan Parantap (12) in the space of 12 overs to slip to 164 for six. The home side was just 16 runs ahead at that time, but Smaran (133 not out, 217 balls, 14x4, 2x5) and Hardik Raj (40, 78 balls, 4x4) shared an alliance of 98 runs for the seventh wicket to shore their side up. More importantly, they consumed nearly 25 overs and a couple of hours during the stand that carried Karnataka to 262 before Hardik fell to Jayant Yadav. But by that time, Karnataka had a lead of 114 runs. Smaran extended that lead to 148 as Karnataka reached 294 for 8 in their second innings, and at that point Haryana agreed for a draw, knowing that there was not enough time to mount a chase. Smaran was also Karnataka's highest run-getter this Ranji Trophy season with 516 runs in seven matches at an average of 64.50 with two hundreds.

BCB independent committee to probe BPL corruption allegations

PTI ■ DHAKA

The Bangladesh Cricket Board has established an independent inquiry body to assist its Anti-Corruption Unit in probing a slew of corruption allegations over the last couple of weeks in the Bangladesh Premier League. This marks the first official corruption investigation in the BPL since 2013 as the league faces challenge with delayed player payments and ticketing controversies. "As part of its ongoing efforts, the BCB is in the process of establishing an Independent Inquiry Body to further support the ACU in its investigations," a BCB press release said. "The BCB remains dedicated to ensuring a fair and

transparent cricketing environment, and will continue to take all necessary actions to safeguard the integrity of the sport in Bangladesh." Recent media reports have alleged instances of corruption, naming specific players and matches, although these claims have not yet been substantiated by the BCB's ACU. "The BCB has also come across media coverage regarding potential anti-corruption concerns about the BPL. The Board reiterates its firm commitment to upholding the integrity and spirit of the game," added the release. "The BCB strictly adheres to the ICC Anti-Corruption Code for Participants and maintains a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption in any form.

Balaji-Bollipalli pair wins, Karan impresses on debut

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

N Sriram Balaji and Rithvik Choudary Bollipalli were clinical in their effort before Karan Singh dished out an impressive show on debut as India thrashed Togo 4-0 in the play-off tie to keep their place in the Davis Cup World Group I, here Sunday. Starting the day with a 2-0 lead in pocket, India needed to win just one of the three matches of the day. The pair of Balaji and debutant Bollipalli did the job in the very first contest against M'lapa Tingou Akomolo and Hod'abalo Isak Padio. The Indians needed only 57 minutes to dispatch the Togo team 6-2 6-1 at DLTA Complex. Togo replaced their best player Thomas Setodji with

to an arm injury. It hurt them as Akomolo could not hold serve even once in the contest. The tie already sealed, India expectedly handed debut to youngster Karan Singh in the first reverse singles. Watched by his coach Aditya Sachdeva, the 21-year-old raced to a 6-2 6-3 victory. Both teams decided not to play the dead fifth rubber. Surprisingly, it was Sasikumar Mukund who sat in the captain's chair instead of Rohit Rajpal when Karan played. Karan served extremely well, was aggressive in his returns and also wisely used the drop shots. Padio, who plays in the US Collegiate circuit, hit the ball well but Karan had better control and that made a huge difference in the outcome of the match. Karan, who also trained at the now-shut National Tennis



Centre (NTC) at DLTA, showed a lot of composure and did not let the occasion get to him. The only blemish for Karan was dropping his serve in the fifth game of the second set. Balaji was sensational with his serving. Playing percentage tennis, he lost just one point on his serve during the match. It was a pretty straightforward

show from Balaji and Bollipalli, who had won a Challenger together last year. Bollipalli was a bit under pressure when he could not pick up a half-volley, making it 30-all in his first ever service game on debut but managed to hold. After that it was one-way traffic throughout. The Indians got their first

break when Akomolo served in the third game. At 15-15, Bollipalli hit an upish forehand return that sailed over the two players but landed inside the lines. Balaji then hit a service return winner to earn two break points. A riveting volley rally ensued on first break points with all four players showing some great reflexes, but eventually one Akomolo return flew over the baseline. It gave India a 3-1 lead and Balaji made it 4-1 with another strong service game. His nerves settled, Bollipalli came out serving even better and soon Akomolo was serving to stay in the set. However, he did not help Togo's cause by serving consecutive two double faults from 15-15, giving the Indians two set points.

Praaggnandhaa and Gukesh in joint lead at Tata Steel Masters

PTI ■ WIJK AAN ZEE

World Champion D Gukesh played out a draw with Jorden van Foreest of Holland, while Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa beat Alexey Sarana of Serbia as the two Indians shared the lead after a thrilling day at the Tata Steel Masters here. Praggnanandhaa notched up his third consecutive win to take his tally to a commendable 8.5 points, same as his compatriot Gukesh after the 12th and penultimate round. The two Indians are now poised for an exciting finish in the prestigious tournament, with the remarkable prospect of one of them potentially clinching the title—a first in Tata Steel Masters history. Eying the top spot after the 11th round, Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan was outdone by Arjun Erigaisi and is all but out of

title contention on 7.5 points. Praggnanandhaa was involved in another Queen's gambit declined opening. Only this time he was playing with white pieces. It was quite a contrast from his previous round game against Caruana as Sarana went for an early advance of king side pawns and then castled on the queen side. It was time to launch an attack against the black king and Praggnanandhaa did not disappoint. In tactical complications, Praggnanandhaa was at his best as he sacrificed a piece to rip-apart the black's king position and what followed thereafter was a pleasure to watch. "At that point I realized it could be a long game, but then I saw this piece sacrifice," said Pragg after the game. The game ended through a queen sacrifice resulting in force checkmate. Gukesh played a game of



fluctuating fortunes against Foreest, who has the ability to play the spoiler on any given day. Foreest declared his peaceful

intentions early in the Queen pawn game as white when he appeared ready for a repetition. However, Gukesh declined the offer and the

game was still equal with many pieces on board. Foreest sacrificed a Rook for a knight but on the 39th move Gukesh returned the

favour with his clock ticking away. It was a won position for Gukesh but precise calculation was needed and it was right here that the Indian faltered allowing his opponent a huge comeback. Foreest had suddenly turned the tables down but did not quite realise it and decided to go for perpetual checks in the heavy piece endgame. Arjun Erigaisi finally proved his mettle against Nodirbek Abdusattorov, whose ambitions of claiming the top spot came to an end. The game featured a Nimzo-Indian Defense, wherein the Indian had white pieces and his choice of Capablanca variation gave little chances for Abdusattorov to disturb the balance. In the early middle game, Abdusattorov went for unwarranted complications and ended up blundering on the king side. Arjun won a pawn first and later won two bishops for a rook. With precise calculations he

wrapped up the issue. In other games, Leon Luke Mendonca shared the point with top seed Fabiano Caruana of United States, while P Harikrishna drew with Vincent Keymer of Germany. The finale could be exciting as Gukesh is up against a resurgent Arjun, while Praggnanandhaa has to tackle Keymer. In case of a drawn result on both boards, the play-off of shorter duration game will decide the winner. In the challengers' section, R Vasihali lost to Ediz Gurel of Turkey to remain on five points and Divya Deshmukh was on the receiving end against Benjamin Bok of Holland. It's a three-way lead in this section with Aydin Suleymanli of Azerbaijan and Nguyen Thai Dai Vam of Czech republic joining overnight leader Erwin Lami in pole position on 8.5 points. Results round 12 Masters:

Erigaisi Arjun (Ind, 4.5) beat Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzb, 7.5); Jorden van Foreest (Ned, 5) drew with D Gukesh (Ind, 8.5); Wei Yi (Chn, 6.5) drew with Anish Giri (Ned, 6.5); Leon Luke Mendonca (Ind, 4.5) drew with Fabiano Caruana (Usa, 6); R Praggnanandhaa (Ind, 8.5) beat Alexey Sarana (Srb, 5.5); P Harikrishna (Ind, 6) drew with Vincent Keymer (Ger, 5); Max Warmerdam (Ned, 3.5) lost to Vladimir Fedoseev (Slo, 7). Challengers: Nodirbek Yakubboev (Uzb, 7) beat Arthur Pijpers (Ned, 5); Divya Deshmukh (Ind, 3) lost to Benjamin Bok (Ned, 8); Nguyen Thai Dai Van (Cze, 8.5) beat Irina Bulmaga (Rom, 1); Aydin Suleymanli (Aze, 8.5) beat Svane Frederik (Ger, 7); Ediz Gurel (Tur, 7) beat R Vasihali (Ind, 5); Erwin Lami (Ned, 8.5) drew with Nogerbek Kazymbek (Kaz, 6.5); Oro Faustino (Arg, 3.5) beat Lu Mlaoyi (Chn, 5.5).