



the pioneer

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QUOTE OF THE DAY
The pioneer

Harish Rao is staging a political drama over a tragedy. Does he think he knows more than top tunnel engineers? Is he trying to insult the Army, Navy commandos and BRO teams who are risking their lives in this operation? The BRS left this project incomplete. If they had functioned efficiently, this project would have been finished long ago, and Telangana would have had 30 TMC feet of extra water benefiting three to four lakh acres



- Uttam Kumar Reddy, Minister P4

BJP using 'fake voters' to win polls, alleges Mamata

INDIA NEEDS TO RAMP UP BILATERAL TIES FOR TRADE, INVESTMENT: FM

Guard film shot entirely in Australia: VIRAJ REDDY

DON'T MISS...

Posani grilled, produced in court

YSRCP leader and popular Telugu film actor Posani Krishna Murali was questioned by the police at Obulavaripalli police station in connection with a criminal case. A police team, led by Annamayya district SP Vidyasagar, interrogated Krishna Murali until 8 p.m. regarding allegations of using unparliamentary and offensive language against opposition leaders. According to sources, he failed to provide satisfactory answers. The police reportedly showed him video footage of his remarks against TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu...

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Maha Kumbh 'truly global event'

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the successful organisation of Maha Kumbh 2025, calling it "a truly global event". Addressing journalists at the media centre here, a day after the conclusion of the Maha Kumbh, Adityanath said, "Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj truly became a global event, and the credit goes to the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His vision has helped us successfully execute this grand event, and you..."

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'ONOP' to expand port footprint

Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Monday launched a consortium consisting of India Ports Global, Sagar Mala Development Company and India Port Rail and Ropeway Corporation to expand their maritime footprint and strengthen supply chains, among others. In addition to this, Sonowal, who is the Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways, also rolled out a slew of other initiatives including 'One Nation-One Port Process (ONOP)' to standardise and streamline operations...

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'Rohit knows how to work under pressure'

Former opener Shikhar Dhawan believes Rohit Sharma has matured as a leader over the years and shares a close bond with his teammates, which augurs well for the Indian team. Dhawan, who was Rohit's opening partner for a considerable period of time, said the Mumbai batter is experienced enough to handle the team. "From 2013 to 2025, 12 years of experience is a lot. Rohit has been through a lot. He knows how to work in a pressure situation, how to gather the boys. As a leader, he has become mature..."

-SPORTS

P-4 system by Ugadi: CM

GOVT AIMS TO SUPPORT THE POOR BY IMPLEMENTING WELFARE SCHEMES

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The State government will launch the P-4 (Public, Philanthropic, People Participation) system by Ugadi to empower the downtrodden sections of society.

The ruling dispensation is making every effort to support the poor, and the P-4 initiative, along with existing welfare schemes, is expected to provide additional assistance to the underprivileged. Chairing a meeting on P-4 and the family empowerment-benefit management system, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu directed officials to ensure that affluent families contribute towards uplifting weaker sections. He also emphasised the need for a structured and sustainable policy to implement the initiative effectively.

Officials informed the Chief Minister that the verification of five lakh families would be completed by August. As part of a pilot project, P-4 will be implemented in four villages, benefiting 5,869 families. Those owning two acres of wetland or five acres of dryland, government employees, income taxpayers, four-wheeler owners, individuals with properties in municipal areas, and financially stable families will be excluded from the scheme. The Government aims to ensure that only the truly eligible beneficiaries receive support.



- CM directs officials to involve affluent families in uplifting weaker sections
- Verification of five lakh families to be completed by August
- Pilot project in four villages to benefit 5,869 families
- Financially stable families and certain categories excluded from the scheme
- About 40 lakh families estimated to be eligible for benefits
- Household survey in 10 districts to conclude by March 2
- Second phase in 16 districts to be completed by March 18
- Eligible families' details to be added to 'Samridhi Bandhanam'

Initially, officials estimated that about 40 lakh families would qualify for the scheme. A household survey is underway in 10 districts in the first phase, to be completed by 2nd

March, while the second phase covering 16 districts will be conducted between 8th and 18th March.

Once the survey is completed, details of eligible families will be

incorporated into 'Samridhi Bandhanam'. Chief Secretary K Vijayanand and officials from the Planning Department attended the meeting.

AP Budget 2025 to be presented today

Will the govt strike the right balance amid high expectations & fiscal challenges?

C PRADEEP KUMAR
cpk007@gmail.com
■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh Cabinet is set to finalise the budget proposals for the 2025-26 fiscal year on Friday morning, ahead of Finance Minister Payyavula Kesav's presentation in the State Assembly later in the day.

According to sources, the State's total expenditure is projected to be between Rs 3.05 lakh crore and Rs 3.20 lakh crore. People across the State are keenly watching how the government will allocate resources amid economic challenges.

This will be Minister Kesav's second budget. His first, presented in November 2024, had an outlay of Rs 2.94 lakh crore. The state had earlier gone through two interim budgets following the TDP-led NDA government's return to power in July 2024. The fiscal deficit for 2024-25 was estimated at 4.19% of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), while the revenue deficit was projected at 2.12%. The agriculture and allied sectors were allocated Rs 11,855 crore, given their importance to the state's economy.

The upcoming budget is expected to include revised estimates for



The State's total expenditure is projected to be between Rs 3.05 lakh crore and Rs 3.20 lakh crore. People across the State are keenly watching how the government will allocate resources

2024-25, likely exceeding the initially projected Rs 2.94 lakh crore. These revisions reflect a reassessment of financial performance and adjustments for economic conditions. However, concerns remain over revenue growth, as Finance Department data shows a marginal 1.2% increase in the state's own tax revenue over the past year.

Continued on Page 2



AP govt signs MoU with Skillbee to train nurses

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh Skill Development Corporation (APSDC) on Thursday signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Skillbee to provide training to nursing students from both public and private institutions, enabling them to secure jobs in Germany and other European countries.

Speaking after the MoU signing, Minister for Education, IT, and Electronics Nara Lokesh stated that Germany is facing an acute shortage of nurses, particularly for elderly care and hostel facilities. He noted that the country requires at least three lakh nursing professionals immediately.

Lokesh expressed confidence that the partnership with Skillbee would help nursing students receive German language training, enhancing their

job prospects in Europe, especially in Germany. He added that the initiative aims to secure employment for at least 1,000 nursing students annually with attractive salary packages.

Skillbee India Pvt Ltd co-founder Vinjamuri Ravichandra Gowtham and CEO Ujwal Chouhan stated that their institute has already facilitated job placements for nearly 10,000 individuals in various countries. They described Skillbee as one of the world's leading start-ups in employment generation.

The officials highlighted that students from their institute have been placed in Germany, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, and other East European nations. They outlined their goal of transforming Andhra Pradesh into a "skill capital" by addressing the language barrier through Skillbee and APSDC.

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Ex-MLA Vamsi opposes solitary confinement, citing health risks

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) leader and former Gannavaram MLA Dr. Vallabhaneni Vamsi Mohan was presented before the Vijayawada court on Thursday after completing three days in police custody.

During the proceedings, Dr. Vamsi raised concerns over being held in solitary confinement, citing his asthma condition and the associated health risks. He requested the court to assign him a cellmate, stating that he had no security concerns.

In response, the presiding judge inquired whether an attendant had been provided and clarified that, as



the in-charge judge, he could not authorise placing another inmate in the same cell. However, he advised Dr. Vamsi's legal counsel to file a formal request in the regular court on

Friday. Meanwhile, the jail superintendent was directed to ensure that a warden was present in Dr. Vamsi's cell to monitor his health. The government's counsel acknowledged that he was placed in isolation for security reasons but did not object to appointing a warden. Following this, Dr. Vamsi was shifted to Vijayawada district jail.

Meanwhile, Vijayawada Central Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) Damodar stated that there was substantial evidence linking Dr. Vamsi and his associates to the abduction of Mudunuri Satyavardhan.

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Jagan condemns Posani's arrest

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

YSRCP president and former chief minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy has strongly condemned the arrest of cine actor Posani Krishna Murali. On Thursday, Jagan Mohan Reddy spoke over the phone with Posani's wife, Kusumalatha, who resides in Hyderabad, to express his solidarity in light of the arrest.

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High voter turnout in MLC elections

Charges of cash distribution mar poll process in State

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The MLC elections in three key constituencies—North Andhra, Krishna-Guntur, and East-West Godavari—saw high voter participation, though allegations of cash distribution marred the process in some areas.

Polling was conducted peacefully across all districts, with a remarkable 91.82% turnout in North Andhra



(Vizag, Vizianagaram, and Srikakulam), where teachers cast their votes. Anakapalle recorded the

highest participation at 96.22%. In Krishna-Guntur and East-West Godavari, where graduates voted, turnout stood at 65.58% and 63.28%, respectively.

In Krishna-Guntur, 51,279 graduates voted in the NTR district (65.69% turnout), while the Krishna district recorded a 68.02% turnout, with 42,927 voters participating. The ballot boxes have been shifted to Vijayawada Sub-Collector's Office, and counting will take place in Guntur on March 3.

However, allegations of voter bribery surfaced in multiple locations. Reports from Pithapuram, Pedana, and Kakinada indicate that cash ranging from Rs 2,000 to Rs 3,000 was allegedly distributed at polling stations. In Visakhapatnam, violations of election norms were reported, with leaders openly flouting Election Commission rules.

Despite these allegations, election officials have not taken action against offenders, raising concerns about electoral integrity in Andhra Pradesh.

Insects outperform humans in social efficiency: Biologist

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

In the bustling world of ants, bees, and wasps, teamwork isn't just a virtue—it's a way of life. These tiny creatures, often overlooked, have built societies that, in many ways, surpass human efficiency. This was the fascinating argument presented by Professor Raghavendra Gadagkar, a distinguished evolutionary biologist, during a lecture at GITAM Deemed to be University as part of National Science Week celebrations.

Professor Gadagkar, a senior scientist at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and recipient of the prestigious Shanti Swarop Bhatnagar Award, captivated the audience with his insights into the advanced social structures of insects. "They exhibit an extraordinary division of labour, effective communication, conflict resolution, cooperation, and even altruism," he said, suggesting that these behav-

iours often put human societies to shame.

A leading authority in ethology, Professor Gadagkar shed light on how insects manage resources sustainably, engineer their environments, and even practise agriculture—a skill some species mastered millions of years before humans. Termites, for

instance, construct elaborate ventilation systems in their mounds, while leafcutter ants cultivate fungi to sustain their colonies. These creatures also possess sophisticated defence strategies, with individual and social immunity mechanisms that safeguard their communities.

One of the highlights of his talk was

the discussion of Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) theory, a concept derived from ant foraging patterns that has influenced fields as diverse as telecommunications, logistics, and artificial intelligence. By following simple rules and learning from one another's successes and failures, ants collectively navigate the most efficient

paths to resources—an approach that has inspired breakthroughs in internet routing and traffic management.

Professor Gadagkar also delved into the disciplined world of honeybee colonies, where age determines responsibility. Younger worker bees handle in-hive duties, while older, more experienced bees venture out for risky foraging missions. This strategic allocation of tasks ensures the survival and efficiency of the hive.

The event, presided over by Professor K.S. Krishna, Dean of the GITAM School of Science, highlighted the university's commitment to fostering scientific curiosity. Professor Krishna lauded Professor Gadagkar's contributions to evolutionary biology and expressed gratitude for the engaging discourse, which left the audience with a newfound appreciation for the intelligence of the insect world—and perhaps, a few lessons for human society to consider.



Insects like ants, bees, and wasps have mastered teamwork, resource management, and even agriculture—long before humans. Renowned evolutionary biologist Professor Raghavendra Gadagkar explains how these tiny creatures operate with remarkable efficiency, offering lessons that could inspire human innovation.

KRISHNA-GUNTUR GRAD MLC ELECTION

Polling held peacefully

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Krishna-Guntur Graduate Constituency MLC election was conducted smoothly on Thursday, with no untoward incidents reported in either NTR or Krishna districts. NTR District Collector Dr G Lakshminsha and Krishna District Collector DK Balaji personally monitored polling across their respective jurisdictions.

The voter turnout stood at 65.69% in NTR district and 68.02% in Krishna district. After polling concluded, ballot boxes were transported to the reception centre at the Vijayawada Sub-Collector's Office. The counting of votes is scheduled for March 3 at AC College in Guntur.

Vijayawada MP Kesineni Sivanath (Chinni) and his wife cast their votes at KBC ZPH School in Patamata, Vijayawada. Several public representatives and officials also exercised their franchise at polling stations across the city.

To enhance voter accessibility, the Election Commission of India (ECI) set up additional polling stations compared to previous elections. While polling began at a slow pace, the trend continued until the end of the voting period. NTR District Police Commissioner SV Rajasekar Babu oversaw security arrangements, ensuring a peaceful voting process.

In NTR district, 51,279 graduates voted out of 78,063 registered voters across 112 polling stations. Collector Dr Lakshminsha visited polling centres at Koneru Basavaiah Chowdary Zilla Parish High School in Patamata and Gentela Venkata Jogaiah ZP High School in Jaggayyapeta, apart from monitoring polling trends in Nandigama and G Konduru. The turnout, which was 49% by 2 PM, surged to 65.69% in the final two hours. Leaders of the TDP-led NDA alliance facilitated voter transportation to polling stations.



Voters cast their votes at a polling station in the Krishna-Guntur Graduate MLC elections in Vijayawada on Thursday. Photo by Ch Vijaya Bhaskar

92.40% voter turnout for Uttarandhra Teachers MLC polls

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The polling process for the Uttarandhra Teachers Member of Legislative Council (MLC) elections successfully concluded across six districts on Thursday, witnessing an impressive voter turnout. The voting commenced at 8:00 AM and continued until 4:00 PM, with a steady stream of voters arriving early at polling stations. The district administration ensured comprehensive arrangements for a smooth election process.

In Visakhapatnam district, 5,529 voters were registered across 13 polling stations. By the end of the day, 4,829 voters had exercised their franchise, resulting in an 87.34% turnout. Across the six districts of Uttarandhra, a total of 22,493 voters were eligible to cast their ballots, with 20,783 participating, marking an overall voter turnout of 92.40%.

The polling process was closely monitored by Returning Officer and District Collector M.N. Harendhira Prasad from the Command Control Room at the District Collectorate Meeting Hall. He also visited polling centres at Prema High School and Andhra University (AU) Primary School in the Daba Gardens area to oversee the proceedings. Assistant

Returning Officer and District Revenue Officer B.H. Bhavani Shankar provided continuous updates on polling percentages, ensuring smooth coordination.

Election observer M.M. Nayak reviewed the overall polling process and visited the AU Primary School polling station alongside the District Collector to ensure a fair and orderly election. Officials were instructed to remain vigilant and maintain a peaceful voting atmosphere. Later, they returned to the Command Control Room at the Collectorate to monitor polling across all six districts, issuing necessary instructions to Returning Officers and Assistant Officers.

Among the six districts, Anakapalle recorded the highest voter participation at 96.22% (2,776 out of 2,885 voters), followed closely by Srikakulam at 94.72% (4,769 out of 5,035) and Vizianagaram at 94.05% (4,912 out of 5,223). Parvathipuram Manyam also saw a strong turnout of 93.74% (2,187 out of 2,333), while Alluri Sitarama Raju and Visakhapatnam reported participation rates of 88.04% (1,310 out of 1,488) and 87.34% (4,829 out of 5,529), respectively.

Polling was conducted peacefully

In Krishna district, 42,927 out of 63,114 eligible graduate voters participated in the election across 77 polling sta-

tions, recording a 68.02% turnout. Of these, 24,240 were male voters, while 18,687 were female voters. The polling

percentage, which stood at 12.45% by 10 AM, increased to 30.59% by noon and reached 49.52% by 2 PM.

Krishna District Collector DK Balaji cast his vote at Hyni High School in Machilipatnam.

AP govt signs...

Continued from Page 1

They also announced that Skillbee is providing German language training to over 4,000 students currently pursuing nursing courses in government and private colleges across Visakhapatnam, East and West Godavari, Vizianagaram, and Srikakulam districts.

Principal Secretary of AP Skill Development and Training Kona Sasidhar, APSDC CEO Ganesh Kumar, Executive Director Manohar, and other officials were present at the event.

SERP to sign MoU with Farmveda, Flipkart, others

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh government is set to enhance the earnings of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Farmers' Producer Organizations (FPOs) by signing Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with leading companies, including Farmveda, Millet Bank, Capital Management Services, and Flipkart.

Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Rural Poverty Alleviation, and Empowerment of Diaspora Affairs, Kondapalli Srinivas, held a review meeting with officials of the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) and representatives of these companies at the Secretariat in Velagapudi on Thursday.



The minister emphasised the need to add value to the products manufactured by SHGs and FPOs to maximise their income. He directed officials to take necessary measures to ensure better pricing for their goods. Representatives from the participating companies presented strategies to enhance the market value of farmers' products.

During the meeting, it was decided that MoUs would soon be signed between SERP and the respective organisations to implement value-addition initiatives. SERP CEO Karuna, Director Padmavati, IAM Bangalore Professor Trilochana Sastry, Millet Bank CEO Visala, Capital Management Services CEO Rajini, Flipkart Project Head Deepu Joshi, and other officials participated in the discussions.

AP Budget 2025... Jagan...

Continued from Page 1

As of January 2025, revenue stood at Rs 68,807 crore, up from Rs 67,993 crore in January 2024.

To meet its ambitious spending goals, the government will need to focus on enhancing both tax and non-tax revenues. Analysts are watching for measures such as tax administration reforms, business incentives, and improved revenue collection mechanisms. Key sectors like agriculture, education, healthcare, and infrastructure are expected to receive significant allocations, particularly under the government's 'Super Six' development priorities.

Public expectations are high, with calls for transparency and accountability in resource allocation. While many hope for a budget that addresses pressing needs, concerns persist about revenue growth and the implementation of previous commitments. With the Cabinet's approval imminent, all eyes are on Finance Minister Payyavula Kesav to deliver a budget that tackles economic challenges while laying the foundation for long-term growth. The details set to emerge in the coming hours will shape Andhra Pradesh's financial trajectory for the year ahead.

Continued from Page 1

He criticised the coalition government in Andhra Pradesh, alleging that it is functioning in an authoritarian manner. Assuring Posani of full support from the YSRCP, Jagan Mohan Reddy stated that both the people and divine forces are witnessing the unfolding events and urged him to stay strong during this challenging time.

He further confirmed that the party would provide legal assistance and has already entrusted the matter to senior lawyers associated with the YSRCP to ensure justice is served.

SDSTPS Unit-3 achieves 100-day milestone

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Sri Damodaram Sanjeevaiah Thermal Power Station (SDSTPS) has achieved a major operational milestone, with its 800 MW Unit-3 successfully completing 100 days of uninterrupted operation for the first time since its Commercial Operation Date (COD).

Announcing this, APGENCO Managing Director Chakradhar Babu said the achievement highlights the plant's efficiency, reliability, and commitment to ensuring uninterrupted power supply.

"This milestone is a testament to the dedication of the APGENCO team and their adherence to best operational practices. We are committed to meeting the state's growing energy demands with seamless power generation," he said.

Chakradhar Babu expressed gratitude to Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, Energy Minister Gottipati Ravi Kumar, and Chief Secretary Vijayanand for their continuous support and leadership in strengthening APGENCO. Their policy support and proactive decision-making have played a key role in enhancing the state's power generation capacity, he said.



The 800 MW Unit-3 milestone underscores the plant's reliability and efficiency in meeting AP power needs. APGENCO MD Chakradhar Babu credited the team's dedication and government support for this success, reaffirming the commitment to uninterrupted power supply.

He added that APGENCO is striving to adopt best practices, improve operational efficiency, and reduce emissions, with a vision to become a leading power generation company at the national level. He reiterated that the state's power utilities are committed to providing round-the-clock electricity to all consumers and nine hours of daytime power for agriculture. The 800 MW Unit-3, a critical contributor to the state's base load energy requirements, overcame initial teething issues before achieving COD. Since November 18, 2024, the unit has generated 1,596.30 million units (MU) with a Plant Load Factor (PLF) of 83%. The SDSTPS station is consistently generating 45 MU daily, contributing 40% of

Andhra Pradesh's thermal power generation.

Chakradhar Babu commended APGENCO's engineers, employees, and support staff for their efforts in maintaining high performance, efficiency, and reliability. He noted that APGENCO has steadily improved thermal generation, maintaining over 110 MU since January 2025.

The utility also achieved a record high of 123 MU (Ex-Bus) thermal generation on February 22, 2025, while working to maintain a coal stock of seven days to ensure a stable power supply. With demand expected to rise in summer, SDSTPS's sustained generation will play a crucial role in meeting the state's energy needs.



TTD officials asked to gear up for summer pilgrim rush

PNS ■ TIRUMALA

Additional EO Ch. Venkaiah Chowdary has directed officials to take early measures to ensure a hassle-free experience for the lakhs of devotees expected to visit Tirumala during the summer vacation.

Chairing a review meeting with senior officials from various departments at Annamaya Bhavan on Thursday, he instructed them to prepare a 90-day action plan to manage the anticipated pilgrim influx.

The Additional EO emphasised the need to apply white coolant at key locations such as Akkagarla Gudi, Srivari Seva Sadan, and other high-traffic areas, including the first ghat road, to provide relief from the

summer heat. He also stressed the importance of uninterrupted power supply to avoid inconvenience to devotees.

Temple authorities were advised to maintain a sufficient buffer stock of laddus, while medical officials were directed to ensure an adequate supply of ORS packets for pilgrims. Engineering officials were instructed to make necessary arrangements to provide sufficient water across Tirumala during summer.

The review also covered key areas such as Annaprasadam and sanitation.

Deputy EOs Lokanatham, Rajendra, and Bhaskar, along with Transport GM Sesha Reddy, VGOs Ram Kumar and Surendra, and other officials, participated in the meeting.

2 AP doctors feted by NHA



PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The National Health Authority (NHA) has felicitated two doctors from Andhra Pradesh for their outstanding performance and early adoption of the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), a Government of India initiative, said ABDM State Nodal Officer BV Rao in a press statement on Thursday. NHA MD and Additional CEO Vaska Kiran Gopal felicitated the doctors virtually.

Dr Srinivas of Sri Krishna Multispecialty Hospital, Guntur, and Dr Srikanth of Sumanth Orthopaedic Center, Guntakal, were among the top 50 healthcare professionals across India recognised for their efforts in implementing ABDM and generating Ayushman Bharat Health Account (ABHA)-linked health records.

The ABDM aims to establish a robust digital health infrastructure in India.

Meet on food processing tech today

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh MSME Association, in collaboration with Best Engineering Technologies, will organise an awareness seminar on Food Processing Technology and Opportunities on February 28 at the MSME Association office in Autonagar. Association president B Venkatarao and Best Engineering Technologies MD M Seshasai announced that Vijayawada MP Kesineni Sivanath (Chinni) will inaugurate the event. Several dignitaries, including Pothuri Bhaskar Rao from the AP Chamber of Commerce, the CEO of AP Food Process Development Society, and other



industry leaders, will share insights on food processing technology.

Addressing the media at the MSME Association office on Thursday, Venkatarao said that for the past two decades, Best

Engineering Technologies has been exporting food technology engineering products across the state and internationally.

He emphasised that Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu is committed to industrial devel-

opment, creating significant opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs. He further stated that the organisation has introduced nearly 300 types of advanced food processing machinery. The awareness programme will cover various technologies in the sector. Bankers will also participate in the seminar, offering insights into loan options ranging from Rs 5 lakh to Rs 50 crore.

Venkatarao urged aspiring industrialists in the food processing sector to take advantage of these opportunities. He also highlighted that the Chief Minister has introduced policies to boost industrial growth in the state, with special incentives for the food processing industry.

Ex-MLA Vamsi opposes...

Continued from Page 1

He alleged that there were attempts to manipulate the case by intimidating the victim. During interrogation, Dr. Vamsi admitted to certain allegations, including a meeting with YSR Congress Party Chief Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on 12 February.

However, he remained uncooperative on other aspects, particularly regarding a missing mobile phone. Police have gathered CCTV footage and technical evidence supporting the kidnapping claims and are seeking an extension of custody for further investigation. A petition has been filed in court for this purpose.

CM Naidu extends Rs 5 lakh aid for specially-abled woman's marriage

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu extended a financial aid of Rs 5 lakh for a specially-abled woman to meet her marriage expenses, said an official press release on Thursday.

The chief minister extended help to R Nagamai from Rallabuduguru village in Kuppam mandal, Chittoor district, who met him along with her

fiancé Bhupathi recently. "Responding to Nagamai's request, the CM extended a financial help of Rs 5 lakh to meet her wedding expenses," said the press release.

The betrothed pair met Naidu on Wednesday to take the cheque. Naidu appreciated Bhupathi for coming forward to marry Nagamai and conveyed his best wishes.

TODAY
ALMANAC
Month & Paksham: Sukla Paksha
Tithi: Prati-pada: Feb 28 06:14 AM to Mar 01 03:16 AM
Dwitiya: Mar 01 03:16 AM to Mar 02 12:09 AM
Nakshatram: Shatabhisha: Feb 27 03:43 PM to Feb 28 01:40 PM
Purva Bhadrpad: Feb 28 01:40 PM to Mar 01 11:22 AM
Rahukalam: 11:01 AM to 12:28 PM
Yamaganadam: 3:23 PM to 4:51 PM
Varjyam: 07:27 PM to 08:54 PM
Gulika: 8:06 AM to 9:33 AM
Amritakalam: 07:05 AM to 08:33 AM
Abhijit Muhurtham: 12:05 PM to 12:51 PM
VIJAYAWADA WEATHER
Forecast: Mostly Cloudy
Temp: 34°C
Humidity: 69%
Sunrise: 6:26 AM
Sunset: 6:14 PM
Updated: February 27, 2025 5:00 PM

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RATHOTSAVAM IN CITY

Devotion marks car rally



Commissioner Rajasekhar Babu described the procession as a visually captivating experience for devotees. The vibrant spectacle featured the chanting of Vedic mantras, the rhythmic beats of 'melathalas' (traditional percussion ensembles), graceful dances, and energetic 'kolatam' (stick dance) performances.

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The annual Sri Durga Malleeswara Swamy Devasthanam Rathotsavam was held on Thursday evening, marking the traditional conclusion of the Maha Shivaratri celebrations. NTR

District Police Commissioner SV Rajasekhar Babu inaugurated the festivities.

The Commissioner initiated the proceedings by ceremonially breaking a coconut at the Sri Kanyakaparameshwari 'ratham'. Devotees and police personnel joined hands to

pull the temple chariot through the streets, creating a devotional atmosphere.

Speaking on the occasion, Commissioner Rajasekhar Babu described the procession as a visually captivating experience for devotees. The vibrant spectacle featured the

chanting of Vedic mantras, the rhythmic beats of 'melathalas' (traditional percussion ensembles), graceful dances, and energetic 'kolatam' (stick dance) performances.

Deputy Police Commissioners (DPCs) Gowthami Shali and

Krishnamurthy Naidu, Additional DCP G Ramakrishna, Durga Temple Executive Officer K Ramachandra Mohan, Deputy EO Ratna Raju, along with police personnel, temple staff, and devotees, participated in the Rathotsavam.

Paddy procurement centres to cease operations on March 3

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Dr G Lakshmisha, the NTR District Collector, has instructed the officials concerned that all paddy procurement centres (PPCs) designated for the 2024-25 Kharif crop season, located at Rythu Seva Kendras (RSKs) and Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS), will be ceasing their operations starting from March 3 onwards. He advised that farmers intending to sell their produce must do so by this date.

In a press release issued on Thursday, Collector Dr Lakshmisha noted that the



NTR District administration has procured 110,513.480 MT paddy against a target of 113,500 MT

Agriculture Department has projected a paddy yield of 236,803 Metric Tonnes (MT) for the 2024-25 Kharif season. He further mentioned that the district administration has

procured 110,513.480 MT against a target of 113,500 MT thus far. So, the district administration has resolved to close all PPCs by March 3, he clarified.

Dewatering, silt removal in progress at SLBC tunnel

PNS ■ NAGARKURNOOL

Rescue teams working to save eight people trapped for over five days in a partially collapsed SLBC tunnel in the district have started cutting parts of the tunnel boring machine and other obstacles hindering their access to the area where the victims are believed to be. Piles of sludge are coming out while dewatering and silt removal is in progress.

Irrigation Minister Uttam assured that rescue operations at the SLBC (Srisailem Left Bank Canal) tunnel are progressing at full speed, with top national and international agencies working in coordination to save the trapped workers.

Addressing the media at the accident site near Domalapeda in Nagarkurnool district on Thursday, he said that the multi-agency operation, utilizing advanced equipment and expertise, would be completed within the next two to three days. He further said that tunnel works would resume within two to three months.



Soft Tennis: AP girls make it to Indian team

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Three players from Andhra Pradesh—N Anusha, M Bhavan, and S Aron Ronaldino—have been selected for the Indian Soft Tennis Team to participate in the second India International Soft Tennis Tournament. The tournament will take place in Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, from March 16 to March 22. In this context, the three international players met with Animima Ravi Naidu, Chairman of the Sports Authority of Andhra Pradesh (SAAP), along with Daram Naveen Kumar, Chairman of the Andhra Pradesh Soft Tennis Association.

During their meeting, the SAAP Chairman enquired about the players' performances and lauded them for their selection to the Indian team. He assured them that the State government will provide support.

Furthermore, he mentioned that the State government, under the leadership of Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, is committed to encouraging sports and supporting outstanding athletes. He emphasised that CM Chandrababu aims for the State to become a hub for sports, stating that the pride of Andhra Pradesh can be projected globally through sports and games.

Withdraw APERC's decision on smart meters: CPM

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The CPM has strongly condemned the Andhra Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission (APERC) for its decision to make smart meter installation mandatory, as proposed by the State government-run power distributors. The CPM demanded that this decision be withdrawn immediately.

In a press release on Thursday, CPM State secretary V Srinivasa Rao stated that his party believes the APERC, which is supposed to function as a quasi-judicial authority protecting consumer rights, has instead become an ally of the State government. He called upon the public to oppose the installation of smart meters and to reject restrictions being imposed in certain areas.

He further remarked that the APERC's decision is

APERC, supposed to function as a quasi-judicial authority, has become an ally of State Govt

entirely motivated by corporate interests and will place an additional burden on consumers. He emphasised that neither the State government nor the APERC has the authority to impose smart meters in this manner. He noted that smart meters are a source of increased charges, contributing to the overall financial burden on consumers.

Additionally, he highlighted that APERC had previously approved power agreements signed with Adani through the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI). He pointed out that, in light of widespread allegations of corruption against Adani, many States and countries have rejected these agreements. By approv-

ing them, the APERC is complicit in promoting corruption. He insisted that APERC has no right to impose an additional financial burden of Rs.1,20,000 crore on consumers.

Srinivasa Rao also mentioned that the Telugu Desam Party (TDP)-led State government had acknowledged in the electricity White Paper that the agreements with SECI would further burden consumers. He criticised APERC's approval of these agreements and urged the government to annul them immediately.

He stated that the CPM had opposed the establishment of the APERC two decades ago, asserting that it was created as a result of a World Bank agreement.

CM, PT Usha discuss AP state's plan to host National Games 2029

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu met Indian Olympic Association (IOA) president P T Usha on Thursday and discussed the possibility of the state hosting the National Games in 2029.

The Chief Minister also reviewed the new sports policy of the state and explored the prospect of setting up a Sports Authority of India (SAI) regional centre.

"It was a pleasure to meet IOA President and Rajya Sabha MP PT Usha. We had a great discussion on our new sports policy and our vision to support athletes," Naidu said in a post on X.

Additionally, Naidu deliberated on plans to establish a national centre of excellence and develop a sports city in Amaravati. Naidu emphasised that the state government is committed to providing the best opportunities for talented young athletes.

Visakhapatnam's shores illuminate with devotion on Maha Sivaratri

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Visakhapatnam's iconic coastline was transformed into a vibrant spiritual spectacle as thousands of devotees descended upon its shores to observe Maha Sivaratri. From the sweeping sands of RK Beach to the tranquil stretches of Yarada, the city's beaches became a focal point of unwavering devotion, with worshippers maintaining an all-night vigil, offering prayers and performing rituals in honour of Lord Shiva.

The air thrummed with the sacred chant of "Om Namah Shivaya," creating an ethereal atmosphere that heightened the spiritual experience for those gathered. From the early hours of Thursday, devotees began taking holy dips in the sea, a tradition believed to cleanse sins and bestow divine blessings. The coastal stretch, encompassing RK Beach, Jodugullapalem, Sagar Nagar, Rushikonda, and

Thousands of devotees gather for an all-night vigil, sacred rituals, and spiritual festivities

Bheemili, saw a sea of humanity engaging in this sacred ritual.

Many devotees also performed ancestral rites, offering prayers to their forefathers and paying homage to the Sun god. Families arrived in large numbers, with children enthusiastically participating by sculpting temple models in the sand, lighting earthen lamps, and taking part in pujas. The sight of young ones creating Shiva lingam replicas added a unique charm to the celebrations.

The Maha Kumbha Abhishekam, organised under the auspices of Dr. TSR Kala Parishad, drew thousands of devotees who eagerly lined up to receive divine blessings. The event featured elaborate Vedic

perform their rituals without risk. The Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) played a pivotal role in regulating the movement of people, managing sanitation facilities, and providing logistical support.

As dawn broke and the celebrations gradually wound down, sanitation workers swiftly moved in to restore the coastline to its pristine state. The efficient clean-up drive ensured the beaches remained free from litter, allowing nature to reclaim its serenity.

Beyond Visakhapatnam, similar observances took place across the coastal regions of Anapalle district, where thousands of devotees engaged in holy dips, temple visits, and night-long vigils. The collective devotion across these regions underscored the deep-rooted cultural and religious significance of Maha Sivaratri.

Can show PM's degree to court, not strangers

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi University (DU) on Thursday informed the Delhi High Court that it was willing to show to court its records on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's degree but not disclose it to strangers under RTI.

Appearing before Justice Sachin Datta, solicitor general Tushar Mehta made the submission following which the court reserved its verdict on DU's plea against a CIC order directing disclosure of information with respect to the bachelor's degree of the prime minister.

"DU has no reservation in showing it to the court (but can't) put the university's record for scrutiny by strangers," Mehta said.

The order of the CIC, he said, deserved to be set aside for the "right to privacy" superseded the "right to know".

DU tells Delhi HC

"What is demanded is the degree of an erstwhile student who is the Prime Minister. As a university, we have nothing to hide. We have the year-wise record. University has no objection in showing the record to the court. There is a degree from 1978, bachelor of art," Mehta submitted.

Following an RTI application by one Neeraj, the Central Information Commission (CIC) on December 21, 2016, allowed inspection of records of all students who cleared the BA exam in 1978 -- the year Prime Minister Modi also passed it.

The RTI plea sought details of all the students who wrote the exam in 1978.

The high court stayed the CIC order on January 23, 2017.

KRMB allocates water to TG & AP

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Krishna River Management Board (KRMB) has allocated water from the Srisailem and Nagarjuna Sagar reservoirs to Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, emphasizing the necessity of judicious usage due to limited availability.

The Board directed officials of both states to review and release water every 15 days to ensure efficient management.

KRMB officials said that only 70 TMCs of water are available in these projects, making it imperative for both states to use the allocated water economically. Telangana will receive 9,000 cusecs from the Nagarjuna Sagar Left Canal, while Andhra Pradesh will get 7,000 cusecs from the Right Canal. 2,400 cusecs will be released from Srisailem to Telangana, and 2,200 cusecs will be diverted from Srisailem to Handreeniva and Mallya in Andhra Pradesh.

Officials cautioned both states



against wasting water and asked them to plan water distribution carefully. The allocations have been made considering the current availability of water in the two reservoirs, KRMB stated.

KRMB advised Telangana and Andhra Pradesh to use the available water in Srisailem and Nagarjunasagar reservoirs judiciously, prioritising drink-

ing water needs and planning irrigation accordingly.

A special meeting of the Board was held at the Hyderabad Jala Soudha under the chairmanship of Atul Jain to review water availability and allocation for both states.

Telangana Irrigation Department Principal Secretary Rahul Bojja, ENC

Anil Kumar, Andhra Pradesh Water Resources Department Special Chief Secretary Sai Prasad, ENC Venkateswara Rao, and senior engineers attended the meeting. Officials from both states presented their water requirements, with Telangana seeking 63 TMCs and Andhra Pradesh requesting 55 TMCs by May-end.

TRUMP ON GOLD CARD VISA

US companies can now hire Indians under new citizenship plan

PNS ■ WASHINGTON

US President Donald Trump has said that the newly proposed 'gold card' initiative will allow American companies to hire Indian graduates from top US universities like Harvard and Stanford.

Trump on Wednesday unveiled the 'gold card' initiative for wealthy foreigners, giving them the right to live and work in the country and offering a path to citizenship in exchange for a USD 5 million fee.

"We're going to be selling a gold card," Trump said from the Oval Office. "You have a green card. This is a gold card. We're going to be putting a price on that card



of about USD 5 million and that's going to give you green card privileges, plus it's going to be a route to citizenship. And wealthy people will be coming into our country by buying this card," Trump was quoted as saying by the CNN.

Trump said the current immigration system has hindered top international talent, especially from India, from staying and working in the US.

Posani Krishna Murali questioned by police, produced before court

PNS ■ KADAPA

YSRCP leader and popular Telugu film actor Posani Krishna Murali was questioned by the police at Obularipalli police station in connection with a criminal case.

A police team, led by Annamayya district SP Vidyasagar, interrogated Krishna Murali until 8 p.m. regarding allegations of using unparliamentary and offensive language against opposition leaders. According to sources, he failed to provide satisfactory answers. The police reportedly showed him video footage of his remarks against TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu, JSP leader Pawan Kalyan, and TDP general secretary Lokesh, but he remained unresponsive.



Earlier, Krishna Murali was arrested from his flat in Hyderabad and brought to Obularipalli police station. Government doctor Guru Mahesh examined him and certified that he was in good health. He was later shifted to Railway Koduru, where he was produced before the court.

YSRCP leader Koramutla Srinivasulu, accompanied by lawyer Nagireddy, attempted to meet Krishna Murali at the police station but was turned away. The case was filed based on a complaint from Rajupodu village's former sarpanch, Jogineni Mani, alleging that Krishna Murali made objectionable com-

ments against TDP and JSP leaders. Police have registered cases under Sections 196, 353(2), 111 read with 3(5) of the BNS.

Meanwhile, YSRCP president and former Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy condemned the arrest, calling the Chandrababu Naidu-led coalition government authoritarian. He spoke to Krishna Murali's wife, Kusumalatha, over the phone, offering support and assuring her that the party would stand by him. He also stated that senior YSRCP lawyers had been entrusted with the case to ensure legal assistance.

Krishna Murali had previously served as chairman of the Andhra Pradesh Film and TV Development Corporation during the YSRCP government.

227 liquor bottles seized, 3 held in Nuzvid

PNS ■ ELURU

The police seized 227 liquor bottles and arrested three persons at Mirzapuram village in Nuzvid mandal.

Circle Inspector K Rama Krishna said that acting on a tip-off, a police team led by Sub-Inspector Lakshman Babu raided a house in the village and found the liquor bottles stocked illegally.

The seized bottles, which were not duty-paid, had been smuggled from neighbouring states.

SI Lakshman Babu warned that possessing and hoarding liquor illegally is a punishable offence and strict action would be taken against violators.

Take steps to mitigate water scarcity during summer: DC

PNS ■ ONGOLE

District Collector A Thameem Ansariya has directed officials to take immediate steps to address drinking water scarcity in areas facing shortages during summer.

Accompanied by Sub-Collector Sahadit Venkat Trivinit, the Collector visited several areas in the Yerragondapalem constituency on Thursday. She held a meeting with mandal-level officials at the MPDO office and reviewed the measures being taken to tackle the issue. She warned of stringent action against any negligence in providing drinking water to affected areas.

She emphasised that drinking water should be supplied through deep borewells and tankers as per



the field situation, ensuring equitable distribution. She cautioned officials against irregularities in water supply and directed them to maintain quality standards by conducting necessary tests and chlorination.

The Collector further warned that action would be taken against RWS AEs and MPDOs if people raised complaints about water shortages. She instructed officials to engage with local communities on water-related

issues, reminding them that the government is also collecting feedback through IVRS.

She also ordered that all solid waste management units be made operational within 10 days. Emphasising the importance of the P-4 survey, she directed officials to conduct it efficiently and explain its significance to the public, ensuring it serves its intended purpose. Earlier, the Collector inspected the protected drinking water supply plant in a village, where officials briefed her on the plant's capacity and chlorination process. She also visited the Tahsil office at Pullacheruvu to review land survey and mutation work. Additionally, she inspected a farm pond and a mini-gokulam being constructed under the NREGA scheme.

Ex-MP Gorantla Madhav gets police notice

PNS ■ ANANTAPUR

The Vijayawada police have issued a notice to YSRCP leader and former MP Gorantla Madhav in connection with a criminal case registered against him.

A team from the Vijayawada Crime Branch visited Madhav's residence and served him a notice under Section 35(3), directing him to appear for questioning at the Vijayawada Crime Police Station.

The case was registered following a complaint by former Women's Commission chairperson Vasireddy Padma on November 3, 2024, alleging that Madhav had revealed the identity of a minor rape victim during a press conference.

Minister felicitates badminton player Sai Pawan

PNS ■ RAJAHMUNDRY

Minister for Tourism and Sports Development Kandula Durgesh felicitated badminton player Karri Sai Pawan on Thursday for winning a bronze medal at the 38th National Games held in Uttarakhand. Sai Pawan, a native of Rajahmundry, secured the medal in the men's doubles category.

Speaking on the occasion, Minister Durgesh lauded Sai Pawan for his achievement, stating that his success at the prestigious National Games, held from January 28 to February 14 at the International Sports Complex, Haldwani, Dehradun, was a proud moment for Andhra Pradesh. He encouraged budding players to draw inspiration from him.

Sai Pawan, accompanied by his father Karri Nageswara Rao, met the Minister at his office and displayed his medal.



Minister Durgesh praised the young athlete for bringing laurels to East Godavari district

and assured the government's support for aspiring sports persons.

Coalition govt in AP losing credibility: YSRCP

PNS ■ RAJAHMUNDRY

Former minister Venugopalakrishna has criticised the coalition government, alleging that it has lost credibility within just nine months of assuming power. He accused it of failing to fulfil pre-election promises and misleading the public with deceptive claims. Instead of focusing on governance, he alleged that the government was prioritising political vendettas, questioning whether this was the mandate given by the people.

He also took issue with the application of the BNS 111 Act in cases like Posani Krishna Murali's arrest, asserting that it

was misused. Further, he highlighted inconsistencies in the government's debt figures, pointing out that the initial claim of Rs 14 lakh crore was later revised to Rs 6 lakh crore. Calling Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu a "master of falsehoods," he also criticised the government for making unverified claims about adulteration in the Tirumala laddoo controversy.

Venugopalakrishna accused the government of neglecting Guntur's mirchi farmers, stating that it only took action after opposition leader Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy intervened. He questioned whether support prices were

announced only after farmer suicides. Slamming the government for taking credit for past achievements while implementing anti-people policies, he alleged that lowering the Polavaram project's height was a serious setback. Despite promising price reductions, he noted that costs had risen sharply in nine months.

Meanwhile, former MLA Jakkampudi Raja accused the coalition government of disturbing peace and security in the state.

He alleged that instead of fulfilling election promises, it was filing cases against critics and targeting YSRCP leaders

through illegal arrests and intimidation, including threats against women.

Raja termed the arrests of Vallabhani Vamsi and Posani Krishna Murali as acts of political vendetta meant to divert attention from failures. He criticised the government for abandoning key promises, such as Rythu Bharosa and Thalliki Vandanam, and relying on distractions to escape scrutiny.

Warning of growing public discontent, he said that the government's oppressive tactics would backfire, and the very people who voted it to power were now prepared to revolt against it.

PNS ■ ONGOLE

Minister for Social Welfare Dola Bala Veeranjanya Swamy has directed officials to identify suitable land for the distribution of house sites to the eligible poor. He held a tele-conference from his camp office at Turpu Naidupalem with the Tahsildars of six mandals on Tuesday. During the meeting, the Minister instructed Tahsildars to conduct a thorough survey to identify government land for house-site allocation. He emphasised that the survey should be conducted strictly and without irregularities.

He also advised farmers to consult with the District Collector regarding land allocation for industries, ensuring that such allocations do not face complications. The Minister further directed officials to issue the required position and caste certificates for housing loans on time. He stressed the need for an efficient land survey to avoid disputes. Later, representatives of village secretariats and the animal husbandry association met the Minister and submitted a petition, requesting the restoration of additional attendance options. The Minister responded positively to their appeal.

Identify land for house-sites: Min Dola



Harish insulting Army, Navy, BRO: Uttam

3PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Irrigation Minister Uttam Kumar Reddy launched a sharp attack on BRS leaders, particularly Harish Rao, accusing them of staging a political drama over a tragedy. He blamed the BRS government for the accident, stating that they had neglected the SLBC project for a decade.

"The BRS leaders left this project incomplete. If they had functioned efficiently, this pro-

ject would have been finished long ago and Telangana farmers would have had 30 TMCs of water benefiting three to four lakh acres," he said.

Responding to Harish's criticism, Uttam said, "Does he think he knows more than the top tunnel engineers? Is he trying to insult the Army, Navy commandos and BRO teams who are risking their lives through this rescue operation?"

He dismissed the BRS leaders' visit to the site as a mere

drama saying, "They came here to stage a drama and left after putting on a show."

He pointed out that during the Srisaalam (Left Bank Power Station) blast, in which nine workers lost their lives no BRS leader visited the site.

"When Revanth Reddy tried to visit the victims back then, he was arrested and taken to a police station," Uttam recalled.

Similarly, he said that in the Devadula Project mishap in which seven workers died, their

remains were recovered only after five years. "Why didn't Harish speak up then?" he questioned.

He accused KCR and Harish of mismanaging irrigation projects despite spending Rs 1.81 lakh crore. He alleged that the Palamuru-Rangareddy project cost Rs 27,500 crore but failed to deliver water to even a single acre. He also pointed out that the Kaleshwaram Project, which BRS leaders boasted about, has collapsed.

PNS ■ ELURU

District Collector K Vetri Selvi inspected the strong room where ballot boxes for the MLC Graduate Constituency elections are being secured at the CR Reddy Engineering College campus on Thursday. Accompanied by revenue and police officials, she reviewed the security arrangements for the strong room.

The Collector instructed officials to ensure stringent security for the ballot boxes. She noted that polling for the Graduate MLC constituency elections, covering the combined East and West Godavari districts, was conducted across six districts. The ballot boxes from these areas will be brought to the counting centre in Eluru.

With the counting of votes scheduled for March 3, the Collector emphasised the need for foolproof security in the strong room until then. The counting process will commence at 8 am on March 3. She directed the staff at the ballot box reception centre to thoroughly inspect the seals on the boxes upon receipt, after which



the strong room staff should place them in their designated locations.

Counters will be set up at polling stations for ballot box collection, and staff are required to take only the boxes assigned to them. Help desks have also been arranged for assistance.

The Collector instructed officials to ensure the availability of drinking water at the ballot box reception centre and to provide food and

snacks regularly to the counting staff.

Later, she inspected the CCTV monitoring centre established for security at the counting venue and reviewed the table arrangements for the counting process.

Joint Collector P. Dhatri Reddy, DRO V. Visveswara Rao, RDOs Achyut Ambarish, and Eluru Municipal Corporation Commissioner Bhanu Pratap were among those present.

AINEF urges centre to address journalists' issues

PNS ■ MACHILIPATNAM

The All India Newspaper Employees Federation (AINEF) has urged the Centre to abolish the Working Journalists and Non-Journalists Miscellaneous Act, 1955, and introduce new legislation to ensure justice for journalists across the country.

The AINEF held its two-day central working committee meetings at Kuchipudi near here and discussed various challenges faced by journalists nationwide. AINEF national vice-president Ch. Poornachandra Rao stated that the national executive meeting resolved to appeal to the Centre to scrap the existing Act and replace it with a new one. The federation also called for expediting the process of setting up a new wage board for journalists and non-journalists.



expressed concern that media organisations were hiring journalists on a contract basis through third-party agencies to bypass wage board regulations and salary disbursements, which amounts to a violation of labour laws. The AINEF urged the Centre to end contract-based recruitment in the media sector.

The federation also demanded that all media houses imple-

ment the 2011 wage board recommendations and pay salaries accordingly.

"Journalists' living standards have declined due to the non-implementation of wage board recommendations. The Centre must improve their financial condition," Poornachandra Rao asserted.

Avanigadda MLA and Andhra Pradesh Journalists'

Union (APJU) honorary president Mandali Buddha Prasad flagged off celebrations marking APJU's 35th anniversary. Addressing the gathering, he stressed the need to resolve the issues of journalists and non-journalists. He also pointed out that print media is facing stiff competition from electronic and social media but remains crucial in upholding moral values in society.

Buddha Prasad lamented that some media houses were displaying bias in news coverage and appealed to them to report facts impartially.

AINEF leaders from Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, New Delhi, Kerala, and Gujarat participated in the meeting. Among those present were PSR Housing MD Dr P.S. Rao, industrialist Vikurthi Srinivasa Rao, and former AMC chairman Chikatmatla Shivarama Prasad.

RINL's outsourcing, workforce cuts spark concerns

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd (RINL), the corporate entity of Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, is facing a storm of criticism following its decision to outsource key operations and implement a significant reduction in workforce, sparking fears for the plant's future and the livelihoods of thousands.



The latest move, the outsourcing of the crucial Quality Assurance and Technology Development (QATD) department to a private contractor for an annual sum of Rs 4.2 crore, has ignited widespread alarm. The department, responsible for the rigorous testing and certification of raw materials and steel products, employs approximately 100 permanent staff. Trade unions have labelled the plan to replace experienced personnel with newly trained contract workers a "recipe for disaster," fearing a sharp decline in quality standards.

"This is a reckless gamble with the plant's reputation and the safety of its products," said a spokesperson for a leading trade union, who wished to remain anonymous. "These are highly skilled jobs that require years of experience. Replacing them with inexperienced contract workers is a recipe for disaster." Further exac-

erating the situation is the ongoing Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS), which has resulted in approximately 1,100 employees leaving the plant. This drastic reduction in permanent staff has raised serious questions about the plant's ability to maintain production capacity, particularly as management prepares to bring the third blast furnace online. Despite the plant reporting exceeding its February production target, concerns remain about the long-term sustainability of this output with a rapidly shrinking workforce. Industry observers and trade unions are sceptical about the plant's ability to maintain its standards with a depleted pool of experienced workers.

Adding to the growing tension are unresolved grievances regarding employment

promises made to farmers who surrendered their land for the plant's construction. Approximately 8,000 displaced individuals and their descendants are still awaiting promised jobs, and the current outsourcing and downsizing efforts have all but extinguished their hopes of securing employment. "We gave up our land decades ago with the promise of a better future," said a local resident, whose family was displaced by the plant. "Now, they are taking away even the few jobs that were available. Where are we supposed to go?"

The decision to outsource and downsize comes amid the Indian government's push for increased efficiency and privatisation in the public sector. However, critics argue that these measures are being implemented at the expense of workers' rights and the long-term viability of key industrial assets.

The unfolding situation at the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant is being closely monitored by trade unions, local communities, and industry analysts. The question remains: can the plant maintain its production capacity and quality standards while drastically reducing its workforce and outsourcing critical functions, or is it sacrificing long-term viability for short term gains?

ACROSS THE STATES



Police busts fake hair removal cream factory in Delhi

The Crime Branch of Delhi Police has busted an illegal factory in the Burari area, which manufactured counterfeit hair removal cream and packaging them in branded containers, officials said on Thursday.



K'taka bans plastic use in idli preparation

Bengaluru, Feb 27 (PTI) Karnataka Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao on Thursday announced a ban on the use of plastic in idli preparation after samples tested positive for carcinogenic elements due to the use of polythene sheets.



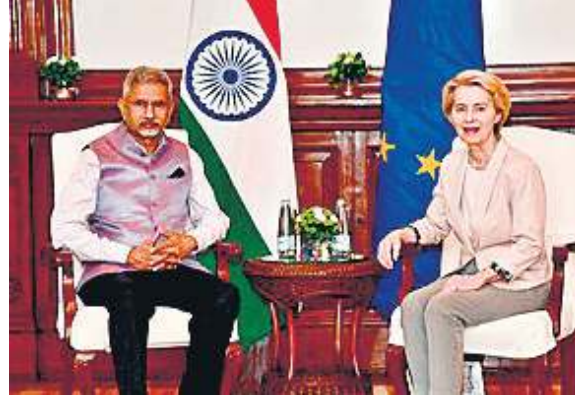
Police use drones, dogs to look for rape accused

Amid mounting pressure, police on Thursday deployed drones and dogs in Shirur taluka of Pune district to trace the accused in the Swargate bus rape case, officials said.

India is a trusted friend and strategic ally: EU President

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The top leadership of India and the European Union (EU) is expected to infuse on Friday a fresh momentum in sealing an ambitious trade deal at the earliest as the 27-nation bloc is keen to re-energize the two-way economic ties amid its looming friction with the US on tariffs.



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, accompanied by the EU College of Commissioners or senior political leaders of the bloc, began a high-profile two-day visit to India on Thursday afternoon.

The talks between Modi and Von der Leyen are taking

Jaishankar met the European Commission president and discussed key bilateral issues.

"Appreciate her thoughts on reenergizing India's engagement with Europe," he said. "The wide ranging participation of Indian Ministers and EU College of Commissioners during this visit stands testimony to the importance we place on deeper India-EU ties," he said on X.

On the EU looking at pressing India to bring down tariffs on cars, wine and agricultural products, the official said India too has certain expectations from the bloc.

External Affairs Minister S

Maha Kumbh 'truly global event': Adityanath

PNS ■ PRAYAGRAJ

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the successful organisation of Maha Kumbh 2025, calling it "a truly global event".

Addressing journalists at the media centre here, a day after the conclusion of the Maha Kumbh, Adityanath said, "Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj truly became a global event, and the credit goes to the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

His vision has helped us successfully execute this grand event, and you (the media) have played a crucial role in conveying its significance to the country and the world. I thank you for that."

He also highlighted Modi's concept of integrating faith and economy, stating that spiritual tourism holds immense potential, with Uttar Pradesh emerging as the most suitable state to harness it.

Credits PM Modi for its success



"In 2024 alone, 64 crore pilgrims and tourists visited various religious sites across Uttar Pradesh, including Ayodhya, Varanasi, Mathura, Prayagraj, Chitrakoot, Vindhya, Gorakhpur and Naimisharanya," the chief minister said.

Adityanath also said that the Maha Kumbh led to the development of five major spiritual tourism corridors in Uttar Pradesh. The first corridor

connects Varanasi and Mirzapur to Ayodhya and Gorakhpur via Prayagraj. The second links Prayagraj to Lalpur and Chitrakoot. The third runs from Prayagraj to Lucknow and Naimisharanya. The fourth connects Prayagraj to Agra via the Bundelkhand Expressway, extending to Mathura, Vrindavan and Sukhteerth.

In the past 45 days, millions of devotees travelled through these five corridors, including not only locals but also pilgrims from across the country and the world, Adityanath said.

Shah's claim on delimitation process not 'trustworthy', says K'taka CM

PNS ■ BENGALURU

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday said Union Home Minister Amit Shah's claim that southern states will not be disadvantaged in the delimitation process is not "trustworthy" and that his statement appears to be aimed at creating confusion among the southern states.

The Chief Minister's remarks came a day after Shah assured the southern states that they would not lose a 'single Parliamentary seat' due to delimitation.

"Going by the Home Minister's vague remarks, it seems that either he lacks proper information or there is a deliberate intent to disadvantage the southern states, including Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh," he said in a state-



delimitation exercises were conducted using the 1971 census as the basis, following constitutional amendments," he stated.

Meanwhile, northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh have failed to regulate population growth and continue to lag in development.

"As a result, if delimitation is based on the latest census, southern states, including Karnataka, may see a reduction or stagnation in their number of Lok Sabha seats, while northern states will gain more seats.

In either scenario, the southern states will bear the loss. Is the Home Minister unaware of this?" he asked.

BHOPAL GAS TRAGEDY

SC refuses to interfere with HC order on toxic waste disposal

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday refused to interfere with a Madhya Pradesh High Court order on shifting of toxic waste of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy and disposing it in Pithampur area in the state's Dhar district.

A bench of Justices B R Gavai and Augustine George Masih disposed of a petition which challenged an order of December 3, 2024 of the high court directing the state government to take steps for removal of toxic waste material from the site of Union Carbide India Ltd (UCIL).

The bench said the high court had passed the order after considering views of an expert committee comprising directors of the National Environmental Engineering Institute (NEERI), the National Geophysical Research Institute

(NGRI) and chairman of Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

It said both NEERI and NGRI were "institutes of repute and recognition" in their respective fields and courts had often relied on their views whenever faced with questions on environmental protection.

The bench took on record the affidavit filed by senior advocate Nachiket Joshi, appearing for the Madhya Pradesh government, that contained minutes of a meeting held on June 19, 2023, where views of experts from NEERI, NGRI and CPCB were noted.

The state government, the court said, took the decision after the approval from the expert panel. "The impugned high court order would reveal that it took a serious view of the lethargic manner in which the state government was dealing with the disposal of waste.

BJP using 'fake voters' to win polls, alleges Mamata

PNS ■ KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday accused the BJP of adding fake voters from other states to the electoral rolls with the alleged backing of the Election Commission (EC), claiming that the party had used similar tactics to secure victories in the Delhi and Maharashtra assembly elections.

Speaking at a TMC state conference at Netaji Indoor Stadium here, Banerjee also raised concerns over the appointment of Gyanesh Kumar as the Chief Election Commissioner, alleging that the BJP was attempting to exert influence over the constitutional body.

"It is evident how the BJP is tampering with the voters' list

WARNS OF PROTEST AGAINST EC



with the blessings of the Election Commission," she alleged. Banerjee warned that if necessary action was not taken to correct the electoral roll, her party would stage a dharna in front of the EC office.

"If I could go on a 26-day hunger strike during the anti-land acquisition movement in

2006, we can also launch a movement against the Election Commission. If required, we will protest indefinitely in front of the EC office to demand the removal of fake names from the voter roll," she said.

However, she did not clarify whether the protest would be in Kolkata or New Delhi.

She accused the BJP of using "the same strategy in Delhi and Maharashtra by enrolling voters from Haryana and Gujarat to influence elections."

"In Delhi and Maharashtra, the BJP secured victory by adding fake voters from Haryana and Gujarat. Now, they aim to do the same in West Bengal.

"They know they cannot win if the elections are held fairly," Banerjee claimed. Targeting the BJP, she instructed TMC leaders and workers to start physically verifying the voters' list, alleging that the BJP had manipulated it with "the support of the Election Commission of India (ECI)".

She emphasised that this task should be a priority for the party ahead of the elections.

MANUAL SCAVENGING

SC says dissatisfied with affidavits



"Meanwhile, of the five affidavits, which are given before

this court, two of the affidavits filed on behalf of Kolkata Municipal Corporation and Delhi Jal Board are not at all satisfactory," the bench said on February 19.

While hearing a plea against the practice of manual scavenging, the apex court said there was no clarity whether manual scavenging and manual sewer cleaning were stopped in these cities.

Regarding KMC's affidavit, it recorded the claim that the practices had stopped there.

"...yet there is no explanation

from them which has come forward to explain to this court as to why even after manual scavenging and manual sewer cleaning was stopped as per their claim, three deaths have occurred on February 2, 2025 due to manual scavenging as we have been informed at the Bar," the bench said.

The bench said the DJB affidavit was a "very evasive reply" to the question whether manual scavenging and manual sewer cleaning were continuing in Delhi or not.

"What it says, is that man-

ual scavenging and manual sewer cleaning in DJB is totally prohibited.

This is not the reply that we had sought from them," it said. The court also found no explanation on how seven such deaths took place in the capital in the last one year.

It noted there was no explanation from the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water and Sewerage Board as to how and when the practices were stopped and why three related deaths took place due in Hyderabad in the last one year.

India, UN sign MoU to renew Hindi@UN project

PNS ■ NEW YORK

India and the United Nations have signed a Memorandum of Understanding renewing a dedicated project at the world body to broadcast news from the UN in Hindi and enhance public outreach in the language. India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador P Harish and UN Under Secretary General, Department of Global Communications (DGC) Melissa Fleming signed the Memorandum of Understanding renewing the 'Hindi@UN' Project for a period of five years, from April 1,

2025, to March 31, 2030, during a ceremony held at the Permanent Mission of India Wednesday.

The Government of India has pledged USD 1.5 million per annum for five years, over and above the cumulative contribution of USD 6.8 million to date for the purpose. Fleming emphasised the importance of social media in the present day and focused DGC's efforts on disseminating messages in Hindi by maximising the use of social media through the Hindi@UN project, particularly among Hindi speakers.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Simmering linguistic tension

Finding a solution to the ongoing language row requires acknowledging India's pluralistic identity

The ongoing row over the three-language formula in school education—a policy embedded in the National Education Policy (NEP)—has once again ignited passionate debates. Most recently, Tamil Nadu's political leadership, led by Chief Minister MK Stalin, has sharply criticised the Centre for what is perceived as an imposition of Hindi on the state. This conflict, however, is not isolated; it resonates across states like Karnataka, Telangana and Punjab, each adding its own chapter to the language war. The current uproar finds its roots in the longstanding historical struggle over language imposition in India. In Tamil Nadu, memories of the anti-Hindi agitations of the past still echo, as the state's ruling DMK perceives the insistence on the three-language formula as a subtle attempt to undermine its linguistic identity. Critics argue that by prioritising Hindi alongside English and the regional language, the policy inadvertently sidelines local languages—a concern that resonates deeply in southern states with rich linguistic heritage.



While some view Hindi as a unifying force, many see its promotion as a threat to regional cultures and identities. The conflict is emblematic of a broader pattern where states feel compelled to assert their linguistic identity against perceived central overreach. Stalin and other leaders in Tamil Nadu argue that the implementation of the NEP's language policy is a thinly veiled attempt to erode Tamil's primacy. Similar sentiments have been echoed elsewhere: The Telangana state government has recently mandated Telugu in all schools to ensure that students learn their mother tongue. In doing so, Telangana is not only preserving its linguistic heritage but also simplifying the curriculum for easier comprehension. Even in the northern state of Punjab, the removal of Punjabi from the regional language curriculum in CBSE schools for the 2025–26 academic session has sparked outrage among Punjabis. Political figures like former deputy chief minister Sukhbir Singh Badal has called it an "attack on our mother tongue." Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attempted to soothe these tensions by emphasising that the BJP honours every Indian language and that each language reflects the soul of Indian culture. He maintains that it is a collective responsibility of every citizen to enrich and embrace all linguistic traditions. Even so, opinions remain deeply divided. Hindi imposition row is more than a policy dispute—it is a reflection of deep-seated historical, cultural, and political currents in India. MK Stalin's strong resistance to perceived linguistic hegemony is shared widely in his state. Language is an emotive issue and if not handled properly could snowball into a major crisis. The best solution lies in a balanced, flexible approach that honours India's linguistic diversity. Only through respectful dialogue, tailored policies, and a celebration of diversity can India navigate this complex linguistic landscape and move toward a truly inclusive nation.

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PICTALK



A visitor takes a selfie at Institute of Himalayan Bioresource Technology Tulip Garden, in Palampur PTI

Declining PhD enrolments threaten the research in the country

Research scholars are not merely assistants or trainees; they are integral to the progress of research institutions and the country

In recent years, India has witnessed a disturbing trend—a decline in PhD enrolments in national institutions. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, the total number of PhD enrolments in India stood at approximately 2.02 lakh, accounting for only 0.5 per cent of the total student enrolment. While this figure has shown a gradual increase over the years, recent data from premier institutions such as IITs, IISc, and central universities indicate a worrying decline in PhD admissions. Research institutions are the bedrock of scientific and technological advancements, serving as hubs for innovation, discovery, and intellectual progress. While principal investigators, faculty members, and senior scientists often receive the limelight for breakthroughs, the research scholars—doctoral candidates, postdoctoral fellows, and junior researchers—form the backbone of these institutions. Despite their critical contributions, research scholars often face numerous challenges, including funding constraints, lack of job security, and the



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BIJU DHARMAPALAN

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(The writer is the Dean-Academic Affairs, at Garden City University, views are personal)

India's ascendant role in global diplomacy

As the nation navigates global issues from terrorism to climate change, India's blend of diplomatic acumen continues to forge a more secure, stable and prosperous future



SUDHIR HINDWAN

India's rising global influence is unmistakable, as it consistently takes center stage in high-level international forums and summits. A clear example is the recent Artificial Intelligence Summit in Paris, co-chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At this event, leaders discussed the need to increase access to AI infrastructure, ensuring that technological advancements serve the public good through inclusive policies and responsible use. The summit underscored India's commitment to diversifying AI applications and establishing highly safe and reliable decision-making frameworks—a testament to its forward-thinking approach in harnessing emerging technologies. India's leadership extends beyond technology. Its prominent roles at major gatherings such as the G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) further solidify its status as an influential global player. In these forums, India has not only showcased its diplomatic acumen but also contributed to discussions on addressing multifaceted global challenges. In today's increasingly globalised world, power dynamics are often shaped by imbalances within the international economic system. The interconnectedness of socio-economic conditions across regions has amplified issues like terrorism, giving non-state actors psychological leverage and operational strength. In this context, combating the spread of misinformation and ideological distortions becomes crucial. Addressing these challenges requires a continuous transfer of talent and specialized training for experts in counter-terrorism—a process that can be significantly enhanced through dedicated foreign policy think tanks. Such institutions provide fresh perspectives and establish frameworks that harmonize diverse stakeholder interests, ensuring robust diplomatic negotiations even when perspectives differ. India's diplomatic journey has always been guided by a well-charted roadmap rooted in effective diplomacy. At its core, foreign policy is about making the right



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AT ITS CORE, FOREIGN POLICY IS ABOUT MAKING THE RIGHT GESTURES-COOPERATION, COORDINATION, AND TIMELY CRISIS MANAGEMENT. AS A MATURE DEMOCRACY, INDIA LEVERAGES ITS RESILIENT LEADERSHIP TO SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES AND CRAFT STRATEGIES THAT BLEND TACTFUL STRENGTH WITH PRAGMATIC RESILIENCE

Polygon" in early 2023 further highlighted India's role in addressing expansionist plans and countering regional threats. The participating nations reaffirmed their commitment to support Pacific Island countries and strengthen regional institutions in combating challenges such as climate change, building resilient infrastructure, and enhancing maritime security. These discussions have played a critical role in reinforcing the framework of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which seeks to stabilize and secure this strategically vital region. In response to growing Chinese assertiveness-exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative and its "String of Pearls" strategy-India has actively pursued measures to safeguard its maritime security. This includes the deployment of naval bases in key Indian Ocean locations, such as Djibouti, and the development of sophisticated coastal radar systems in collaboration with regional partners like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius. Moreover, India has established a fusion system designed to enhance situational awareness in the Indian Ocean Region. Recent defense procurements, including the India-Russia joint venture BrahMos supersonic cruise missile and advanced aero-engines for MiG-29 jets, further bolster its

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(The writer is a recipient of Bharat Gaurav Award and is a professor and an expert on strategic affairs; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CAG REPORT EXPOSES AAP

Madam — The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report has revealed that the now-scrapped excise policy for 2021-22, formulated by the AAP government in Delhi, resulted in a revenue loss of over Rs 2,000 crore to the exchequer, adding insult to the injury to the AAP party, which was recently voted out of power. The 2021-22 policy was framed ostensibly to simplify the liquor trade, bring transparency, check monopoly, and generate optimum revenue.

However, according to the CAG report, the changes effected were fraught with shortcomings, and the objectives stated for switching over to the new excise regime were not achieved. The party has justified its decision to do away with the 'flawed' old policy, but it has failed to explain how and why the new one ran into trouble. The excise scam and the extravagant renovation of the CM's residence-mockingly dubbed Sheesh Mahal by the BJP-betrayed AAP's grand promise of providing clean, hassle-free governance. Ironically, a party that owed its meteoric rise to its tough stand against corruption now finds itself unable to shake off the graft taint. AAP lost the battle of perception long before it was defeated in the 2025 Assembly elections. And the body blow dealt by the CAG findings will make it even harder for the party to regain public trust.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

MAHAKUMBH ENDS

Madam — With the end of the Mahashivratri celebration, it marks the end of the auspicious Mahakumbh as well. The rarest in 144 years, Kumbh, termed Mahakumbh, ended on a delightful note with more than 60 crore people taking a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam of Prayagraj. The beginning of the year 2025 could not be more auspicious with the ecstasy of Mahakumbh. The divine dip in the Sangam water has made all of us connect with spirituality and devotion, taking a break from our hectic schedules.

Rat Miners pushed into tunnel rescue



Water poses a threat to rescuers' lives." published on February 26. As the rescue operations inside the SLBC tunnel in Telangana pose significant challenges with slush and water seepage hampering the work, perhaps the popular method of 'rat mining' could be

a positive solution to locate and extricate the eight workers trapped inside. Rat miners are skilled labourers, proficient in navigating and excavating narrow, hazardous underground tunnels. Their name reflects their capacity to move through tight spaces, similar to that of rodents.

Although this practice is illegal due to safety and environmental issues, it continues, and the miners' skills are indispensable. When standard rescue techniques fail, rat miners come to the fore. Their deep understanding of underground conditions enables them to perform manual excavations with accuracy, accessing locations that machines cannot reach. A striking instance is the Uttarakhnad tunnel collapse in November 2023, where 41 workers were safely rescued after 17 agonising days.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

Mahakumbh has made the people experience true devotion and meditation and find the godly spirit in themselves by taking a divine dip. The time of taking departure from Mahakumbh. The experience was truly mesmerising, filled with pure adoration. Post Mahakumbh bath, as we pledge to have washed our sins, let us embrace practicing good deeds. Let's make a heavenly society, more tolerant, unified, and emphatic. Let's imbibe the spiritual learnings as a part and parcel of our personality and encourage social good by caring, sharing, and helping each other.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

RIISING AGGRESSION AMONG YOUTH

Madam — Recent news reports about youngsters turning violent and causing heavy disasters and deaths to others are something that the state, the society and the nation as a whole have to study, deliberate, debate and find solutions to urgently, or else, rather than taking the nation to progress, the youth of the nation is sure to push the society to the

'primitive age' clashes, conflicts and bloodshed. Be it the heart-wrenching murder of kith and kin by a youngster in Kerala, blood-curdling ragging incidents in some of the schools and colleges in some states, 'psycho-type' cyberbullying, gang assaults, vandalism of trains and vehicles, or a list of criminal activities that paralyse the hearts, it goes to show that the path taken by our present-day youth definitely is not good. A lot of factors are 'culprits' that make our youth uncontrollable, unsympathetic and coldhearted. Individual attention deficit, lack of checking of conduct and behavioural disorders at a low age, early involvement with alcohol and drugs, low intelligence and poor educational achievement, failure in academics, involvement in crime, and also the influence of mass media make many youths turn to anti-social elements.

M Pradyu | Kannur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

DONALD TRUMP'S GLOBAL GAMBIT

Trump's administration is rewriting the rules of global diplomacy, inching closer to Russia



KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

The world has undergone massive change since the new US President's inauguration nearly a month back. The disruptor in town, President Donald Trump is changing every lever of the established global world order, since World War Two. What was unimaginable a month back is a reality, this week! The fact is that, the US and Russia are almost on the same page, as far as Ukraine is concerned. President Trump has called for an early end to the war raging in Europe and is willing to negotiate and even travel to Moscow, if the terms of the negotiation are cosy for his worldview and more importantly can be sold to his domestic political constituency.

Putting an early end to the Ukraine war may be a blessing for several countries especially in the Global South, which are facing high inflation and economic rout. However, the way the US moved on Ukraine, by having a bilateral conversation with Russian President Putin, keeping Europe out of the negotiations and setting economic clauses for Ukraine instead of the billions of dollars worth of military aid it has received from the US, has shocked the global community. US President and his team A, led by billionaire Elon Musk and VP Vance have not minced their words regarding the way Europe and the UK etc. are weak nations, with much of their economy being bankrolled by the US since World War 2.

It has sent shock waves, being felt across the entire of Europe, where, there is renewed vigour for right-centric political parties, gaining



political legitimacy in democratic elections. There is open support for pro-right-leaning parties by the Trump administration, which means the left of the centre political forces, and those who have dominated the narrative for nearly three decades are facing the heat. Many analysts and policy space observers point out that, President Trump believes in creating a Shock and Awe scenario at the negotiating table rather than engaging in traditional surgical strikes to neutralise possible threats to the US.

It may be a smart tactical move, which can force the other parties to come up with out-of-the-box ideas to bypass the US wrath with a hundred and eighty degrees turn by the US on several global issues. It is disruptive and could very well be one of the most consequential events of the 21st century, where, global power equations are being reimagined. That brings us back to how India, with a firmly placed NDA government for more than a decade now, finds itself in the conundrum. Prime Minister Modi was one of the first visitors to the White House after President Trump's inauguration, to revive and remind of the old and cherished friendship between the two, while also trying to reassure that India, will reinvigorate the bilateral relation and take it to a different level.

India agreed to buy more oil and defence equipment from the US, while signalling it would also mean, buying less, from long-standing ally Russia. However, US, and Russia relations are almost on the verge of a reset, which could define how planet earth evolves at least in the next five years. Europe UK and India are feverishly trying to cut mutually beneficial bilateral trade deals, to hedge some of the tariff tirades being pushed by the US President. If not, anything, it has put the fire back in the cold ovens of the new world order.

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

Trump's deal-making redefines Ukraine's fate



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

As Trump leverages his unique, transactional style—one that prioritises lucrative deals over rigid ideology—the global balance is shifting

Ukrainian President Zelensky's colossal misstep in dealing with President Donald Trump could ultimately become one of the most profound blunders in recent history. To Trump, Zelensky is merely a "modestly successful comedian" and a "dictator." However, it is a misguided assumption to believe that Russia will inevitably win this war, yet the divisions within Ukraine's ranks are deepening, fuelled by ambitions that go beyond territorial conquest, pushed by Western powers steering Ukraine down an uncertain path. It is not far-fetched to suggest that Zelensky's days are numbered. A professional comedian skilled in turning tragedy into spectacle, as Marx famously said of history, he now finds himself caught in a high-stakes game where the true motivations remain obscured. One cannot forget that Donald Trump is no traditional dictator, nor a political liberal.

At his core, he is a dealmaker—driven by the pursuit of fame and profit. Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu knows this; Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trying to understand it, while Russian President Vladimir Putin is exploiting it. Chinese President Xi has structured it, while the rest of the leaders, particularly in Europe, are struggling to grasp it. To grasp Trump's approach to global affairs, one must abandon the reductive comparisons to tyrants like Stalin, Hitler, or Mussolini. Trump operates in a different sphere entirely, one that requires a certain mental flexibility to understand. He is not concerned with maintaining power for the sake of ideology or historical legacy; his concern is to make deals that secure material gain.

The world should not mistake him for a man of irrational impulses, for Trump understands the machinery of influence as few others do. His transactional nature is evidenced in his interactions with foreign powers, where his primary concern is leverage, not political principles. A prime example of this comes from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the White House. When an Indian journalist posed a question regarding India's role in countering China, Trump's response was strikingly unconventional. Rather than fall into the trap of aligning with India against China, Trump instead spoke of bringing China, Russia and India together for mutual benefit. This pragmatic approach—concerned not with antagonising one party but rather with securing cooperation from all sides—highlights the difference between Trump's brand of leadership and that of conventional political figures who cling to rigid ideologies.

Trump's worldview is not shaped by traditional political theories; his primary motivation lies in extracting profit from every situation. In this sense, he is a modern-day merchant who sees international relations not as a matter of diplomacy, but as an opportunity for lucrative transactions. This is, after all, a man who, in his bestselling book *The Art of the Deal* (1987), writes, "Sometimes by losing a battle, you find a new way to win the war." This is not the rhetoric of a conventional politician; it is the language of a businessman who understands that in the grand game of power, winning often means losing a few battles along the way. Trump was notorious for cultivating a media presence that exaggerated his



THE WORLD SHOULD NOT MISTAKE HIM FOR A MAN OF IRRATIONAL IMPULSES, FOR TRUMP UNDERSTANDS THE MACHINERY OF INFLUENCE AS FEW OTHERS DO. HIS TRANSACTIONAL NATURE IS EVIDENCED IN HIS INTERACTIONS WITH FOREIGN POWERS, WHERE HIS PRIMARY CONCERN IS LEVERAGE, NOT POLITICAL PRINCIPLES.

wealth and success, as evidenced by the time he manipulated Forbes magazine into listing him as one of the wealthiest individuals, despite his financial situation not reflecting the claim. This is the same man who views international politics through the lens of economic opportunity, where every diplomatic interaction is an avenue for profit. History is replete with similar deals between empires and powerful states—arrangements that were often secretive, strategic and ultimately aimed at controlling the flow of resources and wealth.

Take, for instance, the Treaty of Kadesh in 1259 BCE, a diplomatic agreement between Egypt and the Hittite Empire. While the public version of the treaty touted peace and cooperation, hidden elements revealed that both empires carved up regions like Syria for their benefit, securing timber from the cedars of Lebanon and ensuring access to crucial trade routes. These covert arrangements were not only about ensuring control over vital natural resources.

The very fabric of ancient geopolitics was woven from such secretive deals, where military confrontations were often avoided in favour of securing wealth through backdoor agreements. In the late 19th century, European powers engaged in secretive deals to partition Africa and exploit its resources. The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 is the most notorious example, where the European powers divided Africa without regard for its indigenous populations. This was not merely an exercise in territorial expansion; it was a calculated effort to control Africa's mineral-rich regions—such as the Congo, with its vast deposits of rubber, ivory, and later, uranium and cobalt.

These resources were not just crucial to the European economies—they were the lifeblood of the empires' military and industrial prowess. It is a tragic irony that while European powers publicly championed the benefits of their imperial ventures, the truth behind their actions was one of resource exploitation, where local populations were trampled in the pursuit of wealth. East Timor, in the late 20th century, is one of the blunt examples. Following the region's independence from Portugal in 1975, East Timor was invaded by Indonesia, with the tacit approval of Western powers, particularly Australia and the United States.

While these nations publicly condemned Indonesia's actions, they secretly supported its annexation in exchange for access to the Timor Sea's oil and gas reserves. The 1989 Timor Gap Treaty was signed behind closed doors, securing Australia's share of East Timor's undersea resources despite the ongoing political turmoil.

The exposure of these secret dealings years later revealed how, even in the post-colonial era, resource-rich nations were still subject to exploitation by global powers looking to maximise their profits at any cost. Now, as we return to the present-day conflict between Russia and Ukraine, we see similar patterns at play.

It is no secret that the United States has provided substantial military aid to Ukraine, while making American defence industries the most profitable companies from the war, consequently indebting Ukraine with heavy financial burdens. Zelensky, in his pursuit of securing Ukraine's future, has unwittingly become a puppet of Western interests, never considering the long-term consequences for his country.

Meanwhile, Russia, with its military operations focused on specific regions rich in minerals, continues to tighten its grip on strategic areas like Donetsk and Luhansk, which are abundant in coal, graphite, and other vital resources. As of February 2025, Russia controls approximately 18.6 per cent of Ukrainian territory, including these resource-rich regions.

It is no coincidence that these areas, crucial for energy production and manufacturing, are the focal point of Russia's military campaign. US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, during his first visit to Europe recently, declared that a return to Ukraine's pre-2014 borders is unrealistic, and the Trump administration does not view NATO membership for Kyiv as a solution. On the other hand, President Putin, with his characteristic bluntness, recently remarked that had the 2020 US elections not been 'stolen,' Donald Trump would have won, and the war in Ukraine would never have begun.

This is realpolitik in action. Putin knows how to play the game, not just with Trump, but with any leader, as Angela Merkel aptly noted. Therefore, Trump and Putin could sign a secret deal on Ukrainian minerals, marking a crucial point in history. What is particularly striking is the growing divide between the political circles in Ukraine.

Zelensky's leadership is increasingly seen as compromised, with many wondering if his time is up. Trump, whose sharp criticisms of Zelensky have become more pointed, continues to offer a path to deal with the mineral wealth of Ukraine—one that may well align more with Russia's interests than those of the West.

(The writer is a journalist and policy analyst, Views expressed are personal)

Beyond the hype: Reclaiming authenticity in an AI-driven social media era

With audiences now questioning whether that viral image or breaking news is genuine or simply automated clickbait, brands are challenged to move beyond polished posts

Social media was once a game-changer for brands looking to engage with their audience. It gave businesses a direct line to customers, fostering real conversations and community building. But in the age of AI-driven content, that dynamic is shifting. From content to images to news, AI-generated material is so scarily real that audiences are beginning to question everything they see. Was that viral image doctored?

Is that news article genuine or just AI-generated clickbait? This scepticism has led to a trust crisis—where audiences are unsure if they are interacting with real content or an automated illusion. Naturally, now the audiences are sharper, more discerning, and less

tolerant of inauthenticity. They can spot a robotic, soulless brand from a mile away. The real differentiator isn't just what a brand posts—it's how deeply it connects on a "human" level. In this landscape, it's no longer enough to create routine posts or polished campaigns alone.

To stand out, we must truly understand our audience, which makes the value of data immeasurable. But what truly matters now is how we use that data to create meaningful connections. While data and analytics provide valuable insights, they only tell part of the story. Brands that stay relevant don't just analyse past trends; they incorporate real-time learnings into their content strategy. By actively engaging in ongoing discussions and tapping into



TANYA MICHAEL

recent themes, they make their audience feel seen and heard today and now.

This real-time approach is possible by identifying channels where brands can interact directly with their audience—be it customer support, social media, or community forums. And that's where AI can play a role in making advertisers' lives easier. The key is blending human intuition

with AI efficiency for smarter, more personalised engagement.

I-powered tools can help brands process vast amounts of data while human teams extract the most valuable customer insights. Ultimately, mastering social media connections comes down to truly understanding your audience. In a digital world where trust and authenticity are in short supply, building genuine connections is more important than ever. That's why making your brand as human and audience-centric as possible is key to standing out and fostering real engagement. Here are a few tips to keep in mind.

1. **Make It Fun, Not Just Promotional**
People don't come to social media to be sold to; they



come to engage, learn, and be entertained. Successful brands create content that feels like a natural part of their audience's feed rather than a disruption. Amul uses meme-inspired, quirky posts to entertain users while subtly reinforcing brand recall.

2. **Inject Personality into Your Brand**
Voice Jargon and generic content don't belong on social

media. A distinct and consistent brand voice—whether witty, warm, or bold—helps brands resonate with their audience. Zomato, for example, balances humour with real-time engagement, making its Twitter presence feel friendly rather than a marketing channel.

3. **Making Users Your On-Ground Advocates**
The perfect example of this is the beauty and lifestyle space. Many brands are moving away from celebrity endorsements and instead leveraging customer reviews, user-generated content, and a balance of macro and micro-influencers. Real user demos and authentic experiences have proven to be more effective in building trust and driving engagement, helping even

newer brands compete with industry giants.

4. **Engage in Meaningful Conversations**
Social media isn't just about broadcasting; it's about engaging. Brands that actively respond to comments, DMs, and discussions create a sense of community. For instance, Myntra's Facebook group, Myntra Insiders, fosters a community where fashion enthusiasts discuss trends and share style tips—prioritising conversation over sales.

5. **Tailor Strategies to Your Audience's Platform**
Every brand has a primary audience, and understanding where they spend most of their time online is key to crafting an effective strategy. Instead of relying on a generic approach that can be applied

across all platforms, take the time to understand which platform your audience prefers and create a strategy that's tailored to it. Use the platform's features strategically to ensure maximum visibility and engagement. For example, on Instagram, Reels are crucial for visibility, while on Facebook, interactive posts and community-building are the focus.

By aligning your strategy with the platform's strengths, you'll drive better results and engage your audience more effectively. By focusing on meaningful connections and genuine engagement, brands can rise above the noise, earning trust and loyalty that goes beyond the digital space.

(The writer is Co-founder and Creative Head at Voynic Media; views are personal)

IN BRIEF



Punjab Cabinet approves new excise policy

The Punjab Cabinet on Thursday approved a new excise policy for the year 2025-26, which aims to collect Rs 11,020 crore of revenue. The nod was given in a meeting of the council of ministers, chaired by Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann. Addressing the media after the Cabinet meeting here, Finance and Excise Minister Harpal Singh Cheema said his department would mobilise Rs 10,200 crore by the end of March this year as against the target of Rs 10,145 crore for 2024-25. The target of mobilising revenue to the tune of Rs 11,020 crore has been set for the financial year 2025-26. He said during the previous regimes, the revenue from the excise used to be Rs 6,100 crore. The allotment of liquor vends would be conducted through e-tendering under the new excise policy, Cheema said, adding that the quota for country-made liquor has been increased by three per cent. Cheema also informed that to further strengthen enforcement, new excise police stations will be set up and a committee has been formed in this regard. Under this policy, an approval has been given for setting up a new bottling plant, he said.



Augmont enters lab-grown diamond market

Augmont, a gold trading platform, has entered the lab-grown diamond market by launching a store under the brand 'Akoiroh', and aims to have 100 retail stores in the next three years. Director Ketan Kothari said on Thursday. The company is initially investing Rs 100 crore, anticipating a good demand in coming years, where aspirational consumers may opt for LGD (lab-grown diamond) instead of mined diamonds due to cost savings, he said. The company has opened its first Akoiroh store in Pune, Maharashtra and has plans to expand in other cities targeting aspirational young consumers across the markets looking for LGD, which are visually, chemically and thermally identical to mined natural diamonds. "Around 100 stores planned in the next 3 years of Akoiroh. The initial investment outlay is Rs 100 crore. Later, there will be a combination of franchisee stores along with company owned stores and funds will be added accordingly," said Kothari at a media round-table here.



House price index rises 3.1 pc in Q3: RBI data

All-India House Price Index (HPI) increased 3.1 per cent in the third quarter of 2024-25 as compared to 4.3 per cent growth in the preceding three months and 3.8 per cent growth in the year-ago period, according to data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The RBI released its quarterly house price index for the December quarter of 2024-25 on Thursday, based on transaction-level data received from the registration authorities in 10 major cities. The cities are Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Jaipur, Kanpur, Kochi, Kolkata, Lucknow, and Mumbai. The RBI said the annual HPI growth varied widely across the cities - ranging from a high growth of 8.1 per cent (Kolkata) to 0.1 per cent (Kanpur). On a sequential (q-o-q) basis, all-India HPI increased by 0.4 per cent in Q3:2024-25. Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Kolkata, Chennai, Jaipur and Kochi recorded a sequential rise in house prices during the latest quarter.

India needs to ramp up bilateral ties for trade, investment: FM

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday said India needs to ramp up its bilateral relations for trade and investment, as the world is witnessing a churn, and bilateralism seems to be the new catalyst tool. Speaking at BS Manthan, the Finance Minister said these are very interesting yet challenging times and the government is making all efforts to make India move up the ladder and be an engine of global growth.



"Bilateralism is now taking the top of the agenda... It is for us to ramp up our bilateral relations with many countries, not just for trade, but also for strategic relations. So multilateralism, sort of, out, I'm still saying with a qualifying word 'sort of out', but bilateralism is very much your only catalytic tool that you can use," she said

"Bilateralism is now taking the top of the agenda... It is for us to ramp up our bilateral relations with many countries, not just for trade, but also for strategic relations. So multilateralism, sort of, out, I'm still saying with a qualifying word 'sort of out', but bilateralism is very much your only catalytic tool that you can use," she said.

Observing that multilateral institutions are increasingly fading away, she said, every attempt to revive them and energize them is not having the desired result.

"So, where you have to address issues which affect more than your own country. You have no more forums left which can effectively deliver... multilateral institutions and their contributions probably are fading away, at least in the near future, till an attempt is

made to revive them with that kind of energy... It's not going to happen in the next few years," she said.

Asserting that global trade is undergoing a complete reset, she said, "the terms and references with which all of us played trade, with some kind of an anchor in the World Trade Organization are no longer available."

There is no Most Favoured Nation (MFN) concept, she said, adding, every country wants to be treated special, and every country wants to be sure that special treatment that they get is not by default.

"So if the WTO is getting weakened or multilateral institutions are not being effective... bilateral arrangements are going to be the order of the day in terms of trade," she said.

Sensing the movement toward a new world, India has initiated bilateral trade talks with many nations including the UK and is planning a bilateral trade agreement with the US. India is also in discussion with the 27-nation grouping - the European Union, for a free trade pact.

In the new global order, she said, India needs to ramp up its bilateral relations for trade, investment and boosting strategic relations.

With its technology and talent pool, the country can act as the engine of global growth in a new world order, she said.

"I think these are very interesting yet challenging times... India has to make a meaningful contribution to the global reset, as much as continuous-

ly make all the efforts to make India move up the ladder, both in terms of per capita income, and also in terms of a business destination, where talent can move, investors can move for the global good... we can be the engine of the global growth," she said.

Talking about reforms, Sitharaman said, it is something which the government will continue to do in various areas including debt management and maintaining fiscal prudence.

"Reform cannot be just an agenda only of the union government, it has to be taken up seriously by every state government... I would want a competition among states, a healthy one, to say my economy is far better than the others," she said.

NCLAT sets aside insolvency proceedings against Coffee Day Enterprises

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) on Thursday set aside the insolvency proceedings against Coffee Day Enterprises Ltd (CDEL), which owns the Cafe Coffee Day chain.

A two-member NCLAT bench of Chennai comprising justices Sharad Kumar Sharma and Jatindranath Swain set aside an earlier order passed by the Bengaluru bench of the National Company Law Tribunal.

The latest order was pronounced in the open court and a detailed order is still awaited.

CDEL is the parent company of Coffee Day Group which operates the Cafe Coffee Day chain of coffee houses. It also owns and operates a resort, renders consultancy services and is engaged in the sale and purchase of coffee beans.

Last week, insolvency proceedings against CDEL were resumed as the appellate tribunal NCLAT could not pass the order within the specified deadline of February 21, set by the Supreme Court.

Earlier on August 8 last year, the Bengaluru bench of the NCLAT (National Company Law Tribunal) admitted the plea filed by IDBI Trusteeship Services Ltd (IDBITS) claiming a default of Rs 228.45 crore and appointed an interim resolution professional to take care of the operation of the debt-ridden company.

The suspended board immediately challenged the order before the appellate tribunal NCLAT, which on August 14, 2024, stayed the insolvency proceedings initiated against CDEL.

This NCLAT order was challenged by IDBITS before the Supreme Court, which had on January 31, 2025 directed the Chennai bench of NCLAT to dispose of the appeal before February 21, 2025.

Gold tumbles Rs 1,150 to Rs 88,200 per 10 gm

Silver plunges Rs 1,000 amid weak global cues

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices tumbled by Rs 1,150 to Rs 88,200 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday, tracking a bearish trend in global markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

Gold of 99.5 per cent purity also slumped by Rs 1,150 to Rs 87,800 per 10 grams from the previous close of Rs 88,950 per 10 grams.

Silver prices tanked by Rs 1,000 to Rs 98,500 per kg from the last close of Rs 99,500 per kg. Bullion markets were closed on Wednesday for Mahashivratri.

Meanwhile, in futures trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), gold contracts for April delivery declined Rs 554 to Rs 85,320 per 10 grams.

"Gold prices traded weak as a sell-off was witnessed in MCX, where gold saw a decline touching Rs 85,000.



Further weakness may emerge if MCX gold breaches Rs 84,800," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said. Market participants will closely watch the Core PCE (Personal Consumption Expenditures) Price Index data on Friday for further cues, Trivedi added.

In the overseas markets, Comex gold futures for April delivery fell by USD 23.10 per ounce or 0.79 per cent to USD 2,907.50 per ounce.

Also, spot gold slipped below the USD 2,900-mark as

'One Nation One Port' to expand port footprint

Minister Sonowal launches consortium

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Monday launched a consortium consisting of India Ports Global, Sagar Mala Development Company and India Port Rail and Ropeway Corporation to expand their maritime footprint and strengthen supply chains, among others.

In addition to this, Sonowal, who is the Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways, also rolled out a slew of other initiatives including 'One Nation-One Port Process (ONOP)' to standardise and streamline operations across India's major ports, the Logistics Port Performance Index (LPMI) and Sagar Ankanal for FY 2023-24 and MAITRI (Master Application for International Trade and Regulatory Interface) APP during a post-Budget industry stakeholders meeting here.

Along with this, he also launched the National Centre of Excellence in Green Port and Shipping (NCoEGPS) website. "India's Blue Economy is not just about ships and ports -- it's about jobs, trade, sustainability, and economic growth. There is immense potential, and we are committed to ensuring that you have the right policies, the right financing, and the right

environment to thrive," the minister said.

He said, "We are not just aiming to be a top 10 shipbuilding nation by 2030, we are aiming to create an ecosystem that is world-class, efficient, and future-ready."

By developing robust port infrastructure, the Bharat Global Ports Consortium initiative will streamline logistics, strengthen supply chains, and support the 'Make in India' initiative by boosting exports, Sonowal said.



Bringing together the three different entities - IPGL, which is into ports operation, (operations), SDCL (finance), and IPCL (infrastructure development), the consortium will drive port expansion, operations, and financing to position India as a key player in international trade and logistics, the Minister said.

He said that by focusing on efficiency, innovation, and global collaboration, the consortium aims to improve trade connectivity and enhance India's economic footprint.

LIC gets GST demand notice of Rs 479.88 crore

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) on Thursday said it has received a demand notice of Rs 479.88 crore for short payment of Goods and Services Tax (GST) for 2020-21.

The company has received a communi cation/demand order for interest and penalty for Maharashtra on February 27 from Deputy Commissioner of State Tax, Mumbai, LIC said in a regulatory filing.

The demand notice pertains to wrong availment and short reversal of Input Tax Credit (ITC). Interest on late payments, short payment of tax liability, it said.

The order is appealable before the Joint Commissioner of State tax (Appeals), Mumbai, it said.

The financial impact of the demand is to the extent of the GST (Rs 242.23 crore), Interest (Rs 213.43 crore) and Penalty (Rs 24.22 crore), it said, adding, there is no material impact on financials, operations or other activities of the corporation.

'Business leaders prioritise AI adoption, but talent gap looms'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Generative AI has rapidly transitioned from a mere buzzword to a critical business imperative for Indian organisations, with most business leaders in India prioritising AI adoption, says a report.

However, a significant challenge remains: finding professionals with the right AI and related skills to unlock the technology's full potential, a report by professional networking platform LinkedIn has revealed.

"Around 54 per cent of HR professionals in India report that only half, or fewer, of the

job applications they receive meet all required and preferred qualifications. Finding candidates with the right technical (61 per cent) and soft skills (57 per cent) remains their biggest hiring challenge.

"The hardest-to-find skills in India include technical/IT skills such as software development, engineering (44 per cent), AI skills (34 per cent) and soft skills like communication and problem-solving (33 per cent)," the report said.

This scarcity of qualified candidates is forcing companies to become increasingly selective in their hiring processes.

According to the report,

companies are exercising 'selective hiring' in 2025 with more than half of HR professionals in India saying they would only consider reaching out to (55 per cent) and hiring (54 per cent) of candidates who meet 80 per cent or more of job qualifications.

India is LinkedIn's second largest market in terms of membership, growing more than 20 per cent year-on-year. LinkedIn has over 150 million members in India.

Ruchee Anand, India Country Head, of Talent & Learning Solutions at LinkedIn, emphasised the critical need for a skills-first approach to hiring.

"AI is reshaping how we hire and develop talent, but the real unlock isn't just adopting AI -- it's making it work for the business. Too often, companies pour resources into AI tools without the right talent to unlock their full potential, turning a game-changing opportunity into a missed one."

"To break this cycle, businesses need to approach hiring with a skills-first mindset -- because while AI will be the tool that unlocks innovation, it's human skills like creativity, communication, and collaboration that will help companies truly stay ahead of change," she said.

Moderation in inflation opens up more policy space for RBI: NCAER

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Moderation in inflation to five-month low of 4.3 per cent in January has provided RBI more space to cut interest rate in policy meet, according to the monthly economic review by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

Earlier this month, RBI slashed policy repo rate by 25 basis points to 6.25 per cent. The next monetary policy committee meeting is to be held in April.

Even in the face of global headwinds, some of the high-frequency indicators of the Indian economy have turned more benign and the nascent turnaround is evident in indicators like Purchasing Managers' Index for manufacturing, GST collections and non-EV and EV sales, it said.

PMI for manufacturing increased to 57.7 in January, signalling expansion, while PMI for services remained at an elevated level of 56.5.

The economic think tank added that GST collections, gross and net, achieved robust double-digit growth of 12.3 per cent and 10.9 per cent, respectively in January 2025, as compared to subdued a growth of 7.3 per cent and 3.3 per cent in December 2024.

"Moderation in inflation (headline inflation to 4.3 per cent) has opened up more policy space. The agriculture sector is also exhibiting much-needed resilience, which bodes well for both inflation control and rural push to the economy," NCAER Director General Poonam Gupta said.

Another factor that needs to be monitored is the continued outflow of FII flows, she said.



'AI in healthcare likely to contribute \$30 bn to GDP'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in healthcare is projected to contribute USD 25-30 billion to India's GDP by 2025, enhancing accessibility, diagnostics, and treatment outcomes, according to a report by Deloitte.

Government-backed initiatives like the IndiaAI Mission and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, are setting the stage for a digitally empowered healthcare ecosystem, ensuring responsible AI integration and enhanced data security, it noted.

As per the report -- "Digital Healthcare - Top 10 Myths Debunked Digital Health & AI", AI adoption in healthcare has surged past 40 per cent, surpassing sectors such as FMCG (30 per cent) and manufacturing (25 per cent).

Deloitte India Life Sciences and Health Care Industry Leader Joydeep Ghosh noted that India's digital healthcare ecosystem is rapidly advancing, with AI-powered diagnostics, MedTech innovations and digital health records transforming patient care.

India's surgical consumables and disposables exports



reached USD 1.6 billion in FY 2022-23, showcasing its growing capabilities and presence in the global healthcare market, he added.

"However, to realise its full potential, the sector must overcome challenges such as regulatory alignment, workforce training and infrastructure

limitations. "With targeted investments and focused policy advancements, India can become a global leader in AI-powered healthcare, elevating patient outcomes and accessibility," Ghosh stated.

The report noted that despite advancements, the adoption of AI in healthcare is progressing more slowly than in banking and financial services.

This is largely due to concerns about data security, regulatory fragmentation and limited digital infrastructure in rural areas, it added.

Additionally, the shortage of

professionals trained in AI further complicates the seamless integration of these technologies into clinical workflows, the report said. While India has become a net exporter of surgical consumables, it still relies on imports for high-tech medical equipment, underscoring the need for a stronger domestic manufacturing base, it said.

Strategic investments in training, infrastructure and policy reforms can accelerate AI adoption, paving the way for technologically advanced and self-reliant healthcare system, it added.



GOSSIP GIRL STAR MICHELLE TRACHTENBERG DIES AT 39

Actress Michelle Trachtenberg, widely recognised for her roles as Georgina Sparks in *Gossip Girl* and Dawn Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, has passed away at the age of 39.

According to reports from the BBC, Trachtenberg was found dead in her New York City apartment on Wednesday morning by her mother. Manhattan police responded to the scene and discovered the actress "unconscious and unresponsive." She was pronounced dead at the scene, with authorities confirming that her death is not being treated as suspicious.

A family representative confirmed the tragic news in a statement, saying, "It is with great sadness to confirm that Michelle Trachtenberg has passed away. The family requests privacy for their loss."

Michelle Trachtenberg made her film debut in 1996 as the lead in *Harriet the Spy*, a performance that quickly made her a household name among young audiences. She became a familiar face on Nickelodeon, starring in *The Adventures of Pete & Pete* before transitioning into major television and film roles. She gained immense popularity as Dawn Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a role she played from 2000 to 2003. Later, she cemented her place in pop culture with her portrayal of Georgina Sparks in *Gossip Girl*, a character beloved for her mischievous and unpredictable nature.

Her film career included notable performances in *EuroTrip* (2004), *Ice Princess* (2005) and *17 Again* (2009), among others.

ABC News reported that Trachtenberg had recently undergone a liver transplant and may have been experiencing complications. While the official cause of death remains undetermined, authorities believe she died of natural causes. An autopsy will be conducted to confirm further details.

"Criminality is not suspected. The medical examiner will determine the cause of death. The investigation remains ongoing," the New York Police Department stated.

Following the news of her passing, tributes poured in from across the entertainment industry. Actress Rosie O'Donnell, who starred alongside Trachtenberg in *Harriet the Spy*, expressed her grief, saying, "I loved her very much. She struggled the last few years. I wish I could have helped."

Actor Ed Westwick, known for playing Chuck Bass in *Gossip Girl*, shared a tribute on Instagram, posting a picture of Trachtenberg as Georgina Sparks, with the caption, "So sad to hear of the passing of Michelle Trachtenberg. Sending prayers."

Abhishek Banerjee, Shahana Goswami, Neeraj Kabi join upcoming film *Mahasangam*

Virtual Bharat announces its debut feature film, set against the backdrop of the world's largest human gathering—the Mahakumbh.

Acclaimed filmmaker Bharat Bala is set to bring an evocative new cinematic experience to the big screen with *Mahasangam*, an intense exploration of family, legacy and music, all unfolding within the mystical and chaotic grandeur of the Mahakumbh. Produced by Virtual Bharat, the film promises to be a deeply moving journey into the complex relationships between a father, son, and daughter, whose lives are intertwined by a powerful musical inheritance.

Starring Abhishek Banerjee, Neeraj Kabi and Shahana Goswami in leading roles, *Mahasangam* is set to be a compelling narrative that delves into the intricate layers of love, conflict and redemption. At its heart, the film questions the weight of tradition and the emotional struggles that arise when art becomes both a gift and a burden.

What makes *Mahasangam* even more special is the involvement of Oscar-winning composer A.R. Rahman, whose music will shape the film's emotional and spiritual depth. Speaking about the film, director Bharat Bala expressed his deep passion for the project, stating,

"*Mahasangam* is Virtual Bharat and my tribute to the world's largest gathering of humanity, the Mahakumbh Mela, which concluded today. This is a story that delves into complex layers of human emotions and unfolds at an unprecedented gathering of pilgrims. It is a journey of redemption, inheritance and music, narrated through the three lead characters. I'm immensely proud and fortunate to direct this film, especially with the incredible talent backing it. From the legendary A.R. Rahman coming on board to do the music to an absolutely outstanding cast and with the blessings of Ajoy Chakroborty, a stalwart of Hindustani classical music—each one of them adds something special to this journey."



Harman Baweja, Sidharth Jain join forces for a three-project deal

In a significant move for Indian cinema, Harman Baweja's Baweja Studios has partnered with Sidharth Jain's House of Talksies for a groundbreaking three-project deal. Speaking about this collaboration, producer Harman Baweja emphasised the synergy between the two studios and their shared passion for impactful narratives.

"Great storytelling requires courage, and that's exactly what Sidharth brings to the table. When I watched *Trial By Fire*, I saw a creator unafraid to tackle difficult narratives with sensitivity and depth. At Baweja Studios, we have always believed in telling stories that resonate on a deeper level—whether it's *Mrs.*, which highlights a crucial social issue, or *Khwaabon Ka Jhameela*, which explores the complexities of relationships and personal growth.

This three-film deal with House of Talksies is an exciting opportunity to merge our creative strengths and build stories that challenge, inspire, and entertain. Sidharth's sharp storytelling sensibilities, combined with our shared passion for content with substance, make this partnership a perfect fit. Together, we hope to create films that leave a lasting impact on audiences."

Among its highly anticipated projects is *Dil Ka Darwaza Kholna Darling*, directed by Vikas Bahl. The film features a stellar ensemble cast, including Jaya Bachchan, Siddhant Chaturvedi, and Wamiqa Gabbi. Another ambitious project on the horizon is *Boy From Andaman*, a collaboration between Baweja Studios, *Delhi Crime* creator Richie Mehta and Imagine Entertainment. Meanwhile, House of Talksies continues to build on its strong development slate, leveraging its expertise in multi-format storytelling.



Imtiaz Ali announces *O Saathi Re*, a love story with a vintage soul

After the resounding success of Amar Singh Chamkila, acclaimed filmmaker Imtiaz Ali is reuniting with Netflix for yet another deeply emotional and contemporary exploration of love and human connections. Titled *O Saathi Re*, the series will feature Aditi Rao Hydari, Avinash Tiwary and Arjun Rampal in pivotal roles.

Describing the essence of the series, Imtiaz shared, "*O Saathi Re* surprised me at every turn of its development. It is a modern story with a vintage heart, an enchanted fairy tale set in the fiasco of metropolitan life." Expressing his excitement about the project, he added, "I feel both relieved and excited at having Arif direct the stellar cast of Avinash, Aditi and Arjun (all ace there) and it is the ever-strengthening relationship with Netflix that enabled us to enter the deceptively charming world of *O Saathi Re*."

While Imtiaz will serve as the show's creator, writer, and showrunner, he will also take on executive producer duties alongside Mohit Choudhary. His brother, Arif Ali—known for his directorial work on *She*—will helm the series, with writing contributions from Imtiaz and Amogh Kanaskar. The project is being produced under the banners of Window Seat Films and Reliance Entertainment.

Production for *O Saathi Re* is set to begin by the end of this month, with the narrative delving into the "vintage feeling of love in contemporary times." The series also marks a reunion of its lead actors with Netflix—Aditi Rao Hydari returns after her stellar performance in *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar*, Avinash Tiwary follows his role in *Sikandar Ka Muqaddar* and Arjun Rampal comes back after *Rana Naidu Season 2*.

Pankaj Udhas' unreleased gem *Baithi Ho Kyun Gumsum* released

On the first death anniversary of legendary ghazal maestro Pankaj Udhas, his final posthumous track, *Baithi Ho Kyun Gumsum*, has been released by Bhushan Kumar's T-Series. The soulful melody serves as a poignant tribute to the late singer, ensuring that his legacy continues to resonate with fans worldwide.

Reflecting on the emotional significance of the song, Pankaj Udhas' daughters, Nayaab and Reva Udhas, expressed their deep pride in carrying forward their father's legacy. "Legends don't fade and neither does their music. Our father's voice has always had the power to touch hearts, and with *Baithi Ho Kyun Gumsum*, it does so once



again. This is not just another release—it's the first unreleased gem from his treasured trove, a song he was deeply passionate about bringing to life on a grand scale. Releasing it on his first death anniversary makes this moment even more special." Highlighting the strong bond between their father and T-Series, they further shared, "His bond with Gulshan Ji and T-Series was more than just music—it was a brotherhood built on trust, respect, and melody.

Today, his dream comes full circle, uniting T-Series, the legacy of Padma Bhushan Pankaj Udhas and Neeraj Roy of Hungama Digital—the key link in making this collaboration a reality? The track carries immense sentimental value, as it was one of the songs Pankaj Udhas was eager to bring to life. The song, originally composed by the late Ananda Shankar, has been recreated by Deepak Pandit and Pankaj Udhas, with lyrics penned by Udhas himself.

Lending her voice alongside the maestro is Pratibha Singh Baghel, whose sargam vocals add a rich texture to the song. The music video has been directed by Arif Khan.

Nayaab and Reva Udhas further elaborated on the significance of the release, stating, "As his daughters, we carry forward this legacy with immense pride, honoring the iconic musical journey our father and Gulshan Ji started. With Bhushan Ji's vision, we have taken this treasured partnership to a global scale. While our father may not be here in person, his voice, spirit and timeless music remain—growing stronger, resonating deeper and touching souls for generations to come."

FUN

ARCHIE



GARFIELD



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



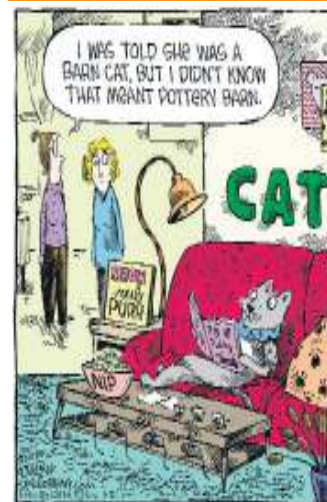
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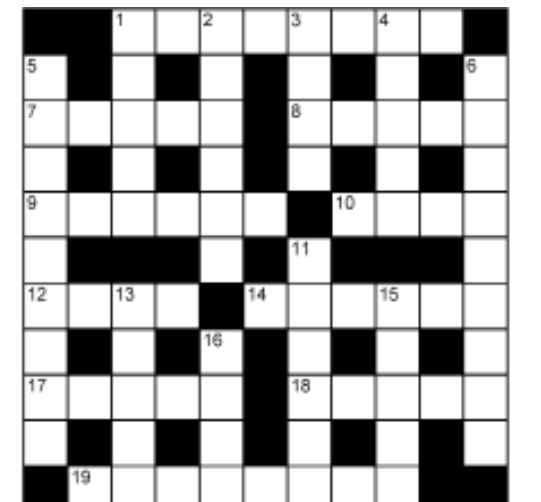
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



SUDOKU

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

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

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

- Motion
- A spicy Indian food dish
- Similar
- Quit your job
- At this place
- Remedy
- Mother or father
- Of greater age
- A fruit with pips
- A place for sick or injured people
- Aud sounds
- A figure in a field to frighten birds
- One third of fifty-one
- With nobody in it
- A communication device
- Kick out of school
- Catch a mouse with this

DOWN

- Dirty stains
- A long journey by sea or in space
- Animal flesh for eating



EMPOWERING INDIA'S ATHLETES!

PNSHYDERABAD

For more than 20 years, a trailblazing leader has been writing an incredible success story in the field of sports education in India. The Institute of Sports Science & Technology (ISST) in Pune has rapidly become India's leading center for sports and fitness education because of the innovative leadership of its founder and director, Dr. Vipul Lunawat. He, who holds a Ph.D. in Sports Management and has over 20 years of distinguished experience, has been the driving force behind ISST's unique programs, helping players, managers and sports support staff reach their full potential. He is an accomplished sports administrator, entrepreneur and certified coach who has instructed more than 3,000 children, represented India in international competitions and won multiple national honours. Under his inspiring direction, it has transformed sports education in India and produced a new generation of athletes who are becoming well-known throughout the world! Due to his outstanding qualifications, love of sports and dedication to quality, he has established himself as a preeminent expert in Indian sports education. A dynamic network of academics, athletes and professionals who share his vision for revolutionising India's sports ecosystem has been established as a result of his commitment to promoting a culture of innovation, inclusivity and excellence. It is the ideal starting point for your athletic career because of its cutting-edge programs, knowledgeable professors and dedication to quality.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW:

When you switched from sports to education and enterprise, what was the most important turning point?

I found it somewhat challenging to balance my studies with competing as a full-time athlete. However, sports are so amazing that they teach you the most important life lessons. I've learned to work hard, never give up and most importantly, be resilient thanks to sports. Being a full-time athlete taught me how to efficiently manage my time so that I could concentrate on my schoolwork as well. When I applied to a few prestigious universities and institutes to pursue a master's degree in sports management, it was a turning point in my transition from an athlete to an educational entrepreneur. While I was doing research for my higher education studies at some of the world's best colleges, I had the notion to launch the first sports management program in India. I discovered that the majority of the concepts covered in these programs were comparable to those covered in the MBA degree I was pursuing. With my marketing master's degree and my understanding of sports from the viewpoints of coaches and athletes, along with the help of my mother Ujwala Lunawat and mentor Dr. P. C. Shejwalkar, we made the decision to start India's first sports management program in 2009 at the Institute of Sports Science & Technology in Pune.

What difficulties did you encounter in establishing ISST?

India's first sports education institute, it was founded with the goal of enhancing Indian sports and giving players and students the chance to pursue careers in sports while participating in them. In a tiny space in my garage, I launched ISST, a start-up project. At first, I had only my parents' and my mentor Shejwalkar sir's support—no financial backing, no investment and no prior experience managing an educational business. I was the founder, the director, the salesperson, the office boy and many other positions throughout the first few years of the company's existence. I recall talking to a number of sports gurus about this notion and many of them told me to give up because it would never work. Nobody could have predicted that this ambitious project would grow into such a distinctive business that offers different sports fans the chance to pursue careers in sports. Since the beginning, it has been a bootstrapped firm and there have been numerous times when I've considered quitting since managing the finances has been difficult. However, just as sports teach us to never give up, I kept up the good work and now we are among India's leading providers of sports instruction.

Based on your vast experience as a manager and coach, what are the most important qualities that you think aspiring athletes and sports professionals require?

To succeed in their sport, many athletes put forth a lot of

effort, blood, sweat, heart and soul. Due to the growth of sports, many athletes now achieve immediate financial success after winning medals at major competitions, championships, or events. Their social media following grows rapidly, they receive unexpected media exposure, advertisers want them to promote their brands and they have a sizable fan base. This fame and glory frequently diverts them from their goals for their athletic careers, leading them to make poor choices and say inappropriate things that could land them in legal hot water. Athletes are trained to improve their skills via practice and dedication. Athletes are trained to win; while some elite athletes are able to cope with setbacks, many are not taught how to maintain the success and notoriety they attain when at the top. In essence, sports management programs train students how to deal with all of these problems. These athletes may manage their jobs more easily and make growth investments even after their athletic careers are done if they have knowledge of good communication techniques, financial management, marketing, public relations and legal issues, among other things.

As an athlete and coach who has competed internationally for India, what structural or cultural adjustments do you think the country should do to raise its profile in international sports?

I firmly think that India's sports governance system has to undergo significant transformation. Even after all these years, India continues to suffer from inadequate sports governance, which has prevented many excellent sports organisations from making an impact on the global scene. Politicians and those with vested interests occupy many high positions in many sports federations and organisations. Top nations with solid administration through their national sports federations are typically the ones who perform well in international competitions. A successful sports organisation must have accountability, transparency, a strong governance structure and a long-term vision. These elements are mostly lacking in Indian sports, with the exception of a small number of organisations that have had success with its athletes abroad. Regarding culture, it is true that India and other major sports-playing nations like Australia, China, or the US have quite different perspectives on sports. While we still struggle to

provide students with an hour of athletics per day in schools, sports are a way of life in these countries. Therefore, it is crucial to have a strong sports culture that is ingrained in the nation's way of life in order to produce winners who will triumph at international competitions and bring honours home. It is urgently necessary to concentrate on grassroots sport development by increasing the number of sporting events and implementing a systematic program for identifying talent in each discipline.

How have sports professionals' needs changed, in your perspective?

I believe that technology has significantly changed the nature of sport during the past 20 years. In order to enhance athlete performance and examine how sports are seen and played, we must take into account the most recent developments in the field as well as the new technology being utilised at sporting events! Today's educational institutions must always be alert to how technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR) and others can alter the way people watch sports. More employment opportunities will arise as sports participation rises and as more opportunities arise, more positions for sports professionals will become available. Educational institutions need to be prepared to investigate and impart the skill sets needed for these demanding new positions.

How can you modify your coaching techniques to motivate every person, regardless of where they are coming from?

A coach who can help pupils who struggle with mental blockages or who are not particularly engaged in sports or physical exercise is more successful than one who has a lot of medal-winning athletes. To deal with elite athletes and instruct a 3-year-old child, a coach needs to possess a variety of skills. Enjoying the game and the process is what matters most in sports. To improve in sports, a good coach should instill in his or her athletes a passion for the routine rather than viewing it as a challenging chore. An athlete doesn't need to train hard to get better once they discover how much they like the sport; instead, progress occurs naturally. When working with young athletes, gamification is a crucial coaching tool for grassroots sport development. It is equally successful when working with elite athletes.

How do you see this market developing in India given the rising popularity of adventure sports?

In the west, adventure sports are quite popular, but in India, they are viewed more as entertainment and leisure. Adventure sports are undoubtedly gaining popularity in India, but it will take some time before they become recognised as professional sports in which one may pursue a career. Through its many initiatives, it hopes to produce knowledgeable, seasoned experts who will lead Indian sports in the future and contribute to the growth of specialised sports to increase chances for adventure sports enthusiasts.

How has your business sense affected your approach to managing a sports institute as a professional qualified by IIM Ahmedabad?

Being a business owner requires full-time work. Prior to enrolling in the IIM Ahmedabad Young Entrepreneurs Program, I managed my company as an individual who was active in every step of the procedure. Delegating work, freeing up time for critical activities and automating procedures were the topics of our first session at IIM A. In order to put productivity at the forefront of development, we were instructed to establish procedures for every organisational process. Making effective use of the resources available to you is crucial while operating a self-funded business. Striking a balance between participation in daily operations and business development is crucial. I applied a variety of business management skills, such as marketing, financial management, business strategy and human resource management, which enabled me to quickly expand our institute's activities. In order to introduce a professional approach to our company, we have always aimed to operate this business as a corporate entity.

In the near future, how can technological advancements impact coaching and athlete development?

The application of technology has elevated sports science to a new level and significantly altered athletic performance. In today's professional sports, physical conditioning is crucial. Technology is practically used in every way to help sportsmen perform better. Numerous technologies, sensors and devices are employed to evaluate every one of these crucial elements of sports performance, from evaluation to analysis, performance improvement to injury recovery. The development of AI has significantly disrupted the tech sector today. AI applications that may be examined in the near future include performance analysis and sports program design. Sports-specific training may now be done from a different angle thanks to the use of technologies like AR and VR. Athletes of different skill levels can be managed and performance development tracked using a variety of coaching tools. Technology use will undoubtedly play a significant role in improving sports performance and identifying talent to win big international tournaments.

'Before I knew it, I started getting more calls for writing than for singing'

Siddhant Kaushal, the man behind some of Bollywood's most memorable lyrics, is currently riding high on the success of *Dhoom Dhaam*, where he penned the entire album and *Deva*, for which he crafted an intense, high-energy track. In an exclusive chat with *The Pioneer*, the versatile lyricist opens up about his unexpected journey from aspiring singer to sought-after songwriter, the challenges of writing across genres and the creative freedom that fuels his work

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In an industry dominated by larger-than-life personalities, Siddhant Kaushal has quietly built a reputation as one of Bollywood's most versatile and impactful lyricists. A silent performer Siddhant, his words have given voice to countless emotions across genres, seamlessly fitting into the narratives of films, independent music, and brand campaigns.

In an era where lyricists often go unnoticed, his words breathe life into melodies, seamlessly blending storytelling with rhythm. With a filmography that includes *Kill*, *Tumhari Sulu*, *Drive*, *Friday Night Plan*, *Loop Lapeta*, *Badla*, *Bob Biswas*, *Love Hostel*, *Jai Mummy Di*, *Darbaan* and *Khoobsurat*, he has quietly carved a niche for himself, working with some of the biggest production houses like Dharma Productions, Excel Entertainment, Red Chillies, Balaji, Anil Kapoor Films and T-Series. His versatility extends beyond cinema—he has penned independent hits such as *Guzar Jayega* (ft. Amitabh Bachchan), dance numbers like *Haaye Oye* and *Kehndi Haam Kehndi Naa*, as well as soulful ballads like *Piharva* and *Soch Ke*. Now, with *Dhoom Dhaam*, starring Pratik Gandhi and Yami Gautam, Siddhant takes on the rare challenge of writing an entire album, showcasing his range and deep understanding of cinema.

But songwriting wasn't always the plan. His journey began with a different dream—singing. Born and raised in Jalandhar, Punjab, with no formal training in writing, he initially moved to Mumbai in 2012 to pursue a career as a singer. "I had never written before. I didn't have any background in poetry or lyric writing," he admits. Coming from a boarding school education and a city where music was not a mainstream career option, he found himself navigating an unfamiliar world.

"In my first two years in Mumbai, I was just trying to find my footing—meeting composers, visiting studios and sending out my demos. I even started doing some jingles," he recalls. Then, a chance encounter changed everything. "I met a composer, who called me to sing a track. But when I got there, I realised the tune did-

n't have any lyrics. He casually asked me to write some dummy lyrics just for the rhythm." What followed was a moment of mixed emotions—within ten days, he got a call saying his lyrics had been approved, but his voice had been rejected. "That was the turning point. Before I knew it, I started getting more calls for writing than for singing."

Despite this unexpected shift, he faced his fair share of challenges. "Every artist experiences imposter syndrome at some point. I had no poetic background, so initially, I struggled with finding my own voice. I didn't want writing to feel forced—it had to come naturally. It took time to develop my style and understand my strengths."

His ability to adapt and explore different musical styles has been key to his success. *Dhoom Dhaam*, for instance, required him to write across various genres. "More than me, it was the situations in the film that defined the identity of each song. There's a romantic track, a wedding song, and a situational number called *Haseeno*—each one demanded a different approach. My job was to ensure that the lyrics seamlessly fit into the narrative and emotions of the film."

The opportunity to write the entire album for *Dhoom Dhaam* came through Shor Police, the music duo Clinton Cerejo and Bianca Gomes. "I was in my studio when Clinton called, saying he wanted me to speak to someone. I had no idea who it was until the call connected and I realised it was the director. Initially, I was brought on board for just one song—*How Are You*—but after working closely with the team, I was entrusted with the entire album." Writing *How Are You* turned out to be one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences for Siddhant. "It was the first song we cracked and it took multiple sessions to get it right. Since it was my first collaboration with this team, there was an initial phase of understanding each other's sensibilities. But once we got into the flow, everything fell into place." Another song, *Silsila*, holds special memories for him. "Some songs just stay with you and *Silsila* is one of them."

His ability to write across genres isn't something he consciously thinks about. "I don't actively adapt my style—it's the tune that drives me. Since I come from a singing background and have a deep love for classical music, I have an emotional connection to melodies. That naturally translates into my writing."

Before *Dhoom Dhaam*, he also worked on *Deva*, one of the most intense action films of the year. "The track I wrote for *Deva* was particularly exciting because the makers gave me complete creative freedom. They simply narrated the situation and told me to go crazy with it. There were no restrictions—I just had to follow the meter and the essence of the scene. That kind of trust is rare and it makes the process so much more enjoyable."

With multiple projects lined up, Siddhant remains tight-lipped about his upcoming work due to the agreements. However, he hints at exciting collaborations, including independent singles and film projects set to release in the coming months. "There's a lot happening, and I can't wait to share it when the time is right." For someone who stumbled into songwriting by accident, Siddhant Kaushal has not only embraced his craft but mastered it, proving that sometimes, destiny has bigger plans than we imagine.



I don't actively adapt my style—it's the tune that drives me. Since I come from a singing background and have a deep love for classical music, I have an emotional connection to melodies



THE LEARNING CURVE

Helping parents stay updated in their child's education

In today's fast, technology-driven world, the educational landscape is evolving quickly.

The modern curriculum is more comprehensive and complex than ever, and parents often struggle to keep up. This phenomenon is known as the "knowledge gap" and it can significantly impact a child's academic performance and overall learning experience. As a parent, have you ever felt like you're struggling to keep up with your child's education? The modern curriculum is constantly evolving, and it can be daunting to stay informed about the latest developments in your child's learning journey.

So, how can parents bridge this knowledge gap?

Stay involved in your child's education

Attend parent-teacher meetings, review your child's assignments and projects, and engage in conversations about their learning experiences. This will help you understand what your child is studying and how you can support their learning.

Leverage digital resources

Utilise online platforms, educational apps and websites that provide interactive learning experiences for children. These resources can help you stay updated on the latest curriculum developments and provide your child with engaging learning opportunities.

Encourage curiosity and exploration

Encourage your child to love learning by asking questions, exploring their interests and thinking critically. This will help them develop essential skills for



lifelong learning and stay motivated to learn.

Seek support from teachers and educators

Don't be afraid to ask teachers and educators for guidance on how to support your child's learning. They can provide valuable insights into the curriculum and offer suggestions for how you can reinforce learning at home.

Embrace lifelong learning

Recognize that learning is a lifelong process and it's essential to model a love of learning for your child. Pursue your interests, take online courses and engage in activities that challenge you and promote personal growth.

Create a learning environment

Establish a dedicated learning space in your home that is quiet, comfortable and free from distractions. Ensure that this space is equipped with the

necessary resources and tools to support your child's learning, such as textbooks, educational software and internet access. By creating a learning-conducive environment, you can help your child develop good study habits and a positive attitude toward learning.

Bridging the knowledge gap requires a proactive and engaged approach to parenting. By staying involved in your child's education, tapping into digital resources, encouraging curiosity and exploration, seeking support from teachers and educators and embracing lifelong learning. As a parent, you have the power to positively impact your child's educational journey. Don't let the knowledge gap hold you back—take the first step today and start bridging the gap between you and your child's education.

(The author, Manish Rastogi, is the CEO, of Zee Learn Ltd.)

Rohit knows how to work under pressure: Dhawan

PTI ■ DUBAI

Former opener Shikhar Dhawan believes Rohit Sharma has matured as a leader over the years and shares a close bond with his teammates, which augurs well for the Indian team. Dhawan, who was Rohit's opening partner for a considerable period of time, said the Mumbai batter is experienced enough to handle the team.

"From 2013 to 2025, 12 years of experience is a lot. Rohit has been through a lot. He knows how to work in a pressure situation, how to gather the boys.

"As a leader, he has become mature, he knows when to be lenient and when to pull back. It's a fine balance and Rohit's bond with the boys is amazing. We are in a great situation," Dhawan said in a special series titled 'The Shikhar Dhawan Experience' on Star Sports and JioHotstar.

Dhawan also spoke about his 2013 ICC Champions Trophy journey, and recollected his nine-year long opening partnership with Rohit,



which also began at the same tournament. The 39-year-old former left-hander said it was Mahendra Singh Dhoni's idea to promote Rohit as an opener alongside him.

"This opening pair decision was made half a day prior to that match. At that time, I was also new, and I was in my own world. I had made a comeback and needed to perform well. But MS Dhoni

took this decision and instructed Rohit to open," Dhawan said. "So I didn't think much about it. I thought if Rohit opens, we'll enjoy batting together. We got such a great start in

the first match. We were at 100 without losing a wicket.

"We didn't score 30-35 runs up to the 10th over because the wicket was seaming. But I never thought that our pair would be so massive and we would play together for 10 years," he added.

Dhawan also talked about his camaraderie with Rohit and said their friendship dates back to junior days.

"We trust each other and our understanding and level of communication was very high. On the field and off the field our bond is same. We played together, we have partied together after winning so many series. We have played as a team," he said.

"That whole journey and even before playing in India, when Rohit was 16-17 years old, I played in the Under-19 World Cup. So, we have been together and have been friends since then."

With two wins from as many matches, India have already qualified for the semifinals of the Champions Trophy and will play New Zealand in an inconsequential final group game on Sunday in Dubai.

Prague Masters: Praggnanandhaa splits points with David Navara

PTI ■ PRAGUE

Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa split points with Czech hero David Navara while compatriot Aravindh Chithambaram escaped with a draw with another local star Nguyen Thai Dai Van in the first round of the Prague Masters.

German Vincent Keymer, who was famously part of team D Gukesh's team during the World Championships, scored the first big upset of the tournament taking down top seed Wei Yi of China.

American Sam Shankland was the other winner of the day as he defeated Gurel Ediz of Turkey while the game between Quang Leim Le of Vietnam and Anish Giri of Holland ended in a draw.

Keymer and Shankland emerged as early leaders after round one with Shankland stealing the limelight in his first outing against Ediz.

Praggnanandhaa, Aravindh, Giri, Le, Dai Van and Navara share the third spot on a half point each and they are followed by Wei Yi and Ediz



who will look forward to opening their account in the next round.

Praggnanandhaa faced the Ragozine out of a Queen's gambit declined as white and did not get much to have a go in the ensuing middle game.

It was a timely pawn sacrifice by Navara that equalised the position and after the trade of queens the players reached a theoretically drawn rook and pawns endgame.

Despite having an extra pawn, Praggnanandhaa tried on till the last nail but the outcome of the game was never in doubt.

Aravindh also played white and Dai Van showed that his victory at the Tata Steel Challengers earlier this month

was no flash in the pan. The Neo-Grunfeld by the Czech Grandmaster faced no problems by the Indian. A few pieces changed hands and it looked as though the game would end soon.

Dai Van ran lower on time when Aravindh blundered and landed himself in a lost position. Left with just a few seconds on the 70th move, Dai Van decided to play it safe and steered the game to a draw through perpetual checks.

Meanwhile in the Challengers section Divya Deshmukh, the lone girl and the only Indian, ended on the losing side against Ivan Salgado Lopez of Spain.



We have planned for Australia, says Shahidi

PTI ■ LAHORE

The Afghanistan team has chalked out plans for the entire Australian side and is not just focussed on its bete noire Glenn Maxwell, skipper Hashmatullah Shahidi said on the eve of their must-win Champions Trophy match.

Having knocked England out of the tournament with a memorable eight-run win here on Wednesday, Afghanistan are now seeking to get the better of Australia at the same venue on Friday and book a semifinal berth.

"You think we will come only to play with Maxwell? Do you think it will be like that? We have planned for entire Australian team, and I know that he (Maxwell) played really well in the 2023 World Cup, but that's part of the history," Shahidi said at the pre-match press conference on Thursday.

Chasing 292, Australia were starting at a certain defeat after losing seven wickets with less than 100 on the board, but then, Maxwell played one of the greatest knocks in history of one-day cricket to steer his side into an unbelievable win, and days later, the Aussies won a record-extending sixth World Cup.

However, the Afghans exacted revenge for that painful defeat with victory against Australia a year later after Maxwell again threatened to take the game away from them.

"After that, we beat them in T20 World Cup, and we think about all opposition team. We are not coming to the ground to play on individual players. We will

try our best to come with the planning, and we are not playing only Maxwell – we are playing Australia," Shahidi said. Wednesday's win was their second in ODIs against England after their stunning victory in the 2023 World Cup in India.

The victory against England sparked wild celebrations in the Afghan capital of Kabul where fireworks were lit and streets were filled with jubilant fans.

Should Afghanistan get past Australia, it will pave the way for their second successive entry into the semifinals of an ICC event in less than a year, following their inspiring run in the T20 World Cup in the Americas in 2024.

Shahidi, however, is not reading much into the prospects of semifinal appearance.

"I think it will be a good game for cricket, and our focus will be to keep things simple and don't worry much about playing semifinal. We will try to do our basics well, and we will try to come to the ground with good planning," Shahidi said.

"Afghan people always cheer for us, as you saw (against England) in the ground. There were a lot of our Afghan people. So, their support is always with us, and wherever we go, they support us. They are coming to the stadiums.

"And whenever we play games like this, all Afghanistan, back home watching from TV. When we wake up, we will analyse the opposition team and we will come with good planning."

WPL: MI eye revenge against DC

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Former champions Mumbai Indians will look to avenge their first-leg loss and continue the recent winning streak when they take on Delhi Capitals in a top-of-the-table Women's Premier League clash here on Friday.

Only DC managed to upstage MI in the four matches at Vadodara earlier this month, and revenge will be high on the Harmanpreet Kaur-led side's mind when it takes the field on Friday.

Since that loss, MI have been on a three-match winning streak, beating Gujarat Giants by five wickets, Royal Challengers Bengaluru by four wickets and UP Warriorz by eight wickets respectively.

And come Friday, MI would want to continue the run to keep their place at the top of the league standings. MI are currently leading the WPL table with six points from four games, but are closely followed by DC on six points from five matches.



MI's strength lies in its power-packed batting line. English batter Nat-Sciver Brunt has been in terrific form for the inaugural tournament, leading the run-getters' chart with 254 from four matches, including three half-centuries.

Skipper Harmanpreet too is in good touch and has a fifty to her name in four games. Hayley Matthews's return to form augurs well for MI. The West Indies opener hit a 50-ball 59 in MI's comfortable eight-wicket win over UP Warriorz in their last match here on

Wednesday. But wicketkeeper-batter Yastika Bhatia hasn't come good at the top of the order which remains a cause of concern for MI. Besides New Zealand's Amelia Kerr too will be desperate for runs in the middle-order. Sciver-Brunt is not just contributing with the bat. With the ball in hand, she returned with impressive figures of 3 for 18 in MI's last match.

Shabnim Ismail has also been impressive for MI with the new ball, while they will depend on Amanjot Kaur,

Mathews and Kerr's all-round abilities in the middle overs.

DC, on the other hand, have not been particularly consistent in their three wins out of five games.

The team is one of the pre-tournament favourites, and it will take confidence from the six-wicket win over Gujarat Giants in its last game on Tuesday.

DC's batting lineup has finally fired with Shafali Verma (44) and Jess Jonassen (61 not out) striking form.

But skipper Meg Lanning, who had just one good outing, continues to struggle at the top. Jemimah Rodrigues, and Annabel Sutherland have provided occasional fireworks in the middle-order but DC would look for more consistent performances from the batting department.

In Shikha Pandey, Marizanne Kapp, young Titas Sadhu, Sutherland and Minnu Mami, DC also boast of a formidable bowling attack.



Pakistan vs Bangladesh match called off due to rain

PTI ■ RAWALPINDI

Pakistan's winless campaign in the Champions Trophy (CT) continued with their match against Bangladesh being called off without a ball being bowled due to incessant rain on Thursday.

The match was effectively a dead-rubber, with both teams already out of contention after failing to secure a win in their two previous matches. Pakistan, hosting an ICC tournament for the first time in 29 years, had hoped for a strong finish but ended their disastrous campaign without a victory.

Persistent downpour left the ground soaked, with covers in place and puddles forming around the field. With weather not improving, match officials called off the game nearly two hours after the scheduled start time. The gloomy weather prevented even the toss from taking place.

As a result, the two teams shared one point each, though both Pakistan and Bangladesh finished the tournament winless. This is the second match in Rawalpindi to be called off without a ball being bowled, following the washout between South Africa and Australia earlier this week.

The rain-induced abandonment left the home fans frustrated, as they hoped for play at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium.

Pakistan have faced criticism for their poor showing in the tournament, having suffered defeats to New Zealand (by 60 runs) and India (by six wickets).

"We wanted to do well and

perform well in front of our nation. The expectations are very high. We didn't perform well and it is disappointing for us," Pakistan captain Mohammad Rizwan said.

Reflecting on the road ahead, Rizwan said: "You can learn from your mistakes. We have made mistakes in the last few games. Hopefully, we can learn from these.

"We are next going to New Zealand and, hopefully, we can perform there and the mistakes that we did against New Zealand here in Pakistan, we can learn from that. And we will do better in New Zealand."

"We put a lot of pressure on ourselves playing against India'

Pakistan's assistant coach, Azhar Mahmood, who hails from the city, attributed his team's poor show in the tournament to injuries to key players, and the fact that the team took too much pressure against India.

"We have not played well in this tournament. We have played good cricket in this format, but in the tournament it has not gone well because of injuries. Against India, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves," he said.

"We know where we need to improve. It is all about adapting and taking responsibility. The results have also been a surprise for us," he added.

The former Test all-rounder said that the people need to keep faith in the players.

"We have to stick with the talent we identify for it to come good over the months," said Mahmood.

Gary Woodland wins PGA Tour Courage Award

PTI ■ PALM BEACH GARDENS (US)

Former US Open champion Gary Woodland was honoured with the PGA Tour Courage Award as he comes back from brain surgery to remove a lesion that was causing him to have unfounded thoughts that he was dying. Woodland, who won the US Open at Pebble Beach to go along with three other PGA Tour titles, had a hole the size of a baseball removed from his head so doctors could remove the lesion in a September 2023 surgery.

He returned last year and continues to make strides toward restoring his game and his life at home with wife Gabby and his three children.

"Receiving this is a testament to the people around me because there's no way, one, I'd be back playing or no way I'd be sitting here today if it wasn't for them," Woodland on Wednesday said at PGA National, where he is playing the Cognizant Classic.

"It means everything for me to receive



it, but it really belongs to the people around me."

The Courage Award is presented to a person who overcomes extraordinary adversity, such as personal tragedy or debilitating injury or illness, to make a significant and meaningful contribution to golf. Chris Kirk was honored last year for his battle with

alcoholism. Previous winners include Jarrod Lyle of Australia, who died after a long battle with leukemia, and two-time heart transplant recipient Erik Compton.

PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan presented Woodland with the award at PGA National.

"He's overcome so many challenges, which is nothing short of miraculous," Monahan said. "He continues to manage symptoms associated with his initial diagnosis while competing — and competing very well — at the highest level of professional golf. Gary Woodland is a constant inspiration to us all."

The Courage Award includes a contribution of \$25,000 from the tour to a charity of the recipient's choice. Woodland selected Champion Charities — he and his wife are matching the donation — an organisation dedicated to research and patient support in brain tumor, brain disease and brain trauma.

Australia wil not take Afghanistan lightly: Jonathan Trott

PTI ■ LAHORE

Afghanistan is "never going to be taken lightly" by any team after his "resilient" side knocked England out of the Champions Trophy (CT) with a memorable win, head coach Jonathan Trott has asserted.

Ibrahim Zadran's majestic 177 and pacer Aizatullah Omarzai's fierer trumped Joe Root's masterful hundred, as the Afghanistan registered a thrilling eight-run win against England.

Looking ahead to their next must-win game against Australia, Trott also said that Afghanistan team will take confidence from their fine showings against the Aussies in recent World Cup outings. "Since I've been coach we've played against Australia three times and we've been in the game each of those

games. So, we should take a lot of confidence from that. "And I think certainly what happened in the World Cup, T20 World Cup, and I say this to the players as well, that Afghanistan's never going to be taken lightly ever again," Trott said at the post-match press conference.

"I see every game that we play is going to be competitive and every game we go into I expect to win," the Englishman added.

Wins by Afghanistan against established Test nations are no longer seen as upsets and recent performances on the world stage mean they cannot afford to fly under the radar.

"Australia aren't going to take us lightly," Trott said.

"So, we've got to be prepared. In the past, perhaps people would have seen the fixture and thought it was a little bit easier than playing a historic



Test nation. But in this format, in these conditions, I don't see that." With two points from two games, Afghanistan are still

in the semifinal race. A win against Australia will take them to four points, which will elevate them to the top two. Australia have three

points from two games after their washout against South Africa. A loss for Afghanistan will mean they are out of the competition.

"I'm going to make sure when they wake up tomorrow, they enjoy tonight, (but) wake up tomorrow ready for

Australia," Trott had told the media after their nail-biting victory over England.

"As soon as they wake up tomorrow, the focus is on Australia."

Having seen first-hand Afghanistan's rise to cricketing prominence, Trott attributed it to the battle-hardened side's self-belief and resilience.

"There's a resilience to them. I think if you add to some cricketering experience and cricketering match awareness with regards to batting in particular, with regards to how you pace the innings ... it's not always down to one person."

"We saw Ibrahim, the way that he's done today, we've seen Gurbaz do it in the past ... we have Gulbadin at eight at the moment, who can come in and change games," he said.

"So that self-belief is important and it starts within, but it's also quite infectious and it spreads within the squad." Their clash with Australia has turned into a virtual knockout with the winner entering the semifinals and loser exiting the tournament. Trott is hoping for strong support for his team on Friday.

"Hopefully Friday will be a massive sell out and people will turn up or take the day off work and come and watch us from two o'clock onwards. I think it's great for the guys."

"I think it's a huge experience and these players will never forget nights like this. We've had a few other nights along the way in ICC events and series' and that will just add to the confidence that we should hopefully take in on Friday," he concluded.

Guard film shot entirely in Australia: Viraj Reddy



I'VE ALSO PREPARED VERSIONS FOR OTT PLATFORMS IN ALL LANGUAGES



Debutant Viraj Reddy is making his debut this Friday with the film *Guard*, which also stars Mimi Leonard and Shilpa Balakrishna in the lead roles, with Jaga Peddi as the director. Viraj Reddy, originally from Nizamabad, shared that his father is a farmer. "I went to Australia to study and later settled there," said Viraj Reddy. He mentioned that he has been passionate about cinema since childhood, which led him to pursue acting at an acting school in Australia. "Since I stayed in Australia, this movie was entirely shot there. All the actors trained properly before we began the shoot," Viraj explained. He further revealed that he has known director Jaga Peddi for a long time and when it was time to make a film, he asked Jaga to direct it.

Despite being filmed in Australia, Viraj Reddy assured that the film has a distinct Telugu vibe, with an added Australian flavour. "The story revolves around the life of a security guard in Australia. In India, the life of a security guard is different, but in Australia, a security guard can own a BMW car," he shared.

Viraj further stated that he has invested all his money in this film and decided to produce it on his own. "I had said earlier that I wanted to release this film independently," he added. The film, which is set to release this Friday, combines elements of horror, action, comedy and revenge. Viraj believes that his role in the horror genre will help him connect with the audience.

Notably, Viraj's father is a farmer, and the teaser of the film was even released by a farmer. "The promotional videos are getting a good response. Although the film was entirely shot in Australia, all post-production work was done in India. The action sequences are made in the Chinese style," he revealed.

Guard is releasing in Telugu, and if successful, Viraj plans to release it in other languages as well. "I've also prepared versions for OTT platforms in all languages," he said, adding that he's already working on another film.



Kannappa teaser unveiled in Mumbai

The much-awaited Pan-Indian mythological film *Kannappa* unveiled its teaser in Mumbai on Thursday. Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar, along with actor and producer Vishnu Manchu, attended the event, where the teaser was showcased to the media. Starting March 1, the teaser will be released on public platforms. Akshay Kumar, Vishnu Manchu, director Mukesh Kumar Singh and key members of the cast and crew celebrated the event. The teaser, which has already generated significant buzz, offers a glimpse of a historical narrative of devotion, sacrifice, and grandeur.

The film, directed by Mukesh Kumar Singh and produced by M Mohan Babu, aims to take audiences on a visual and emotional journey by blending traditional sto-

rytelling with modern filmmaking techniques. "At first, I wasn't sure, but Vishnu's unwavering belief that I was the right person to bring Lord Shiva to life on the big screen in Indian cinema truly convinced me. The story is powerful, deeply moving, and the film has turned out to be a visual masterpiece. I'm honored to be part of this incredible journey," said Akshay Kumar about his role in the film.

Vishnu Manchu, who plays the title role of *Kannappa*, shared his personal connection to the story: "This film is not just a project for me; it's a personal journey. I'm currently visiting all the Jyotirlingas across India, and I've felt a deep, spiritual bond with the story of *Kannappa*. It's a tale of unwavering faith and sacrifice that touches the soul." The film is set to release worldwide on April 25.

Dulquer Salmaan makes history with *Lucky Baskhar*

Some films perform well in theaters and continue to do well when released on OTT platforms, but Dulquer Salmaan's latest film *Lucky Baskhar* is a standout example. The film was a hit in theaters and has since achieved remarkable success on Netflix, trending for an unprecedented 13 consecutive weeks.

This record-breaking achievement makes *Lucky Baskhar* the first South Indian film to trend on Netflix for 13 consecutive weeks. Directed by Venky Atluri and produced by Naga Vamsi S and Sai Soujanya, the film's gripping storyline and standout performances have been widely praised. Dulquer Salmaan delivers one of his finest performances as Baskhar, bringing both depth and charisma to a story that resonates with audiences across generations. In its first week, the film trended at number one on Netflix's Top 10 in over 15 countries and held the number two spot globally for two weeks, with an impressive 17.8 billion minutes viewed.



Vicky Kaushal's *Chhaava* arrives in Telugu on March 7

The historical epic *Chhaava*, starring Vicky Kaushal and Rashmika Mandanna, has been a massive box-office success in Hindi, earning widespread acclaim, particularly for Vicky's powerful performance. Directed by Laxman Utekar, the film has now grossed over Rs 400 crore worldwide. Due to overwhelming demand from Telugu audiences, the film is set to release in Telugu on March 7, with Allu Aravind's Geetha Arts Distributions handling its release. The makers revealed that they have been receiving numerous requests from Telugu audiences to bring *Chhaava* to the region, as the film has generated immense buzz following its Hindi success.

Produced by Dinesh Vijan's Maddock

Films, the film's Telugu distributors are also banking on Rashmika Mandanna's popularity in the region as a key factor for its success.

Interestingly, *Chhaava* was originally scheduled for a December release but was later pushed to February 14. During that time, the makers of *Pushpa 2* were reportedly concerned about competition. With *Pushpa 2* eventually securing a solo release and *Chhaava* getting postponed, speculation suggests that Allu Arjun's father, Allu Aravind, decided to distribute the Hindi film's Telugu version as a token of gratitude.

With its gripping narrative and stellar performances, *Chhaava* is expected to make a strong impact on Telugu audiences upon its release.



Kuberaa locks release date

Director Sekhar Kammula is returning after a nearly four-year hiatus with the film *Kuberaa*, following the success of his last film *Love Story*, starring Naga Chaitanya and Sai Pallavi. *Kuberaa* features Dhanush, Nagarjuna and Rashmika Mandanna in the lead roles. Sekhar Kammula, known for his sensible storytelling, has a dedicated fan following, and the film is eagerly anticipated.

Produced jointly by Suniel Narang and Puskur Ram Mohan Rao, the film is all set for a release on June 20. The makers officially announced the release date on Thursday and revealed

that the film will release not only in Telugu but also in Tamil, Hindi, Kannada and Malayalam.

In addition to the South Indian stars, Sekhar Kammula has cast Hindi actor Jim Sarbh in a key role. Sarbh, acclaimed for his theater work and performances in Hindi films, brings a fresh dimension to the film. Sekhar Kammula, known for his deep, character-driven narratives, is venturing into new creative territory with *Kuberaa*, making it one of the most anticipated films of the year.

The film is being produced on a grand scale with high production values.

Bhumika Chawla returns to Telugu cinema with *Euphoria* after three-year hiatus

Actress Bhumika Chawla, who made her Telugu debut with *Yuvakudu* alongside Sumanth nearly 25 years ago, has worked across multiple industries, including Telugu, Hindi and Tamil films. However, she has always been selective about her roles. Now, after a three-year gap, she is making a comeback with the Telugu film *Euphoria*, directed by Gunasekhar. The actress was drawn to the project because of its compelling storyline.

Gunasekhar, known for his technical brilliance in filmmaking, is bringing *Euphoria*, a youthful social drama, to the big screen. The film is an edgy and fast-

paced take on contemporary societal issues, raising curiosity since its announcement.

The film's shooting has recently been completed and the makers have confirmed that post-production is progressing at a rapid pace.

Vignesh Gavireddy is making his Tollywood debut with this project, while senior actress Bhumika Chawla plays a crucial role. The film boasts an ensemble cast, including Sara Arjun, Nassar, Rohith and Likhita Yalamanchili.

Produced by Neelima Guna, *Euphoria* also features music by young sensation Kaala Bhairava, adding to the anticipation surrounding the film.

