

QUOTE OF THE DAY
 The pioneer

KTR is a karyakarta of the BRS. Just like he stands by all our karyakartas, the party will stand by him when he is facing problems. The cases against KTR are part of the attempts to deflect public attention from the Congress Government's failures

- Harish Rao, BRS MLA P4

www.dailypioneer.com
 Published From: VIJAYAWADA HYDERABAD DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL RAIPUR CHANDIGARH BHUBANESWAR RANCHI DEHRADUN

Efforts to undermine that status won't succeed: Mamata 5

WHERE LOVE & CARE REWRITE THE LIVES OF HIV+VE ORPHANS 10

'I don't focus on screen time; I focus on giving MY BEST' P12

DON'T MISS...
200 kgs of ganja worth Rs 25L seized
 The police seized 200 KGs of cannabis and two cars, worth over Rs 25 lakh, while being transported in two cars on the outskirts of Nandigama town at two places. Vijayawada Rural DCP Maheshwar Raju told the media in Nandigama ACP office on Wednesday that on a tip off, a police team conducted checking of vehicles at Gattu Bhimavaram village and at Keesara toll gate plaza. The drug peddlers in one of the cars, in which ganja was being transported, noticed the police checking, took diversion and started going towards...

-PAGE: 4

Showdown between AAP and BJP in Delhi
 A high drama unfolded Wednesday outside the 6, Flagstaff Road bungalow, once occupied by former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and dubbed a 'Sheesh Mahal' by the BJP, as AAP leaders attempted to enter it but were stopped by the police. The party workers later tried to reach the Prime Minister's official residence on Lok Kalyan Marg, but were stopped by police again, following which they staged a 'dharna'. In its turn, the BJP also took media to the AB 17 Mathura Road bungalow allotted to...

-PAGE: 5

Industry status for food sector sought
 National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) on Wednesday asked the government to grant industry status to the food services sector while seeking an equitable and fair e-commerce policy to provide a level-playing field to protect restaurants, delivery partners and consumers from potentially exploitative practices of platforms. In its pre-Budget recommendations, National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) said restaurants should be allowed to operate for longer hours, and also...

-PAGE: 8

Bumrah continues to remain No. 1
 India's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah continued to reign supreme at the top of the bowlers' chart with a career-best rating of 908 in the latest ICC Test Rankings, released on Wednesday. Bumrah, who made history ahead of the fifth and final Test against Australia by recording the highest-ever ICC Rankings rating for an Indian bowler at 907 points, improved that tally by one point after taking two wickets in the first innings at the SCG. However, a back spasm ruled him out of bowling in the ...

-SPORTS

6 KILLED IN STAMPEDE AT TIRUPATI

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

The issuing of tokens for 'Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam' at Tirupati turned tragic with six people including five women getting killed in a stampede here on Wednesday. The stampede took place when the gate was opened and thousands of people who were waiting to get a 'Vaikunta Dwara Darshan' ticket to have darshan of Lord Venkateswara at the Tirumala hill shrine on the auspicious Ekadasi Day rushed in. The Ekadasi Day falls on Friday. Sources said that 20 injured people were admitted to the Ruia Hospital and nine were admitted to the SVIMS Hospital and are undergoing treatment.

Heavy rush for tickets led to the tragedy at 'Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam'



Hospital and nine were admitted to the SVIMS Hospital and are undergoing treatment. The stampede took place in the Bairagipatteda area when thousands of people rushed to get Vaikunta Dwara Darshan tokens when the gate was opened. As the police and the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) officials did not make adequate arrangements to control crowds, the stampede lasted for around 20 minutes, devotees told the media. Collector Venkateswarulu, SP Subba Rayudu and TTD EO Shyamala Rao visited the place and brought the situation under control. [Continued on Page 2](#)

'Came to seek blessings but my wife died'
 PNS ■ HYDERABAD
 The tragic stampede in Tirupati that claimed six lives and left many injured continues to draw emotional responses from victims' families and eyewitnesses, highlighting lapses in crowd management during the distribution of darshan tokens. Krishnan, the husband of stampede victim Mallika, shared his heart-wrenching experience. "My wife and I arrived at the foot of Tirupati hill around 3 pm. We were told tokens would be distributed at 6 pm. While waiting, a sudden push in the crowd caused her to fall. She suffered a spinal injury and was unable to speak or breathe. Despite rushing her to the hospital, she was declared dead. I am still in shock and unable to come to terms with the loss of my wife. We had come to Tirupati to offer prayers and seek the blessings of Lord Venkateswara, but instead, we faced this tragedy," he said, still in shock. An eyewitness who was present at the scene described the events as chaotic and poorly managed. [Continued on Page 2](#)

Poor crowd management led to tragedy
 VIJAYAWADA: The tragic stampede in Tirupati that claimed six lives appears to have been primarily caused by inadequate crowd management, which points to administrative lapses. However, other contributing factors must also be considered to gain a full understanding of the incident. The Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam is a highly anticipated event that draws large crowds annually. The failure to anticipate the sheer number of devotees and prepare accordingly indicates a lapse in planning. The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) had set up approximately 90 ticket counters across various locations in Tirupati, with tickets made available from 5 am on January 9. This announcement drew tens of thousands of devotees eager to participate in the sacred event, but the sheer volume of people at centres such as Vishnu Nivasam, Bairagipatteda, and Ramachandra Pushkarini led to chaos. The crowd management arrangements reportedly failed to cope with the overwhelming number of attendees. Devotees who came for tokens were kept at the Padmavathi Park near Byragipattedu to avoid crowding on the roads. [Continued on Page 2](#)

TTD apologises to devotees, Naidu to visit Tirupati

PNS ■ HYDERABAD
 The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) has apologised to devotees for the stampede at Tirupati, which claimed six lives and injured 40. TTD Chairman BR Naidu termed the incident as unfortunate and said that, so far, only one victim has been identified while the identities of the others have not been confirmed. He said that Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu is taking the matter seriously and had expressed dissatisfaction with the officials' way of management during a teleconference. The Chief Minister warned that such incidents must not be repeated and is monitoring developments. He is scheduled to visit the families of the deceased on Friday at 11:45 am. Chairman BR Naidu arrived at the Sri Venkateswara Rammarain Ruia Government General Hospital in Tirupati where the injured are undergoing treatment and spoke to doctors. [Continued on Page 2](#)

AP is a state of possibilities: PM Modi

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM
 Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone and inaugurated development works worth over Rs 2 lakh crore here on Wednesday. Paying his due respects to Lord Simhachalamba Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy, Modi said it was after a gap of 60 years, with the blessings of the people, a Union Government was elected for the third time in a row in the country. Modi thanked the people for the grand welcome given to him during the roadshow prior to the event. He added that he respected the spirit of every word and feeling of Chief



Minister Chandrababu Naidu during his speech and expressed confidence in achieving all the goals mentioned by the CM. "Our Andhra Pradesh is a State of possibilities and opportunities," said

cial priority to AP in projects worth lakhs of crores. Today, projects worth more than ₹2 lakh crore were inaugurated," the PM said, and congratulated the people of Andhra Pradesh and the entire nation for these development projects. **The Prime Minister added:** "It is time for Andhra Pradesh to become a centre for futuristic technologies." He stressed the importance of leading in emerging technologies, such as green hydrogen. Modi noted that the National Green Hydrogen Mission was launched in 2023, with a target of producing five million metric tonnes of green hydrogen by 2030. [Continued on Page 2](#)

Will move forward taking Modi as inspiration: CM

Lauds PM as globally renowned leader
 PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM
 Terming Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a global leader who is applauded by the whole world, Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, here on Wednesday announced that he will move forward taking Modi as an inspiration. Addressing a huge public meeting after the Prime Minister inaugurated and laid the foundation for the developmental works in the State worth Rs 2,08,548 crore, Chandrababu expressed happiness over the massive gathering for the programme. "For the first time I am experiencing such an auspicious occasion in my life." "We have laid the foundation for Visakha railway zone which is the dream project of the people of North Andhra and the NTPC is investing Rs 1.85 lakh crore at Pudimadaka in the green hydrogen project," the Chief Minister observed. Maintaining that 52 acres of land was allocated to the railway zone immediately after the TDP-led NDA came to power in the State, Chandrababu said the works of the project have been inaugurated with the blessings of the Prime Minister now. Giving the details of various other projects for which the Prime Minister laid the foundation, Chandrababu thanked him for inaugurating various projects by visiting the State for the first time after assuming charge as the Prime Minister for the third time. [Continued on Page 2](#)

Key step towards AP's prosperity: Pawan

Visakhapatnam: Visakhapatnam witnessed a historic moment as Andhra Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister K Pawan Kalyan delivered an inspiring address during the foundation stone-laying ceremony for a series of projects aimed at reshaping the region's future. The Deputy Chief Minister highlighted the spirit of unity, courage, and adventure as the pillars of a strong and progressive India, emphasising the importance of goodwill from Kanyakumari to Kashmir in fostering a cleaner and more harmonious nation. Speaking on the immense trust placed in the NDA government, Pawan Kalyan attributed its success to a clear vision and decisive leadership under

Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "The NDA government has consistently worked toward balanced regional growth and the nation's development," he stated. He underscored the Prime Minister's commitment to Andhra Pradesh, announcing investments worth Rs 2.1 lakh crore during Modi's visit to the State, which are expected to generate 7.5 lakh new employment opportunities. "This is a significant step toward the prosperity of Andhra Pradesh and its people," Pawan Kalyan added. The Deputy Chief Minister praised Modi's leadership, describing him as a leader who has "won the hearts of the people through visionary policies and tireless efforts".

Lokesh confident of AP becoming digital tech hub

Two-day Andhra Pradesh Digital Technology Summit-2025 kicks off

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM
 The Minister for Education, IT and Electronics, Nara Lokesh, has said that Vision-2047 will certainly be realised under the able leadership of Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, and the State will finally transform into the global digital technology hub. Inaugurating the two-day Andhra Pradesh Digital Technology Summit-2025, being organised by the AP Digital Technology Industry (AP DGI) and the Software Technology Park of India (STPI), here on Wednesday, Lokesh said that



he is proud to participate in the summit which will provide the way for the progress of technology in the State. The event will focus on development of IT, Deep Technology and start-ups. [Continued on Page 2](#)

Priority to common devotees: TTD Chairman

ALL PRIVILEGED DARSHANS REMAIN CANCELLED DURING THE 10-DAY VAIKUNTA DWARA DARSHAN

PNS ■ TIRUMALA
 As per the instructions of AP Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, priority is given to common devotees in providing Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam, stressed TTD Chairman BR Naidu. Addressing media persons at Annamaiah Bhavan in Tirumala on Wednesday, the TTD Board Chief said elaborate arrangements have been made for the 10-day Vaikunta Dwara Darshan to be held from January 10, keeping in view of the huge turnout of devotees. He said the VIP darshan commences on January 10 at 4:30 am while the Sarva Darshan begins at 8 am. Keeping in view the larger interests of the pilgrims, SSD tokens will be

issued at 90 counters set up at eight centres in Tirupati for devotees, and four counters at one centre in Tirumala for the Tirumala residents alone. All the privileged darshans including senior citizens, disabled, parents with infants, NRI, and others remain cancelled during these 10 days. Recommendation letters will also not be accepted during these days to allow more common devotees to have darshan through Vaikunta Dwaram, he stated. "We have made better arrangements to avoid any traffic problems in Tirumala and Tirupati, and around 3,000 policemen have been deployed besides 1,550 TTD personnel for security arrangements. Arrangements have been made to distribute water and Annaprasadam to the devotees without interruption from 6 am to 12 midnight," he added. The Chairman reiterated that only devotees with darshan tokens or tickets are allowed in the queues due to limited accommodation available



in Tirumala. Devotees are requested to come only on the allotted date and time on their token or tickets to avoid long waiting hours, he said. The devotees were also requested to wear masks for their safety. He appealed to Govindamala devotees to come to Tirumala only with Time Slot Tokens. Later, the Additional EO said that unplanned darshan creates issues for the devotees as well as the administration. Hence devotees are requested to observe restraint and get the SSD tokens in Tirupati. They should come to Tirumala only on the allotted date and time on their tokens or tickets to avoid any sort of problems, he asserted. Board members Panabaka Lakshmi, Bhanuprakash Reddy, JEO Veerabrahmam, CVSO Sridhar and others were present.

ISRO's ambitious space docking experiment today

PNS ■ BENGALURU
 ISRO will carryout its ambitious space docking experiment using two satellites on orbit, on January 9. The event was scheduled on January 7 but postponed to Thursday morning. If the ISRO succeeds in its mission, India will become the fourth country in the world to have space docking technology. ISRO had launched the two satellites -- SDX01 (Chaser) and SDX02 (Target) -- as part of the mission on December 30 with the help of PSLV C60 rocket from Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota. The two small spacecraft weighing about 220 kg each were injected into a 475-km circular orbit as intended. According to ISRO, SpaDeX mission is a cost-effective technology demonstrator mission for the demon-

SPADeX

Illustration of the SpaDeX mission showing two satellites in orbit around Earth, one docking with the other.

stration of in-space docking using these two small spacecraft. This technology is essential for India's space ambitions such as Indian on Moon, sample return from the Moon, the building and operation of Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS), etc. The Space Docking Experiment (SPADeX) is a pivotal project, which is designed to develop and demonstrate the technology needed for spacecraft rendezvous, docking, and undocking using two small satellites, the space agency said.

'MODI IS PEOPLE'S MAN'

Golden era in development history of AP: Nara Lokesh

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is supplying oxygen to the State which was on ventilator due to the inefficient rule of the previous government, remarked the Minister for Education, IT and Electronics, Nara Lokesh, here on Wednesday.

Addressing a public meeting after Narendra Modi virtually inaugurated and laid the foundation for Rs 2 lakh crore worth of various developmental projects here, Lokesh pointed out that the State is now facing a Rs 4,000 crore deficit budget every month and Modi is now supplying oxygen for the State. "The Prime Minister has already extended Rs 15,000 crore for Amaravati and Rs 12,157 crore for the Polavaram project while the Bhogapuram airport works have been taken up only after the NDA came to power," the IT Minister stated.

"The visionary Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu and Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan have been making every effort to fulfil each promise made to the people despite the financial crisis. With a single signature, Chandrababu revised the pension by Rs 1,000 while the previous government had taken five full years to raise the pension by Rs 1,000," Lokesh noted.



"Please extend your cooperation for the development of Andhra Pradesh as an elder brother. We will become partners in achieving the targets of Vikasitha Bharat-2047. I always strongly believe that if the States become strong society grows stronger. Now in every corner of the country, be it South, North, East or West, is in the grip of Namoo mania."

Pointing out that Anna Canteens have been reopened and free cooking gas cylinders are being supplied under Deepam scheme, Lokesh told the public that Mega DSC along with a job calendar will soon be announced. "That is CBN (Chandrababu Naidu) and today is a golden era in the development of Andhra Pradesh," he observed.

"On behalf of the Beautiful City of Destiny, Visakhapatnam, we fondly welcome the Prime Minister. Modi is in the heart of every Indian and due to Modi, the whole world is looking

country which was in 11th position in the world in 2014 has now reached the fifth position. Modi is making every effort to transform India into the first or second economic system in the world with his goal of Vikasitha Bharat-2047, Lokesh said, adding that with this inspiration Chandrababu released the Swarnandhra Vision-2047 document.

Pointing out that when Chandrababu released the Vision-2020 many people made fun of him, Lokesh said that if anyone goes to Hyderabad now one can easily find out that this vision has been realised. Modi laid the foundation on Wednesday for the projects which will totally change the face of the State and foundation has been laid for the Visakh railway zone, which is the dream of the people of North Andhra, he stated.

"Please extend your cooperation for the development of Andhra Pradesh as an elder brother. We will become partners in achieving the targets of Vikasitha Bharat-2047. I always strongly believe that if the States become strong society grows stronger. Now in every corner of the country, be it South, North, East or West, is in the grip of Namoo mania," Minister Lokesh maintained.

towards India. Modi has given a totally different meaning to the post of the Prime Minister. Generally, PM means Prime Minister but Modi is People's Man.

The vision of Modi is global but still his heart beats for the poor. Namoo means trust of the poor, assurance to the poor and courage to the country," Lokesh said.

Stating that Modi is working with the sole objective of development of the nation by releasing the Vikasitha Bharat-2047 document, Lokesh said that the

6 killed in...

Continued from Page 1

They also visited the injured in hospitals. Three centres were opened to issue tokens at Srinivasam, Sattanarayanapuram and Bairagipattada areas. TTD officials had announced that 1.20 lakh tokens would be issued to devotees for having darshan of Lord Venkateswara on January 10, 11 and 12. Meanwhile, officials identified two of the deceased as Mallika of Selam in Tamil Nadu and Naidu Babu of Narsipatnam town.

Sources said the police found a person suffering from breathlessness. In order to help him, the police opened the gate but a large number of people rushed in leading to the stampede. They also said that adequate security arrangements were not made to regulate the crowd.

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu expressed deep shock at the deaths of six pilgrims in the stampede at Vishnu Nivasam in Tirupati earlier in the day. In a release here on Wednesday, the Chief Minister said that he is deeply saddened by the ghastly incident in which six pilgrims lost their lives. The CM inquired with officials about the treatment being given to those who had suffered serious injuries in the incident.

The Chief Minister is closely monitoring the treatment being given to the injured and other developments. The Chief Minister asked officials to visit the place and take all possible steps for providing relief to the devotees and ensure that effective medical treatment is provided to the injured. The Chief Minister held a teleconference with the Tirupati Collector, SP and the TTD Chairman and inquired about the injured. He also expressed anger over officials not making proper arrangements to regulate the crowds.

Govt seeks public input on proposed reforms

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Minister for Education, IT and Electronics, Nara Lokesh, in a release on Wednesday stated that the Government of Andhra Pradesh is taking significant steps towards revamping the State's Intermediate Education system, with the goal of better preparing students for a competitive future. The initiative follows extensive consultations with various stakeholders, including parents, students, and academicians, and aims to address longstanding gaps in the education system.

He said that the key proposed reforms include revision of syllabus and text-

books, the content will be updated to meet current academic and industry standards, ensuring that students are equipped with relevant and modern knowledge. The proposal introduces greater flexibility in subject choices, allowing students to tailor their academic path according to their interests and future aspirations.

The evaluation system will be restructured to promote a more holistic assessment, reducing the emphasis on rote learning and focusing on overall student development. The proposal includes removal of Intermediate first-year board examinations and this major step is

intended to alleviate academic pressure on students, offering a more streamlined educational experience.

The Minister stated that these reforms are part of the government's broader vision to create an inclusive, globally competitive education system that focuses on student well-being and long-term growth. The government is actively seeking feedback from the public, students, parents, and academic professionals. Suggestions on the proposed changes can be submitted via email to biereforms@gmail.com by January 26. The details and modalities of the proposed reforms are available on the official website: bieap.gov.in.

Poor crowd...

Continued from Page 1

However, when one of the staff members at the token issuance counter fell ill, the queue line gate was opened to shift him to hospital. Devotees, thinking that the counter had been opened for token issuance, devotees rushed forward. Witnesses report that a stampede occurred at this moment. Some have also alleged that proper security arrangements were not made at the queue lines. It is also said that the local staff did not inform the higher authorities about the alternative arrangements.

The decision to distribute tokens for darshan, while well-intentioned, was poorly executed. The absence of sufficient counters, a systematic queuing mechanism and clear communication exacerbated the situation. The lack of trained personnel to control the crowds and direct them safely contributed to the chaos. This festival holds immense spiritual importance, attracting devotees from across the country. The administration may have underestimated the turnout, especially after a period of pandemic-related restrictions. Devotees eager to attend after prior disruptions in temple activities likely contributed to the unusually high numbers.

AP is a state of possibilities...

Continued from Page 1

He added that in the initial phase, two green hydrogen hubs will be established, one of which will be in Visakhapatnam.

Modi said he had the opportunity to lay the foundation stone for the bulk drug park project in Nakkapalli and highlighted that Andhra Pradesh was one of the three States in the country where such a park is being established.

The PM noted that the government views urbanisation as an opportunity and aims to make Andhra Pradesh an example of new-age urbanisation. To realise this vision, the foundation stone for the Krishnapatnam Industrial Area, also known as Kris City, was laid on Wednesday. He remarked that this Smart City will be part of the Chennai-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor, attracting thousands of crores in investment and creating millions of industrial jobs in Andhra Pradesh.

Remarking that Andhra Pradesh is already benefiting from Shri City as a man-

ufacturing hub, Modi underscored that the goal for Andhra Pradesh is to be among the top States in the country in the industrial and manufacturing sectors.

The Prime Minister said that the government is promoting manufacturing through initiatives such as the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, resulting in India being counted among the top countries in the world for manufacturing various products.

The Prime Minister noted that the foundation stone for the South Coast Railway Zone headquarters was laid in the new city of Visakhapatnam.

He highlighted that the establishment of the South Coast Railway Zone headquarters will expand agricultural and trade activities in the region, and provide new opportunities for tourism and the local economy. Modi said that Andhra Pradesh is among those States with 100 per cent railway electrification, and more than 70 railway stations are being developed under the Amrit Bharat Station scheme.

Protests overshadow PM Modi's visit to Visakhapatnam

Protesters seek assurance on protecting VSP from privatisation



Left party activists were detained by police on Wednesday during their protest against the strategic sale of the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant.

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Visakhapatnam on Wednesday, intended to highlight Rs 2 lakh crore worth of development projects, was overshadowed by widespread protests demanding the protection of the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) from privatisation.

Activists of the CPM and the CPI spearheaded demonstrations across the city, demanding that the Prime Minister publicly guarantee that the VSP would remain a public sector undertaking. Protesters allege that the Central government, led by the BJP, has deliberately withheld the allocation of captive mines to the plant, contributing to its current financial struggles.

One of the most significant demonstrations took place at Maddilapalem Junction, where CPM, CPI members, and numerous women activists wearing black bands briefly disrupted traffic. The protesters staged a sit-in, chanting slogans and demanding immediate government action

to safeguard the VSP. The situation escalated, prompting intervention from women police officers who detained the protesters and transported them in buses designated for attendees of the Prime Minister's public meeting. Even while detained on the buses, the protesters continued their demonstrations.

Authorities had taken pre-emptive measures to minimise disruptions, placing leaders from various political parties who had pledged to oppose PM Modi's roadshow and public meeting under house arrest starting Tuesday evening. This move aimed to prevent them from participating in the planned protests.

The protests highlight the escalating public concern surrounding the potential privatisation of the VSP. The steel plant is considered a vital component of the region's economy and a symbol of local identity, making its future a highly sensitive issue. The demonstrations served as a stark reminder of the strong opposition the government faces regarding its plans for the VSP.

Modi's visit transforms city into election-mode festivity

Massive turnout at AU Engineering College Grounds

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The city embraced an electrified atmosphere on Wednesday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's roadshow and public meeting at AU Engineering College Grounds, Maddilapalem, took centre stage. The event saw a massive turnout, with supporters flooding the streets and the venue, marking a vibrant political spectacle.

The roads leading to the venue were decorated with colourful flags of NDA allies - TDP, BJP, and JSP - along with banners and flex boards welcoming the leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, and

Deputy Chief Minister K. Pawan Kalyan. Streets around Maddilapalem and Siripuram were abuzz with activity as corporators and other elected representatives flagged off buses and auto-rickshaws ferrying people to the event.

Supporters donning yellow T-shirts emblazoned with Pawan Kalyan's image, along with BJP enthusiasts in saffron attire and pagadis, added to the political fervour. LED screens were strategically placed to ensure that attendees did not miss any part of the proceedings. Food packets were distributed at transit points and onboard vehicles, reflecting well-coordinated event management. By 2 pm, the grounds were

teeming with thousands of attendees who had arrived in hundreds of buses and auto rickshaws. Stringent security measures were in place, with metal detectors and thorough checks, including the removal of black garments before entering the venue.

Traffic management saw significant rerouting, with heavy vehicles diverted to the Anandapuram-Anakapalli route and RTC buses directed via Beach Road. Maddilapalem, Siripuram, and China Waltair witnessed substantial traffic restrictions. Schools declared a holiday, and examinations in several educational institutions were postponed, underscoring the event's prominence.

TTD apologises...

Continued from Page 1

TTD Board Member Bhanu Prakash Reddy provided additional details, stating that the stampede occurred during the distribution of tokens for 'Ekadasi Darshan' at 91 counters.

"This has never happened in TTD's history. Six devotees lost their lives, and 40 were injured. We are providing the best possible medical care to the injured. I apologize to the devotees for this unfortunate incident," he said. Bhanu assured that an inquiry will be conducted and action will be taken against those responsible.

He added that the Chief Minister and the Health Minister will visit Tirupati on Friday morning to oversee the situation and help those affected.

'Came to seek...'

Continued from Page 1

"When police officials opened the gate, there was a heavy rush. Out of 20 members of my family, six were injured. We joined the queue at 11 am and were provided with milk and biscuits while waiting. However, a large number of male pilgrims rushed forward, causing several women to be injured and shifted to the hospital," she recounted.

Tirupati Municipal Commissioner Maurya shed light on the circumstances leading to the chaos. "Eight counters were opened for token distribution, and most operated peacefully except the one at MGM School near Padmavati Park. At 9:00 pm, the park was suddenly opened, and around 4,000-5,000 people rushed in at once, causing the stampede."



Board of Intermediate office, she stressed the need to introduce these reforms and revise the existing syllabus to meet national standards. A key focus is to enable students to seamlessly pursue higher education in other States while ensuring alignment with the syllabus

used in competitive exams such as NEET and JEE.

The Secretary outlined the changes proposed by the subject committees formed on October 1, 2024, which included university professors, degree college lecturers and junior lecturers. According to the report, significant revisions will be made for science students. Starting in the academic year 2025-26, first-year science textbooks in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, and Zoology will be based on the NCERT syllabus. For second-year science students, the syllabus will be reduced in line with NCERT guidelines. The plan is to implement a full NCERT-based syl-

labus for science students by the academic year 2026-27.

For arts and humanities subjects, including Civics, Economics, History and Commerce, the revised textbooks based on the Board of Intermediate syllabus will be introduced in the academic year 2025-26. No changes will be made to the second-year syllabus for the 2025-26 academic year, but the revised textbooks for these subjects will be printed by 2026-27.

Shukla explained that the transition to NCERT textbooks at the 10th grade level in 2024-25 necessitates the introduction of these changes in intermediate education.

Will move forward taking...

Continued from Page 1

The Prime Minister has become closer to the people by undertaking various developmental works on a regular basis, Chandrababu said and added that Modi is a global leader and the affection towards him is not confined to the North alone as is being mentioned by many leaders. "In the recent elections, Modi and Jana Sena chief Pawan Kalyan contested together and the people have given a record verdict with 93 per cent strike rate and 57 per cent voting giving us 164 Assembly and 21 MP seats," the Chief Minister noted.

Making it clear that the same alliance will continue in future, Chandrababu said that the NDA's victory in Haryana and Maharashtra is only because of Modi's charisma. "Take it for granted that the NDA is coming to power in New Delhi, too, as it is all because of the style of functioning of Modi for the whole nation," he remarked.

The people are always standing by Modi as he strives hard for the welfare of the nation and is taking the country forward with slogans like development, reforms along with good governance, Chandrababu said. Pointing out various welfare programmes being implemented by the Centre like PM Kisan Nidhi, Make-in-India, Skill India and Digital India, the Chief Minister expressed confidence that the country will acquire the second or even first position in the world in the economic system. This is possible only with none other than Modi, he remarked.

Lokesh confident of AP...

Continued from Page 1

"I am sure that very soon, Andhra Pradesh will get transformed into the global digital technology hub and by improving the innovation and Deep Tech skills, not only economic development but also social progress can be realised," Lokesh stated. Stressing the need for innovation to achieve progress, the IT Minister added that Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, quantum computing, health tech, edu tech and infrastructure technology will play a crucial role in the coming days.

"There is a need for IT, Electronics, Medtech and Smart Technologies to work in close coordination to resolve social issues," Lokesh said. He announced that the State will be elevated as a \$2 trillion economy by 2047. Observing that Chandrababu had developed IT as part of Vision-2020, the IT Minister said that he is fortunate enough to become a partner of Vision-2047 and this will certainly be realised.

Stating that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is extending his cooperation for the development of the State, Lokesh announced that Rs 2 lakh crore is now being invested in the State. Making a promise to decentralise development, he said Kurnool will be promoted as a renewable energy hub while Chittoor and Kadapa will be encouraged as electronics manufacturing hub. "Godavari districts will be transformed into aqua hub," Lokesh said, and announced that the biggest chemical park is going to be established in North Andhra.

Although every possible care and caution has been taken to avoid errors or omissions, this publication is being sold on the condition and understanding that information given in this publication is merely for reference and must not be taken as having authority of or binding in any way on the writers, editors, publishers, and printers and sellers who do not owe any responsibility for any damage or loss to any person, a purchaser of this publication or not for the result of any action taken on the basis of this work. All disputes are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of competent court and forums in Delhi/New Delhi only. Readers are advised and requested to verify and seek appropriate advice to satisfy themselves about the veracity of any kind of advertisement before responding to any contents published in this newspaper. The printer, publisher, editor and any employee of the Pioneer Group's will not be held responsible for any kind of claim made by the advertisers of the products & services and shall not be made responsible for any kind of loss, consequences and further product-related damages on such advertisements.

Preparations for cockfight arena at a brisk pace

Organisers ignore warnings from High Court, Collector and police

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Despite clear bans and directives from the Andhra Pradesh High Court, the NTR District Collector Dr G Lakshmi, and Police Commissioner SV Rajasekhra Babu, preparations for conducting cockfights during the upcoming Sankranti festival in the outskirts of Vijayawada continue unabated. Organizers, allegedly backed by influential TDP leaders and representatives, are reportedly arranging arenas for this illegal blood sport under the guise of Sankranti Sambharalu.



The Andhra Pradesh High Court has directed the police to take strict measures to prevent cockfights in the state, emphasising the ban under Section 10 of the Andhra Pradesh Gaming Act, 1974, and Section 34 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. Special vigilance teams were formed by the district collector, involving officials from the Police, Revenue, and Animal Husbandry departments, to enforce the ban and raise public awareness, interestingly, these teams have not inspected these cockfight grounds preparation works.

While teams were formed at the village, mandal, and district levels, no significant inspections have taken place, and many officials appear unaware of the preparations. Areas like Jakkampudi, Kothuru Tadepalli, Ramavaram, and Ambapuram. Large arenas are being set up, with banners and hoardings featuring the photographs of MLAs to attract participants and punters. A major arena has reportedly been constructed near Ramavaram, close to the residence of the Home Affairs and Disaster Management Minister Vengalapati Anitha, further highlighting the lack of enforcement.

Organisers argue that cockfighting is a traditional aspect of Sankranti, seeking a three-day exception for the event. The alleged backing of TDP and Jana Sena Party leaders has emboldened the organisers, with some asserting they will proceed despite police warnings. The Ambapuram Arena's organisers are ready to perform a special puja to start the further works to conduct the cockfight on Thursday. Cockfighting is explicitly banned under state and national laws due to its violent nature and cruelty to animals. Violators are subject to penalties under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and the Gaming Act, yet enforcement remains inconsistent. The blatant disregard for legal and administrative orders raises questions about the effectiveness of enforcement and the influence of political leaders in perpetuating the illegal practice.

Despite these measures, cockfight organisers, many linked to TDP leaders, have

Kondapalli Srinivas to attend Pravasi Bharatiya Divas

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Kondapalli Srinivas, Minister for Non-Resident Andhra Pradesh Affairs, will represent the State government at the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, scheduled to take place in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, on Thursday and Friday. The event will be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday morning.

The Minister received an invitation from Union Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar, who requested the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, N Chandrababu Naidu, to attend the summit on behalf of the State government. In accordance with the Chief Minister's directives, Minister Srinivas will travel from Vizianagaram to Bhubaneswar this evening to participate in the proceedings.

The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas aims to unite people of Indian origin residing in various countries around the globe and to engage in comprehensive discussions on the issues faced by the Indian Diaspora. The Central government is organising this programme to explore viable solutions for challenges faced by Indian-origin individuals abroad. Several prominent members of the overseas Indian community will be in attendance, adding to the significance of the event.

Handri-Neeva works will be completed by next season: Min

Accuses Jagan Mohan Reddy of neglecting the project, resulting in five-year delay



PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Water Resources Dr Nimmala Ramanaidu has assured that the Handri-Neeva Main Canal works will be completed by the next agricultural season. He also reiterated the government's commitment to ensuring that the last acre in the Rayalaseema region receives irrigation water at the earliest.

The meeting was held at the Camp Office in Vijayawada. The Minister accused former Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy of neglecting the Handri-Neeva project, resulting in a five-year delay. He emphasised that the coalition government, led by Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, resumed the works by allocating Rs.2,629 crore.

Minister Ramanaidu conducted a video conference on Wednesday with officials from the Water Resources Department, discussing progress on the Handri-Neeva Project, Chitratvi Balancing Reservoir, and related projects. The meeting focused on link projects, particularly those connecting the Handri-Neeva Main Canal to the Galuru-Nagari Sujala Sravanti Scheme and the Chitratvi Balancing Reservoir. Minister Ramanaidu emphasised

preparing a comprehensive progress report detailing obstacles and solutions for ensuring uninterrupted water flow through the Handri-Neeva Main Canal. The Minister promised to submit a detailed report to Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu soon, outlining the current status and immediate actions required to complete the project. The meeting was attended by G Sai Prasad, Special Chief Secretary of the Water Resources Department, M Venkateswara Rao, Engineer-in-Chief, Chief Engineers, Superintending Engineers, and other project officials.

Jagan calls for unity, grassroots strengthening of party

Accuses Chandrababu of betraying people with broken promises, debt burdens, regressive policies

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In a spirited meeting with the Nellore district cadre, former Chief Minister and YSR Congress Party chief YS Jagan Mohan Reddy issued a clarion call for unity, grassroots strengthening, and an aggressive presence on social media to counter misinformation and amplify the party's achievements.



proudly visit any home in the State, while TDP leaders cannot even face the people," he remarked.

Jagan also emphasised the importance of social media in countering the Opposition and biased media narratives, declaring, "Our phones are our weapons in this fight. Every cadre member must actively use platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to highlight our achievements and expose the failures of the Opposition."

Jagan reassured party workers of his unwavering support, stating, "We will stand by every worker who faces injustice. Those who have wronged our people and workers will be held accountable under the law. I promise to protect you from the unlawful actions of this government." He also announced plans to visit districts starting at January's end or February to connect with grassroots workers and strengthen the party's presence.

"This is the time to show commitment to the people and the party. Only those who genuinely serve the people will emerge as true leaders. Together, we will strengthen our party and secure the trust of every household in Andhra Pradesh," he said.

Highlighting his government's exemplary track record, Jagan declared, "Our administration fulfilled 99 per cent of the promises made in the 2019 manifesto, a feat unmatched by any other government in the country." He contrasted this with the failures of his predecessor, N Chandrababu Naidu, whom he accused of betraying the people with broken promises, debt burdens, and regressive policies. "Chandrababu Naidu's governance left people burdened with Rs.15,000 crores in debt, introduced toll taxes on rural roads, and hiked registration fees on lands and houses," he said.

and every household is discussing this betrayal," Jagan said, contrasting this with his administration's commitment to accountability and transparency. Jagan recounted his government's welfare achievements, from expanding Aarogyasri healthcare coverage to ensuring timely disbursement of funds under the schemes like Vidya Deevana and Vasathi Deevana. "Our manifesto was not just a document but a commitment, implemented with a clear execution calendar published alongside the budget. Every month, we delivered financial assistance directly to the people," he stated.

He underscored the failures of the current coalition government, emphasising its inability to deliver on election promises. "Governments are usually given a year to settle, but this coalition has already lost public trust in just seven months. Promises have been thrown to the wind,

New action plan prioritises tribal students' health

Stress on standardised policy, zero-tolerance approach to marijuana use near schools

PNS ■ PADERU

The Integrated Tribal Development Authority (ITDA) Project Officer, V Abhishek, has emphasised the need to prioritise the health and well-being of tribal students. He highlighted the importance of consistency across schools and announced plans to implement a standardised policy along with an immediate 100-day action plan targeting 10 students.



Abhishek further directed that identity cards be issued to the parents and guardians of students, stating that only those with these cards would be allowed to collect students from school. He advised maintaining a visitor register at Ashram Schools, restricting visiting hours to Sundays from 10 AM to 4 PM. He also prohibited sending students home with unfamiliar individuals. The meeting also included the release of a five-day activity and study plan for the ten students. Abhishek stressed the need for structured study hours in Ashram Schools, with a focus on supporting academically struggling students.

In a meeting with Assistant Tribal Welfare Officers, Ashram School Principals, and Gurukul School Principals, Abhishek outlined clear instructions regarding the students' health and safety. He mandated that Ashram School Principals submit monthly reports using Form 1, as required by the Tribal Welfare Department's Director. He also recommended setting up sick rooms in schools to assist students with health concerns and emphasised the importance of emergency procedures, including transport to hospitals and notifying parents and ATWs immediately.

In response to the issue of marijuana use near schools, Abhishek declared a zero-tolerance policy. He ordered strict action if students were found using marijuana, including counselling and informing parents. He urged the implementation of the Margadarshini programme and reminded attendees of the State's commitment to eradicating marijuana cultivation.

Unity Mall will boost handloom sales: Savitha

Rs. 172-cr project aims to promote handloom and handicraft products, ensure artisans' welfare

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Minister for Handlooms and Textiles and BC Welfare, S. Savitha, has announced the construction of Unity Mall, a dedicated facility aimed at promoting handloom and handicraft products. Supported by the Central government, the Rs. 172-crore project is envisioned to create a sustainable market for artisans, ensuring their financial stability while showcasing India's rich craft heritage.



During a site visit near Ramanaidu Studio in Visakhapatnam on Wednesday, the Minister, accompanied by State Handloom and Textile Commissioner Rekha Rani, reviewed the proposed four-storey structure. She emphasised the need to design the mall to accommodate future demands and ensure that it serves as a hub for artisans' growth. "The mall will enhance the sales of handloom and handicraft products and support the financial security of

artists," she stated. Unity Mall will seamlessly

blend commerce and entertainment to attract both locals and tourists. The first two floors will house 62 shops

dedicated to handloom and handicraft products. The third floor will feature sea-view restaurants, offering a unique dining experience, while the fourth floor will include two mini-theatres, additional retail outlets, and dining spaces. Constructed using the advanced Zee Plus 4 method, the mall's strategic location near popular attractions such as Rushikonda Beach and Ramanaidu Studio is expected to draw significant footfall.

Following the site inspection, Savitha visited the Lepakshi showroom in Ram Nagar and the APCO showroom in Siripuram. She assessed the handloom and handicraft collections on display and reviewed daily sales performance. In anticipation of the upcoming Sankranti festival, the minister urged for aggressive promotional campaigns to highlight handwoven garments and government subsidies on handloom products. She also stressed the importance of meeting sales targets set by the government.



Andhra suffers defeat in Volleyball Tournament

Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Haryana enter semi-finals

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh made a shock exit in the School Games Federation of India Under-19 Girls National Volleyball Tournament that is taking place at PB Siddhartha Arts and Science Junior College in Vijayawada. The AP team faced a straight-set defeat against Kerala in the quarter-finals (25-23, 25-20, 26-16).

Despite a close contest in the first set, Andhra Pradesh couldn't capitalise on their momentum, allowing Kerala to dominate in the subsequent sets. Kerala secured a spot in the semi-finals. In another match between Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, Tamil Nadu triumphed 3-1 (25-23, 25-15, 16-25, 25-14). Tamil Nadu displayed resilience despite losing the third set, recovering strongly to advance.

However, in the third quarter-final match between Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, Haryana dominated with a 3-0 victory (25-12, 25-23, 25-14). Haryana's consistent performance ensured a smooth path to the semi.

People raise objections to APERC at public hearing

CPI State secretary demands immediate cancellation of agreement between SECI and Adani

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The second day of the public hearing on the proposed annual revenue requirements and retail prices for the financial year 2025-26 under the auspices of the Andhra Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission (APERC) was held in person and through video conference at a private function hall in Vijayawada on Wednesday. APERC Chairman Thakur Ram Singh and member P Venkata Rama Reddy conducted the public hearing on electricity tariffs and other issues.



On the second day, 59 individuals registered to share their views: 14 participated in person, while 25 joined through video conference. On the first day, 27 people registered, with 11 attending in person and 10 participating via video conference. In total, 60 individuals provided their objections, opinions, and suggestions to APERC over the two days. Chairman Thakur Ram Singh stated that they would thoroughly review every issue raised by consumers, public associations, politicians, and industrialists and would communicate these concerns to the government.

During the session, CPI State secretary K Ramakrishna expressed that the power sector in the State has deteriorated to

a point where it seems beyond improvement, stressing that the responsibility for safeguarding the sector lies with APERC. He noted that consumer trust in the Electricity Regulatory Commission is waning and argued that it is unjust to impose additional charges repeatedly. He called for a public hearing on the installation of smart meters and requested the immediate cancellation of the agreement between SECI and Adani.

The convener of the Electricity Consumers' United Forum, MV Anjaneyulu, stated that claims about the benefits of smart meter installation are misleading. He raised concerns about the high cost of coal purchased from abroad, which he believed would further burden consumers, and urged the government to shoulder the Fuel and Power Cost Adjustment (FPCA) charges.

Rs 22.38 crore loans extended to SCs during FY 2024-25: Collector

PNS ■ BHIMAVARAM

District Collector Chadalavada Nagarani has said that Rs 22.38 crore loans will be extended to the people of SC communities during the Financial Year 2024-25 and asked the bankers to reach the targets in extending loans through the SC and BC Corporations.

Collector Nagarani held a meeting with the bankers, SC & BC Corporation, LDM, DRDA, MEPMA and Industries department officials here on Wednesday and reviewed the loans granted to various communities by the SC and BC corporations.

Speaking on the occasion, Collector Nagarani said that the government decided to sanction various types of subsidized loans under self-employment and MSME schemes for the uplift of SC and BC communities. She highlighted that for the uplift of SC and BC communities and their financial stability, subsidized loans worth Rs 22.38 crore were being sanctioned to the SC communities to set up 714 units.

She revealed that 120 autos rickshaw being sanctioned through SERP while Rs 36.49 crore being sanctioned to 1,901 people under self-employment



schemes of BC communities, Rs 3.08 crore for setting up generic medical shops in 39 units, and Rs 3.73 crore being sanctioned to 215 people under self-employment schemes for non-BC communities like Kamma, Reddy, Vaishya, Kshatriya and Brahmin. She stated that Rs 2.92 crore would be sanctioned as subsidized loans for setting up generic medical shops in 35 units for them.

"In addition to these, loans of Rs 13.88 crore will be sanc-

tioned for setting up 694 units under the Kapu Corporation MSME scheme. Among the loans sanctioned to the SC communities, bank linkage loans of up to Rs 10 lakh will be provided for setting up units such as three and four-wheeled passenger autos, four-wheeled goods trucks, dairy buffaloes, cows, goats, sheep, hotel and catering, sari polishing and rolling, beauty parlor, photo studio and tourism photoshoot, vegetable shop, cell phone

repair shop, fancy shop, ice cream parlor, metal brass unit, generic medical shop, mobile food stall, jute bag making, textile unit, power tiller and rice mill," the Collector asserted.

She said that those interested can apply on the OBMMS portal from January 8 to January 16, adding that from January 20 to 24, mandal and municipal officials will inspect the field along with bankers.

The district Collector urged the people of SC, BC and non-

BC low-income groups to take advantage of the loans and become financially stronger. SC Corporation Executive Director V Vijaya Prakash, BC Corporation Executive Director Pushpalatha, Lead Bank District Manager A Nagendra Prasad, DRDA PD MMS Venugopal, District Industries Department Officer U Mangapathi Rao and MEPMA Officer Nani Babu were among those who attended the meeting.

Officials directed to collect all taxes through digital mode

PNS ■ RAJAHMUNDRY

East Godavari district Collector P Prashanthi directed the officials concerned to take steps to collect all kinds of taxes through Digital Mode through the UPI, QR 2 and Point of Sale machines in all village panchayats.

She held a meeting with the officials concerned here on Wednesday and reviewed the collection of taxes from people. Speaking on the occasion, Collector Prashanthi issued orders to the officials of all Gram Panchayats to collect house taxes, water taxes and other collections only digitally through UPI, QR2 and Point of Sale (POS) machines.

Previously all the Gram Panchayats in East Godavari district had collected house taxes and water taxes through digital mode, UPI QR codes and POS machines, and henceforth, all the gram panchayats will have to collect every tax and non-tax revenue through digital mode, she instructed the officials.

The Collector said that there is already sufficient awareness in terms of digital cash payment collections among the people and the officials so that the Gram Panchayat needs to perform more efficiently in the utilization of funds.



Collector Prashanthi clarified that all the Panchayat Secretaries in the district should henceforth handle all types of transactions with transparency, and directed that the Gram Panchayat should do all the transactions (Building and Land Regularization (BLR) fee, fish tank lease fee, all other types of taxes, only through the digital system

Collector Prashanthi clarified that all the Panchayat Secretaries in the district should henceforth handle all types of transactions with transparency, and directed that the Gram Panchayat should do all the transactions (Building and Land Regularization (BLR) fee, fish tank lease fee, all other types of taxes, only through the digital system.

She warned that from now on, cash collections should be 100% digital and that department action would be taken against those who violate these orders. Joint Collector S Chinna Ramudu, DRO T Sitarama Murthy and other officials were present.

Meanwhile, the special principal Secretary held a video conference with the Collector and other officials from the Secretariat on Wednesday. Speaking on the occasion, Collector Prashanthi said that the compensation enumeration of the crops damaged due to unseasonal rains that occurred during the month of July has been completed.

"Horticulture crop compensation has been disbursed. A comprehensive project report has been prepared by the irrigation officials regarding the Yerra Kaluvu Canal works and proposals have been sent to the ENC on the works to be undertaken," the Collector revealed.

Police takes custody of retired ASP Vijay Paul again for questioning

PNS ■ GUNTUR

The Prakasam district police took retired ASP Vijay Paul once again for questioning in the custodial torture of the then Lok Sabha member K Raghuram Raju. The Guntur Special Court Judge G Sravanti on Tuesday had granted permission to the Prakasam police to take Vijay Paul to custody for questioning. Now the retired ASP of the CID was lodged in the Guntur district prison.



would be grilled, sources said. It may be mentioned here that the Prakasam district police who are investigating the custodial torture of the then Narasapuram MP Raghuram Raju

had taken him to custody for three days earlier as the court granted his custody and questioned him. However, the police once again sought his custody to question him again and he did not cooperate with the police.

Meanwhile, another accused in the same case, Kamepalli Tulasi Babu went to the SP office in a rally with 27 cars. However, the police did not allow the cars into the SP office premises but they allowed Tulasi Babu cars only. Earlier, the police issued a notice to Tulasi Babu to attend for questioning in the custodial torture of Raghuram Raju. The police questioned Tulasi Babu in the case.

600 bags of PDS rice seized, hoarders flee

PNS ■ RAYACHOTI

The special police party conducted a raid on a godown, located near Lakshmi theatre here, and found 600 bags of rice meant to be distributed under the Public Distribution System.

Police said here on Wednesday that on a tip off, a police team conducted a raid on the godown and found a huge quantity of 600 bags of PDS rice hoarded. The police seized the rice bags.

However the hoarders of the PDS rice fled the scene after noticing the police. The police registered a case and launched a search for the godown owner.

Two kgs of hash oil seized, one peddler arrested



PNS ■ PADERU

The police seized 2 KGs of hash oil and arrested one person at Donkarai village in Chintoor Mandal in ASR district on Wednesday.

Police said that on a tip off the police conducted a raid at the Amnavari temple. They found two bottles of hash oil

being taken in a vehicle illegally.

The police seized the hash oil worth over Rs 5 lakh and arrested the drug peddler Rahul Chandra who belongs to Hyderabad.

The arrested drug peddler was produced in the court which sent him to the judicial remand.

200 kgs of ganja worth Rs 25 lakh seized



PNS ■ MACHILIPATNAM

The police seized 200 KGs of cannabis and two cars, worth over Rs 25 lakh, while being transported in two cars on the outskirts of Nandigama town at two places.

Vijayawada Rural DCP Maheshwar Raju told the media in Nandigama ACP office on Wednesday that on a tip off, a police team conducted checking of vehicles at Gattu Bhimavaram village and at Keesara toll gate plaza.

The drug peddlers in one of the cars, in which ganja was being transported, noticed the police checking, took diversion and started going towards Hyderabad.

The police, using a drone camera, located the car and tried to stop the car at Gattu

Bhimavaram. However the drug peddlers took another 'U' turn and went some distance. Later, fearing the police, they left the car at Gowravaram village at an agriculture field and fled the scene. The police checked the car and found 80 KGs of ganja.

The drug peddlers in the second car, escaped the toll plaza. The police used drone cameras and located the car at a real estate venture at Ambarupet village. A police team led by CI YV Naidu and MRO Suresh Babu rushed there, checked the car and found 120 KGs of ganja in it. However, the drug peddlers in the two cars managed to escape.

The police in the two incidents seized 200 KGs of cannabis, two cars worth Rs 25 lakh.

Red Cross Blood Storage Centre opened at Bapatla

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Indian Red Cross Society, Bapatla district branch, has established a Red Cross Blood Storage Centre at Bapatla, the district headquarters, which is going to have a Medical College and Teaching Hospital soon.

To augment the growing demand for blood units in the near future, Red Cross has established this Blood Storage Centre at a cost of Rs. 12 lakh. Sriram Seva Sankalp Foundation, Chennai, a Trust of Sriram Finance Limited, has supported this centre under their CSR initiatives.



V Narendra Varma, MLA, inaugurated the Blood Storage Centre and appreciated the efforts of the Red Cross to mitigate the problems of making available the safe blood to people in his constituency in times of emergencies. He has assured all support to the Red Cross in taking up more service activities in Bapatla.

BVS Kumar, State coordinator of Red Cross Blood Banks and Projects in Andhra Pradesh, has informed that AP Red Cross is operating 21 Blood Centres across the State, and are providing around 1,10,000 safe blood units per year in the State. AP Red Cross

wishes to establish more Blood Storage Centres in all districts to make available the blood units in emergencies at prominent divisional and mandal headquarters.

Narayana Bhatt, Chairman of the IRCS, Bapatla district branch, thanked the Sriram Seva Sankalp Foundation for their support.

Dr C Venkateswara Reddy, treasurer of AP Red Cross, Mogalleshwar Rao, Satyanarayana of Sriram Finance, Raghunadha Reddy, Municipal Commissioner, Dr Veera Raghavaiah, Vice Chairman, IRCS, Bapatla district branch, were present.

Will stand by KTR, says Harish

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Gathering support for BRS Working President KT Rama Rao, BRS MLA Harish Rao said that BRS stands united against the political targeting of its leaders.

"The cases against KTR are part of a conspiracy to deflect attention from the Congress Government's failures. KTR is a karyakarta of our party. Just like he stands by our karyakartas, the entire party will stand by him, when he is facing problems," he asserted.

Reflecting on the state's progress under BRS rule and the shortcomings of the current administration, Harish emphasized the symbolic and practical value of the BRS diary.

"These diary launches were once instrumental during the Telangana Movement, serving as reminders of our struggle and success. Today, they should inspire us to reclaim our position and inform people about the development achieved under BRS," Harish stated.

Criticizing the Congress government's performance, he said,



"Revanth Reddy's one year in power has been about cuts, diversions and cases. The welfare schemes introduced by KCR have either been cut or discontinued. Even promises made in their manifesto have been ignored." He labelled the Chief Minister as "Eggethal Revanth Reddy," accusing him of renegeing on key commitments, including farm loan waivers, Rythu Bandhu benefits and welfare schemes like Kalyana Lakshmi.

Harish also accused the government of prioritizing infrastructure projects benefiting

private parties over social welfare programmes. "Funds are being spent on elevated corridors, metro expansions and six-lane roads near private lands, but there's no money for Aasara pensions or Rythu Bandhu," he charged.

Referring to alleged public attention diversion tactics, Harish mentioned the controversies surrounding KTR, arrests of tribal farmers in Lagcherla, and symbolic gestures like emblem changes, asserting that these were attempts to distract attention from governance failures.

TTD Chairman inspects dump yard

PNS ■ TIRUMALA

TTD Chairman BR Naidu, along with former DRDO Chairman and present Scientific Advisor to Government of India Dr G Sathesh Reddy, inspected the dump yard in Kakulamuru on Wednesday.

The Chairman said that lakhs of metric tonnes of garbage has been piled up over the years which is hazardous to both the Tirumala environs as well to the

denizens. Every day nearly 50-60 tonnes get piled up here and it needs immediate clearance. To find a permanent and quick solution to this issue, Sathesh Reddy was asked to visit the dump yard. He will give his observations, the Chairman said.

Sathesh Reddy, while appreciating the motto of TTD Chairman in clearing the dump yard that has piled up over the years at Tirumala, said a technical team of experts is visiting Tirumala soon to see

how this legacy waste shall be segregated. A part of this can be sent to factories and another portion shall be used as manures. But before that the samples will be sent for lab testing.

After the test results, our scientists will possibly give a concrete solution to overcome this issue, he added. Board members Panabaka Lakshmi, Bhanuprakash Reddy, CE Satyanarayana, Health Officer Madhusudhan and others were also present.



100 kgs of ganja seized, 6 peddlers arrested

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

The police seized 100 KGs of ganja at two places and arrested six drug peddlers in the district.

Superintendent of police L Subba Rayudu told the media here on Wednesday that the police conducted checking of vehicles at two places and seized 100 KGs of ganja and three cars worth Rs 25.50 lakh and arrested six drug peddlers.

A police team led by CI Murali Krishna and SI Kondappa Naidu conducted checking of vehicles in the Tada police station limits. They found 28 KGs of ganja in the car and arrested two peddlers. They were transporting the ganja to Chennai in the car. The 28 KGs seized ganja and the car worth Rs 9.50 lakh.

The police arrested K Sharukh Khan and G Arul, seized 28 KGs of cannabis and the car. One of the arrested peddler, Sharukh Khan was a notorious criminal and he was involved in a murder case, in a clash and a case under NDPS was also registered against him.

In another case, a police team conducted checking of vehicles under the Chillakuru police station limits. On noticing the police checking, the

The police arrested K Sharukh Khan and G Arul, seized 28 KGs of cannabis and the car. One of the arrested peddler, Sharukh Khan was a notorious criminal and he was involved in a murder case, in a clash and a case under NDPS was also registered against him

four accused who were transporting 72 KGs of ganja in two cars tried to flee from the place. However the police chased and apprehended them.

Police seized 72 KGs of cannabis, two cars worth Rs 16 lakh. The police arrested drug peddlers including Paspupati Giribabu, Mohan Madan Kumar, Panjanathan Ajay, Gummadi Pundi and M Keeru Bakaran.

The arrested drug peddlers told the police that they had purchased Ganja at Tuni area in Kakinada district and taken the same to Chennai to sell at Gummidiipoondi and Puttur surrounding areas in retail. SP Subba Rayudu warned of stringent action if peddlers were caught with ganja. The SP appreciated the police teams for arresting the drug peddlers and seized a huge quantity of ganja.

ACROSS THE STATES



Kerala to be free from extreme poverty soon:CM

Kerala will be free from extreme poverty by November this year, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said on Wednesday. Speaking at the annual conference of district collectors and heads of departments, the chief minister stressed the need for effective implementation of all government programmes to achieve the goal. "Kerala will become a state with zero extreme poverty. We have been implementing comprehensive and scientific schemes to achieve this. These initiatives must be executed efficiently," he said. He instructed officials to ensure that each panchayat, block, and constituency could declare themselves as "extreme poverty-free" by November. He also told the officials to find adequate land for constructing houses for the poor. Various campaigns of the government including anti-drug drive and garbage-free Kerala should be completed in a time-bound manner, he said.



Delhi's temperature settles at 21.5 degrees C

Delhi witnessed a sunny afternoon on Wednesday after several breezy cold days as the maximum temperature settled at 21.5 degrees Celsius, 2.5 notches warmer than the season's normal. Mainly clear skies were observed during the day even as the city was enveloped with dense fog in the morning with the visibility dropping to zero. The Humidity level at 5.30 am was recorded at 81 per cent. The maximum temperature on Wednesday rose significantly from the 16.2 degrees Celsius recorded the day before. However, it was a colder morning on Wednesday as the minimum temperature dropped sharply to 7.4 degrees Celsius, as compared to 10.5 degrees Celsius recorded on Tuesday. Meanwhile, the air quality was recorded in the "poor" category with a reading of 287 at 6 am, according to the Central Pollution Control Board data. The AQI stood at 334 in the "very poor" category at 9 am. An AQI between zero and 50 is considered 'good', 51 and 100 'satisfactory', 101 and 200 'moderate', 201 and 300 'poor', 301 and 400 'very poor', and 401 and 500 'severe'.



DU professor accused of sexual offence resigns

A professor at Delhi University's Ramjas College, who had been accused of sexual harassment, resigned on Wednesday following protests by students on campus over the alleged inaction by the administration on the issue. The alleged incident reportedly took place in December last year, when the professor, who also holds a prominent position in the university's student welfare cell, sexually harassed a minor female student. Students from various groups, including left-leaning organizations such as the All India Students Association (AISA) and the Students Federation of India (SFI), as well as the RSS-affiliated Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), held demonstrations on Wednesday demanding the professor's suspension. The protest turned violent when some unidentified individuals wielding sticks attacked students on campus, as seen in videos circulating on social media. While AISA and SFI alleged that the attackers were ABVP members, ABVP denied the allegations, claiming they were peacefully protesting.

India, EU reaffirm commitment to democracy, rule of law

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India and the European Union (EU) on Wednesday reaffirmed their commitment to principles and values of democracy, rule of law and human rights and agreed on the need to safeguard freedom and diversity of civil society actors. The issues were extensively discussed at the 11th India-EU Human Rights Dialogue held in Delhi. The two sides discussed the issues related to civil and political rights, social, economic, and cultural rights, countering religious hatred, elimination of discrimination in all its manifestations, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and opinion, both online and offline, a joint readout said. While the EU reiterated its opposition to capital punishment, India reiterated its stand on recognition of the right to development as a "distinct, universal, inalienable and fundamental human right," it said. India is among few countries that



still have death penalty. "During the dialogue, India and the EU reiterated their commitment to the shared principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law, and to the promotion and protection of all human rights," it said. The two sides emphasised the "universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness" of all human rights, it added. "Reflecting their commitment

relating to technology and human rights. The two sides also exchanged views on the rights of migrants and business and human rights, according to the readout. India and the EU recognised the importance of strengthening national and international human rights mechanisms for the protection and promotion of human rights," it said. Both sides underlined the importance of enhancing cooperation in the multilateral fora particularly at the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, it said. "In this regard, they committed to closer cooperation and more regular exchanges between the Permanent Missions of India and the EU in Geneva, in order to identify further opportunities for joint action," the readout added. The two sides also discussed cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in accordance with international humanitarian law.



Tricolour hoisted on 73-foot mast near India-China border

PNS ■ ITANAGAR

A tricolour on a 73-foot-tall mast now stands at Gorsam Chorten in Jemithang, the first administrative centre near the India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh's Tawang district. The flag was hoisted on Wednesday in the presence of over 200 locals and Indian Army personnel. Organised jointly by the Army, the civil administration and local monks, the ceremony was led by Tawang Brigade Commander Brigadier Vipul Singh Rajput. Zila parishad member Lek Norbu, Jemithang Circle Officer Deewan Mera, local village elders and school children attended the event, a statement said. The flag was hoisted with full military honours by Army personnel, followed by the singing of the national anthem.



BENGAL LEADER IN ALL SPHERES

Efforts to undermine that status won't succeed: Mamata

PNS ■ KOLKATA

Asserting that West Bengal is a leader in every sphere - from education to culture and sports, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday said the people of the state know how to counter any threat to undermine that preeminent position and heritage. She also said that all members of Bengal's Santosh Trophy squad, which won the championship this year again, will be recruited into the state police force in the junior official rank under a special quota. Speaking at the 'Students Week' programme here, she named social reformer Rammoan Roy and polymath Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar to buttress her point that Bengal has shown the path in eradicating social evils like practice of 'Sati' and exploitation of widows, while ushering female education. Banerjee also underscored how Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam had spread the message of brotherhood, patriotism, amity and love for the motherland through their poems and songs to "unite people and not divide them." "Now if someone threatens to undermine that spirit, that glorious heritage of the state, counter

that, combat that," she said without elaborating. Banerjee said that sons and daughters of Bengal are working in every leading institute and organisation of the world and the country, reflecting the state's distinguished position in the field of education. "Besides (Economist) Amartya Sen and (historian) Sugata Bose, both associated with Harvard University, so many Bengali academicians are spread worldwide, making the country India their home state proud with their achievements and contributions," she said. Addressing the hundreds of students present at the venue, the chief minister asked them to study in the state's "top class higher educational institutions" offering a wide array of courses and realise their dreams. Banerjee recalled during the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, she had facilitated the enrollment of the state's medical students who had to return midway through their courses at medical colleges in the state. "If you (students) are enrolled at the institutes of your specialised discipline here, you won't have to

'India eyeing integrated satellite communication grid'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India's defence forces are planning to build an integrated satellite communication grid comprising spacecraft in different orbits and data relay systems as space emerges as a new domain of warfare, a senior officer said. Addressing the DefSat Conference here, Defence Space Agency Director General Air Vice Marshal Pawan Kumar said the defence forces were also looking at collaborating with the industry to meet its requirements to get an edge over its rivals in the domain. "When you talk of communication, I think the technology that we are focusing on is integrated satellite communication grid. We don't want any service to be over dependent on a particular satellite," Kumar said in the inaugural address at the DefSat conference organised by Satcom Industry Association-India here. Kumar said the defence forces were looking at a mix of constellations, either Medium Earth Orbit (MEO)-Geostationary Orbit (GEO)



or Low Earth Orbit (LEO)-MEO-GEO, and a lot of studies have happened on that. "We are also looking at tracking and data relay satellite systems primarily because it reduces demand to delivery time as far as OODA loop is concerned," he said. Kumar said the defence forces were also exploring quantum communications because of the obvious advantages of secrecy. "We are looking for space and ground-based sensors which include telescopes and radars, along with the complete network so that the commanders can make appropriate decisions, whether it is military level, operational level, or tactical level," he said.

Transformer theft leaves UP village without power for 25 days

PNS ■ BUDAUN (UP)

Villagers in Soraha have been living without electricity for close to a month because of the theft of a 250 KVA power transformer. Thieves dismantled the transformer in the village in Ughaiti area, stole its oil and other valuable components, and fled, according to locals and officials. "Though the power department has launched a probe into the matter, it is yet to install a new transformer even after 25 days. Neither have police been able to track the burglars. After dusk, the village with a population of 5,000 is plunged into darkness. The most affected are students preparing for the Uttar Pradesh

Board exams, set to begin in February. Village head Satpal Singh said, "The power cut has severely disrupted children's education and the daily lives of residents. Basic necessities like inverters and mobile charging are also unavailable. Villagers are increasingly becoming more and more agitated." Vijay Sharma, a local class 12 student, said his online study has been severely impacted because of the power cut. "The board exams are approaching, and it has been nearly a month since the transformer was stolen, yet it hasn't been replaced. This has made home online classes extremely difficult. My entire academic year is at stake," he said.



Delhi polls: Cong promises ₹25 lakh health cover

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Wednesday promised a "Jeevan Raksha Yojana" for free health insurance of up to Rs 25 lakh if voted to power in Delhi. Senior Congress leader and former Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot said the proposed scheme would be a game-changer. "The chances of the Congress forming the government in Delhi are increasing. I believe this is also necessary for the country," he said. Gehlot also highlighted that the proposed scheme reflected the party's commitment to addressing Delhi residents' healthcare needs.

Showdown between AAP, BJP over 'Sheesh Mahal'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A high drama unfolded Wednesday outside the 6, Flagstaff Road bungalow, once occupied by former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and dubbed a Sheesh Mahal' by the BJP, as AAP leaders attempted to enter it but were stopped by the police. The party workers later tried to reach the Prime Minister's official residence on Lok Kalyan Marg, but

were stopped by police again, following which they staged a "dharana". In its turn, the BJP also took media to the AB 17 Mathura Road bungalow allotted to Chief Minister Atishi to show that she already had a government residence and sought to know why she was asking for a separate bungalow. AAP leaders Sanjay Singh and Saurabh Bhardawaj staged a sit-in outside the Flagstaff bungalow after they were not allowed to enter it,



which they had invited the media to tour with them in a bid to counter the BJP's "Sheesh Mahal" jibes.

Clinical trials of medicines often done in poor countries: SC

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Observing clinical trials of medicines and vaccines were often carried out in poor countries, the Supreme Court on Wednesday allowed a petitioner to file submissions and objections to the rules framed by the Centre on the issue. A bench comprising Justices Hrishikesh Roy and S V N Bhatti considered the submissions of Centre's additional solicitor general Archana Pathak Dave who said rules for new drugs and clinical trials were framed in 2019. "We know that the clinical trials are conducted in poor countries," the bench said. Following the rules, Dave said New Drugs and Clinical Trials (Amendment) Rules were notified in 2024 to streamline the approval process for clinical trials and new drugs in India which aimed to improve patient safety protocols and ensure compliance with global standards. Senior advocate Sanjay Parikh, appearing for NGO Swasthya Adhikar Manch, which filed a PIL in 2012 alleging large-scale clinical drug trials across the country by multinational pharmaceutical firms, said poor citizens were still being used as "guinea pigs" and not paid adequate compensation.

Despite law, Centre yet to rise from slumber

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In a case over Mullaperiyar Dam, the Supreme Court on Wednesday expressed shock and said despite the Dam Safety Act by Parliament, the executive was yet to rise from its slumber. A bench of Justices Surya Kant, Dipankar Datta and Ujjal Bhuyan made the remarks after the Kerala government said the Centre enacted the Dam Safety Act in 2021 to stonewall proceedings, which were going on in court for the safety of the 130-year-old dam and since then nothing has been done. When the bench was informed the Centre was yet to constitute a national committee for the dam's safety prescribed under the law, it said. "We are agast to know that despite enact-

ment of the Dam Safety Act by Parliament, the executive is yet to wake up from slumber." Senior advocate V Krishnamurthy, appearing for Tamil Nadu, said under the law, the Centre created a dam safety authority and an audit of the structure would be done. Petitioner Mathews J Nedumpara has sought review of apex court's orders over the safety of the dam on the ground that if water damages the dam, it would affect 50 to 60 lakh people living downstream. The top court issued notice seeking the Centre's response and the assistance of the attorney general in the matter. The bench observed under Section 5(2) of the Dam Safety Act, a national committee comprising members prescribed under Section 5(1) was required to

● Supreme Court on Mullaperiyar dam row



be constituted within a period of 60 days from the date of the law's commencement, and it was required to be reconstituted every three years thereafter. "We are informed that no such national committee has been

constituted so far. Even the rules/regulations regarding the constitution, composition or functions of the said national committee have not been formulated," said the bench's order.

The court noted Tamil Nadu government's submission on the Centre creating a new supervisory committee led by the chairperson of the national dam safety authority by an office memorandum of November 21, 2024, in supersession of the supervisory committee constituted by the top court in 2014. "It further appears there is no provision in the Dam Safety Act prescribing the constitution of a supervisory committee," the bench said, "and it further appears a supervisory committee was constituted by this court in an earlier round of litigation with respect to the Mullaperiyar Dam and the union of India has also conceptualised the constitution of the supervisory committee, maybe in terms of the judgment of this court."



Brace up for battle royal

With polling scheduled for February 5, Delhi is poised for a fiercely contested three-way battle

As the Election Commission officially announced the schedule for Delhi's upcoming assembly elections, the stage is set for what promises to be a hard-fought, three-cornered contest. Polling for the 70 assembly seats in Delhi will take place on February 5, with the results to be declared on February 8. This election is poised to be a high-stakes battle between the incumbent Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, each bringing its own strategies, narratives and issues to the forefront. Under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwal, AAP is looking to secure a third consecutive term in Delhi. The party, which has enjoyed overwhelming success in the last two elections, is fiercely campaigning for a 'hat-trick.' Kejriwal, whose party has transformed the political landscape of Delhi since its formation in 2012, is betting on his track record of governance and what he calls the 'politics of work.' AAP's focus remains on welfare programmes such as free electricity, water and healthcare, while the party claims its tenure has been marked by development and transparency. With the slogan "Phir layenge Kejriwal," AAP has launched a campaign centred around a positive vision for the future, contrasting its achievements with the BJP's focus on divisive politics. However, AAP's victory is far from assured. Despite its dominance in the previous two elections, the party now faces mounting challenges. AAP has been dogged by corruption allegations, a point of attack that the BJP has effectively capitalised on.

For the BJP, this election is a do-or-die contest. The party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has mounted an aggressive campaign aimed at ousting Kejriwal and the AAP from power.

The BJP's central theme revolves around anti-incumbency, accusing AAP of corruption and failing to address the capital's development needs. Prime Minister Modi, at the forefront of the BJP's attack, has called the AAP government an 'AAP-da' (disaster) and criticised its inability to offer a vision for Delhi's growth. Modi's rhetoric positions the BJP as the party of national progress, while framing Kejriwal's leadership as an obstacle to Delhi's future. The BJP's strategy is two-fold: discredit the AAP's governance while appealing to voters' desire for change. The Congress, once the dominant force in Delhi, is now a distant third. After losing power in the capital in 2013, the party has been trying to rebuild its political base, which has been severely eroded by both AAP and BJP. However, this time the party is determined to make its presence felt in the elections. Given the deepening polarisation, high stakes and aggressive strategies on all sides, the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections are shaping up to be a politically charged, hard-fought, and closely contested battle. Voters will have to choose between a legacy of governance under AAP, a vision for change from the BJP, and the prospect of stability from the Congress, making this election one of the most bitterly fought yet interesting to the core.

PICTALK



A man and children perform for alms at Sagar Island on a foggy winter morning, in South 24 Parganas. PTI

Influencer marketing is making a big impact on India's small towns

Influencer marketing, once seen as an urban phenomenon, is now making waves in India's small towns and rural areas

Influencer marketing is no longer just a big-city thing in India. It has taken even the country's small towns and rural areas. The sole reason behind this shift is the recent surge in regional content creators, who connect deeply with local audiences by speaking their language, both literally and culturally.

The rise in regional content
A regional revolution is on the cards for India's digital landscape. The share of regional language consumption on OTT platforms alone is estimated to go beyond 50-50 per cent by 2025, leaving Hindi content behind. This is to say, India's appetite for content in native languages is growing aggressively, laying down a strong foundation for regional influencers to thrive.

Brands tapping into 'Bharat'
Brands seem to acknowledge this shift and have begun increasingly collaborating with regional influencers to penetrate non-metro markets. There's no argument over how crucial influencer marketing has become for



brands, with 75 per cent of brands considering it a part of their marketing strategy. Partnering with local creators gives an edge to brands in delivering messages that resonate with regional audiences and build engagement and trust.

Enter micro & nano influencers

Brands are going big on micro and nano influencers, given their unmatched effectiveness in these markets. Their content is more relatable and trustworthy to local audiences. Notably, 47 per cent of brands prefer collaborating with micro and nano influencers for cost-effective campaigns and better engagement.

Economic opportunities for regional creators
The creator economy is ris-

ing rapidly. The market size is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 22 per cent from 2023 to 2030.

This growth rate is proof of the plethora of opportunities that lie for regional creators, enabling them to monetise their content while contributing to the local economy. Despite the promising growth, challenges remain. Many creators in smaller towns may need more access to high-quality production resources or brand partnerships.

However, as the digital infrastructure improves and brands continue to recognise the value of regional influencers, these hurdles are likely to go away. The rise of regional content creators is reshaping India's influencer

Donald Trump's H-1B dilemma

As President-elect Donald Trump prepares for his second term, the debate over H-1B visas for skilled foreign workers is heating up

As the US President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office on January 20, he faces a unique challenge. The issue of immigration and the H-1B visa has become a contentious point among the two key groups. He is trying to satisfy the conflicting interests of the billionaire tech community, who heavily fund his campaigns, and his 'America First' base.

Trump's recent favourable statements on H-1B visas for foreign skilled workers have sparked renewed discussions on the future of this critical programme. The New York Post quoted Trump, "I've always liked the visas, I have always been in favour of the visas. That's why we have them." He added: "I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H-1B visas. I have used it many times. It's a great program."

Trump admitted, Trump has backed Elon Musk and his other wealthy funders from Silicon Valley (South Africa-born Musk had an H-1B visa himself). While tech leaders want a liberal H-1B visa regime, 'America First' hardliners wish for stricter restrictions on immigration at all levels. In his first term, Trump prioritised protecting American citizens' interests, which had significant implications on the H-1B visas. 'America First' advocates argue that H-1B visas take jobs away from American workers. The looming question is, will the Trump's second term may prioritise American workers' jobs, or it could revert to the traditional Republican belief that immigration primarily benefits employers. Debates arose over H-1B visas following Trump's appointment of India-born Sriram Krishnan as his advisor on artificial intelligence. It caused divisions within Trump's team—opponents of the H-1B visa claim that the immigrants take away American jobs. The intriguing question is whether a second Trump term will prioritise jobs for American workers or revert to the traditional Republican stance that immigration is pri-

marily beneficial for employers. Influential supporters like Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy argue that H-1B visas are crucial for addressing the US engineers shortage. Musk, who built his empire, and Vivek Ramaswamy have strongly supported the program. Musk expressed his readiness to go to war over it. They highlight a significant skills gap in the US labour market, particularly in STEM fields.

What is an H-1B visa, and why is there such controversy surrounding it? Would India suffer if H-1B visas were eliminated? The visa system for skilled workers from other countries was introduced in 1990 by President Bush to work legally in the US. The visa is for three years. Applicants must have a job lined up with a US-based sponsoring company or institution. Since 2004, the United States has limited the number of new H-1B visas to 85,000 yearly.

This cap includes 20,000 visas for international students with advanced degrees from US universities. In the fiscal year 2023, the US approved just over 386,000 H-1B applications. For the fiscal year 2024, there were 758,994 eligible registrations, an increase from 474,421 in 2023. Most approved applicants work in

science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The issue is more than just an economic concern; new developments in artificial intelligence and advanced computing technology make it vital for US defence and national security. India receives approximately 72 per cent of H-1B visas, while Chinese citizens account for around 12 per cent. Eliminating country-specific caps could increase job opportunities for Indians in the United States. It is a significant concern for many prospective applicants. Major employers in the tech industry, including Indian companies like Infosys, TCS, HCL, and Wipro, represent 35 per cent of the top 10 beneficiaries of H-1B visas. Beginning with FY 2025, USCIS changed from an employer-based to a beneficiary-centric registration system, following the agency's "serious concerns" noted after the FY 2024 registration period. Amazon, the largest H-1B sponsor, saw a steep decline in approvals, dropping from over 11,000 in 2023 to just above 9,000 in 2024. Major US companies, including tech giants like Amazon and Google, are significantly scaling back their sponsorship of H-1B visas. Indian IT firms, including Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS),



also recorded substantial reductions. Not everyone wants to get rid of the visa system. According to the American Enterprise Institute and the Partnership for a New American Economy, increasing the H-1B visa cap could generate 1.3 million new jobs. It would contribute approximately \$158 billion to the US GDP by 2045. H-1B visa holders often add to the workforce instead of taking jobs from US workers. Trump's recent statement about H-1B visas has given hope to many visa seekers, especially Indians. He stated that the US needs skilled and intelligent people and promised more job opportunities. It provides a positive outlook for H-1B visas. H-1B visa holders often complement, rather than compete with, US workers. Now many H-1B visa seekers are hopeful after Trump has sided with Musk. He claimed that there was a need for skilled and intelligent workers. His promise of unprecedented job opportunities offers a positive outlook for those seeking H-1B visas. The Indian government closely monitors any backlash against Indian H-1B visa holders in the US.



MAJOR US COMPANIES, INCLUDING TECH GIANTS LIKE AMAZON AND GOOGLE, ARE SIGNIFICANTLY SCALING BACK THEIR SPONSORSHIP OF H-1B VISAS. INDIAN IT FIRMS, INCLUDING INFOSYS AND TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES (TCS), ALSO RECORDED SUBSTANTIAL REDUCTIONS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SUPERSTAR CULTURE HURTS INDIA

Madam — No kudos is enough for Harbhajan Singh for boldly opposing the 'superstar culture' revolving around the 'holy cows' of Indian cricket. Irfan Pathan has also done the same and also questioned the place of Virat Kohli in the team. Not only has Kohli aggregated merely 190 runs in his nine innings in the just-concluded Indo-Australia Test series, but he has averaged less than 30 over the last five years! Yet Kohli gets not only allowed to dominate in the team; a deluge of silly excuses gets bizarrely served on the lines of 'Form Temporary Class Permanent,' 'A century just an innings away,' and "Stop criticising; runs will come!" And to render a damn lie to 'ultimate truth' through constant repetition, some former stars have started shouting, "Kohli has still 4-5 years of glorious cricket in him!" But if one is not a 'superstar', we get Wriddhiman Saha! So even after saving India from an imminent defeat in the Kanpur Test against New Zealand, that too by overcoming the unbearable pain of a stiff neck, Saha (then reigning as the world's best wicketkeeper) was clearly conveyed publicly, even when the Test was still on, that he is not in the team's 'scheme of things!' So in this biased, prejudiced setup, it is highly natural that this 'gallant show' of failures is sure to go on unless the 'superstar' culture is made to see its immediate end!

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

JUSTIN TRUDEAU QUITS

Madam— The editorial 'Trudeau steps down' (Jan 8) highlights the domestic political reasons, economic failure and discontent in his own Liberal party for his resignation. In fact, Justin Trudeau scripted his own exit. His diplomatic blunders are also potential reasons for his resignation. He unnecessarily antagonised India for gaining Sikh support in elections without realising that the Khalistani movement is a secessionist and a hostile agitation that has the least support in India. He admittedly had no proof of the involvement of

Cashless treatment for road accident victims



As per the report titled "National Strategy for Prevention of Unintentional Injury," there were 430,504 deaths from unintentional injuries and 170,924 deaths due to intentional injuries in India. Despite efforts to improve road safety, India continues to grapple with a high number of fatalities due to road traffic injuries. It is unfortunate. The government of India, in line with its commitment to reduce fatalities, launched a pilot programme in Chandigarh in March 2024 to provide cashless treatment to the victims of road accidents caused by the use of motor vehi-

cles. The aim of this scheme was to establish an ecosystem for providing timely medical care to the victims of road accidents, including during the golden hour. As per the scheme, the victims will be entitled to cashless treatment up to a maximum of 1.5 lakh rupees per accident per person for a maximum of 7 days from the date of the accident. It is applicable to all road accidents caused by the use of a motor vehicle on any category of road. Claims raised by hospitals for providing treatment to be remembered from the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund. The pilot programme was later expanded to six states. The scheme is going to be implemented nationwide from March 2025, as announced by Nitin Gadkari, Central Minister for Road Transport. It is really a welcome move. Certainly, lives of more accident victims will be saved.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

those foreign leaders who are inciting and supporting anti-national organisations in India.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

SALARY INCREMENTS DELAYED

Madam — Economic instability and the tendency of customers to reduce expenses have compelled major IT companies to postpone salary increments. This step by reputed firms like Infosys and LTI Mindtree is an effort to maintain financial balance, but its long-term impact could be severe. A blow to employees' morale may lead to a decline in their creativity and efficiency. Additionally, measures like layoffs and reduction in workdays could create insecurity among the workforce. It is essential for companies to take balanced decisions that ensure financial stability while considering the human aspect, paving the way for holistic growth.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

STOP BLAMING, START AIMING

Blame is an easy escape when life doesn't go as planned, but it's also a barrier to personal growth



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Every man is the architect of his own life; hence one can easily say that we all try to make our lives just the way we want them to be, however, when something goes wrong, we immediately start looking out for someone or something to blame instead of changing ourselves to better the situation. It's a fact that we all spend too much of our time and energy in finding people to blame for all the problems in our life. But why do we need to blame someone? Because we want to redeem ourselves of the guilt of doing something wrong by justifying it, therefore internally we pass on the responsibility of our behaviour to a person, situation or an external factor. Doesn't that sound very normal? Well!!! It may be to the majority of us, but while playing this game of blaming, we forget that as per the Law of Karma, the one who changes himself first is the one who gets the gift of happiness. Hence if we are seekers of peace and happiness, then we have to change ourselves and not wait for others to do so. Blaming others happens due to a lack of vision to recognise and accept our faults and laziness in making amendments.



Gradually it becomes a habit of lethargy in a royal disguise. Usually, we blame others for our misery because we feel that things could have been better if the other person behaved properly with us, but we fail to understand the very fact that every action has an opposite and equal reaction, hence instead of looking at self, we always struggle to set the opposite person right.

When we are unable to find someone to blame, we end up blaming the situation. However, while doing so, we forget the fact that all the situations in our life are our creations, hence according to Karma Philosophy whatever we are experiencing currently is the result of an action, word or thought manifested sometime earlier. And now when it is time for us to repay, we should readily do it with courage & settle our karmic account to experience a burden-free state of mind. Right?

When the above two factors i.e. blaming someone or something don't work, the despaired human soul goes to the extent of blaming the Almighty because he feels that since everything in the world happens by the will of the Supreme, his plight is also an outcome of God's desire. Quite funny, isn't it? But we all indulge in such pastime activity daily. Remember! We all are actors who fall under the law of karma & perform actions to derive fruit out of it. Almighty never gets a share out of it.

As our teacher & guide, HE can teach, and make us understand, but HE cannot appear in the exam for us. Hence, we have to take all the tests of life by ourselves with full confidence. For a spiritual aspirant, unpleasant situations are examinations of life that are necessary to elevate one's spiritual stage & help in leaping forward in self-progress. Hence, we must not miss the opportunity to snap the web that we have all created with rationalization. Whether we fail or pass in these examinations doesn't matter much, what counts is the courage & vigour with which we face these examinations. For spiritual evolution, the habit of blaming is one of the major obstacles simply because the first rule of spirituality is observing one's self and not the others.

Hence it is very important to take responsibility for the experiences we undergo & make a conscious effort to do the right and be honest and accountable to ourselves because deceiving ourselves will only take us further away from spiritual liberation. So!! Stop blaming and start aiming because when you blame others, you give up your power to change.

(Writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

India's forests: Gains, gaps and the way forward



B K SINGH

The report underscores the need for robust monitoring, effective execution of plantation drives and third-party certification of carbon stock to meet India's climate commitments



Forest Survey of India has been releasing biannual reports on the status of Indian forests. The last report was released on December 31, 2021, and the current report which was due in December 2023, has been released after a year's delay. The highlight of the report is that total forest cover has been increased from 7,15,187 square km (2021 assessment) to 7,15,343 square km (current assessment), which is now 21.76 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. Also, the tree cover, which comprises trees along the linear infrastructures and also in agricultural fields up to one hectare is increased by 1289 square km, which is 3.41 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. The net increase of forest cover and tree cover is 1445 square km in two years period till 2023.

The increase in forest cover is a meager 156 square km. Among the states that have gained maximum increase in forest cover are Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. A maximum decrease in forest cover has been noticed in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Ladakh and Nagaland. Recorded Forest / Green Wash areas (RFA/GW) are the forests in control of the forest department. While Mizoram, Odisha, Karnataka, West Bengal and Jharkhand have added in RFA/GW areas and the forest cover has increased, Tripura, Telangana, Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat have lost. It indicates that states are losing their recorded forests. Villages on the fringes of the forests have been burning tree growth and occupying forest land with the support of local leaders and to claim it under the Forest Rights Act, of 2006. Improper implementation of the Forest Rights Act, of 2006 can be attributed to the reason for the loss of forests for agriculture. All the states have been taking up ambitious plantation programmes to increase forest cover and tree cover. The degraded forest areas are being planted regularly.

Taking a conservative estimate, a minimum of 18,000 square km area is being planted annually in the country; should



THE NET INCREASE OF FOREST COVER AND TREE COVER IS 1445 SQUARE KM IN TWO YEARS PERIOD TILL 2023. THE INCREASE IN FOREST COVER IS A MEAGER 156 SQUARE KM. AMONG THE STATES THAT HAVE GAINED MAXIMUM INCREASE IN FOREST COVER ARE UTTAR PRADESH, RAJASTHAN, CHHATTISGARH AND ODISHA

it not be reflected in this report? How can we justify a 7 square km increase in two years in RFA? It only indicates that deforestation and degradation are taking place at the same pace, we are planting the areas. Such an important report should contain an assessment of the success of plantations across the states. Forest cover outside RFA has increased in Gujarat, Bihar, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Assam, while it has been lost in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. Loss of cover outside RFA is on account of the failure of the administration of the Revenue department of the state. States should put greater vigil on such forests.

These are the carbon sinks and in the era of a warming world, we cannot afford to plunder tree growth even outside RFA. The bright spot in the report is the success of the agroforestry programme. Most states have lost forest cover, but have gained in tree cover. This means that tree planting programmes on private lands/community lands have been largely successful. Trees on government lands can be cut and destroyed, but the same cannot be done on private lands. In this period of two years, very dense forests increased by 3465.12 square km, while moderately dense forests and open forests have decreased by 1043.23 square km and 2480.11 square km respectively. Forest departments' efforts in taking up plantations in open and degraded areas appear to have shown some success. A large chunk of open and degraded areas has been re-stocked, which has pushed it into the very dense forest category.

But a simple arithmetic indicates that 58 square km of forests have been lost. Most probably, several small plots taken from forests on the fringes of the villages must

have been encroached on for agriculture and eventually community members had an intention to claim rights over it. Decadal changes in forest cover in Western Ghats eco-sensitive areas have also been brought out in the report. It is found that 58.22 square km of cover is lost in ten years. How can we forget the 30th July tragedy that struck Wayanad, Kerala? Nearly 500 humans were buried under landslide debris when they were asleep. It also damaged roads, bridges, buildings and human houses. Landslides in portions of Karnataka and Maharashtra across the Western Ghats have disrupted lives and livelihoods. Losing 58 square km in ten years means losing nearly 6 square km annually. We need to mend our ways and cannot afford to lose any tree growth in such eco-sensitive areas. Mangroves in the country along the coastline protect against tsunamis, cyclones and Sea surges of any kind. The report indicates that out of 4991 square km of mangroves 7.5 square km is lost in two years. While Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra together have added 25 square km of mangroves, Gujarat has lost 36 square km. On the western coast Gujarat is the most vulnerable state against frequent and destructive cyclones, how can it afford to lose such a big chunk of mangrove forests?

Other coastal states are reportedly expanding their mangroves by taking up large-scale planting, but the report does not show any increase. There has to be an enquiry as to why mangrove plantation programs are failing. Another highlight of the report is that the growing stock of carbon in the forests is 7285 Mt, and comparing it with the 2021 report there is an increase of 81.5 Mt in two years. Thus our forests are adding 40.75 Mt of carbon annually,

which is like 149 Mt of CO2 equivalent annually. Comparing it with the report of 2005, the growth in forests has created a carbon sink of 2.29 billion tons of CO2 equivalent compared to the 2005 level. To contain the average global rise in temperature within 1.50 Celsius, we have committed in our nationally determined contribution to achieve a carbon sink of 2.5 to 3.0 billion tons of CO2 equivalent by 2030 in response to the Paris Climate Accord of 2015. We are on course to achieve the target well before 2030. I suppose we need a third-party assessment for carbon stock in our forests. Carbon credit has been quite a contentious issue and in several annual climate conferences, UNFCCC has failed to find a resolution. However, for the first time at Baku CoP 29, a resolution has been achieved. It has allowed countries to trade carbon credits - certified reductions of carbon emissions at prices determined as a consequence of emission caps imposed.

It has also been agreed that the operations of the carbon market would be supervised by the UN body. Strict UN control is needed, as a project proponent in the developed nation can pay for an afforestation project to absorb 1000 tons of CO2 in a developing nation where trees fail to put in desired growth and are unable to sequester the entire quantity of carbon credited. Therefore, the carbon sink created by us through our interventions in forest growth needs certification from the UN body. The report in future should take into account the plantation programs each state is implementing and measure the change in the cover concerning the success/ failure of plantations.

(The writer is retired Principal chief conservator of forests, head of Forest Force, Karnataka. Views expressed are personal)

Mahakumbh 2025: A spiritual confluence of faith, wisdom and Sahaj Smriti Yog

The Mahakumbh invites millions to experience a celestial confluence of rivers, spirituality and wisdom

The Mahakumbh at Prayagraj, commencing on January 13, 2025, promises a celestial confluence of rivers, minds, and spirituality. This ancient gathering is a tribute to India's cultural and spiritual heritage, drawing millions of pilgrims and seekers worldwide. This year, the Mahakumbh assumes greater significance as it hosts a 'Samagam' (gathering) of seers and spiritual leaders to discuss Guru Nand Kishore's book, Sahaj Smriti Yog (An Impactful Form of Yoga and Meditation) and his teachings on Sanatan Dharma, spirituality and meditation.



B K JHA

Sahaj Smriti Yog, founded by Guru Nand Kishore of the Darpan Foundation, transcends being a meditation technique; it is a journey to

self-realisation. It guides individuals to transition from clear thinking to transcending thought, unveiling inner peace and clarity. Gurujee emphasizes that rediscovering one's true self involves uncovering innate purity and harmony. In Sahaj Smriti Yog, Gurujee delves into the alignment of

this practice with the eternal principles of Sanatan Dharma, which sees truth as timeless and unchanging. The Mahakumbh's spiritual energy provides an ideal setting for this exploration. Guru Nand Kishore's interpretation of Sanatan Dharma underscores timeless wisdom, essential for spiritual pursuits. He highlights Guru Parampara (the lineage of spiritual masters) as vital for spiritual evolution, stating, "Sanatan Dharma offers solutions before problems arise - a clarity achievable through meditation or Samadhi." This wisdom, he explains, allowed ancient seers to provide fearless counsel to rulers. Central to Sahaj Smriti Yog is the Guru's role as a mirror reflecting the seeker's inner

self. Guru Nand Kishore asserts that true Gurus cannot self-proclaim; they are identified by seekers who trust their guidance.

He warns against false spiritual leaders, emphasising that genuine Guru help dissolve ego, a prerequisite for enlightenment. Trust, he stresses, forms the foundation of the Guru-disciple relationship - a value modern society must urgently rediscover. The philosophy of Sahaj Smriti Yog is rooted in simplicity and universality, making it accessible to all. Unlike practices advocating detachment, it encourages embracing life's responsibilities fully. Transformation arises not by escaping reality but by engaging with it deeply and meaningfully. This approach fosters



spiritual growth while remaining grounded in daily life. The practice is built on three principles: understanding, experiencing, and feeling. Understanding cultivates self-awareness through intelligence and emotions. Experiencing transforms life's events into opportunities for growth. Feeling connects prac-

tioners with ultimate reality, transcending superficial existence to access profound essence.

What sets Sahaj Smriti Yog apart is its non-coercive nature. It doesn't demand rigorous discipline or thought suppression but gently guides the mind to a state of deep peace and harmony. Practitioners effortlessly rediscover inner stillness and clarity.

Guru Nand Kishore's vision extends to societal harmony. The Darpan Foundation and its ashram in Noorundumalai, Tamil Nadu, embody this philosophy. The ashram is a sanctuary for exploring Sahaj Smriti Yog principles, emphasising sustainability and holistic living. Gurujee advocates conscious choices, such as

supporting locally grown food, to nourish both individuals and the planet.

The Mahakumbh provides an unparalleled platform for spiritual exchange. The 'Samagam' on Sahaj Smriti Yog will explore trust, humility, and spiritual growth. Gurujee's teachings offer a roadmap for resolving global conflicts by fostering trust and reducing ego-driven blindness. He believes peace begins with personal transformation, replacing arrogance with clarity and humility.

As humanity faces division and mistrust, Gurujee's Sahaj Smriti Yog serves as a beacon of hope, offering paths to personal enlightenment and collective harmony. The Mahakumbh amplifies this

message, inviting individuals from all walks of life on a transformative journey.

Through the lens of Sahaj Smriti Yog, the Mahakumbh celebrates eternal spirituality, where ancient wisdom meets contemporary relevance. It calls humanity to embrace simplicity, sustainability, and spiritual clarity. As millions gather at Prayagraj to witness the confluence of rivers, Sahaj Smriti Yog reminds us that true peace begins within. Gurujee's words, "Clarity gives you power," encapsulate the transformative potential of this timeless practice. Let Mahakumbh 2025 be a milestone in redefining spirituality for a harmonious world.

(The writer is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal)

IN BRIEF



BHEL commissions PHEP-2 project in Bhutan

Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited has successfully commissioned two units of the 6x170 MW Punatsangchu-II Hydroelectric Project (PHEP-II) in Bhutan. Executed as part of a bilateral agreement between the Indian and Bhutanese governments, PHEP-II is a greenfield hydro project located in the Wangdue district of Western Bhutan, a BHEL press release said. Significantly, the Francis Turbine installed in the project is designed to operate at a rated head of 241 metres – the highest for any Francis Type Hydro Turbine in Bhutan. On commissioning of all six units, the expected annual power generation will be 4,357 gigawatt-hours, the release said. Unit 1 and 2 of the 6x170 MW PHEP-II were synchronised on December 16 and 17, 2024, respectively.



Mouri Tech, Amanta Healthcare scrap IPO plans

Solution provider Mouri Tech and Ahmedabad-based pharmaceutical company Amanta Healthcare have withdrawn their initial public offerings (IPOs). The companies had filed their Draft Red Herring Prospectus (DRHP) for the proposed IPO in September-October 2024 with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). However, the draft offer documents for the IPOs were withdrawn in December last year and the reasons for the withdrawal have not been disclosed, an update with Sebi showed on Wednesday. Going by the draft papers of Hyderabad-based Mouri Tech's proposed IPO comprises a fresh issue of equity shares worth Rs 440 crore and an offer-for-sale (OFS) of shares worth Rs 1,066 crore by promoters and an existing shareholder. Under the OFS, promoters Sujai Paturu and Anil Reddy Yerrareddy will sell shares worth Rs 615 crore and Rs 316 crore, respectively. Further, existing shareholder Srinivasu Rao Sandaka intends to offload equity shares valued at Rs 129 crore.



ONGC market valuation surges Rs 9,749.72 cr

Shares of ONGC climbed 3 per cent on Wednesday, on a day when UK's BP Plc won a bid for ONGC's giant Mumbai High oil and gas field, offering to raise crude oil production by 44 per cent and natural gas by a staggering 89 per cent over a 10-year period. The stock went up by 2.94 per cent to settle at Rs 271.25 on the BSE. During the day, it rallied 3.77 per cent to Rs 273.45. At the NSE, shares of the firm jumped 3 per cent to Rs 271.50. The company's market valuation surged Rs 9,749.72 crore to Rs 3,41,240.07 crore. Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) in a stock exchange filing said it has selected BP Exploration (Alpha) Ltd, a wholly-owned step-down subsidiary of BP Plc, as the Technical Service Provider (TSP) for raising production in the field. ONGC had in June last year floated a tender seeking foreign partners to reverse declining output at its flagship Mumbai High fields, offering a share of revenue from incremental production plus a fixed fee but not any equity stake.

India should build foundational models for AI: Nadella

Says investment is real entry barrier

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India must get into frontier work in artificial intelligence and build foundational models, but investment is a real entry barrier and just one mathematical breakthrough can change entire dynamics, Microsoft Chairman and CEO Satya Nadella said here on Wednesday. During his second day of Microsoft India AI Tour, Nadella said that India can do great work in the area of Indic languages and transforming its industries using artificial intelligence.

are very fantastic math team and algorithms team.

"Let's not be bound, quite frankly, with what is considered frontier. So I would say India definitely should also do frontier work. Also use the frontier in order to, post training, to make it great for Indic languages, make it great for



"There's no reason why India can't do frontier work, but you can even define frontier pretty unique. So for example, I don't think the last known big breakthrough in AI frontier has happened. I always say we are one mathematical breakthrough away from that entire edifice being thrown out and being going after something else," Nadella said.

He said academics in India, the research institutions, including Microsoft Research,

Indian industry, and so on," Nadella said.

In response to a question by additional secretary in the IT ministry Abhishek Singh on whether India should build its own AI foundational model, Nadella said that India always has an option to do that but the real entry barrier in making foundational models is investment.

He said the other way to look at the investment barrier is to lower the cost with the help of research, which is always open for India.

GDP growth likely to be 6.3 %, tad below govt estimates: Report

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The GDP growth is expected to be about 6.3 per cent in the current fiscal year, a tad lower than the government's estimates of 6.4 per cent, owing to several factors such as weak demand, SBI research report said on Wednesday.

According to the first advance estimates (FAE) of National Income for 2024-25 released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), released on Tuesday, India's economic growth rate is estimated to slip to a four-year low of 6.4 per cent in 2024-25, because of poor showing by the manufacturing and subdued investments.

Historically, the difference between the estimates of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the NSO is always in the range of 20-30 bps and hence the 6.4 per cent estimate for the 2024-25 fiscal year is along expected and reasonable lines, the SBI's research report 'Ecowrap' said.

"We, however, believe that GDP (gross domestic product) growth for FY25 could be around 6.3 per cent, with downward bias," it said.

The report authored by Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Group Chief Economic Adviser, State Bank of India (SBI), also said as per capita nominal GDP is



expected to increase significantly in the current fiscal ending March 2025, by Rs 35,000 more than 2022-23, despite a slowdown in real GDP growth and nominal GDP growth remaining almost stagnant.

The FAE of the GDP in general shows a slowdown in aggregate demand in 2024-25, it said.

The heads that have positively contributed include government consumption with a growth of 8.5 per cent in nominal terms (4.1 per cent in real terms). Exports have also held the fort with positive growth of 8 per cent (5.9 per cent in real

terms).

The worrying aspect of the demand is marked slowdown in gross capital formation, SBI's study said, adding that the capital formation nominal growth declined 270 bps to 7.2 per cent.

"...overall picture is that demand remains weak and sequential slowdown in FY25 at 6.4 per cent is an outer limit while the actual growth is definitely below the estimated figure," it said.

The report further said that the fiscal deficit at the end of November 2024 stood at Rs 8.5 lakh crore, or 52.5 per cent of the Budget Estimates (BE).

However, taking into account the revised GDP figures, if tax receipts grew by the BE, government expenditure lowered due to low CAPEX then fiscal deficit will be 4.9 per cent of the GDP in 2024-25, SBI's research said.

While, if government sticks to the fiscal deficit of Rs 16.1 lakh crore, then with the revised GDP numbers, the deficit as per cent of GDP would be at 5 per cent in 2024-25, the report said.

In the Union Budget, the government projected to bring down the fiscal deficit to 4.9 per cent of the GDP in the current financial year.

LIC's BSY records over 50,000 registrations within one month

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Bima Sakhi Yojana of LIC has seen over 50,000 registrations within a month of its launch by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as an initiative towards Viksit Bharat through women empowerment.

After completion of one month since the inauguration, the total registration for Bima Sakhi is 52,511 of which 27,695 Bima Sakhis have been issued appointment letters to sell policies and 14,583 Bima Sakhis have started selling policies, LIC said in a statement on Wednesday.

Speaking about the development LIC Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer Siddhartha Mohanty said, "It is our objective to cover each panchayat of the country with at least one Bima Sakhi within one year." LIC is strengthening the Bima Sakhi stream by grooming women with appropriate skills and empowering them with robust digital tools, he said.

Hybrid technology key to small farmers' growth: P K Mishra

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Hybrid crop technology can play a crucial role to address the unique challenges faced by the agricultural sector, particularly in supporting small-holding farmers who comprise 88 per cent of the agricultural workforce, helping India become a developed nation by 2047, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister P K Mishra said on Wednesday.

Despite agriculture's share in GDP declining from 42 per cent in 1977 to 18 per cent in

2023-24, the sector remains critical for inclusive growth with 46 per cent of India's workforce still dependent on it, compared to 70 per cent in 1977.

"For becoming a developed country, we need to have not only higher rate of economic growth but the growth should be inclusive and sustainable," Mishra said addressing a national symposium organised by Trust for Advancement of Agricultural



Sciences (TAAS) here.

"The agriculture sector plays an important role in making growth inclusive and equitable." India's agricultural growth has shown remarkable acceleration, reaching an unprecedented annual growth rate of 5 per cent during 2016-17 to 2022-23, with significant contributions from livestock (5.8 per cent) and fisheries (9 per cent). However, structural challenges persist. The

number of small farmers has increased to 146 million in 2015-16, with average holding size shrinking from 2.8 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.08 hectares. ICAR projects agriculture's GDP share will further decrease to 7 per cent by 2050, while still employing 27 per cent of the workforce.

"Hybrid technology can play a crucial role in addressing these structural challenges," the official said, emphasising its potential to boost productivity and profitability for small-holding farmers.

Gold reclaims Rs 80,000-mark; silver rallies Rs 500

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices reclaimed the Rs 80,000-level in the national capital on Wednesday driven by increased buying from jewellers and stockists, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity rose Rs 300 to touch nearly a one-month of Rs 80,000 per 10 grams. It settled at Rs 79,700 per 10 grams in the previous session on Tuesday. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity climbed Rs 300 to Rs 79,600 per 10 grams on Wednesday. The yellow metal finished at Rs 79,300 per 10 grams on Tuesday.

Extending its winning run for the third day, silver prices also jumped Rs 500 to hit almost a month high of Rs 92,500 per kg. The white metal had closed at Rs 92,000 per kg in the previous market session.

Traders attributed the rise in increased demand from jewellers and retailers in local markets. On the MCX, gold contracts for February delivery appreciated Rs 43 to Rs 77,574 per 10 grams. Silver contracts for March delivery increased Rs 224, or 0.25 per cent, to Rs 91,097 per kg in futures trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX) on Wednesday. Meanwhile, Comex gold futures slipped 0.09 per cent to USD

2,663.10 per ounce in the international markets. "Gold rose on Wednesday as sentiment was boosted by strong Chinese demand. China, the leading gold consumer in the world, raised its reserves in December for a second straight month based on official figures published on Tuesday," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

the inter-national markets.

"Gold rose on Wednesday as sentiment was boosted by strong Chinese demand. China, the leading gold consumer in the world, raised its reserves in December for a second straight month based on official figures published on Tuesday," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

Expect RBI to cut interest rates next month: CII

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Industry body CII expects the RBI to cut the benchmark interest rates next month to support sagging growth, its President Sanjiv Puri said on Wednesday and stressed the need to boost job creation through targeted interventions for labour-intensive sectors in the upcoming Budget.

In an interview with PTI, Puri flagged "sticky" food inflation, highlighting the need to build agricultural resilience and delinking it from the interest rates under the inflation targeting framework, arguing that it is on account of climate change and not really influenced by the monetary policy.

Puri is also the Chairman and Managing Director of ITC. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is slated to present the Budget in Parliament on February 1. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) chief also expressed optimism that much-needed labour reforms will be taken up by the BJP-led NDA government in the third term, stressing that it would benefit the economy and create more jobs.

Markets settle marginally lower on muted GDP growth projection

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended marginally lower in a volatile session on Wednesday, as investors stayed on the sidelines ahead of the earnings season amid lower economic growth projections.

Besides, a depreciating rupee and persistent foreign fund outflows also dented sentiments.

However, buying in bellwether stocks TCS and Reliance Industries managed to restrict a steep decline in markets, traders said.

The 30-share BSE bench-

mark Sensex fell 50.62 points or 0.06 per cent to settle at 78,148.49. During the day, it dropped 712.32 points or 0.91 per cent to 77,486.79.

The NSE Nifty skidded 18.95 points or 0.08 per cent to 23,688.95.

"Slowing economic growth projections and caution ahead of Q3 numbers added volatility in the market. However, the market witnessed a recovery from the day's low owing to the accumulation of beaten-down blue-chip stocks and in expect-



ation of government reforms in the upcoming budget to lift the tepid economy.

"The near-term sentiment is likely to be subdued due to the rise in US bond yield and fear of fewer rate cuts by the Fed," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Adani Ports, UltraTech Cement, Larsen & Toubro, Sun Pharma, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, NTPC and State Bank of India were the

major laggards.

Tata Consultancy Services, Reliance Industries, ITC, Asian Paints, HCL Tech and Maruti were among the gainers. "IT stocks to be in focus as Tata Consultancy Services is set to kick-start the Q3 earning season with its results tomorrow. While revenue for the IT giant is expected to remain impacted by furloughs, client-specific challenges are likely to normalize in 3Q. Its EBIT margin may improve, driven by talent development, training, and operational efficiency. Rising crude prices led to buying interest in upstream oil & gas companies.

NRAI seeks industry status for food services sector

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) on Wednesday asked the government to grant industry status to the food services sector while seeking an equitable and fair e-commerce policy to provide a level-playing field to protect restaurants, delivery partners and consumers from potentially exploitative practices of platforms.

In its pre-Budget recommendations, National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) said restaurants should be allowed to operate for longer hours, and also sought targeted subsidy schemes and access to debt financing for SMEs.

NRAI said the industry is expected to reach Rs 7,76,511 crore and grow at an 8.1 per cent CAGR by 2028, making it the third-largest food services market globally.

"Given the size (and) immense contribution of the country's economy, it should be accorded an industry status," NRAI said in a statement.

Industry status helps in get-

ting lower utility tariffs, reduced property taxes, easier access to finance, and softer loans.

Seeking an equitable and fair e-commerce policy, NRAI said, "Balanced policies and regulations are required to enable a level-playing field where platforms can continue to innovate while restaurants, delivery partners and consumers are protected from potentially exploitative practices."

The restaurants' association also called for rationalisation of licences saying a simplified and standardised licence policy -- applicable across the country should essentially cover issues related to food safety, hygiene, environment, human safety, labour and taxation.

On the taxation part, NRAI recommended restoration of GST input tax credit and said, "In addition to the existing 5 per cent slab without ITC, a new slab of between 12 per cent and 18 per cent GST, with ITC as the government deems fit, may kindly be introduced for restaurants not located in hotels with room tariff of more than Rs 7,500."

'Budget should focus on tax reforms, reduction in personal I-T'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Budget is expected to focus on boosting private capex, tax simplification and reduction in personal income tax, particularly for the lower-income groups, to stimulate demand, EY India said.

The Union Budget for 2025-26 is scheduled to be presented in Parliament on February 1.

EY India, in its Budget expectation note, said with over Rs 31 lakh crore stuck in income tax disputes as of 2023-24, there is an urgent need to clear Commissioner of Income

Tax (Appeals) backlog and bolster alternate dispute resolution mechanisms like advance pricing agreements and safe harbours.

"While a full comprehensive review of the direct tax code may take time, we might see some initial steps towards its implementation in this Budget. I also hope for a reduction in personal income tax, particularly for the lower-income groups, to provide relief and stimulate demand," said Sameer Gupta, National Tax Leader, EY India.

EY said the expectations from Budget are focused on a



set of strategic reforms that can propel the economy forward. With an emphasis on fiscal consolidation, tax system simplification, and investment-driven growth, the Budget is

expected to lay a solid foundation for sustained economic development.

EY anticipates significant reforms to simplify the tax system and improve taxpayer ser-

vices, reduce litigation, and enhance tax compliance.

The government is already working on simplifying the Income Tax laws. It should follow a consultative approach and invite public comments on the draft proposals, EY said.

"Key areas of focus are likely to include enhancing public spending, reducing the fiscal deficit, incentivising private sector investment, and introducing targeted tax reforms that foster business innovation," EY said.

In the last Budget, government had rationalised the capital gains structure in terms of

holding period of assets and tax rates. The government may further address some of the unintended anomalies to make the rationalisation of capital gains more complete, EY said.

For instance, the holding period for capital assets, such as business undertakings in slump sales may be reduced from 36 months to 24 months and unlisted shares in IPO offer for sale (OFS) from 2 years to 1 year, aligning them with listed securities.

Gupta further said for businesses, particularly SMEs, reducing the complexity of tax compliance is critical.

Aamir Khan sees Sridevi's spark in Khushi Kapoor's performance

Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan has praised Khushi Kapoor, saying she possesses a similar energy to her legendary mother, Sridevi. Khushi is set to make her theatrical debut with the film *Loveyapa*, opposite Junaid Khan, Aamir's son. Aamir in a latest chat shared his thoughts on the film, saying, "I've watched the rough cut and I must say, it's very entertaining. The storyline cleverly weaves in how our lives have changed due to cell phones, and the cast has done an excellent job." He particularly highlighted Khushi's performance, drawing a parallel with her iconic mother. "When I watched Khushi, I felt like I was watching Sridevi - her energy is undeniable."

Khan, who has been a self-proclaimed huge fan of Sridevi, expressed his admiration for the late actress. "I always wanted to work with her; she was an exceptional talent. Her ability to transform when the camera started rolling was remarkable and I see a similar spark in Khushi."

Loveyapa is reportedly an adaptation of the Tamil film *Love Today*. The movie's first song, *Loveyapa Ho Gaya*, received mixed reviews from the internet. While some enjoyed its fun vibe, others found it cringe-worthy. The film is set to be released on February 7, 2025.



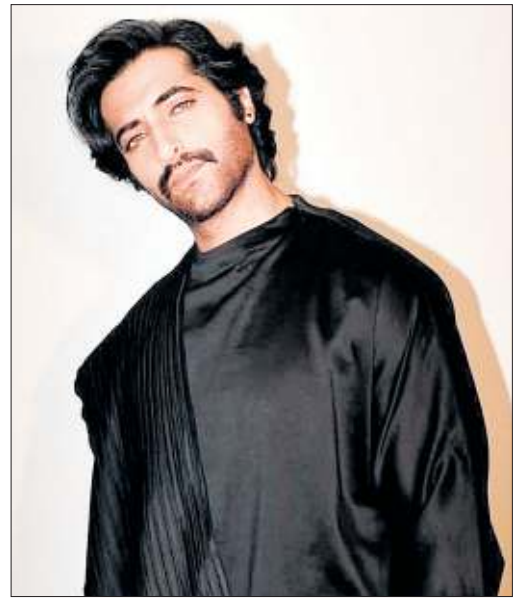
what's brewing?

Akshay Oberoi's 14-year struggle pays off with Dharma Productions collaboration

Actor Akshay Oberoi, known for his dedication and versatility, has marked a pivotal moment in his 14-year-long journey in the Indian film industry. With perseverance and consistent performances, Akshay has secured a collaboration with Dharma Productions, one of the country's most esteemed film banners, led by the celebrated filmmaker Karan Johar. This achievement, according to the actor, is a defining milestone in his career.

Speaking about the project, Akshay shared his excitement for *Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari*, an upcoming rom-com under the Dharma banner. "It has taken me 14 years to get the attention of a powerhouse like Dharma Productions, and for me, this is a huge personal milestone," he reflected. "In our industry, Karan Johar's films are synonymous with impactful storytelling and incredible audience reach. To be part of a Dharma film is like becoming part of a legacy—an aspiration for any actor."

The film, helmed by acclaimed director Shashank Khaitan and produced by Karan Johar and Apoorva Mehta, boasts a stellar ensemble cast, including Varun Dhawan, Jhanvi Kapoor, Sanya Malhotra, Rohit Saraf and Maniesh Paul. Akshay expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to work alongside such a talented team. "*Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari* is not just another rom-com—it's a pro-



ject with heart, humor, and universal appeal. The opportunity to collaborate with such incredible co-actors and work under Dharma Productions is something I'm truly grateful for," he said.

Akshay also acknowledged the significance of the association for his career trajectory. "Being part of a Dharma project brings immense exposure, reach, and respect. It's proof that hard work and perseverance pay off. I hope this is just the beginning of a new chapter in my career and I'm excited for what lies ahead."

Jacob Elordi in negotiations to star in Ridley Scott's next project

Hollywood actor Jacob Elordi is in talks to star in Ridley Scott's upcoming movie *The Dog Stars* for 20th Century. The film is a post-apocalyptic thriller. The actor is said to replace Paul Mescal, who ran into scheduling issues. Mescal, who stars in Scott's *Gladiator* sequel, had been poised to star in the film about a catastrophic flu virus that wipes out nearly all of humanity, reports *Variety*.

But he was forced to drop out due to filming Sam Mendes' *Beetles* anthology. The project is based on a 2012 novel by Peter Heller, with its screenplay written by Mark L. Smith and is expected to be Scott's next film after a Bee Gees biopic for Paramount.

As per *Variety*, if his deal closes, as is expected, Jacob Elordi would play a pilot named Hig who befriends a cranky gunman as they try to outlast a roaming band of scavengers called Reapers. During a December conversation with fellow filmmaker Christopher Nolan that followed a *Gladiator II* screening, Scott hinted that Mescal's involvement in the project was precarious. "Paul is actually stacked up, doing the *Beetles* next. So I may have to let him go," he told Nolan. Mescal is rumoured to be playing Paul McCartney. But Elordi, too, has a packed schedule, with both the final season of HBO's *Euphoria* and Warner Bros. *Wuthering Heights* opposite Margot Robbie set to go into production in the first quarter of 2025. Scott is said to also be eyeing a spring 2025 start date, so it is unclear which of these productions, if any, push back in order for Elordi to commit to *Dog Stars*. By working with Scott, Elordi continues his streak with A-list directors. The Australian actor, whose breakout role was in the Netflix movie *The Kissing Booth*, recently starred as Elvis in Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla*.



Jackie Shroff takes centre stage in crime drama *Chidiya Udd*

The countdown begins for Amazon MX Player's upcoming crime drama series *Chidiya Udd*. The streaming service launched its official trailer, offering a peek into the show's intense world. Based on the critically acclaimed novel Cages by Aabid Surti, *Chidiya Udd* delves deep into the heart of Mumbai's underworld, bringing together a story of power, crime and survival. Produced by Harman Baweja, Vicky Bahri and directed by Ravi Jadhav, *Chidiya Udd* features Jackie Shroff, Bhoomika Meena, Sikandar Kher, Madhur Mittal, Mayur More and Mita Vashisht in pivotal roles.

The story follows a young woman caught in the crossfire of criminals and shifting alliances. Seher, a young woman from Rajasthan has to confront the harsh world of Mumbai. *Chidiya Udd* explores her fight to break free from the chains that bind her, while revealing the harsh realities of life.

Jackie Shroff, who essays the role of Qadir Khan, expressed, "The world of *Chidiya Udd* is full of twists and turns. It's a place where survival is the ulti-

mate game, and every character is fighting their own battle. Portraying Qadir has been a challenging yet rewarding experience and the audience will love it."

Bhoomika Meena, who portrays the role of Seher, added, "Portraying Seher has been an incredible journey. She is a fighter, someone who refuses to succumb to the harshness around her. The challenges she faces in this unforgiving world are daunting, but her strength and determination shine through. *Chidiya Udd* is a powerful story of survival, and I hope the audience finds themselves drawn to Seher's spirit and the choices she makes along the way."

"The world of *Chidiya Udd* is grey, where every decision comes with consequences. It's a place where power, loyalty, and survival are at the forefront and I've loved exploring the dynamics of my character within this environment. This series is filled with intense moments and I believe it will leave the audience on the edge of their seats as they witness these characters fight for their very survival," shared Sikandar Kher.



FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



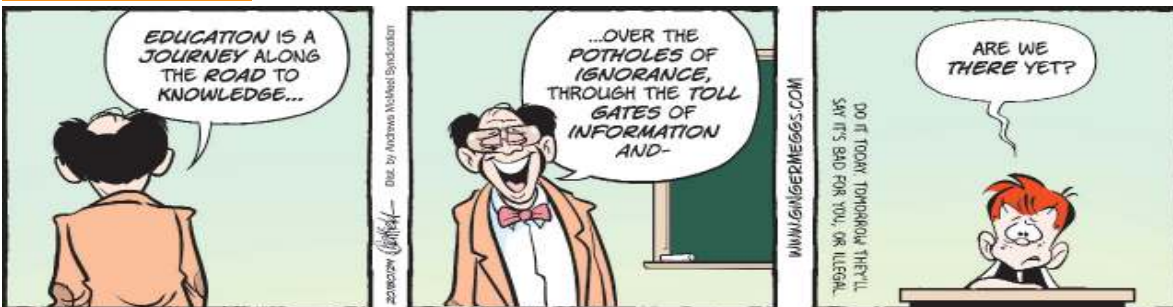
GARFIELD



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



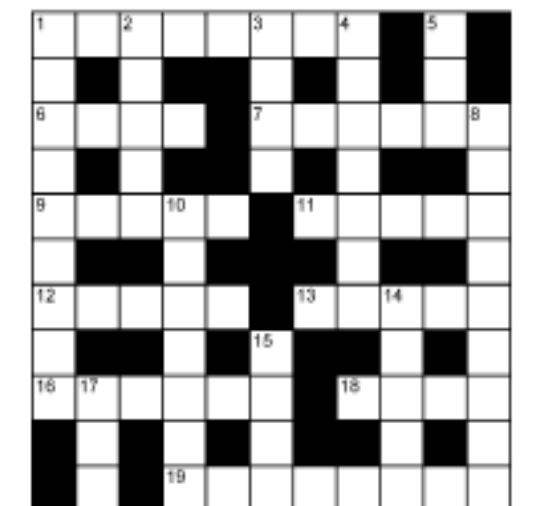
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



SUDOKU

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

Yesterday's solution

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

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

ACROSS

- Blew up with a bang
- Part of the foot
- Baby cows
- Beneath
- Wool-covered animals
- Melodies
- A garden ornament like a small person
- Leave
- Wound someone with a pointed weapon
- A person who controls the making of a film
- The floor on a ship
- A type of sea mammal
- Tell a fib
- A month
- A green gemstone
- Group of eight
- Film celebrity
- A long slippery fish

DOWN

- Completely tired out
- Beg



Where love & care rewrite the lives of HIV+ve orphans

VAISHNAVI TIKKA
vaishnavi.tikka@gmail.com

In a world that often dismisses the vulnerable, Palawi stands as a beacon of hope and a testament to the transformative power of compassion. Founded in 2001 by the dynamic mother-daughter duo Mangal Shah and Dimple Ghadge, this organisation has redefined the lives of HIV-positive children. What began as a modest effort in a small shed with just two abandoned girls has blossomed into a sanctuary for over 150 children. With its foundation rooted in love, they have touched the lives of more than 6,000 children, ensuring they receive shelter, education, healthcare and dignity.

Their journey is not just about providing care—it's about defying societal prejudices and rewriting the narrative for children who are often stigmatised. In an exclusive conversation, Dimple Ghadge, founder secretary of Palawi, shared the story behind this extraordinary endeavor. "In 2001, we found two abandoned girl children. When we took them to the hospital, they were diagnosed as HIV-positive. That moment changed everything for us. We started working with people in red-light areas, and that's how Palawi was born," she recounted.

Today, they operate from three buildings, providing a safe haven for children of all age groups. Its logo—a growing sapling—symbolises the organisations

Founded in 2001 by the determined mother-daughter duo Mangal Shah and Dimple Ghadge, Palawi has become a beacon of hope for HIV-positive children. In an exclusive chat with *The Pioneer*, Dimple takes us through their noble cause



mission to nurture these children and help them thrive. However, the path to this success was fraught with challenges.

"People around us often asked, 'Why are you protecting such children who will die soon?'" Dimple revealed. Yet, these questions only strengthened their resolve. Education became a critical focus area. "Providing food and shelter was not enough. Schools refused to admit HIV-positive children and even when one agreed, there was blatant discrimination. That's when we decided to start our own school, Gyaan Mandir, affiliated with the Maharashtra Board in 2013. We even opened its doors to underprivileged non-

HIV students," she said.

Healthcare posed another significant challenge. To ensure the children received adequate medical attention, Palawi established its own medical unit. The organization also goes beyond traditional care by emphasising skill development. "Once a child turns 14, they are encouraged to pursue arts or crafts like candle-making and stitching. The money they earn is saved for their future education," she explained, adding that creativity knows no boundaries or prejudices. One of their most heartwarming initiatives is the Palak-Balak program, where an older child takes responsibility for a younger one. "For

instance, a 15-year-old might take care of a 2-year-old, ensuring they're safe and happy. This builds a bond of love and responsibility. Every night, the elder child writes a note to the younger one, fostering a unique connection," she shared.

Funding, too, has seen an evolution. "Initially, we relied solely on individual contributions. As awareness about our work grew, we began receiving international funding from organisations like CAF America and explored crowdfunding avenues," she highlighted.

The success stories from Palawi are a source of immense pride and inspiration. She shared one such story: "Two years ago, our students were barred from participating in a district-level sports competition. We pleaded for them to be allowed, even if they didn't win. Out of 15 sports events, our children emerged victorious in 13. It was a proud moment that silenced many critics."

Despite the obstacles, they have achieved a remarkable milestone: zero mortality under the Prabha Hira Pratishtan initiative. "Looking at the successful results of what you work hard for makes it feel worth it," she shared, her voice filled with pride.

Palawi's story is a powerful reminder that love, determination and a belief in the fundamental rights of every individual can overcome even the harshest challenges. It is not just an organisation; it is a family where children grow, thrive, and dream of a brighter future. As Dimple concluded, "We are here to give these children a life of dignity, and we will continue to fight for their right to live, grow, and succeed."

This is the heart of Palawi—a place where hope finds a home, and lives are transformed every single day.

48 HOURS OF NO SLEEP SHOOTING IN LUCKNOW!

It was 'exhausting yet rewarding' for Nidhi Singh

TEJAL SINHA
tejal.sinha30@gmail.com

Nidhi Singh's journey from Allahabad to becoming one of the most versatile talents in the entertainment industry is a captivating story of resilience and passion. With each role she takes on, Nidhi has not only proven her ability to adapt and grow but also her commitment to delivering authentic and powerful performances. In her latest project, *Moonwalk*, she steps into a character that challenges her like never before — one that is unpredictable, complex and thrilling. In this in-depth conversation with *The Pioneer*, the *Apharan* fame shares her experiences, the preparation behind her role and what it truly means to be a part of a project that pushes her to explore new dimensions as an actor.

Reflecting on her journey in the industry, Nidhi says, "I honestly feel it's just begun. Every single project feels as new and exciting as the first time I faced the camera." For her, the thrill of acting lies in the constant evolution and the opportunities to work with creative minds. "It's really lovely when the people you're collaborating with—be it the writers, directors, producers, co-actors, or crew—are aware of what you've done. But I still approach every project as a clean canvas."

Despite her success, she remains grounded about the ups and downs of her career. "The journey is never all smooth; there are days when it gets frustrating. But you hold on, look ahead and keep moving. Being a part of this industry, which once seemed like a far-fetched dream for someone from Allahabad like me, feels surreal."

Talking about her latest project *Moonwalk*, she shares how she was introduced to the script. "It was sheer luck. I had worked on a series, and through that, I was called in for a meeting. When they mentioned *Moonwalk*, I thought it might be something related to dance. I was thrilled initially, thinking I'd get to tap into my teenage love for dancing. But as I read the script, I realised it was a high-stakes comedy-drama, and I was hooked."

While Nidhi assumed she'd be auditioning for the character of Asma, she was pleasantly surprised when director Ajay Singh insisted she was perfect for the role of Chandni. "When he said Chandni, I couldn't believe it. I was sitting there in a casual T-shirt and pants, but he was convinced. It was thrilling and daunting because Chandni is unlike any character I've played before."

She describes the character as a complex and layered character. "She's manipulative, cryptic and thrillingly unpredictable. Playing such a character makes you question a lot about human nature. She's not an outright villain, but her moral fabric is questionable. She's defiant, doesn't tolerate nonsense and

From navigating the bustling streets of Lucknow during live shoots to embracing the complexities of her character Chandni in *Moonwalk*, Nidhi Singh offers a glimpse into the world behind her screen persona and her love for the art, in an exclusive conversation with *The Pioneer*

does what she wants without second-guessing. It's freeing and challenging to play someone so different from myself."

Preparing for her role required the *Mission Mars* star to step out of her comfort zone. "Chandni is super disciplined, into yoga and presents herself perfectly at all times—qualities I don't naturally embody. I had to physically and mentally align myself with her. Getting into the physicality of a character helps tap into their mindset. I trained rigorously, and somewhere along the way, I even started enjoying it!"

Since the character had no detailed backstory in the script, she crafted her own as an acting exercise. "While the audience won't get much insight into why Chandni is the way she is, I needed something to anchor myself. I created a backstory to help me bring conviction to her actions."

The shooting process for *Moonwalk* came with its own set of challenges. "We shot in live locations, often in the outskirts of Lucknow, with tight schedules. I remember shooting for 48 hours straight without sleep because of location constraints. It was exhausting but rewarding." The *Bahut Hua Samman* actress credits director Ajay Singh for his clarity and support. "He had such a clear vision for every character. He wouldn't handhold us, but whenever I struggled, he would step in with the perfect guidance. His brilliance as a storyteller was inspiring."

With her passion for storytelling, commitment to every role, and a relentless drive to evolve, Nidhi Singh continues to charm audiences and push her artistic boundaries.



Chronic acid reflux? Here's everything you need to know!

GERD or Gastroesophageal reflux disease is a chronic condition. It typically involves regurgitation of stomach acid and other contents into the esophagus, leading to symptoms such as heartburn, chest pain, difficulty swallowing and coughing. It occurs when the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), a ring of muscle at the bottom of the esophagus, fails to close properly, leading to reverse flow of the stomach contents back up into the esophagus. GERD can be caused by various factors including obesity, hiatal hernia, pregnancy, smoking and certain medications. Additionally, certain foods and beverages, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, spicy foods, caffeine, alcohol and chocolate, can exacerbate symptoms.

Treatment for GERD aims to alleviate symptoms, heal esophageal damage and prevent complications. Here are some common approaches:

Lifestyle modifications: Making changes to diet and lifestyle can often help manage GERD symptoms. This includes avoiding trigger foods, eating smaller meals, avoiding lying down or bending over after eating, losing weight if overweight and quitting smoking.

Medications

- **Antacids:** Over the counter antacids such as Gaviscon, Mucaine gel or Ulgel can help neutralize stomach acid and provide temporary relief from heartburn.

- **H2-receptor antagonists (H2RAs):** These medications, including ranitidine and famotidine, provide longer-lasting relief than antacids by reducing the production of stomach acid.

- **Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs):** Drugs like omeprazole, esomeprazole, rabeprazole and lansoprazole are more potent acid suppressors than H2RAs and are often prescribed for more severe cases of GERD or to heal esophageal damage.

- **Prokinetic agents:** These medications help strengthen the lower esophageal sphincter and improve esophageal motility, reducing the frequency of reflux episodes. Examples include metoclopramide and baclofen.

- **Surgery:** For patients who do not respond to lifestyle changes and medications, surgical intervention may be necessary. Fundoplication is a common surgical procedure for GERD, that involves wrapping up the upper part of the stomach around the LES to strengthen it and prevent reflux.

- **Endoscopic treatments:** Less invasive procedures such as endoscopic suturing or radiofrequency energy delivery can be used to tighten the LES and improve its function, reducing reflux symptoms.

- **Biologic therapies:** In recent years, biologic therapies targeting specific pathways involved in GERD pathophysiology have emerged as potential treatments. These therapies aim to modulate acid production, improve esophageal function, or reduce inflammation.

It's important for individuals with GERD to work closely with their healthcare providers to develop a customised comprehensive treatment plan catering to specific needs and preferences. Untreated GERD can lead to complications such as esophageal ulcers, strictures, a pre-cancerous condition called Barrett's esophagus, and esophageal cancer rarely. In summary, GERD is a chronic condition characterized by the regurgitation of stomach contents into the esophagus. The condition presents with symptoms such as heartburn and chest pain. Treatment options include lifestyle modifications, medications, surgery, endoscopic procedures and biologic therapies, with the goal of alleviating symptoms, healing esophageal damage, and preventing complications.

(The author, Dr. Lohith U, is a Consultant - Surgical Gastroenterology Bariatric and GI Oncology, at Manipal Hospital Sarjapur Road.)

Bumrah continues to remain No. 1 in Test rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

India's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah continued to reign supreme at the top of the bowlers' chart with a career-best rating of 908 in the latest ICC Test Rankings, released on Wednesday. Bumrah, who made history ahead of the fifth and final Test against Australia by recording the highest-ever ICC Rankings rating for an Indian bowler at 907 points, improved that tally by one point after taking two wickets in the first innings at the SCG. However, a back spasm ruled him out of bowling in the second innings, restricting his role to just batting. Left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja, who climbed a spot to be joint-ninth, is the other Indian giving Bumrah company in the top-10. He shares the ninth spot with Australian pacer Scott Boland, who has made a remarkable leap of 29 places to break into the top 10. Boland's stellar performance in the Sydney Test, where he



claimed a 10-wicket haul (4/31 and 6/45), proved too much for the Indian batters on a lively pitch. His efforts were instrumental in Australia's triumph, ending a decade-long wait to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Australia skipper Pat Cummins also made gains in the rankings, climbing to number two after picking up five wickets in the final match. South Africa's Kagiso Rabada rose a spot to occupy the third place while injured Josh Hazlewood moved down two places to be fourth. Rishabh Pant's blistering 33-ball 61 in the second innings earned him a three-spot rise in the batting rankings, moving him to number nine while India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal retained his fourth spot. South Africa captain Temba Bavuma extended his rich vein of form, scoring a vital century in the first innings to climb three spots to number six, also achieving a career-best rating of 769.



Sam Konstas regrets stand-off with Jasprit

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Australian teenage batting sensation Sam Konstas regrets his involvement in the stand-off with Jasprit Bumrah during the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, admitting he was only trying to waste time but ultimately, the Indian pace spearhead had the "last laugh". Konstas made an impact in the final two Tests of the series with his audacious strokeplay, but also found himself at the center of a couple of fiery exchanges with Indian stars Bumrah and Virat Kohli. One such incident occurred on the opening day of the fifth Test, when Konstas had a heated run-in with Bumrah. "I love being in the contest and always try to put my best foot forward," Konstas told CODE Sports. Near the end of the day's play, Bumrah, looking to get in one more over, was met with resistance from the Australian players, who were trying to waste time. This led to a fiery exchange of words between Konstas and the Indian pacer. Two deliveries later, Bumrah, who was leading the side in the absence of an off-colour Rohit Sharma, took the wicket of Usman Khawaja off the last ball. After dismissing Khawaja, Bumrah walked in Konstas' direction and stared him down. Reflecting on the incident,

Konstas admitted, "I feel like it's probably a good learning for me. I was trying to waste a little bit of time there so they didn't get another over. But he (Bumrah) had the last laugh. "Obviously he is world class and he took, what, 32 wickets in the series." Konstas seems to have learned his lesson about not provoking the peerless pacer. "If that happened again, maybe I wouldn't have said anything," he said. The teenager was also involved in an on-field exchange with Kohli, who shoulder-charged Konstas, followed by a heated verbal exchange between the two. However, Konstas revealed that despite the incident, he later went to speak with his childhood hero Kohli. "I had a little chat after the game telling him that I idolise him, and it's obviously a huge honour playing against him," Konstas said. "When I did verse him, I was like, 'wow, Virat Kohli is batting.' He just had that presence about him, all the Indian crowd getting amongst it. Chanting his name. It was quite surreal." Konstas added that "He was very down to earth. A lovely person and just wishing me all the best saying hopefully I go well on the tour of Sri Lanka he said if I'm in. "My whole family loves Virat. I've idolised him from a young age and he's a legend of the game."



Prasidh Krishna, Devdutt, Washington available for Vijay Hazare knockouts

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Karnataka's Prasidh Krishna, Devdutt Padikkal and Tamil Nadu all-rounder Washington Sundar will be available for the Vijay Hazare Trophy knockout matches, starting in Vadodara from Thursday, after featuring in the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy series against Australia. However, KL Rahul, who played all the five Test matches against the Aussies, has requested for a break and will skip the Hazare knockouts. Rahul's availability for the second phase of the Ranji Trophy, beginning on January 23, will be decided at a later date. India head coach Gautam Gambhir had recently expressed his desire to see frontline Indian players making themselves available for the remainder of the premier domestic red-ball tournament. Washington, though, could link up with Tamil Nadu only if the team progresses to the semifinals of the Vijay Hazare Trophy. He played three matches and made 114 runs with a fifty but bowled just 37 overs across those Tests as pacers were preferred because of the conditions. The off-spinner took just three wickets. Prasidh will be high on confidence after making a good impression in the fifth

Test at Sydney, where the pacer grabbed six Australian wickets — 3/42 in the first innings and 3/65 in the second essay. Devdutt played just one Test match at Perth, primarily because skipper Rohit Sharma stayed back in India to welcome his second baby. The left-hander made a zero and 25 in India's 295-run win at Perth but was not selected for any of the other four Test matches. The 24-year-old was in terrific form prior to leaving for Australia for the India A tour, smashing four First-Class hundreds across Duleep Trophy and in the first leg of the Ranji Trophy. Both Prasidh and Devdutt are scheduled to join the Karnataka squad on January 10, a day ahead of their quarterfinal match against Baroda at Vadodara. Nitish to play Ranji Nitish Kumar Reddy too will fly out of Australia on Wednesday but he will not be seen in action immediately as Andhra has not progressed to the knockout stage. However, Nitish, who impressed everyone with his gutsy batting Down Under including a hundred at Melbourne, is likely to play in the second phase of the Ranji Trophy. He has played only one match this season before travelling to Australia.

Virat Kohli is always super motivated, he will know what to do: Faf du Plessis

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Virat Kohli will be "super motivated" to put a struggling phase behind him and the premier India batter is capable of returning to his run-making ways, said former South African captain Faf du Plessis here on Wednesday. Kohli had a torrid time in Australia during the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy, amassing a mere 190 runs at an average of 23.75 across five Tests despite starting off with an unbeaten hundred in the first Test at Perth. Du Plessis backed Kohli, his one-time teammate at Royal Challengers Bangalore, to come back stronger from the struggles, and said retirement is a "very personal" choice. "That is very, very personal. No one can speak to you about when that time is (up) as a player, you'll know," du Plessis told PTI on the sidelines of the SA20 Season 3's Captain's Day. "I know someone like him is super super motivated, he's gone through it all before, so he knows exactly what to do,"



said Du Plessis. The 40-year-old then went back to the day when he felt his time was up as a Test cricketer. "It is different for every player. Every player needs to answer that question. I remember when that time was for me," he said. "I just knew that certainly from the Test cricket perspective for me, I didn't have that same hunger and drive anymore and I felt that that stage certainly for me was a good time to let new guys come in and also step into the

T20 world. "I wanted to do that at the stage where I still felt like I was on top of my game," he added. Du Plessis was not pleased with ICC reportedly exploring the possibility of a two-tier Test system. "No, I think we need the game to be healthy," Du Plessis said. "We saw over the last few years the value that was put on Test cricket by Australia, England and India making sure that there were 4-5 Test series. "When you look at the other teams, there are two Test

matches here and there and playing six Test matches a season. I do not think that is healthy for the game," he offered. "As long as we can look at Test cricket as (being) important, you just look at all the Test matches that took place over the last few weeks, some incredible matches have been played," Du Plessis noted. "SA deserve to raise WTC trophy" South Africa spinner Keshav Maharaj rated the consistency of his side in Test cricket "phenomenal" and said they deserve to "raise a prestigious title." The Proteas will face Australia in the final of the World Test Championship in June at the Lord's. South Africa advanced to the title clash of the 2023-25 cycle with a 2-0 win over Pakistan at home, while India's string of losses against New Zealand at home and against Australia ended their hopes of a third consecutive WTC final appearance.

BGT: SCG track deemed 'satisfactory', other pitches rated 'very good' by ICC

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Four out of five pitches used in the recent Border-Gavaskar Test series between India and Australia have been rated 'very good' by the ICC, which found the track for the fifth and final game in Sydney to be 'satisfactory'. The marquee five-match series ended 3-1 in favour of the hosts, who regained the Border Gavaskar Trophy after a decade and also qualified for the World Test Championship final in June against South Africa. "The pitches at Perth Stadium, Adelaide Oval, Gabba and Melbourne Cricket Ground — the venues for the first four Tests — were rated as 'very good'; the ICC said in a statement.

"Meanwhile, the surface for the final Test in Sydney received a 'satisfactory', the second-highest rating on ICC's scale," it added. The traditionally batting-friendly pitch at the Sydney Cricket Ground favoured bowlers this time. Batters from both the teams struggled for the majority of the Test which ended in two and half days. "We encourage pitches that bring out the unique characteristics of that venue and this has long been a feature of Australian cricket," Cricket Australia's Head of Cricket Operations Peter Roach said in a media release while reacting to the ICC's ratings. "We don't look to prepare wickets that favour the home



side or suit our situation in a series. What we seek is a good contest between bat and ball and pitches that are likely to produce a result. "Weather obviously plays a

significant part in preparation and we know that even our most skilled curators are challenged at times by adverse weather," he added.

The Sydney track had a green top with variable bounce on offer and as many as 26 wickets fell on the first two days while four Indians and as many Australians were dismissed on day three as bowlers largely dominated the proceedings. "The SCG has been striving to bring out their unique characteristics of early pace and bounce before the pitch wears and spins," Roach said. "This year was a step in the right direction to achieving this which provided an exciting finish to the Border Gavaskar Trophy series and bodes well for the Ashes summer in 2025-26," he added. There was some debate around the SCG track after a few former players, including

Indian great Sunil Gavaskar, called it "not ideal". However, India head coach Gautam Gambhir had termed it as "spicy" but overall good for Test cricket. "The series also emphasised the benefits of playing first-class cricket at major venues," Roach said. "It allows our curators to become more familiar with the different challenges that go into preparing wickets in different weather conditions, and also allows players to enter the Test team familiar with the conditions they will confront," he added. In 2023, the ICC revamped its pitch rating system, reducing it from six categories to four — very good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory and unfit.

Shastri wants Rohit and Kohli to play domestic cricket; Ponting proposes time off for Kohli

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former India head coach Ravi Shastri wants the struggling Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli to get back to playing Ranji Trophy and feels the Test future of the two superstars is dependent on the hunger to maintain their excellence in the game. The repeated failures of the star Indian duo in the Border-Gavaskar trophy contributed to the visitors' series loss. India head coach Gautam Gambhir underlined the importance of domestic cricket following the loss and Shastri too feels Rohit and Kohli should return to playing Ranji Trophy even though the next series is in June. "If there's a gap for them, they should go back and play some domestic cricket and see how it is. Because when you play Test match cricket for that

length of time, it's important to play domestic cricket for two reasons," Shastri said during a conversation alongside Australian great Ricky Ponting on ICC Review. "One you are abreast with the current generation (and) you can contribute to that younger generation with your experience. And more importantly, you get to play spin more than you will ever play. "If you see, India's record in India on turning tracks is not the greatest. If you have quality spinners in the opposition, they can trouble you. And they have troubled India," he added. Asked specifically on their Test future, Shastri added: "I would leave that on them and would be closely tracking how they fare in the upcoming games (ODIs against England, Champions Trophy).



"The hunger and desire as well is very important. One is 36 the other is 38 they would

know how hungry they are. They will walk away if they think they have had enough,"

added Shastri. Kohli will be better served by a break: Ponting

Former Australian captain Ponting has no shame in admitting that he carried on

playing at the highest level longer than he should have. Back in 2022, Kohli had taken a month off from the game and that worked well for him. Ponting feels time has come for Kohli to get away from the game following his constant troubles outside the off-stump over the course of the five Test series Down Under. "...The challenge is, and I can see it with Virat now, you can see how much he wants it. He's trying so hard that actually makes batting harder. The harder you try sometimes with batting, the less success you're going to have," said the multiple World Cup winner. "I started thinking more about not getting out rather than scoring runs and that might sound strange but that's what it was. I was trying to be so perfect set the right example play exactly the way my team needed me all the time but when I was playing

my best I didn't think about any of that. "I just walked out and thought about scoring runs. I can just see a little bit of that with Virat now. Even the way that he's getting out you can see he doesn't want to be playing at those balls he's trying not to do it but he's there's some mental block there that's making him feel for that one outside the off stump." A break can only help the Indian legend, said Ponting. "He had a mental break (in the past) where he stepped away for a while and then came back and find the love for the game again. So right now it just seems like that real love of the game for him is not there because he's making it too hard to enjoy. "So if he wants to continue playing Test match cricket, he might just need to have a little spell for a while, find the love for the game again."

'I don't focus on screen time; I focus on giving my best'

SURESH KAVIRAYANI
sureshkavirayani@gmail.com

Irrespective of a film's result, Shraddha Srinath continues to take on a variety of characters. In her last two films, *Saindhav* and *Mechanic Rocky*, she portrayed vastly different roles. Now, she is set to play another powerful character in her upcoming film *Daaku Maharaaj*.

In this movie, Shraddha stars opposite Balakrishna for the first time and revealed that her role in this film is unlike anything she has done before. She plays the character of Nandini, a pivotal role in the story. Directed by Bobby Kolli, the film is slated for release on January 12.

"The kind of films I've done often have a subtle or serious theme, or they are thrillers. But this film is an all-out package with a lot of emotion, comedy and action. Being part of a Balakrishna film means I'm watched by the whole world, and it's a do-or-die kind of opportunity for me. I have to make the best of my performance," said Shraddha Srinath.

The actress also opened up about working with Balakrishna and shared her admiration for him. "He is a big star, but he remains a down-to-earth person who never shows his stardom on set. That's one big quality of his. Another is his curiosity—despite being a superstar, he fully submits to the director and is always eager to try something new," said the actress about her co-star. Discussing her character Nandini, Shraddha described her as a quiet, mature woman with emotional depth. "Nandini is soft yet strong. She knows when to say no, when to stop, and she can endure a lot. I have to thank director Bobby for giving me such a performance-oriented role. Generally, in big films, female characters don't get much to perform, but in this movie, we've been given substantial parts. Each character in the film is memorable, and everyone has given their best," she explained.

Shraddha revealed the effort that went into creating her character's look. "We did extensive research



ACTRESS SHRADDHA SRINATH OPENS UP ABOUT DAAKU MAHARAAJ, WORKING WITH BALAKRISHNA, HER ROLE AND MORE

on certain eras, fabrics, prints on sarees, nail polish, and hair makeup. The director wanted a special look, and it was a thorough process," she shared. The film also features Pragya Jaiswal and Urvashi Rautela. When asked about comparisons between her role and the other female leads, Shraddha emphasised that she does not focus on comparisons. "I don't compare; it's futile and only leads to disappointment or insecurity. When the director narrated the story, I only focused on my character. Regardless of screen time, if you shine and give your best, people will remember you. I'm confident all of us will be appreciated for our performances. It's unwise to dwell on comparisons," said the actress. She added that her role has significant emotional weight. "I dubbed my own voice for this role, which was one of the hardest parts. A co-director, who follows old-school methods, would sit with me and correct my Telugu lines. While I was delivering my lines, he literally had tears in his eyes because he got so emotional. The kind of performance this role required was very different. It reminded me of my theater days, as I had to delve deeply into my emotions. While I've played natural, next-door-girl characters before, this role was a unique challenge," she said.

Shraddha, who started her career in Kannada films, has also worked in Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi cinema. When asked about juggling multiple industries and coping with language differences, she said, "It's natural for actresses to move from one industry to another. Whether big or small, actresses receive offers from various industries. I'm quite happy to work across all of them. Kannada and Telugu share some similarities, so learning Telugu was easy for me. Tamil, however, was a big struggle and remains challenging—I think a lot before speaking Tamil. Hindi isn't an issue since I was born in the North. Malayalam is very difficult, and I haven't tried it much."

Addressing a recent statement by Mega Star Chiranjeevi about the importance of good behavior in addition to talent, Shraddha agreed. "Talent is important, but being a decent human being and respectful is equally vital. I feel both are necessary," she said. Finally, Shraddha shared a glimpse of her upcoming Tamil film *Aryan*, where she plays a journalist.

'People have now recognised me because of Godari Gattu from Sankranthiki Vasthunnam'

PNSJ HYDERABAD

Director Anil Ravipudi and veteran actor Venkatesh have teamed up for the third time in the much-awaited family entertainer *Sankranthiki Vasthunnam*, set to release on January 14. The film stars Aishwarya Rajesh and Meenakshi Chaudhary as the female leads, with Aishwarya taking on a comedic role for the first time in her career. She plays Bhagyam, the wife of Venkatesh's character.

Sharing her journey, Aishwarya revealed how she landed the role: "I was working on a web series when I got a call from director Anil Ravipudi for a look test. I was surprised because I had watched all his films and admired his work. My character has a unique accent, so I came to Hyderabad for the test. After I delivered just two lines of dialogue, he said it was enough and narrated the entire script to me. I've never laughed so much in my life; it was the most enjoyable narration I've ever experienced. After auditioning many others, they chose me for *Bhagyam* and I feel incredibly lucky to have played this role."

Aishwarya described *Sankranthiki Vasthunnam* as a special milestone in her career. "The song *Godari Gattu* has become a sensation. At airports, people recognize me and take photos with me and I believe it's all because of that song. I haven't had many duet songs in Telugu and this one fills that gap beautifully. I'm even happier because I got to perform it alongside Venkatesh sir and it's become a huge hit," she said.

Reflecting on her role, Aishwarya admit-



ted to initial nerves about working with Venkatesh. "*Bhagyam* is not an easy character to portray. It's a role that requires the right balance to avoid overdoing it and I've never done anything like this in my career. It's a role that evokes sympathy, and you have to deliver a nuanced performance. Thankfully, Venkatesh sir encouraged me at every step. His support made all the difference, and that's why I was able to give my best performance."

Aishwarya recalled the challenges of filming, including a moment when she was overwhelmed: "On some days, I was so nervous that my hands would shake while delivering dialogues. Once, I even developed a fever from the pressure. But both Anil sir and Venkatesh sir were incredibly supportive, which helped me pull through." The actress added that *Sankranthiki Vasthunnam* is a rare gem in the Telugu film industry. "It's been five years since a family entertainer like this came out. I'm proud to be part of a project that will resonate with families across generations."

Speaking about her co-star Meenakshi Chaudhary, Aishwarya said, "Meenakshi and I became great friends during the shoot. She's such a sweet and hardworking girl. She's also a doctor and her journey to this stage is truly inspiring. In the film, Meenakshi and Venkatesh sir's characters share a lot of screen time. Watching how Venkatesh's character navigates between us adds an interesting dynamic to the story."

Aishwarya concluded by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to be part of such a unique film. "Not everyone gets to act in a film like this and I consider myself very lucky. I always aim to take on diverse roles, and I see my work as a way to contribute something meaningful to society," she said.

My words about Pushpa misinterpreted on social media: Rajendra Prasad

Veteran actor Rajendra Prasad recently addressed reports surrounding his comments about the portrayal of characters in films, particularly referencing the blockbuster *Pushpa*. At an event, Rajendra Prasad remarked about certain contemporary roles played by actors. His comments, including a reference to a red sander smuggler becoming a hero, sparked speculation on social media.

On Wednesday, the senior actor clarified his stance, firmly denying the reports. "My words about *Pushpa* were completely misinterpreted. Not long ago, I met Allu Arjun and we both laughed about the social media rumours. Some characters we see on-screen are inspired by real people in society. My own films, such as *Appala Apparao* and *Ladies Tailor*, are prime examples of this concept," explained Rajendra Prasad.

Having spent nearly four decades in the film industry, Rajendra Prasad was asked about never receiving a Padma Award. Responding candidly, he said, "I have never thought about not receiving the Padma Award. It has never been a concern for me," he remarked. The actor is currently promoting his latest film, *Shashti poorthi*, which reunites him with his *Ladies Tailor* co-star Archana after many years. Speaking highly of the film,

Rajendra Prasad said, "*Shashti poorthi* is a beautiful, family-friendly movie. The ceremonies depicted in the film are integral to our culture and traditions. This is a film for those who respect Telugu culture and values."

He also drew a connection between the new film and his previous work, *Aa Nalaguru*. "A song from *Aa Nalaguru* is often played during the mourning ceremonies of celebrities. The lyrics for that song were written by Chaitanya Prasad and he has penned the songs in *Shashti poorthi* as well," said Rajendra Prasad.

Talking about Archana, he said, "Archana was a seasoned performer even when we worked together in *Ladies Tailor* in 1986. In *Shashti poorthi*, our characters are solidly written and carry great depth. I have always felt a sense of responsibility as an actor since my days at the training institute. Being part of this film is truly a blessing."

Directed by Pavan Prabhas and produced by Rupeysh, who also plays a lead role, *Shashti poorthi* promises to be a celebration of Telugu culture and traditions. Rajendra Prasad's involvement in the film underscores his dedication to meaningful and culturally resonant cinema.



YASH'S TOXIC TEASER OFFERS A GLIMPSE INTO BOLD, INTOXICATING CINEMATIC WORLD

On the occasion of his 39th birthday, Rocking Star Yash, the actor who revolutionized Indian cinema with the KGF franchise, has treated his fans to a bold and enigmatic teaser from his upcoming film, *Toxic: A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups*. This special 'birthday peek' video offers a glimpse into a world unlike anything Yash's audience has seen before, reaffirming his penchant for pushing cinematic boundaries.

In the teaser, Yash appears in a striking white suit, paired with a fedora and a cigar, exuding charm and dominance as he steps into a lavishly styled club. The sultry atmosphere is alive with extravagance and mystery, setting the tone for this daring tale. The provocative visuals tease an intoxicating narrative that promises to be a bold departure from traditional storytelling, captivating viewers with its audacity and allure. Acclaimed filmmaker Geetu Mohandas, who has helmed *Toxic*, spoke passionately about the project and working with Yash. "*Toxic: A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups* is a story that defies convention and provokes the chaos within us. On Yash's birthday, as we release this first look, we celebrate not just a national icon but a visionary mind. His process is as mysterious as it is meticulous and collaborating with him has been a thrilling journey. This project represents the union of artistic vision and commercial storytelling, transcending borders, languages and cultures. "To Yash, the journey of creation is sacred, and through this process, he has taught me that the thrill of the unknown is what keeps the craft alive. Together, we have created a world that is not just meant to be watched but to be deeply felt. Happy birthday to our Monster Mind!" she added.

Kangana Ranaut to launch teaser of GV Prakash's Kingston today

National Award-winning music composer, actor, and producer GV Prakash Kumar is gearing up for a major milestone in his career with the release of his pan-India sci-horror film, *Kingston*. Set to hit theaters on March 7, the film will be released in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, promising a cinematic experience that transcends language and regional boundaries. Adding to the excitement, Bollywood superstar Kangana Ranaut is set to launch the much-anticipated teaser of the film digitally on January 9, kickstarting the campaign titled "Road to Kingston."

The collaboration between GV Prakash and Kangana Ranaut is a testament to their mutual respect and creative camaraderie. Their partnership began with *Thalavi*, where

GV Prakash's soul-stirring compositions complemented Kangana's compelling portrayal of Jayalalitha. The duo's artistic connection deepened with *Emergency*, Kangana's ambitious political drama, for which GV Prakash is also composing the score. Speaking about the collaboration, industry insiders have lauded the synergy between the two, which promises to deliver yet another remarkable cinematic venture with *Kingston*.

The film stars Divya Bharathi as the female lead and is backed by the collaborative efforts of Parallel Universe Pictures and Zee Studios. The production houses are sparing no effort in ensuring that *Kingston* is a visual and narrative spectacle that appeals to audiences across India and beyond.



Racharikam promises intense political drama

The upcoming political thriller *Racharikam*, directed by Suresh Lankapalli and Eswar Vase, has garnered attention with its intriguing trailer. Featuring Vijay Shankar, Varun Sandesh and Apsara Rani in lead roles, the film explores the complexities of political power and its impact on society. The trailer, launched on Wednesday by renowned director Maruthi, offers a glimpse into the intense political narrative the film promises. Packed with powerful and thought-provoking dialogues, it builds anticipation for what seems to be

a gripping drama. Eswar Vase, who is also the producer, has assembled a strong team for the film. Arya Sai Krishna's cinematography and Vengli's music composition add to the film's appeal. The supporting cast includes Hyper Aadi, Rangasthalam Mahesh, Srikanth Iyengar and others, all set to deliver impactful performances. With its release date set for February 1, *Racharikam* aims to captivate audiences with its blend of drama, politics and emotions. It will be interesting to see how this political thriller unfolds and resonates with viewers upon its release.

