

**The Bhu Bharati Act provides a permanent solution to land disputes in the state. Due to the Revenue Act-2020 commoners were facing many problems in Telangana. Even three years after the Act was introduced rules were not framed. There is no village in Telangana without land disputes. The BRS admin had destroyed the revenue system for its selfish interests**

**- Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy, Minister, Telangana**

**'Genome India data will help develop precision medicines'**

**INDIA AIMS TO BOOST ORGANIC PRODUCTS EXPORTS: GOYAL**

**Pragya Jaiswal: Akhanda is my life-changing FILM**

**DON'T MISS...**

**Stampede survivors recount horror**

For five minutes we thought all of us were dead. I have been coming to the temple for the past 25 years and it has never happened like this," D Venkata Lakshmi said, recounting the horrific Tirupati stampede that killed six persons and left over 40 injured. Many others who escaped the tragedy on Wednesday night complained about long waiting hours to get tickets for Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam to the sudden opening of the gates that prompted the crowd to surge ahead. Venkata Lakshmi told a vernacular news...

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**'India's contribution to civilisation great'**

President of Trinidad and Tobago Christine Carla Kangaloo on Thursday said India has made some of the 'greatest contributions' to the world civilization in various fields such as mathematics, medicine and navigation. Addressing the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, 2025 convention virtually as the chief guest, Kangaloo said, "India's contributions to the world's development are remarkable. The world's first university was established in Takshashila in 700 BC." Stating that...

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**Adani-ISKCON to start 'Mahaprasad Seva'**

The Adani Group and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) have joined hands to serve meals to devotees at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj this year. The Mahaprasad Seva will be offered for the entire duration of the Maha Kumbh Mela, from January 13 to February 26. To thank ISKCON for this initiative, Adani Group chairman Gautam Adani on Thursday met Guru Prasad Swami, the Chairman of ISKCON Governing Body Commission (GBC). Speaking about...

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**'I think he will be the next captain'**

The legendary Sunil Gavaskar is in awe of Jasprit Bumrah's leadership qualities and reckons the peerless fast bowler will succeed Rohit Sharma as the next captain of the Indian team following his extraordinary display in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Bumrah recently produced one of the best-ever bowling performances by an overseas pacer in Australia and picked 32 wickets over five Tests. He was also captain during India's only victory in the series, helping the visitors to a convincing win at the Optus Stadium...

-SPORTS

# CM orders probe into Tirupati stampede

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday ordered a judicial inquiry into the tragic stampede incident in Tirupati that resulted in six deaths and left nearly 40 devotees injured. He also announced the suspension of several senior officials for their role in the incident, including Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Raman Kumar, and SV Gosala Director Dr. Harinath Reddy, who were directly responsible for the site's management. Additionally, three other officials — JEO Goutami, SP Subbarayudu, and CVSO Sridhar — have been transferred as part of the administrative overhaul.

Addressing a media conference in Tirupati on Thursday, Naidu expressed his deep sorrow over the incident and assured that steps would be taken to prevent such occurrences in the future. He pledged to ensure a smoother and safer Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam for devotees, especially during the Vaikuntha Ekadasi celebrations.

The Chief Minister also announced ex gratia compensation for the victims: Rs 25 lakh to the families of the deceased, Rs 5 lakh to those severely injured, and Rs 2 lakh for the 33 others who are receiving medical treatment. Naidu assured that arrangements would be made for the injured devotees to receive a special darshan of Lord Venkateswara on January 10, following their wishes.

Naidu explained that the stampede occurred as devotees were queuing up for Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam tokens. He noted that the new system of issuing tokens in Tirupati, introduced by the previous government, might have contributed to the confusion. He emphasised that the system would be reviewed in consultation with Agama experts to make it more pilgrim-friendly and aligned with temple traditions.

Continued on Page 2

■ 2 officials suspended, 3 shifted; ■ ₹25L ex gratia for deceased



- Compensation announced: Rs 5 lakh for the severely injured, and Rs 2 lakh for others
- Naidu assured special arrangements for injured devotees to have darshan on January 10
- The new token system in Tirupati, introduced by the previous administration, will be reviewed with Agama experts
- Naidu emphasises the importance of maintaining the sanctity of Tirumala and improving the pilgrimage experience

## CM visits injured in hospital



**TIRUPATI:** Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday visited the injured undergoing treatment in a hospital here following a stampede that left six people dead. Six devotees died and nearly 40 more were injured in the stampede at Bairagi Pattada near MGM School in Tirupati on Wednesday night as hundreds of them jostled for tickets for Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam at Lord Venkateswara Swamy temple on Tirumala Hills. Hundreds of devotees turned up from across the country for the 10-day Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam commencing on January 10. "Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu comforted devotees who were injured in yesterday's (Wednesday) stampede at SVIMS (Sri Venkateswara Institute of Medical Sciences (SVIMS))." said an official statement. The CM spent 90 minutes in the hospital with the injured devotees.

Continued on Page 2

## Tension as Pawan, Jagan enter SVIMS

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

A mild scuffle broke out at SVIMS hospital on Thursday evening when two prominent political figures, Pawan Kalyan and Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, arrived simultaneously to visit the victims of the recent stampede. The high-profile visits, combined with the tense atmosphere due to the critically ill victims, led to confusion and disorder, highlighting major lapses in security arrangements at the hospital.

Pawan Kalyan, the leader of the Jana Sena Party, and Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, the former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, both expressed concern for the victims and their families. However, the visit seemed to take the hospital staff by surprise, as there had been no prior coordination to ensure proper security and crowd control.

Continued on Page 2



## Dy CM visits stampede site, offers govt's apologies

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan has expressed regret on behalf of the state government over the tragic stampede that occurred during the distribution of tokens for Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam at Tirupati on Wednesday.

After visiting the site of the incident and meeting with the victims undergoing treatment at the hospital, Pawan Kalyan addressed the media, offering the state government's apologies. He acknowledged, "A mistake has occurred, and we take full responsibility. On behalf of the state government, we seek forgiveness from the injured, the people of the state, devotees of Lord Venkateswara, and all who believe in Hindu dharma. This incident should not have happened."

The Deputy CM added that devotees had raised concerns regarding poor crowd management. "It is unfortunate that six lives were lost despite the presence of TTD staff and police. The focus should not only be on VIPs but on ordinary devotees as well," he said. He called for TTD officials to visit the families of the deceased and offer their apologies.

Pawan Kalyan further stressed that the TTD Executive Officer

(EO) and AEO must be held accountable for the incident, as well as the police officers present. "We are facing criticism for the mistakes made by the authorities. When such a tragedy occurs, there is no plan in place for providing immediate aid. The failures of individuals are being blamed on the state government. Moving forward, it is essential that measures are taken to prevent such incidents from recurring," he said.

The Deputy CM also raised suspicions of possible negligence on the part of certain police officers, asserting that an inquiry should be conducted to address these concerns. "There are claims of miscommunication between the EO, JEO, and the TTD governing body. Despite a strong police presence, how did this mistake occur? I will be bringing the matter of police negligence to the attention of the Chief Minister and the Director General of Police (DGP)."

Pawan Kalyan also addressed the long waiting times for devotees seeking darshan of Lord Venkateswara in Tirumala, stating, "The situation where devotees have to wait for 8 to 9 hours must change. If possible, darshan should be arranged within one or two hours."



## Naidu pulls up TTD EO, DC, SP

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu expressed his anger at officials, including the District Collector, TTD Executive Officer (EO), Joint EO (JEO), and the Superintendent of Police (SP), during his visit to the site of the stampede. He reprimanded them for their lackadaisical attitude and for holding him responsible for the incident. Naidu visited the areas where the stampede occurred on Thursday, accompanied by several officials and ministers.

The Chief Minister questioned TTD JEO Gowthami about her responsibilities and expressed his displeasure over her handling of the situation. He also asked why token distribution had not been accompanied by adequate arrangements for crowd regulation. When she tried to explain the sequence of events, Naidu did not listen.

He also expressed his frustration with District Collector Venkateswar, questioning him on his understanding of crowd psychology.

Continued on Page 2

## RTGS holds mirror to Naidu's vision: Nadendra Manohar

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Civil Supplies, Nadendra Manohar, has hailed Real-Time Governance (RTGS) as a testament to Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu's visionary leadership. He remarked that the Chief Minister has demonstrated how technology can revolutionise governance through RTGS. The minister also welcomed the launch of WhatsApp Governance in Andhra Pradesh, stating that it would enable citizens to access governance-related services seamlessly via WhatsApp.

On Thursday, Minister Manohar visited the Real-Time Governance Society at the Secretariat, where RTGS CEO K. Dinesh Kumar received him and provided a detailed overview of the system's operations.

Continued on Page 2

## Jagan blames Naidu, officials for stampede

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) President Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy squarely blamed Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, as well as Temple, police, and revenue officials, for the stampede that occurred recently. He stated that the sanctity of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) had been compromised and emphasised that such an incident had never happened before.

Speaking to the media after consulting the injured at the hospital, Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy said that the entire police force had been



deployed for Chandrababu's Kuppam tour for three days, leaving no police personnel for crowd management, which led to the stampede.

Continued on Page 2

**Modi govt has made GST a means of 'looting' poor: Kharge**

P5

## Central team reviews AP drought situation



### State govt seeks relief of Rs 151.77 cr for farmers

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

A central team, led by Perin Devi, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, conducted a field study of Kharif 2024 drought conditions in the state. Special Chief Secretary, Revenue, Lands, Stamps & Registration, RP Sisodia, urged the team to provide substantial assistance, citing the severe impact of the drought on farmers.

In a meeting held at the State Disaster Management Office on Thursday, Sisodia explained the challenges faced by the state due to the drought. The state government has officially declared 54 mandals in five districts as drought-affected.

Among these, 27 mandals are classified as severely affected and the remaining as moderately affected. The districts include Annamayya (19 mandals), Chittoor (16), Sri Sathya Sai (10), Anantapur (7), and Kurnool (2).

The declaration was based on central drought norms, including insufficient rainfall, prolonged dry spells, remote sensing data, low soil moisture, and over 33% crop loss in the affected regions.

Sisodia detailed that 14 crops, such as cotton, jowar, groundnut, red gram, and maize, have been severely impacted across 1.06 lakh hectares, affecting around 1.44 lakh farmers.

Continued on Page 2

# World is listening to India, says Modi

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Asserting that the world today listens to India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said due to the country's heritage, it is able to tell the international community that the future does not lie in 'Yudhi' (war) but in 'Budhi' (Buddha).

Addressing the diaspora at the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention here, Modi said India is not only the mother of democracy, but democracy is a part of people's lives here.

Emphasising that he has always considered the Indian diaspora as ambassadors of India, the PM expressed his joy in meeting and conversing with fellow citizens around the world and said the love and blessings he receives from them are unforgettable.

"I have always believed that our diaspora is our 'Rashtradoot', and I

closely interact with them during my visits overseas," he said.

Underlining India's growing global role due to its achievements and prospects, the PM said, "Today's India not only firmly asserts its point, but also strongly amplifies the voice of the Global South". He highlighted the unanimous support for India's proposal to make the African Union a permanent member of the G-20, emphasising India's commitment to "Humanity First."

Noting that at the time when the world was witnessing the expansion of empires by the power of the sword, Emperor Ashoka chose the path of peace, he said this was the strength of India's heritage.

"Due to this heritage, India is able to tell the world -- 'bhavishya yudh mein nahai hai, Budh mein hai' (the future does not lie in war but in Buddha)," he said.



**"Today's India not only firmly asserts its point, but also strongly amplifies the voice of the Global South". He highlighted the unanimous support for India's proposal to make the African Union a permanent member of the G-20, emphasising India's commitment to 'Humanity First.'**

"We are not just the mother of democracy, but democracy is part of our lives, our lifestyle. We don't have to be taught diversity, rather, our life runs on diversity. That's why wherever Indians go, they become part of the society of that particular place. We respect the rules and traditions of that country and also honestly

serve that country and its society, contributing to its growth and prosperity," he said.

The PM said it was because of the diaspora, that he keeps his head high wherever he goes. "I do not forget the love, affection and prestige I receive across the world. I would like to say thank you. This is because of you, I

keep my head high across the world. During the last 10 years, I have met several leaders across the world. The world leaders praise the Indian diaspora. It's because of the social values you add to their society," he said.

The PM said the diaspora played a major role in Independence in 1947, and sought their help to make India a developed country by 2047.

He said India is not only a young country but also a country of skilled youths. "The government is trying to ensure that whenever Indian youths go abroad, they go with skills," Modi said, noting that India has the potential to fulfill the world's demand for skilled talent.

Modi said the speed at which India is progressing in the 21st century, the scale on which development work is being done in the country, is unprecedented.

# Tirupati stampede sparks national outrage over crowd management

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The tragic stampede in Tirupati on January 8, which claimed six lives during the distribution of tokens for the Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam, has triggered national outrage. The incident has raised serious concerns about crowd management, safety measures, and accountability, drawing comparisons with the swift response to a similar tragedy in Hyderabad just weeks earlier.



The lack of proper crowd management protocols and basic facilities is unacceptable, especially during such a significant religious event," said a relative of Swati Lavanya, 38, from Visakhapatnam, who lost her life in the chaos. "The situation was unimaginable, and the authorities' inadequate response was disheartening. It's devastating to think that such a tragedy could occur in a place of worship."

Public frustration has been further fuelled by comparisons

with Hyderabad, where a similar stampede occurred during the premiere of Pushpa-2. "The swift actions taken in Hyderabad set a benchmark for accountability," said political analyst Rajesh Kumar. "It's frustrating to see the lack of urgency in Tirupati. Why is there such a glaring double standard? The authorities seem to treat these two incidents very differently."

Critics have also pointed out the meticulous planning evident during large-scale events like Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to

Visakhapatnam. "If such rigorous measures can be implemented for political events, why was there no foresight for a high-profile religious occasion like Tirupati, where the risks were clear?" questioned an event coordinator, highlighting the apparent lapses in planning.

The focus now shifts to accountability. "Who will take responsibility for the deaths of innocent devotees?" asked Gudla Lakshmi Reddy, husband of G. Rajini (47), a homemaker from Maddilapalem, Visakhapatnam, who also lost

her life in the stampede. "Will the blame be shifted to lower-level staff, or will senior officials, including the TTD Executive Officer and Chairman, be held accountable for the evident mismanagement?"

The stark contrast in responses to the two tragedies has sparked calls for systemic reforms in crowd management during major events. "The Tirupati disaster cannot be forgotten or brushed aside," said a spokesperson from a human rights organisation. "A thorough investigation is needed, and those responsible must face consequences."

As public demands for justice grow louder, the pressing question remains: Will authorities take concrete steps to prevent such incidents in the future, or will this tragedy fade from public memory? The need for robust measures to ensure devotees' safety is urgent, and the onus is now on the authorities to rise to the challenge.

## JEO transferred with immediate effect

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh government has ordered the immediate transfer of M Gauthami, IAS (2014), from her position as the Joint Executive Officer (Health & Education) at Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) in Tirupati.

The transfer order GO Rt No 56, issued on Thursday by the Chief Secretary to the Government, K Vijayanand, withdraws her services from the Revenue (Endowments) Department. Gauthami has now been directed to report to the General Administration Department (GAD).

In light of this transfer, the Executive Officer of TTD has been requested to make necessary internal arrangements to manage the responsibilities of the Joint Executive Officer (Health & Education) position until further instructions are given.



## Minister, Chief Secy unveil Solar Corp diary

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The AP Solar Power Corporation 2025 diary and calendar were unveiled by Chief Secretary K. Vijayanand along with State Energy Minister Gottipati Ravi Kumar at the Secretariat on Thursday. Speaking on the occasion, Minister Gottipati Ravi Kumar highlighted that the Andhra

Pradesh government is giving a strong push to the renewable energy sector.

He mentioned that the AP Integrated Clean Energy Policy has been formulated as part of these efforts.

The minister also noted that the renewable sector is now attracting investors who had previously left the state.

Minister Gottipati lauded

the performance of the Solar Power Corporation in the state, appreciating its efforts in providing quality electricity.

AP Genco MD Chakradhar Babu, Transco JMD Kirti Ch., CPDCL CMD Pathan Shetty Ravi Subhash, Solar Power Corporation MD Kamalakar Babu, and others also participated in the event.

# Stampede survivors recount harrowing experience

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

"For five minutes we thought all of us were dead. I have been coming to the temple for the past 25 years and it has never happened like this," D Venkata Lakshmi said, recounting the horrific Tirupati stampede that killed six persons and left over 40 injured.

Many others who escaped the tragedy on Wednesday night complained about long waiting hours to get tickets for Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam to the sudden opening of the gates that prompted the crowd to surge ahead.

Venkata Lakshmi told a vernacular news channel that six boys pulled her aside and gave her some water to drink after the crowd surge led to the deadly stampede.

According to Lakshmi, people rushed forward and up to 10 people fell down where she was standing.

"Though I was raising a hue and cry that I was falling on the side, people were still rushing from behind and could not be controlled. I don't know if they were pushing ahead, but



the men were uncontrollable. People were walking over devotees. I could not even breathe for a long time," she said.

Further, had the police allowed devotees to proceed in an orderly way, this disaster could have been averted, she said and highlighted that people could not make sense of what was happening.

Another devotee said she came around 11 am on

Wednesday and the gate was opened at 7 pm.

"One person told devotees not to rush and go in a line, but who will listen. Police were outside, not inside," she said.

A male devotee insisted the police were told about the presence of 5,000 devotees.

He claimed that police opened the gates suddenly, leading to the stampede. On Wednesday night, six

devotees died and nearly 40 more were injured in the stampede at Bairagi Pattada near MGM School in Tirupati as hundreds of them jostled for tickets for Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam at Lord Venkateswara Swamy temple on Tirumala Hills.

Hundreds of devotees turned up from across the country for the 10-day Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam commencing from January 10.

## CM visits stampede site

**TIRUPATI:** Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday visited the accident site where a stampede claimed six lives and injured many. Six devotees died and nearly 40 more were injured in the stampede at Bairagi Pattada near MGM School in Tirupati on Wednesday night as hundreds of them jostled for tickets for Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam at Lord Venkateswara Swamy temple on Tirumala Hills. Hundreds of devotees turned up from across the country for the 10-day Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam commencing from January 10.

## Minister Farooq reaffirms gov't's commitment to welfare of Minorities

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Law and Minority Welfare, NMD Farooq, underscored the vital role of education in achieving success across all fields. The birth anniversary of Sheikh Fatima, India's first Muslim woman teacher and a trailblazer in the community, was celebrated at the Secretariat in Velagapudi, Amaravati, on Thursday. Minister Farooq paid floral tributes to her portrait and spoke about her historic contributions to women's education, alongside Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule.

Minister Farooq highlighted Sheikh Fatima's unwavering determination despite facing numerous challenges and even physical assaults during her mission to promote education. He praised her as a beacon of inspiration for future generations and emphasised the need for minority communities and

society at large to prioritise education to ensure progress in various sectors.

The Minister also reaffirmed the state government's commitment to the welfare and development of minorities. He announced that in recognition of Sheikh Fatima's remarkable efforts in promoting girls' education, her life and struggles have been documented and included in the Telugu textbooks for Class 8, ensuring her legacy is honoured.

Later in the day, Minister Farooq attended the inaugural session of the 428th Urs-Mubarak festival of Hazrat Syed Shah Bukhari (R.A.) at Kondapalli village near Vijayawada. Organised on a grand scale by the local community, the three-day festival holds great significance. During his visit, the Minister offered his respects at the historic Dargah by presenting a Chadar.

## 37 students hit by diarrhoea, 13 hospitalised

PNS ■ ANAKAPALLI

As many as 37 school students in Vemulapudi village fell ill with diarrhoea, with 13 of them being admitted to hospitals in Anakapalli. Health officials reported that the affected students are from an Ashram school in the village. While 13 students required hospitalisation, the remaining students were being treated at a medical camp set up on the school premises.

Medical and health officials visited the school to assess the situation and monitor the students' recovery. They instructed doctors to continue the medical camp and ensure treatment until all students fully recovered.

Concerned parents and relatives rushed to the hospitals and the school to check on the students. Officials stated that the exact cause of the outbreak is under investigation.

Water and food samples from the school have been sent to a laboratory for examination to determine the source of the infection.

## CM orders...

Continued from Page 1

Earlier, Naidu visited the hospital where the injured were being treated and reaffirmed his commitment to safeguarding the sanctity of Tirumala. He stressed that the TTD Board and the Administration would need to work in close coordination to ensure the safety and well-being of all pilgrims.

Ministers Anam Ram Narayana Reddy, Anitha, Satya Prasad, Satya Kumar Yadav, Parthasaradhi, Rama Naidu, along with TTD Board Chairman BR Naidu, TTD EO Syamala Rao, and other officials, were present at the press briefing.

## CM visits...

Continued from Page 1

He visited one patient after the others and heard their grievances. Earlier, Naidu visited the accident site where the stampede claimed six lives and injured many.

Accompanied by several ministers, Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) officials and others, the CM inspected the makeshift arrangements made to handle the multitudes of crowds arriving for the pilgrimage. At the stampede site, Naidu demanded answers from TTD joint executive officer (health & education) M Gowthami over the incident.

# Tension as Pawan, Jagan...

Continued from Page 1

The simultaneous presence of two major political leaders in the same space led to an influx of supporters and media, creating an environment ripe for confusion.

According to witnesses, the situation escalated when the entourages of the two leaders collided in the hospital corridor. Fearing a clash between their supporters, hospital staff struggled to maintain order. The scuffle grew intense, and security personnel had to intervene. However, the lack of preparation made it difficult to restore calm quickly. Medical staff were also caught in the chaos, with some patients and

their families expressing frustration over the disruption.

This incident not only exposed the lack of proper security measures but also raised concerns about how sensitive situations should be handled. With the stampede victims already in critical condition, the added stress of the political visit further exacerbated the tense atmosphere. Many critics of the administration pointed out that the hospital should have been better prepared for the simultaneous visits of both political figures, particularly in such a highly charged environment.

The scuffle served as a stark reminder of the lapses in crowd management and secu-

rity, leading to public outrage. Both Pawan Kalyan and Jagan Mohan Reddy later issued statements urging their supporters to remain calm and respect the patients, though the damage had already been done. The incident sparked discussions on the need for better coordination between political leaders, hospital authorities, and security personnel during such sensitive situations.

The hospital administration later promised to review its security protocols to ensure that such incidents would not occur in the future, emphasising the need for a more structured approach to handling high-profile visits.

# Ex-minister Amarnath blames AP gov't for Tirupati incident

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) leader Gudivada Amarnath has strongly criticised the Andhra Pradesh government following the tragic stampede at the Vaikunta Dwara Darshan token counter in Tirupati on January 8, which claimed six lives and left several others injured.

Addressing the media on Thursday, Amarnath questioned the authorities' failure to make adequate arrangements to manage the heavy influx of pilgrims during the festival, which led to the deadly incident. He expressed concern over what he described as "official apathy and negligence" in handling the situation.

"The government, which constantly promotes the use of modern technology for efficient governance, failed to implement it in this case. This tragedy could have been avoided with proper planning and the use of available technology."



use of available technology," Amarnath stated, demanding that the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) officials, including the TTD Chairperson, resign for their lack of accountability.

The former Minister further accused the current government of neglecting the temple trust board, pointing out that during the YSRCP's tenure, comprehensive measures were put in place to ensure smooth operations for the Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam. He stressed that such an incident should never have occurred under any circumstances.

Amarnath also raised concerns over the government's response to the tragedy, calling for an ex gratia of Rs 1 crore for the families of the deceased and Rs 25 lakh for the injured. "This is the least the government can do for those who lost their lives or suffered injuries," he added.

On a separate issue, the former Minister criticised the NDA government's political manoeuvring in Visakhapatnam. He pointed out that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had laid foundation stones for several projects in the city on January 8, many of which were initiated by the previous YSRCP government.

## TODAY ALMANAC

Month & Paksham:	Sukla Paksha
Tithi:	Ekadashi:
Ekadashi:	Jan 09 12:22 PM to Jan 10 10:19 AM
Dwadashi:	Jan 10 10:19 AM to Jan 11 08:21 AM
Nakshatram:	Krithika:
Krithika:	Jan 09 03:07 PM to Jan 10 01:45 PM
Rohini:	Jan 10 01:45 PM to Jan 11 12:29 PM
Rahukalam:	11:00 AM to 12:23 PM
Yamagandam:	3:09 PM to 4:32 PM
Varjyam:	04:54 AM to 06:25 AM
Gulika:	8:15 AM to 9:38 AM
Amritakalam:	11:29 AM to 01:00 PM
Abhijit Muhurtham:	12:01 PM to 12:45 PM

## VIJAYAWADA WEATHER

Forecast: Mostly Sunny  
Temp: 31°C  
Humidity: 57%  
Sunrise: 6:38 AM  
Sunset: 5:51 PM  
Updated: January 9, 2025 5:00 PM

## Naidu pulls...

Continued from Page 1

"A large number of people were waiting, and they lost patience. When the gate opened, they rushed forward, leading to the stampede," he said angrily. Naidu further questioned TTD EO Shyamala Rao, asking what measures had been taken to regulate the crowds, especially considering the growing number of people.

"This is an unforgivable mistake," he asserted. He also asked the officials about the number of tokens issued online and offline, as well as how many ambulances had been kept on standby. The officials, however, could not provide satisfactory answers.

## Jagan blames Naidu...

Continued from Page 1

He demanded that Chandrababu Naidu, the Executive Officer (EO), Additional Executive Officer (AEO), TTD Chairman, Superintendent of Police (SP), and the Collector take responsibility for the incident in which six people died and nearly 50 others were injured. He also called for an ex-gratia payment of ₹50 lakhs each to the families of the deceased and ₹5 lakhs for the injured, once they were discharged after treatment.

"Every year, lakhs of devotees visit on Vaikunta Ekadasi when the Vaikunta Dwaram is opened. Arrangements should have been in place, as has always been the practice. However, this year there was negligence and a lack of manpower to control the crowd,

which resulted in this tragic incident. This shows how the coalition leaders and the TTD leadership treat devotees who come from far and wide for darshan," he said.

He further added, "During our tenure, we handled such events with care and dedication, but this year, caution was ignored. Arrangements similar to those at Srinangam should have been followed to avoid such incidents. But this government has failed to safeguard the sanctity of the TTD."

YS Jagan Mohan Reddy criticised the lack of basic amenities for the devotees, saying that they were left in parks and other areas without food or water. He also noted that no proper arrangements were made to manage the crowd, and the police force was inadequate, with no queue system in place.

## RTGS holds...

Continued from Page 1

Expressing his appreciation, the minister said he was impressed by the comprehensive technological setup implemented by the state government. He observed that the RTGS infrastructure has the potential to drive transformative changes in governance.

Highlighting the critical role of data, Minister Manohar stated that while technology is essential, data serves as the foundation of effective governance. By leveraging data, the government can better manage resources, monitor scheme implementation, and ensure that benefits reach citizens at the grassroots level. He commended RTGS for efficiently delivering governance to the Panchayat and Municipal levels.

# Central team...

Continued from Page 1

To mitigate the effects, the state government has initiated relief measures, including seed distribution to nearly one lakh farmers with 80% subsidy (Rs 16.67 crores), support for livestock feed and seeds, total mixed ration (TMR) at 60% subsidy, chaff cutters at 40% subsidy, and provision of medicines, collectively amounting to Rs 55.47 crores. The state has sought Rs 151.77 crores in immediate assistance, comprising Rs 90.62 crores for input subsidies,

Rs 0.78 crores for rural water supply, Rs 4.89 crores for urban water supply, and Rs 55.47 crores for animal husbandry support.

Perin Devi assured that a comprehensive report on crop losses and drought impacts would be submitted to the central government. She stated that the government is committed to supporting farmers and would explore all possible measures to address the crisis. The team visited drought-affected districts, including Annamayya, Anantapur, Sri Sathya Sai,

Chittoor, and Kurnool, interacting with farmers and assessing the ground realities. Their observations were complemented by photo exhibitions highlighting the extent of damage in these regions.

The central team included key officials, such as Supriya Malik, Deputy Director; Anuradha Batna, Senior Research Officer, NITI Aayog; Dr Deepankar Seth, Assistant Commissioner; Dr Pradeep Kumar, Assistant Director; M Manojji Upadhya, Director; Jayanti; and Dr K Ponnuswamy. Discussions were held with Dilli Rao, Director of Agriculture, during their visit.

# Minister announces monthly handloom exhibitions in State

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Handlooms, Textiles, BC Welfare, and EWS, S. Savitha, announced that monthly handloom exhibitions would be organised to provide financial security to handloom workers in the state. She emphasised that these exhibitions and expos have led to an increase in sales of handloom products. On Thursday, the Minister inaugurated the Niche Handloom Marketing Expo 2024-25 at A Convention Centre in Vijayawada. During the event, she visited each stall to inquire about the states the exhibitors were from and how sales were progressing.

Minister Savitha expressed her gratitude for the support that handloom workers receive from Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu. She highlighted that the state is organising handloom expos and exhibitions both within India and abroad to ensure financial security for handloom workers. The Minister confirmed that efforts are underway to organise monthly handloom exhibitions. As part of this initiative, the Niche Handloom Marketing Expo was organised in Vijayawada in collaboration with the Weaver's Service Centre, a central government agency, and the

- To provide 365 days of work for weavers
- Minister urges public to wear handloom fabrics this Sankranti



state government. The expo featured 49 stalls from various states, including Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Madhya

Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Bihar.

Minister Savitha stressed that handloom fabrics are symbolic of Telugu traditions and urged people

to buy and wear handloom products during the upcoming Sankranti festival, an important celebration for the Telugu community. She appealed to the public to support handloom workers by purchasing their products.

The Minister emphasised that the primary goal of CM Chandrababu Naidu is to provide a dignified livelihood for handloom workers. She noted that high-quality handloom products such as Uppada Jamdani sarees, Mangalagiri sarees, Venkatagiri sarees, and Dharmavaram silk sarees are being produced by weavers in the state. The state government, in collaboration with the Weaver's Service Centre, is facilitating marketing opportunities for these handloom products.

The Minister also revealed that steps are being taken to provide a 5% GST reimbursement and free electricity for spinning mills (up to 200 units) and weaving mills (up to 500 units). A 15% subsidy is being offered for the purchase of yarn, and a health insurance scheme for weavers is being implemented. The government is also running schemes like the Thrift Fund and Weaver's Mudra and offering a 50% subsidy for power loom units.

# Foolproof arrangements for 'Vaikuntha Ekadasi' darshan

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The NTR district administration has made foolproof arrangements to ensure a smooth and secure experience for devotees visiting temples for the Vaikuntha Ekadashi darshan on Friday, taking necessary precautions to avoid any unfortunate incidents. Following the tragic stampede incident at Tirupati, the officials are implementing strong safety and protective measures for the auspicious occasion of Vaikuntha Ekadashi.

District Collector Dr. G. Lakshminsha held a video conference from the Collectorate on Thursday with Police Commissioner S.V. Rajasekhara Babu, temple officials, and representatives from the Endowments, Revenue, and Police departments to review preparations aimed at providing a spiritually enriching experience for the arriving devotees.

Collector Dr. Lakshminsha emphasised the need for coordination among officials from various departments to ensure a seamless darshan experience for the devotees. He instructed the officials to take necessary precautions to prevent any untoward incidents, given the expected large crowds. Specific instructions were given to maintain orderly queues, ensure a regular supply of drinking water, and



uphold hygiene standards at major temples such as the Vedadri Swamy Temple, Nemali Sri Venugopala Swamy Temple, and other local temples across Vijayawada to avoid any inconvenience.

Dr. Lakshminsha stated that tahsildars, sub-inspectors, and field-level officials should work in coordination to successfully conduct the 'Vaikuntha Ekadasi' darshan. Regarding the preparations, the Collector mentioned that they are continuously reviewing arrangements with temple executive officers and stressed that joint teams from the Endowments, Revenue,

and Police departments must remain vigilant, regularly visiting and monitoring the temples.

The Collector also highlighted that the safety of devotees is of utmost priority and confirmed that prior arrangements have been made for parking, traffic management, and 'prasad' distribution counters as part of contingency planning. District Endowments Officer P. Seetaramaiah, Executive Officer K. Ramachandra Mohan of Sri Durga Malleswara Swamy Temple, and various temple executive officers and officials were present at the meeting.

# Vijayawada Division seeks reduction in electrical traction tariff rates

- Increased tariffs to elevate operational costs for the Railways



PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Vijayawada Division of the South Central Railway (SCR) has submitted a formal plea to the Andhra Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission (APEREC) to reconsider the proposed electricity tariff rates for railway traction for the financial year 2025-26. This submission was made during a public consultation meeting held by APEREC in Vijayawada as part of its State-wide review of electricity tariffs.

Representing the South Central Railway, Ch Dinesh Reddy, Senior Divisional Electrical Engineer, Traction Distribution, presented the case for a reduction in the proposed retail supply tariff rates. Highlighting the impact of the announced rates by APDISCOMS on December 7, 2024, Dinesh Reddy pointed out that the increased tariffs will significantly elevate operational costs for Indian Railways. This development could hamper the progress of electrification projects and critical infrastructure upgrades, such as tripling and quadrupling of railway lines, in Andhra Pradesh.

The Indian Railways, which plays a pivotal role in affordable public and goods transportation, is committed to achieving 100 per cent electrification in alignment with the Government of India's

green energy initiatives. However, the high proposed tariff rates threaten the feasibility of these initiatives, posing a challenge to the Railways' efforts to enhance operational efficiency and sustainability, he said.

In its plea, SCR underscored the need for Andhra Pradesh to align its tariff policies with neighbouring States. Comparative data presented by the Railways revealed that Andhra Pradesh's current per-unit rate of Rs 7.89 is significantly higher than Telangana's Rs 7.13 and the rates in states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, which range between Rs 6.10 and Rs 6.60 through open access arrangements. The Railways also proposed the introduction of a monthly rebate, similar to the one per cent rebate offered in Odisha, to acknowledge its status as a bulk consumer with a consistent payment record.

Speaking on the issue, Narendra A Patil, Divisional Railway Manager, Vijayawada Division, stated, "Vijayawada Division remains committed to delivering efficient and affordable services to our passengers. However, the proposed tariff rates pose a significant challenge to our cost-efficiency initiatives. We urge APEREC to consider our plea and work towards a mutually beneficial solution that supports both Indian Railways and the energy sector."



# VMRDA plans to construct roads using plastic waste

- Initiative aims to tackle plastic pollution and enhance road durability

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Visakhapatnam Metropolitan Region Development Authority (VMRDA) has unveiled an ambitious plan to construct roads using plastic waste, aligning with the Central government's mission to promote sustainable infrastructure and combat plastic pollution.

Speaking to The Pioneer, VMRDA Commissioner KS Viswanathan shared details of the initiative, noting that the Centre issued directives on November 26, 2024 mandating the use of plastic waste in road construction within a 50-kilometre radius of urban centres with populations exceeding five lakhs. These orders focus on integrating plastic waste into specific applications, such as wearing coats for service and slip roads on national highways.

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has accelerated the rollout by directing the construction of 15 link roads connecting to the national highway, prioritising their completion ahead of the Bhogapuram International Airport's inauguration. The project will involve collaboration among VMRDA, the Roads and Buildings Department, Panchayat Raj, and the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC).

Commissioner Viswanathan explained that non-recyclable plastic waste will make up to eight per cent of the total road construction materials. "Road construction contracts will only be awarded to contractors who agree to incorporate plastic waste in their projects," he emphasised. This approach not only address-

es the city's growing plastic waste management challenges, but also offers significant cost reductions and improved road durability. "Plastic-mixed roads prevent water penetration, reduce deterioration during rains, and provide a sustainable solution for managing waste," the Commissioner added.

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has established guidelines for using plastic waste in infrastructure projects. Viswanathan hailed the initiative as a transformative step. "This is a win-win solution that combines innovation, sustainability, and economic efficiency."

By pioneering the use of plastic-mixed roads, the city is setting an example for the rest of the country, paving the way for a greener and more resilient future.

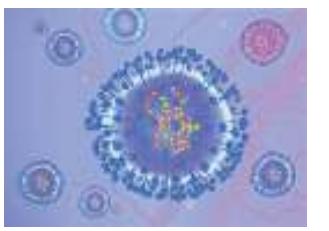
# Visakhapatnam ramps up preparedness against HMPV

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Visakhapatnam is taking steps to address growing concerns surrounding Human Metapneumovirus (HMPV) after 11 confirmed cases were reported in India. The situation has prompted memories of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading the State government to implement measures aimed at preventing the virus's spread.

A key development is the establishment of a 20-bed isolation ward at King George Hospital (KGH). Dr Sivananda, Superintendent of KGH, confirmed the preparations, stating, "We are preparing a dedicated isolation ward on the first floor to manage any potential HMPV cases. The facility will be fully equipped with the necessary medical resources to handle this situation effectively."

Health experts are emphasising the similarity of HMPV symptoms to common flu-like illnesses, including cough, cold, fever, fatigue, and itching.



# IMIB to train 50,000 AP youth in green and professional skills

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The United Nations-accredited IMIB Foundation (One Million for One Billion) has announced its collaboration with the Kuppam Area Development Authority (KADA) to establish the IMIB Green Skills Academy's Career Readiness Centre in Kuppam.

This initiative aligns with Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's vision for a technologically advanced and sustainable Andhra Pradesh. The centre was formally inaugurated by Naidu during his recent visit to Kuppam. The first of its kind, the centre aims to equip youth and young professionals with critical green skills and career readiness training, laying the foundation for sustainable employment within both Andhra Pradesh's and India's growing green economy.

Manav Subodh, Founder of IMIB, said, "The setting up of the IMIB Green Skills Academy Career Readiness Centre marks a significant leap in fulfilling Andhra Pradesh's vision of sustainable growth, providing young people with the skills and support they need to thrive in the green economy. IMIB's vision is to make Kuppam a global hub for green skills and a model for nurturing climate talent."

Srikanth Kancharla, MLC,

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remarked, "We are proud to launch the IMIB Green Skills Academy Career Readiness Centre in Kuppam as a pilot initiative. This centre will empower our youth with future-ready skills, inspiring them to lead the way in sustainability and innovation."

# Teen author Keya Hatkar inspires Port City audience

- From overcoming SMA challenges to becoming a bestselling author, Keya shares her journey

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Fourteen-year-old Keya Hatkar, a recipient of the prestigious Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar 2025, shared her inspiring journey of overcoming challenges posed by Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) at a felicitation ceremony held at the Public Library in Visakhapatnam on Thursday. Hosted by the Visakha Rasagna Vedika, the event showcased Keya's remarkable resilience and determination.

Diagnosed with SMA type-II at just 10 months old, Keya was initially given a life expectancy of two years. Despite her father abandoning the family due to a lack of understanding about the rare disorder, Keya, supported by her mother, sister, and teacher, has defied the odds. "Today, I am alive because of my mom and grandparents," Keya said, adding, "I have two dozen titanium screws in my body—you can call me a titanium girl," which drew enthusiastic applause from the audience.

Speaking from her wheelchair, Keya openly discussed the immense financial burden her family faces, with her treatment costing a staggering Rs 80 lakh annually. She thanked her mother's unwavering support, stating, "Mom had two choices: break down and



Keya Hatkar, recipient of the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar 2025, addressing the gathering at a meeting organised by Visakha Rasagna Vedika in Visakhapatnam on Thursday

give up or never give up. She chose the second." Keya's journey is not just one of survival, but also of remarkable achievement. While awaiting surgery in 2022, she began writing, publishing her debut book, "Dancing on Wheels," which became a bestseller. This was followed by "I'm Possible," which won the Best Young Author Award, and "How to Write a Book." Her literary talents have also led her to the TEDx stage as a motivational speaker.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recognised Keya's extraordinary accomplishments by awarding her the Bal Puraskar and initiating

efforts to translate her books into regional languages. "The greatest moment of my life was when officials informed me that the Prime Minister wanted my books to reach a wider audience," Keya proudly stated.

Keya emphasised the importance of inclusive growth and encouraged others to transform their disabilities into strengths. "We should all come together for a world where every child has the opportunity to thrive," she concluded, leaving a lasting impression on the audience. Keya Hatkar's story is a powerful testament to the power of determination and support in overcoming adversity.

# Chinna Jeeyar highlights Ramanujacharya's teachings on equality

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Sri Tridandi Chinna Jeeyar Swami has stressed the timeless relevance of Ramanujacharya's teachings on equality, during his address at the Goda Devi Kalyanam held at PB Siddhartha College Grounds. The event, organised by Mummaneni Subbarao Siddhartha Kalapitham, saw a large gathering of devotees, dignitaries, and students.

In his speech, Chinna Jeeyar Swami praised Ramanujacharya for his pioneering efforts to promote social equality over a thousand years ago. The renowned philosopher and reformer worked to dismantle societal hierarchies, notably by opening temple doors to untouchables and offering them spiritual guidance, a progressive step rooted in the teachings of the ancient Goda Devi.

Swami also acknowledged the foresight of Siddhartha Kalapitham's management in

organising the grand celebration of the Goda-Sriranganatha Kalyanotsavam, which is a precursor to the Sankranti festival, bringing the festive spirit four days ahead of the official celebration. He highlighted the event's auspicious timing during the sacred Dhanurmasam period, which is believed to enhance the spiritual significance of the Kalyanam.

Scholar Dr Medasani Mohan has been delivering Bhagavata discourses as part of the ongoing Bhagavata Saptaham under the auspices of Siddhartha Kalapitham. The event was attended by several dignitaries, including Siddhartha Academy president Malineni Rajayya, secretary Paladugu Lakshman Rao, joint secretary Nimmagadda Lalith Prasad, treasurer Sureddy Venkateswara Rao, and other faculty members, NCC, NSS volunteers, and students of the institution.





**Workshop on non-communicable diseases organised**

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) and the National Health Systems Resource Centre (NHSRC) recently organised a two-day workshop on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in Hyderabad, Telangana. The event, hosted by the Telangana government, gathered senior officials, including NHM MDs and Principal Secretaries from various States.

The workshop was led by Punya Srivastava, Secretary of MoHFW, and Aradhana Patnaik, Additional Secretary of MoHFW. Renowned experts from institutions such as AIIMS, Tata Memorial Trust, and others delivered presentations on the current state of NCDs, including hypertension, diabetes, cancer, chronic kidney disease (CKD), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), STEMI, and stroke. Discussions also focused on management strategies and the actions required by governments to reduce the disease burden and prevent NCDs.

State representatives shared their initiatives to tackle NCDs. MT Krishna Babu, Special Chief Secretary of Andhra Pradesh, presented the State's comprehensive cancer care roadmap, which includes strengthening public infrastructure, mass screening for the adult population, and setting up preventive oncology units for cancer diagnosis and treatment.

PNS ■ ELURU

Eluru MP Putta Mahesh Kumar distributed financial assistance from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund (CMRF) to 32 beneficiaries on Thursday.

Speaking on the occasion, the TDP MP announced that Rs 63 lakh in financial aid had been sanctioned to the beneficiaries, who were handed over the cheques. He highlighted that development activities in the Eluru Parliamentary constituency are being executed in a systematic manner.

Mahesh Kumar pledged to continue efforts to attract industries to the constituency and revealed plans to establish Smart Industrial Parks. He added that the Government would provide sup-

port to industrialists purchasing land independently, with investments ranging from Rs 50 lakh to Rs 1 crore, to set up small-scale industries.

Acknowledging the lack of major industries in the constituency, he expressed his determination to transform Eluru into an industrial hub to create large-scale employment opportunities.

The MP emphasised his focus on infrastructure development, including the improvement of national highways and railway stations, and the establishment of a new railway station. He disclosed that he had appealed to the Union Minister for funds to construct a flyover bridge in the constituency, with tenders for the project expected to be invited in March. Mahesh Kumar also mentioned

that the Centre is considering reducing the GST on tobacco from 34% to 29%. He noted that he had recently requested the Union Minister not to increase GST on tobacco produce, as it would adversely affect farmers. He added that he plans to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi to reiterate his appeal.

Criticising the previous YSRCP regime, the MP accused the Government of exhausting the state exchequer during its five-year tenure and causing widespread financial mismanagement. He alleged massive misuse of funds under the YSRCP administration, which, he said, has left the coalition Government grappling with financial constraints to implement developmental works.



**Minister underscores need for efficient implementation of Central schemes**

PNS ■ RAJAHMUNDY

Minister for Tourism Kandula Durgesh emphasized the need for the efficient implementation of Central-sponsored welfare schemes and criticized the previous YSRCP government for its failure to implement these schemes properly.

The District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committee meeting was held here, presided over by Collector P. Prashanthi, with the participation of Minister Durgesh, MP Daggubati Purandeshwari, and other leaders.

Speaking at the meeting, Minister Durgesh highlighted that the implementation of Central-sponsored welfare schemes was being reviewed and discussed, with a focus on overcoming lapses and achieving better results.

"Over the last five years, we witnessed schemes like the Jal Jeevan Mission and Amrit not being implemented efficiently. However, this is not the time for criticism," he said. "Had the YSRCP government implemented the Central schemes effectively, many people would have benefited."

The Minister also stressed the importance of coordinated efforts between party representatives and



officials to ensure the efficient implementation of Central schemes. He urged officials to perform more effectively in the coming days, noting that the drinking water needs of both rural and urban areas have not been fully addressed through the Jal Jeevan Mission and Amrit schemes.

The meeting discussed the progress of various schemes, including MGNREGA, Jal Jeevan Mission, PM Gram Sadak Yojana, PMAY, TIDCO, AMRUT, SHG Lakhpati DDs & Drones, PM Vishwakarma, PM Swanidhi, PM Suryagarh, Agriculture, National Gokul

Mission, Tourism, Industrial Parks, Municipal Administration & Urban Development, and ST Welfare.

MP Daggubati Purandeshwari spoke about the review conducted to identify shortcomings in the effective implementation of Central government schemes. She stated that the coalition government is working to address these issues and ensure that Central funds benefit the people.

District Collector P. Prashanthi assured that the material component funds under the National Employment Guarantee Scheme

would be utilized efficiently in the coming days. She mentioned that the first phase of work had already begun at the field level, with 60 per cent of the work completed, and plans were in place to complete the remaining targets by March. The Collector also revealed that a daily wage of 254 is being paid under the Employment Guarantee Scheme.

The meeting was attended by 20 Points Implementation Committee Chairman Lanka Dinakar, MLA M. Venkateswara Rao, Municipal Commissioner Ketan Garg, and ZP CEO V.V.S. Lakshman Rao.

**Shepherd, 25 sheep run over by tipper**

PNS ■ ANANTAPUR

A tragic accident occurred on Thursday at Kodakandla Ramapuram village in Bathalapalli mandal, Sri Sathya Sai district, where a speeding tipper lorry fatally ran over a shepherd and 25 sheep.

According to the police, the incident happened when a herd of sheep was crossing the highway. The tipper lorry, travelling at high speed, ploughed through the sheep and the shepherd, Obulapati,

killing them on the spot. The deceased belonged to Kodakandla village.

Following the incident, locals chased the tipper lorry and detained the driver. They demanded the government announce compensation for the family of the bereaved shepherd.

The Bathalapalli police have registered a case and shifted the shepherd's body to the Government General Hospital (GGH) for post-mortem examination.



**Innovation Hub set up at Siddhartha College**

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Computer Science Department of PB Siddhartha College of Arts and Science inaugurated an Innovation Hub in collaboration with Tilicho Labs, Visakhapatnam, on Thursday. Through this Innovation Hub, students pursuing Computer Science at PB Siddhartha College will be trained in Artificial Intelligence, Web Designing, Mobile Application Development, and Product Engineering. Additionally, they will be encouraged to undertake new research initiatives.

"Following the training, eligible students will be provided employment opportunities," said Hema Kiran Mokhamatam, founder of Tilicho Labs. Furthermore, Tilicho Labs has committed to assisting in organising technical seminars, con-



ducting training programmes, promoting research, and teaching advanced computer technologies to both students and faculty. They have also expressed their willingness to collaborate with the college in partnerships with various organisations. Siddhartha Academy Advisor

Prof LK Mohan Rao, Principal Dr Meka Ramesh, Director Vemuri Baburao, Dean Prof Rajesh C Jampala, Vice Principal Dr M Manoranjani, Head of the Computer Science Department Dr TS Ravi Kiran and faculty members were also present.

**11 arrested in ₹5 crore fake loan scam**

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Guntur District Superintendent of Police (SP) G. Satish Kumar announced the arrest of 11 individuals, including a former Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) and a former Bank Branch Manager (BM), in connection with a fake loan scam worth Rs 5 crore involving the GDCC Bank. The arrests followed an investigation triggered by a complaint from G. Lingeswara Rao, who reported that a loan had been taken in his name without his involvement. The scam, which involved the sanctioning of 54 fake loans, was uncovered, and the remaining accused are expected to be arrested soon.

Satish Kumar explained that the investigation revealed that for the past 15 years, local political brokers in Palnadu district had been involved in financial crimes, fabricating fake documents with the help of experts and government employees. The investigation further revealed that the scam was primarily carried out under the state government's "crop loan waiver scheme," which was intended for eligible farmers. The fraudsters exploited this scheme, assuming that the fake loans taken under it would eventually be waived, and this activity had spread to other districts as well.

The SP elaborated that approximately 30 people were involved in different stages of the scam,

**The SP elaborated that approximately 30 people were involved in different stages of the scam, including selecting fake farmers and taking loans in their names from the bank. Eleven of them have been identified and arrested. The accused used to upload forged documents such as fake Pattadar passbooks, 1-B, Adangal, Aadhaar cards, PAN cards, and other false details on government websites like Webland. After securing the loans, they would then delete the fraudulent details from the websites.**

including selecting fake farmers and taking loans in their names from the bank. Eleven of them have been identified and arrested. The accused used to upload forged documents such as fake Pattadar passbooks, 1-B, Adangal, Aadhaar cards, PAN cards, and other false details on government websites like Webland. After securing the loans, they would then delete the fraudulent details from the websites.

Among the arrested were people who played key roles in the scam, including Mandru Seetharamanjaneyulu, who created fake passbooks, and Avula Tirupati Reddy, who fabricated PAN cards by altering Aadhaar card details. Thiruvvedhula Yogayya and Turumella Venkata Sandeep provided fake farmers required for loan sanctioning, while Bollinedi Ravikumar, the former GDCC Prathipadu Branch Manager, and Garnepudi Levi, the former Machavaram MRO, offered technical advice and assistance.

On Thursday, the police arrested the following people: Somepalli Nagaraju, Jillellamudi Prabhakar, Thiruvvedhula Yogayya, Mundru Seetharamanjaneyulu, Sunkara Venkateswarlu, Turumella Venkata Sandeep, Nimalapuri Srinivasa Rao, Anavam Nageswara Rao, Bathula Lakshmi Narayana, Avula Tirupati Reddy, and Garnepudi Levi, a retired MRO.

**2 arrested for organising cricket betting, ₹8L seized**

PNS ■ ONGOLE

The police have arrested two individuals for organising cricket betting and seized Rs 8 lakh in Naguluppapadu village.

DSP R. Srinivasa Rao informed the media on Thursday that, acting on a tip-off about two persons involved in organising cricket betting, the police conducted a raid at the village and arrested Kota Vijay Krishna and Chikkala Chakravarti.

Both individuals were organising cricket betting over

the phone. While on their way to Goa to establish links with cricket betting organisers in other states, the police apprehended them and seized Rs 8 lakh from their possession.

Kota Vijay Krishna is a notorious criminal with a history of involvement in several cases across Vizianagaram and Krishna districts. SP A. R. Damodhar lauded CI N. Srikanth Babu, SI B. Srikanth, and other officials for their role in arresting the cricket betting gang members.



**Banned tobacco products seized**

PNS ■ ONGOLE

The police seized a large quantity of banned tobacco products on Swarna Road within the One Town police station limits in Chirala on Thursday.

A police team, led by Circle Inspector Srinivasa Rao, conducted a raid at a godown in the area and discovered banned tobacco products, including gutka, stored in 50 bags.

The police seized the bags containing the banned gutka and other tobacco products, with an estimated value of Rs 7.5 lakh.

**YSRCP slams govt for negligence over Tirupati stampede**

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) has expressed deep anguish over the tragic stampede in Tirupati and held the coalition government responsible for the loss of lives, accusing it of negligence and political interference that compromised the sanctity of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD).

At separate press conferences, former Minister RK Roja, MLA Busineni Virupakshi, YSRCP Guntur district president Ambati Rambabu, and former LIDCAP chairman Kakumanu Rajashekar criticised the ruling coalition government, TTD officials, and other key individuals for administrative lapses that led to the tragedy.

Former Minister RK Roja blamed the government for its failure to manage the massive influx of devotees despite prior knowledge of the expected crowd size. She called the incident a case of "criminal negligence" and demanded a transparent investigation under BNS-105, which addresses criminal liability. Roja also sought Rs.1 crore compensation for the families of the deceased and Rs.25 lakh for the injured, along with the resignation

of TTD Chairman B.R. Naidu and other responsible officials. Roja pointed out the lack of basic amenities such as food and water for devotees waiting in long queues and accused officials of prioritising political events over public safety.

Alur MLA Busineni Virupakshi expressed his anguish, accusing the TTD leadership of turning temple administration into a political platform. He demanded accountability from Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan, and TTD Chairman B.R. Naidu. "Who will take moral responsibility for these deaths?" he asked, demanding immediate resignations and corrective actions.

Virupakshi also criticised Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan for his silence on the issue and urged the coalition government to prioritise public welfare over political interests.

Former Minister Ambati Rambabu echoed these sentiments, holding the ruling coalition responsible for misgovernance and the politicisation of temple administration. He accused Chief Minister Naidu of appointing TTD Chairman BR Naidu based on political loyalty rather than merit.

**GUV APPROVES BHU BHARATI ACT**

**Will come into force soon, assures Ponguleti**

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Governor Jishnu Dev Varma has approved the Bhu Bharati Act (ROR Act-2024) and the government will bring the Act into force as soon as possible, Revenue, Housing and Information and PR Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy said. The government will provide effective revenue services from now on, he added.

Ponguleti asked officials to implement the historic Bhu Bharati Act cleared by Governor Jishnu Dev Varma as soon as possible. He said the Bhu Bharati Act is being introduced to provide comprehensive revenue services to Telangana's people.

"On behalf of the government, I extend special thanks to the Governor for approving the Bhu Bharati Act to provide a permanent solution to land problems. On behalf of landowners, I would like to express my special thanks to Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, who has provided all

possible assistance to introduce this law, to all my fellow Cabinet members, public representatives, officers and staff who worked day and night, as well as to the intellectuals who gave many suggestions to enact this law. Thanks to everyone behind this law," he said.

He said the Bhu Bharati Act was introduced by consolidating public opinion and its main objective is to serve commoners. Officials were told to pay special attention to formulating the procedures connected to this law, he said. A copy of the Bhu Bharati Bill, approved by the Governor, was handed over to the Minister by Naveen Mittal, the Principal Secretary of Revenue at the Secretariat on Thursday.

Ponguleti said that due to the Revenue Act-2020 commoners were facing many problems in Telangana. "Even three years after the passing of the Act, rules were not framed and as a result there is no village in Telangana without land disputes.

ACROSS THE STATES



Six surrendered naxals produced before NIA court

Six naxals who surrendered in the presence of Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on December 8 were produced before a special court of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) here on Thursday. They underwent medical examinations at the Victoria hospital in the city, before the court proceedings. The Chikkamagaluru police escorted the surrendered Maoists to the NIA special court. While the three women were kept at the Mahila Santwana Kendra near Dairy Circle, the three men were lodged at the FSL special cell in Madiwala. The surrendered group includes Mundagaru Latha and Vanajakshi from Chikkamagaluru, Sundari from Kotlur in Dakshina Kannada, Jisha from Kerala, Vasanth K from Tamil Nadu, and Marappa Aroli from Raichur. According to officials, the ultras handed over their uniforms and a formal surrender letter to the CM, signalling a shift away from insurgency towards integration into mainstream society.



What is the solution for air pollution : HC

The Bombay High Court on Thursday wondered if there would be a solution for air pollution in the city or if citizens have to continue seeing haze each year after Diwali. It also suggested that bakeries should be prohibited from using wood and coal and banned for CNG and electric cars. A division bench of Chief Justice D K Upadhyaya and Justice Girish Kulkarni said while all authorities are broadly aware of the problems and the reasons behind Mumbai's depleting Air Quality Index (AQI), the solution and measures to be taken need to be arrived at immediately. The bench had in 2023 taken suo moto (on its own) cognisance of the poor air quality in the city and state. On Thursday, the court noted that each year the situation is the same after Diwali. "What is the solution in such situations? All this starts every year after Diwali. Broadly we know the problems and the causes."



Centre ignoring Dallewal's indefinite fast: SKM

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha on Thursday slammed the Centre, accusing it of ignoring the ongoing fast-unto-death of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal and asked it to hold talks with the protesting farmers. In a 'Kisan Mahapanchayat' at Moga in Punjab, the SKM said the draft of the National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing (NPFAM) announced by the Union government is "a dangerous form of re-enforcing the now-repealed three farm laws." It announced to burn the copies of the draft policy on January 13 and take out a tractor march on January 26. The SKM held the second 'Kisan Mahapanchayat' within a week to express their anger against the NPFAM, alleging it will "destroy" the mandi system if it is implemented. The first 'mahapanchayat' was held at Tohana in Haryana on January 4. The SKM leaders also lashed out at the AAP government in Punjab for not calling a session of the state Assembly for rejecting the draft policy on agricultural marketing.

India captured my heart, says US envoy Garcetti

US ambassador to India Eric Garcetti on Thursday described his tenure in the country as the "most extraordinary", and said India captured his heart. During his interaction with select media representatives on the sidelines of a programme here, he said the relationship between India and the US holds "endless possibilities". Garcetti, whose term as the US ambassador to India is ending soon, said his stint in the country was the most extraordinary job of his life. "This was to be in the right place at the right time with the right relationship," he said. "President Joe Biden had said India was the most important country in the world to him and if you want to work on the future, you need to come to India. No US president has ever said this," he said.



'Genome India data will help develop precision medicines'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Genome sequencing data of 10,000 Indians will now be available to researchers to develop precision medicines tailored for the local population, a step hailed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a "milestone" in biotechnology research.

In a video-recorded statement to the Genomics Data Conclave here, Modi said the national database encapsulated the extraordinary genetic landscape of the country and promised to serve as an invaluable scientific resource.

The Genome India Data, that represents the genetic diversity in the country, will be available to researchers at the Indian Biological Data Centre (IBDC) through "managed access". "The GenomeIndia Project is an important milestone in the biotechnology revolution in India. I am told that through this project we have succeeded in creating a diverse genetic resource in the country," Modi said.

At the conclave organised by the Department of Biotechnology, Science and Technology Minister Jitendra Singh unveiled the 'Framework for Exchange of Data (FeED) Protocols' for sharing of genetic data with researchers.

Singh also launched the



"The GenomeIndia Project is an important milestone in the biotechnology revolution in India. I am told that through this project we have succeeded in creating a diverse genetic resource in the country," Modi said

'Indian Biological Data Centre (IBDC) DATA Access Portal' and unveiled the 'Call for proposals on Genome India Data'.

"This will help in understanding the unique genomic

patterns of the Indian population. And only then can we prepare special solutions or effective medicines for a specific problem of a particular group," the prime minister said.

Modi said in India, researchers were still unaware of several illnesses that are transferred from one generation to the next and the GenomeIndia Project will help in the development of effective treatment for all such diseases.

The prime minister noted that the GenomeIndia Project was launched in 2020 and scientists from 20 research institutes worked through the Covid pandemic on the whole genome sequencing of 10,000

Indians.

"It will facilitate advancements in the treatment of genetic and infectious diseases, foster the development of new medications and precision medical techniques, and enable research into the lifestyles and habits of diverse communities," Modi said.

The prime minister said the world was looking towards India for solutions to global problems. "This is both a responsibility and an opportunity for our coming generations. Therefore, today a very large research ecosystem is being created in India. In the last 10 years, a lot of emphasis has been given to research and innovation at every level of education," he said. Modi said India has established its identity as a major pharma hub of the world and has taken many revolutionary steps regarding public healthcare in the past decade.

Principal Scientific Adviser Prof. Ajay Kumar Sood, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Director General and Secretary, Department of Health Research Rajiv Bahl, and Secretary in Department of Biotechnology Rajesh S Gokhale were present on the occasion.

Sood said the GenomeIndia Project data will create a precious national resource for India's public health.



Kejriwal accuses BJP of manipulating electoral roll

FILES COMPLAINT WITH EC

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

AAP supreme Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday lodged a complaint with the Election Commission, alleging that the BJP has manipulated the electoral roll in the New Delhi assembly constituency from where he is contesting the upcoming elections.

Kejriwal alleged that people associated with the BJP applied to add 13,000 new voters in the electoral roll and they sought to cancel 5,500 voter entries to "influence" the voting in its favour. The former Delhi chief minister visited the Election Commission (EC) on Thursday to lodge a complaint against these alleged malpractices.

Addressing the media after meeting EC officials, Kejriwal

said, "In the past 22 days, 5,500 applications have been received for deletion of voter names in the New Delhi constituency. There are about one lakh voters in this constituency, meaning applications to remove 5.5 per cent of the electorate have been filed in just 22 days." "This raises serious concerns, as when the Election Commission contacted some of these people, they denied submitting such applications. All 89 individuals contacted stated they had not filed any requests. It clearly indicates a scam," he said.

Kejriwal further highlighted the sudden surge in voter registration applications. "In the last 15 days, applications for adding 13,000 new voters have been received.

Modi govt has made GST a means of 'looting' poor: Kharge

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Thursday alleged that the Narendra Modi government has made the Goods and Services Tax (GST) a means of "looting" the hard-earned money of the poor and middle class and demanded that it end this "tax terrorism" and "loot" in the upcoming Union Budget.

Kharge further alleged that nine types of rates make GST "complex and absurd" and not a "good and simple tax".

"Call it 'Gabbar Singh Tax' or 'Household Destruction Tax' or 'Give Sitharaman Tax'! Whatever name we call BJP's GST, one thing is certain -- the Modi government has made



GST a means of looting the hard-earned money of the poor and the middle class," he said in a post in Hindi on X.

The GST is a tax on public consumption, said the Congress chief, adding that the

Modi government rubs salt into their wounds by celebrating record GST collections.

"Two-thirds of the total GST -- i.e. 64 per cent -- comes from the pockets of the poor and the middle class but only 3 per cent

GST is collected from the billionaires. The Corporate Tax rate has been reduced from 30 per cent to 22 per cent," he said.

Kharge said GST has been imposed on 36 agricultural products of farmers for the first time. Even 18 per cent GST has to be paid on the premiums of Life Insurance and Health Insurance, he said.

The Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha also said Income Tax collection increased by 240 per cent and GST collection increased by 177 per cent in the last five years.

"The Congress party demands that in the upcoming general budget, the Modi government should put an end to 'tax terrorism' and looting of the public," Kharge said in his post.

Bangladesh rejects allegations of mistreatment of Indian fishermen

PNS ■ DHAKA

Bangladesh on Thursday rejected as "baseless and fabricated" the allegations about mistreatment of Indian fishermen, an apparent reference to recent remarks by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Expressing its "utter dismay and deep disappointment," Bangladesh Foreign Ministry also urged "all parties" to avoid such unfounded accusations that undermine the "spirit of bilateral cooperation and mutual respect".

Banerjee had on Monday alleged that some of the 95 fishermen, who were released by Bangladesh recently, were beaten up in jail.

"I found some of them were limping. When asked, the fishermen told me that they were assaulted in jail with their hands tied. As a result, they

have injuries below the waist and the legs... They were crying while talking to me," Banerjee had said at the felicitation of the released fishermen. They were arrested for illegally entering Bangladesh waters more than two months ago. Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry on Thursday termed as "baseless and fabricated" the allegations of mistreatment of its fishermen detained in Bangladesh, and urged "all parties" to avoid making such unfounded accusations that undermine the spirit of bilateral cooperation and mutual respect.

JEE-ADVANCED SC agrees to hear plea against cut in exam attempts

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday agreed to examine a plea against bringing down from three to two, the attempts given to Joint Entrance Examination (JEE)-Advanced aspirants.

When the plea came up before a bench of Justices B R Gavai and Augustine George Masih, the petitioner's counsel said, "This matter pertains to the IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) admission entrance examination in which the number of attempts have been reduced from three to



two." The lawyer said a similar plea was listed before the bench on January 10 following which the court directed both to be tagged. The fresh plea, filed through advocate Sanjeet Kumar Trivedi, said it related to the process for admissions into the prestigious IITs but the

joint admission board (JAB), entrusted to conduct the JEE-Advanced exam, changed the eligibility criteria for students in an "arbitrary" manner.

"The JAB, vide its press release dated November 5, 2024, first fixed the permissible number of attempts for JEE-Advanced at three, only to change it abruptly vide another press release dated November 18, 2024, and thereby reducing the number of attempts to two," the plea said. "The abrupt changes in the eligibility criteria," it said, "has affected the petitioner as well as thousands of similarly situated persons denying them a valuable opportunity to enter the IITs."

Too many power centres in Raj govt causing confusion: Pilot

PNS ■ JAIPUR

Congress leader Sachin Pilot on Thursday said people of Rajasthan are suffering due to the confusion caused by too many power centres in the state's BJP government.

He claimed that the BJP ministers and the state government often give conflicting statements and there is no clear policy. "People are suffering due to too many power centres in the BJP government of the state. Ministers in the government say something and the government says something else," Pilot told reporters here.



Highlighting the issue of the sub-inspector recruitment exam-2021, Pilot said the government is completely confused as its ministers say that they will get the exam cancelled whereas the government denies it. The people are

suffering due to the deadlock within the government. There should be a clear policy. It has been so many months since this has been going on, he said. "Whether it is the SI recruitment or other examinations, the state of uncertainty and indecision in it creates confusion among the public," he said.

Pilot said there is resentment among the people of the state due to the decisions taken by the BJP government in the last year. He said that Congress will raise the issue related to the people in the Assembly and seek a reply from the government.

'India's contribution to civilization remarkable'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

President of Trinidad and Tobago Christine Kara Kagaloo on Thursday said India has made some of the "greatest contributions" to the world civilization in various fields such as mathematics, medicine and navigation.

Addressing the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, 2025 convention virtually as the chief guest, Kagaloo said, "India's contributions to the world's development are remarkable. The world's first university was established in Takshashila in 700 BC."

Stating that Ayurveda is widely acknowledged as an earlier school of medicine, she said that the art of navigation was born in the Sindhu river about 6,000 years ago.



"Algebra, trigonometry and calculus were also first developed in India," she said.

This apart, Kagaloo also noted that India was the first

country of civilization which used the symbol zero (0) in arithmetic operations. The game of chess is also believed to have originated in eastern

India while the decimal system is widely acknowledged to have been developed in India.

"And India's very own Shushruta is widely acknowl-

edged to be the father of surgery," she said. India is one of the countries that established diplomatic relations with Trinidad and Tobago following the country's independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, Kagaloo said. "Our country's ties with India, however, long precedes that. Our relationship goes back to 1845 when the first ship carrying 225 Indians reached the shores of Trinidad and Tobago, then a British colony," she said.

Nearly 72 unbroken years thereafter, more than 1,43,000 Indians came from cities and states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and many others, reshaping the social, demographic, economic and cultural landscape of Trinidad and Tobago forever, the Trinidad and Tobago President

said. "They were a fascinating mix of people - languages, tradition and belief system, all united in a new life," Kagaloo said. Lauding India's efforts in holding the PBD, she said that over the last two decades, this convention has been collaborating between India and its diaspora.

Kagaloo thanked India for conferring the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman (award), the government and the people of India give powerful expression to the commitment to strengthen the ties between India and all of its children throughout the world," she said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Breaking ice

The India-Afghanistan talks reflect India's shift from non-recognition of the Taliban to a pragmatic approach to engagement

In a significant step towards recalibrating ties, India and the Taliban-led Afghan government held a high-level meeting in Dubai. The dialogue, attended by India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, revolved around enhancing bilateral relations and addressing regional challenges.



gain relevance amidst regional tensions, notably Pakistan's airstrikes in Afghanistan, which New Delhi strongly condemned. This shared concern over Islamabad's destabilising actions further aligns Indian and Afghan interests, fostering mutual cooperation.

The Dubai meeting covered a wide range of topics. India reaffirmed its commitment to aiding Afghanistan's recovery. It pledged continued support in healthcare, food security, and disaster relief, building on its earlier contributions, such as 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat, medical supplies, and vaccines.

Importance of Chabahar Port in Iran as a key trade and humanitarian supply route. The port offers Afghanistan access to global markets, bypassing Pakistan, and could serve as a stabilising economic lifeline for the war-torn country. India has expressed readiness to resume developmental activities, including infrastructure and capacity-building projects.

PICTALK



A commuter rides his bicycle through a mustard field on a winter morning, in Nadia

Navigating Trump redux: India's tightrope



BHOPINDER SINGH

While Trump's focus on countering China could strengthen Indo-US strategic ties, his erratic temperament and divisive policies present challenges

In India, there is a mix of excitement, tentativeness, and even concern, with the second coming of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. While Trump's excitable temperament is well known, he ought to be served better with hindsight of experience.



A lot will depend on 'Team Trump' who will aid and assist Trump as he attempts the shape his poll promises of MAGA i.e., Make America Great Again! However, unlike the first term when he did inherit and heed reputation and professionalism as the criteria for key jobs in the Trump administration (though subsequently, he developed a penchant for 'revolving door' ousters of many), this time the criteria only seem to be 'loyalty' to Trump, personally.

is' instinct embolden Beijing to finally bite the bullet on Taiwan and storm the same, knowing that beyond mouthing platitudes, Washington DC will not intervene militarily? The picture emerging out of a beleaguered (and potentially isolated) Ukraine does not seem reassuring from a security angle, as the possibility of America pushing its 'allies' under the bus, seems very plausible.



THERE IS A DISCONCERTING AND CONTRADICTION LOGIC TO MANY RECENT APPOINTMENTS THAT BEGS THE QUESTION IF IT INDEED WILL BE 'BUSINESS AS USUAL' - SOMETHING DELHI HAD GOT USED TO, IRRESPECTIVE OF THE DISPENSATION IN WASHINGTON DC

engagement and conversations, as the Indian democracy has its dynamics and imagined perceptions that will disallow unruly comments, even if they were to come from the USA. Adding to the complexity is the contradiction that many amongst this new Trump cabinet are trigger-happy interventionists (e.g., Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Elise Stefanik the Ambassador to UN etc.) a la neoconservatives whom Trump rubbish repeatedly - how this contradiction will manifest will be interesting.

rifying ability to shed responsibilities towards his allies (sovereign, coalition, and even personal) and also his moral responsibility by readily abandoning its vital geostrategic stakes (remember Afghanistan, and now Syria) with a thoughtless shrug of the shoulder and "not my problem" approach. This tests the will to invest in a transactional relationship like the one offered by Trump, as no support can be construed for sure.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA'S GDP GAP WITH CHINA WIDENS

Madam - An analysis of the economies done by a start-up highlights the pressing necessity to boost India's lacklustre growth. In 1980, India's Gross Domestic Product was \$186 billion, close to China's \$303 billion. But, by 2024, India's GDP had grown 21 times to \$3.93 trillion, while China's GDP had surged to \$18.5 trillion-61 times its 1980 level.

India's AI gets a leg-up



A golden chapter has begun in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in India. The announcement by Microsoft Chairman and CEO Satya Nadella to invest \$3 billion (approximately Rs 25,000 crores) marks a historic step toward elevating India's technological capabilities to new heights.

Modi's 'Digital India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (Self-Reliant India). The Government of India is already committed to promoting digital infrastructure, skill development, and startups.

The initiative to train 10 million Indians in AI over the next five years is a significant step to prepare the youth for global competition. This effort will create new opportunities in areas such as cloud infrastructure, data centres, and SaaS (Software as a Service).

How India's healthcare sector is accelerating towards Viksit Bharat 2047



P N ARORA

As India embarks on its journey toward becoming a \$35 trillion economy by 2047, the healthcare sector emerges as a critical pillar in this transformation.

As India aims to achieve its ambitious goal of becoming a \$35 trillion economy by 2047, the healthcare sector stands as the cornerstone of this transformation. With aspirations to increase the average life expectancy from 71 to over 85, India's vision of Viksit Bharat aligns closely with the sentiment of "Swasth Bharat, Viksit Bharat, and Niramaya Bharat."



Viksit Bharat 2047 journey builds upon substantial achievements in the healthcare sector. Since independence, the nation has witnessed notable reductions in neonatal, infant, under-five, and maternal mortality rates, reflecting improved healthcare outcomes.

India's pharmaceutical leadership has further solidified the country's position as a global healthcare contributor. As a leading producer of vaccines and generic medicines, the nation plays a pivotal role in ensuring global healthcare equity. Coupled with its steadily increasing medical tourism industry, India continues to attract patients worldwide, offering advanced care at affordable costs.

emphasis on preventive care, mental health, and holistic wellness. The transition from mass-produced to biotech-based personalized medicine, supported by advancements in CRISPR and nano-technology, is set to redefine pharmaceutical practices. India's healthcare system is also poised to transform its business models, shifting from predominantly out-of-pocket expenses to public and insurance-funded frameworks.

As part of its vision, the government strives to establish a healthcare system capable of addressing the diverse needs of a population exceeding 1.4 billion. Not only are efforts underway to improve physician and hospital bed ratios, expand access to affordable healthcare, and ensure universal health insurance coverage but the inclusion of senior citizens over 70 years through the Ayushman Bharat Vay Vandana Card highlights the commitment to an inclusive healthcare approach. India's

Role of the Pharmaceutical Sector

STAMPEDE AT TIRUPATI TEMPLE

Madam - Six devotees, including four women, and many injured in a stampede near Vishnu Niwasam in Tirupati for getting tokens to visit Tirumala Srivari Vaikuntha Dwara is disturbing, tragic and appalling. A huge rush for getting tokens by devotees had caused the tragedy. But this accident at Tirupathy is unfortunate and could have been avoided.

EARTHQUAKE IN TIBET

Madam - Powerful Tibet earthquake near Nepal kills 53, injures 62; tremors also felt in Bhutan and northern India, including Delhi-NCR and parts of Bihar. The impact of the temblor was felt across the region of 800,000 people, which is administered by Shigatse, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, one of the most important figures in Tibetan Buddhism.

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

TRUMP 2.0: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ASEAN

With Trump's return, Southeast Asia finds itself bracing for another era of US ambiguity



KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

With the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency, Southeast Asia braces for another era of unpredictability in American foreign policy. Southeast Asian nations, while expressing formal congratulations following Trump's victory, are now focusing on how his administration will impact their economies and strategic interests.



post-pandemic era, as China and ASEAN emerged as each other's largest trade partners. The direction of US-China relations will have profound consequences for Southeast Asia's economic stability and security.

Delhi is trying to rebuild bilateral relationships with several ASEAN groups of countries, even as it participates with full vigour on the multilateral platform. The chief guest for 2025 Republic Day would be the President of Indonesia, a key country in ASEAN.

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

The courage to tell untold stories on the celluloid



SANTANU GANGULY

Despite the challenges, a new wave of filmmakers continues to illuminate untold stories, challenging entrenched narratives and bringing forgotten truths to light



Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has praised the film The Sabarmati Report produced by Ekta Kapoor and her Balaji Motion Pictures. Before this also PM has been praised for films - The Kashmir Files and The Kerala Story.



SINCE THE LAST MANY YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A TENDENCY AMONG THE LIBERALS, THAT WHENEVER THE HINDUS ARE THE VICTIM, THE STORIES HAVE BEEN BURIED WITH ALL EXTRA EFFORTS SO THAT THE SO-CALLED PEACE SHOULD BE MAINTAINED IN SOCIETY

But not all filmmakers are lucky enough; forget about PM's praise to release their films, get proper distribution channels or theatres, or the cooperation from the local authorities, governments and positive reviews by film critics. It is almost swimming against the tide.

Even if there has been immense loss of human lives, property, rape of women, and permanent displacement from the homeland, nothing is much more impor-

tant than the pseudo ideology of keeping peace in the society to just appease the particular community.

That is why so far whatever films have been made on the partition of India very few films portrayed the true stories. Most of the films are sugar-coated to portray that the victims belong to both communities and it was a loss for everyone.

Filmmaker M K Shivaaksh made the film Accident or Conspiracy: Godhra which is based on the infamous case of Godhra in Gujarat, where fifty-six Ram devotees were burnt alive in a train coach of the Sabarmati Express by one particular community. Again the film became the victim of the ecosystem and got a very limited release so the film can't be seen by many people in the country.

He had planned to release his film Accident or Conspiracy: Godhra in February but the censor board delayed the process for seven months. They have asked for literally all the evidence and the makers have provided all the related evidence based on the

Nanavati - Mehta Commission Report, Court Verdicts, eyewitness records as well as all the supporting documents.

To study the material the censor board took seven months and even after that they gave the certificate where they chopped about fifty per cent of the content, informed Shivaaksh. Unfortunately, some renowned actors also took advantage of the situation from these novice young independent filmmakers to bully them, those who have good connections with the government agencies as well as some strong political backing.

Pushendra Singh director of Ajmer 92, Kamal Chandra director of Humare Baraah and Shivaaksh, all of them have the same terrible experiences with some of their actors. Akashaditya Lama's Bengal 1947 described the hardships faced by the displaced Hindu refugees from the then East Pakistan now Bangladesh to the completely unknown, unfamiliar terrain of present days Chhatisgarh.

A few political leaders' high ambitions divided the country into three different territories and created devastating for the crores of innocent people in the country. The film was released in very limited theatres. Akashaditya said that when he made the film in Chhatisgarh, the then Congress government helped him a lot

without imposing many terms and conditions, then Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, told him only not to show Pundit Nehru in a bad light.

Even a cabinet minister came to receive the shooting team at the airport, and arranged the full-proof security for the entire team, with overwhelming hospitality. By the time the film got ready to release BJP government came to power in Chhatisgarh, but unfortunately, the film never got any special attention or tax rebate from the local government.

However, the films have been screened at various film festivals. In the same manner, another film The Diary of West Bengal directed by Sanoj Mishra has suffered massively at the hands of the government and political elements of West Bengal. Finally, the film was released, which too a very limited release by the order of the court. All of these films are not only talking of the great human rights violations by one particular religious community towards the majority Hindu community but also these films are unbiased, true documentation of time a political era as well as the impact on society.

(The writer is a Delhi based Film Festival curator. The views expressed are personal)

What gaming regulation can learn from SEBI'S F&O regulations

India's gaming sector stands at a critical juncture. Thoughtful regulation can help it realise its immense potential while safeguarding consumers

Two seemingly disparate sectors—India's gaming industry and capital markets—are drawing significant attention in public policy discourse. Both sectors hold immense promise: gaming contributes to job creation, while capital markets foster capital formation.



MANDAR KAGADE

around 568 million players—and employing 15,000 developers. The sector's revenue is projected to grow from \$3 billion in 2023 to \$6 billion by 2028, potentially creating 250,000 new jobs over the next decade.

The Opportunities and Challenges: India is a global gaming hub, housing 40 per cent of the world's gamers—

on balanced regulation, particularly concerning gaming's habit-forming nature. Unfortunately, current proposals by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), and other stakeholders lean toward rigid, prescriptive measures, drawing inspiration from China's heavy-handed regulatory framework.

Flaws in Current Gaming Regulation

1. Time and Age Restrictions: Proposals to impose strict time limits and age restrictions on gaming apps are touted as innovative but raise significant concerns. Forcing intermediaries to monitor minors' activities infringes on privacy and contravenes the data minimi-

sation principle of India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA). Such policies may inadvertently lead to surveillance overreach, compromising minors' online privacy.

Parents, who have a far greater vested interest in their children's wellbeing, are better positioned to manage their gaming habits. Handing this responsibility to unelected bureaucrats not only undermines parental discretion but also risks creating intrusive and overly broad policies.

2. Blanket Warnings and Advertising Restrictions

The Ministry of Education's 2021 advisory linking online gaming to "gaming disorder" is an overgeneralisation. Such broad statements, without clinical substantiation, stigmatise



gaming and equate it with gambling. Similarly, ASCI's restrictions on advertisements portraying gaming as a viable career path stifle creativity. These measures lump educational and cerebral games with gambling-like activities, dis-incentivising developers from creating "good habit-forming" games. This could slow innovation and limit the gaming sector's growth potential.

Learning from SEBI'S Approach to F&O Regulation

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) faced a similar challenge with F&O trading, where explosive volumes exposed retail investors to speculative risks. Instead of resorting to outright bans.

Key Steps by SEBI:

Increased Contract Sizes: Raising the minimum investment size by 50 per cent reduced speculative trading by retail investors.

Disclosure Requirements: Brokers were mandated to display potential downsides prominently, promoting informed decision-making.

Structural Adjustments: Limiting weekly expiries to one per exchange curbed excessive speculative activity. These steps exemplify a bal-

anced approach—relying on nudges and incentives rather than bans. SEBI recognised that heavy-handed policies could undermine broader goals, such as increasing equity market participation.

India's gaming sector can benefit from SEBI's measured approach to F&O regulation. Policymakers must embrace strategies that balance innovation, consumer protection, and industry growth. Here are three actionable recommendations:

1. Nudges and Incentives Over Mandates

Rather than micromanaging user behavior, regulators can incentivise responsible gaming through voluntary measures. For instance, gaming platforms could offer rewards for adhering to healthy gaming limits.

2. Transparent Education Over Stigma

Policymakers should prioritise honest disclosures about gaming's potential downsides instead of messaging that fosters shame. Clear and factual communication can empower gamers to make informed choices without demonising the industry.

3. Consideration of Unintended Consequences

A tunnel-vision approach risks stifling innovation and creating barriers to growth. Policymakers must evaluate how restrictive measures might deter investment, hinder creativity, or drive users to unregulated platforms.

(The writer is Founder & Principal, Black Dot Public Policy Advisors; views are personal)

## IN BRIEF



### Gold rises to Rs 80,300 on global cues

Gold price climbed Rs 300 for a third consecutive session to Rs 80,300 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid strong global cues, according to the All India Sarafa Association. Traders said the precious metal surged, following news that People's Bank of China (PBoC) increased its reserves for the second consecutive month. In the previous session, the yellow metal of 99.9 per cent purity ended at Rs 80,000 per 10 grams. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity rose Rs 300 to Rs 79,900 per 10 grams on Thursday. Silver rose by Rs 500 to Rs 93,000 per kg from the previous close of Rs 92,500 per kg on Wednesday. Additionally, gold contracts for February delivery climbed Rs 247 or 0.32 per cent to Rs 77,994 per 10 grams in futures trade on the MCX.



### Lupin gets USFDA nod for generic medicine

Pharma major Lupin Ltd on Thursday said it has received tentative approval from the US health regulator to market its generic version of Ivacaftor oral granules used in treatment of cystic fibrosis. The approval granted by the US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) is for the abbreviated new drug application for Ivacaftor oral granules of strengths 25 mg, 50 mg, and 75 mg per unit dose packet, Lupin said in a statement. These are the generic equivalent of 'Kalydeco' oral granules, 25 mg, 50 mg, and 75 mg, of Vertex Pharmaceuticals Incorporated. "Lupin is the exclusive first-to-file for this product and may be eligible for 180 days of generic drug exclusivity," the company said, adding that the product would be manufactured at its Nagpur facility. Ivacaftor oral granules, 25 mg, 50 mg and 75 mg per unit dose packet are indicated for the treatment of cystic fibrosis (CF) in patients aged four months and older who have at least one mutation in the 'CFTR' gene that is responsive to Ivacaftor.



### SAIL supplies 45,000 tonnes of steel for Kumbh Mela

SAIL, country's largest steel maker, on Thursday said it has supplied approximately 45,000 tonnes of steel for the upcoming Mahakumbh Mela which is one of the biggest religious congregations in the world. Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh will host the Maha Kumbh Mela from January 13 to February 25. The total quantity of steel supplied includes chequered plates, hot strip mill plates, mild steel plates, angles and joists, the state-owned firm said in a statement. Steel Authority of India Ltd (SAIL) had also supplied steel during the Mahakumbh Mela of 2013. The steel supplied by SAIL will play an important role in supporting the construction of various temporary structures essential for the smooth conduct of the Mahakumbh Mela. These include pontoon bridges, passages, temporary steel bridges, substations and flyovers, the statement said. Major customers for this steel supply, include the Public Works Department, Uttar Pradesh State Bridges Corporation, Electricity Board and their suppliers.

## 'WILL HIT RS 20,000 CR IN 3 YEARS'

# India aims to boost organic products exports: Goyal

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India has the potential to increase exports of organic products up to Rs 20,000 crore in the next three years, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Thursday.

He said this while releasing the eighth edition of National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) with new regulations aimed at enhancing clarity and transparency in organic product standards as well as aligning with global standards.

"Currently, our organic product exports are at Rs 5,000-6,000 crore. In the next three years, we can easily achieve Rs 20,000 crore exports, about 3-3.5 times increase from the current level," Goyal said at an event organised in partnership with industry body Ficci.

He said the global demand for these products is about Rs 1 lakh crore, which can grow up to Rs 10 lakh crore in the coming years, a unique opportunity India should not miss. India already has one of the largest numbers of farmers in the world undertaking organ-



**"Currently, our organic product exports are at Rs 5,000-6,000 crore. In the next three years, we can easily achieve Rs 20,000 crore exports, about 3-3.5 times increase from the current level," Goyal said**

ic farming.

He also asked startups to come out with solutions that help in growth of the sector.

The NPOP has undergone several revisions since its inception in May 2001. The eighth edition marks a significant update to the regulatory framework governing organic products in India, with the last revision occurring in 2014.

Key features of the eighth edition of NPOP include farmer-friendly regulations, streamlined certification, enhanced transparency and revamped traceability system. The eighth edition aims to bolster India's organic export

sector, with an ambitious target of reaching USD 2 billion in organic food exports by 2030.

Ministers of State for Cooperation Krishan Pal Gurjar and Murlidhar Mohol, Minister of State for Commerce Jitin Prasada and Cooperation Secretary Ashish Kumar Bhutani were also present at the event.

NPOP plays a crucial role in enhancing the credibility of organic products in both national and international markets. It ensures that agricultural products labelled as "organic" meet stringent standards, thereby protecting con-

sumer interests and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

It is overseen by the Commerce Ministry, with the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) managing its implementation.

TraceNet 2.0, an upgraded traceability platform of NPOP for seamless operations and enhanced tools for regulatory oversight, was also launched.

On the occasion, a dedicated NPOP portal was launched for more visibility and ease of Operations for Organic stakeholders.

## 'Freebies or better amenities, choice rests with citizens'

PNS ■ PANAJI

People have to decide if they want freebies or better roads, good drainage system and improved water supply, said economist and 16th Finance Commission Chairman Arvind Panagariya on Thursday.

He was interacting with the media here after a meeting between a delegation of the commission and top ministers and officials from Goa.

To a question about states allegedly utilising funds allocated for infrastructure for distributing freebies, Panagariya said if the money is given for projects, then it has to be used for those works. However, in a democracy, the elected government makes the final decision, he added.

"The decisions are not made by the Finance Commission. The Finance Commission can

raise the issue in the overall interest of macroeconomic stability. The commission can say something at the general level but cannot control how states choose to spend the amount," he said.

The onus finally lies with the citizens as they elect governments, said Panagariya.

"If citizens vote for a government based on freebies, then they are asking for freebies. Ultimately, the citizens should decide whether they want better amenities, better roads, better sewerage, better water or these freebies transferred to your bank accounts," he added.

During the meeting with the commission members, Goa officials sought a four-fold increase in the coastal state's share of funds from the divisible pool. Chief Minister Pramod Sawant and many of his ministerial attended the meeting held at a hotel in the Dona Paula area.



## Aim is to make India no.1 in auto segment: Gadkari

PNS ■ DHAR

Union minister Nitin Gadkari on Thursday highlighted the growth of the country's auto sector in the past few years, during which it became the third biggest player in the segment, and said the aim is to become number one.

"...our number was seventh in the world but we are third in the automobile sector... we surpassed Japan and now our number is third," Union Road Transport and Highways Minister said while addressing a function at National Automotive Test Tracks (NATRAX) here.

"The size of the USA automobile sector at the top (of the table) was Rs 78 lakh crore industry size, while that of China was Rs 47 lakh crore," Gadkari said. "When I took charge of the minister. The size of the industry was Rs 7.5 lakh crore and today its size is Rs 22 lakh crore."

## Markets tumble amid broad-based selloff

SENSEX SINKS BELOW 78K

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty tumbled nearly 1 per cent on Thursday due to heavy selling in market heavyweights HDFC Bank, TCS and Reliance as investors turned nervous over earnings growth concerns amid unabated foreign capital outflows.

Besides, abysmally low Chinese inflation data, an indication of poor demand, and a sell-off in US bonds added to the pressure, traders said. Sliding for the second straight day, the 30-share benchmark dropped 528.28 points or 0.68 per cent to sink below the 78,000 level at 77,620.21. During the day, it tanked 605.57 points or 0.77 per cent to 77,542.92.

The NSE Nifty slumped 162.45 points or 0.69 per cent to 23,526.50.

"The Indian stock market mirrored the decline across its Asian peers, with cautious



investor sentiment driven by a sell-off in US bonds. The US 10-year Treasury yield surged to its highest level since April 2024, signalling the expectation of fewer rate cuts by the Fed.

"Further, disappointing inflation data from China added pressure, indicating that recent stimulus measures have failed to rejuvenate one of the world's largest consumer markets," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

From the 30-share Sensex blue-chip pack, Tata Steel,

Zomato, Larsen & Toubro, Tata Motors, Adani Ports, Tata Consultancy Services, HDFC Bank and NTPC were the major laggards.

Nestle, Hindustan Unilever, Mahindra & Mahindra, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Asian Paints and Bharti Airtel were among the gainers.

Meanwhile, India's largest IT services company TCS reported an 11.95 per cent jump in net profit to Rs 12,380 crore for the December quarter. The financial results were announced after market hours.

The BSE smallcap gauge tanked 1.17 per cent while the midcap index declined 0.96 per cent.

Among BSE sectoral indices, realty slumped 2.90 per cent, oil & gas (2.19 per cent), energy (1.83 per cent), power (1.68 per cent), capital goods (1.54 per cent) and BSE Focused IT (1.14 per cent).

FMCG emerged as the only gainer.

## Adani-ISKCON to start 'Mahaprasad Seva'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Adani Group and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) have joined hands to serve meals to devotees at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj this year.

The Mahaprasad Seva will be offered for the entire duration of the Maha Kumbh Mela, from January 13 to February 26.

To thank ISKCON for this initiative, Adani Group chairman Gautam Adani on Thursday met Guru Prasad Swami, the Chairman of ISKCON Governing Body Commission (GBC).

Speaking about ISKCON's support in offering the



Mahaprasad Seva, Adani said, "Kumbh is a sacred place of seva, where every devotee gets involved in the name of seva to God. It is my good fortune that we are starting the 'Mahaprasad Seva' for the devotees at the Maha Kumbh in collaboration with ISKCON.

"With the blessings of Maa Annapurna, free food will be provided to lakhs of devotees. Today, I got the opportunity to meet Guru Prasad Swami ji of ISKCON and I deeply experienced the power of dedication towards seva. In the true sense, seva is the highest form of patriotism. Seva is meditation,

seva is prayer and seva is God."

Guru Prasad Swami, one of the outstanding preachers of the International Krishna Consciousness Society, said, "The Adani Group has always been a shining example of corporate responsibility and social service. What makes Gautam Adani ji outstanding is his humility -- he never waits to be called but moves forward to serve selflessly. We are extremely grateful for his contribution. His work inspires us to give back to the society and unite in the service of humanity."

The Mahaprasad Seva will be offered to 50 lakh devotees and the meals will be prepared in two kitchens in and outside the mela area.

## 'PVT LABELLING', FOOD DELIVERY VIA SEPARATE APPS

# NRAI to file complaint against Zomato, Swiggy

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Opposing "private labelling" by Zomato and Swiggy and their recent foray into quick commerce food delivery via separate apps, restaurant body NRAI on Thursday said it will file complaints with "relevant regulatory authorities" and initiate legal action to prevent them from monopolising the market.

According to NRAI, the entry of the two food delivery giants into delivering private

labelled food via their own quick commerce platforms such as Blinkit Bistro and Swiggy Snacc fundamentally violates marketplace neutrality, creating an uneven playing field.

Comments from Zomato and Swiggy could not be obtained as emailed queries remained unanswered.

NRAI President Sagar Daryani said, "What we are absolutely not okay with is Zomato and Swiggy doing private labelling and selling



food by themselves. In Zomato via Blinkit's separate

Bistro app and Swiggy launching Snacc for quick food deli-

very". "Zomato and Swiggy, originally established as marketplace platforms, are now leveraging their dominant positions and access to restaurant data to venture into private-label food delivery either directly or via their subsidiary. This strategy not only cannibalises the business of restaurants that rely on these platforms but also raises serious concerns under the Copyright Act and related laws," NRAI stated.

It further said the move

undermines the principles of fair competition and "poses a significant threat" to the viability of thousands of restaurants across India.

"We are committed to pursuing all available legal remedies to safeguard the interests of the restaurant industry.

This includes filing complaints with relevant regulatory authorities and initiating legal action to prevent Zomato and Swiggy from monopolising the market," it stated.

## 'Levy customs duty on broader industry categories'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Budget could consider levying customs duty on the basis of broader categories of the industry to reduce the number of tax rates, Price Waterhouse & Co LLP said on Thursday.

"The government may come out with different slabs for various products depending on where it is placed in the value chain. Goods may be categorised as Value added/primary and raw material/Intermediary and accordingly slab rates may be fixed," said Anurag Sehgal, Managing Director at Price Waterhouse & Co LLP.

The 2024-25 Budget had announced that a comprehensive review of the Customs Duty rate structure will be undertaken over the next six months to rationalise and simplify it for ease of trade, removal of duty inversion and

reduction of disputes.

To reduce classification disputes, the Budget had announced a review of the customs duty rates. Currently, there are more than a dozen customs duty rates and the government is looking at reducing the number of rate slabs.

The Budget for 2025-26 will be tabled in Parliament on February 1.

In its Budget expectation, Price Waterhouse & Co LLP also said that the current low 15 per cent tax on new companies should be extended to existing companies which are expanding their manufacturing facilities or making brownfield investments.

Price Waterhouse & Co LLP Partner (Corporate & International Tax) Sandeep Puri said the 15 per cent tax on new manufacturing companies, which was brought in October 2019, should be extended.





# what's brewing?

## Shreyas Talpade and Kajal Aggarwal begin filming *The India Story*



Filming has officially begun for *The India Story*, a hard-hitting drama produced and written by Sagar B Shinde of MIG Production and Studios. Directed by Chetan DK, the movie stars acclaimed actors Shreyas Talpade and Kajal Aggarwal in pivotal roles. With its first schedule kicking off in Mumbai, the film

shedding light on issues that affect millions. Through compelling storytelling and powerhouse performances, *The India Story* seeks to captivate audiences while initiating conversations about corporate accountability and environmental justice. Speaking about the project, sources close to the production shared, "This is not just a film; it's a movement that aims to raise awareness about the impact of unchecked corporate practices. With actors like Shreyas Talpade and Kajal Aggarwal leading the way, we're confident this story will resonate with audiences." Slated for release on August 15, 2025, *The India Story* is directed by Chetan DK, known for his ability to balance drama with thought-provoking narratives. The film's production house, MIG Production and Studios, is committed to delivering cinema that is both impactful and entertaining.

## Priyanka Chopra Jonas backs Oscar-shortlisted *Anuja*

*Anuja*, a powerful short film directed by Adam J. Graves and produced by Suchitra Mattai, tells the heart-wrenching story of two sisters navigating a world of exploitation and adversity. The film follows nine-year-old Anuja, an orphan working in a back-alley garment factory with her older sister Palak. When faced with a rare opportunity, Anuja must make a life-altering decision that will shape her future and her family's fate. The film, which won the Oscar-qualifying Best Live Action Short award at the 2024 HollyShorts Film Festival, has been shortlisted for the 2025 Academy Awards. It draws attention to the harsh realities faced by millions of children worldwide, blending impactful storytelling with themes of resilience and hope. Priyanka Chopra Jonas, a globally celebrated actor, producer, and New York Times bestselling author, has joined *Anuja* as an executive producer. Known for her diverse and award-winning body of work, Chopra Jonas continues to support projects that shed light on important social issues. Speaking about her association with the film, Priyanka shared: "This beautiful film shines a spotlight on a subject that affects millions of children around

the world, who are faced with the impossible decision between a future they cannot yet see and the immediate realities of their present. *Anuja* is a poignant, thought-provoking piece that makes us reflect deeply on the power of choices and how they shape the course of our lives. I am immensely proud to be associated with such a phenomenal and impactful project." Chopra Jonas's recent ventures include producing the Oscar-nominated feature documentary *To Kill A Tiger* and starring in Netflix's *The White Tiger*. She will soon appear in Prime Video's *Heads of State* alongside Idris Elba and John Cena, as well as in *The Bluff* and the second season of the hit series *Citadel*. *Anuja* was created in partnership with the Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT), a nonprofit that supports street and working children, and SHINE Global, a production company known for its Emmy and Oscar-winning documentaries such as *war/dance* and *Innocent*.



## Reacher Season 3 will premiere on February 20

Prime Video has officially released the trailer for the highly anticipated third season of *Reacher*. Following the immense success of Season 2, which became the most-viewed release on Prime Video in 2023, the action-packed series returns with its eight-episode third installment. The first three episodes will premiere on February 20, 2025, with subsequent episodes released weekly every Thursday through March 27, 2025. The series will be available in over 240 countries and territories worldwide. Based on Lee Child's novel *Persuader*, Season 3 follows Jack Reacher as he delves into the dark underbelly of a sprawling criminal network. The gripping storyline centers on Reacher's mission to rescue an undercover DEA informant whose time is running out. Along the way, he uncovers layers of secrecy, violence, and an unexpected connection to unresolved events from his own past. Alan Ritchson reprises his role as the formidable Jack Reacher, with Maria Sten returning as Frances Neagley. Joining the cast this season are Anthony Michael Hall as Zachary Beck, Sonya Cassidy as Susan Duffy, Brian Tee as Quinn, Johnny Berchtold as Richard Beck, Robert Montesinos as Guillermo Villanueva, Olivier Richters as Paulie and Daniel David Stewart as Steven Elliot. The series is written for television by Emmy-nominated writer Nick Santora (FUBAR, Prison Break), who also serves as executive producer and showrunner. Alan Ritchson joins Santora and Child as executive producers, alongside Don Granger, Scott Sullivan, Mick Betancourt, and Skydance Television's David Ellison, Dana Goldberg and Matt Thunell. Carolyn Harris and Kenny Madrid are overseeing the series for Skydance Television. Produced by Amazon MGM Studios, Skydance Television and CBS Studios, *Reacher* has already been renewed for a fourth season, with production set to begin this year.



## Triptii Dimri's exit from *Aashiqui 3* is all false

The highly anticipated romance film, which was initially expected to be a sequel to the iconic *Aashiqui* franchise, has been mired in confusion and controversy. Produced by Bhushan Kumar, directed by Anurag Basu, and starring Kartik Aaryan, the film has undergone several twists and turns, leading to speculation and buzz in the film industry. Originally announced in September 2022, the project was widely anticipated to be *Aashiqui 3*, a continuation of the beloved romantic saga known for its melodious soundtrack and emotional storyline. However, as the film began to take shape, the project's true identity started to blur. In March 2024, Bhushan Kumar announced that he would be producing the film solo, and the project was allegedly renamed *Tu Aashiqui Hai*. Reports soon suggested that Aaryan, despite the change in the film's title, wanted to keep it linked to the *Aashiqui* franchise due to the legacy and fan expectations associated with the name. Yet, the latest rumours have added a new layer to the drama. In November, the film was thrust into the spotlight once again when reports indicated that actor Triptii Dimri, initially believed to be a part of the film, had been dropped. The reason for her alleged exit? According to sources, it was due to her more mature and sensual image, especially from her roles in *Animal* and *Bad Newzz*, which the pro-

ducers supposedly felt didn't fit the "pure, innocent" character they envisioned for the film. These claims sparked a flurry of discussions online, but sources close to Dimri have vehemently denied the rumours. According to the source, "The film is not in development and any claims regarding Triptii's involvement are false. There is no ongoing conversation about the film at all. These rumours are likely being spread by someone connected to the project, possibly to facilitate Triptii's removal from the film." As of now, the filmmakers have not issued an official statement regarding the matter, leaving fans and industry insiders in the dark. What remains clear is that *Tu Aashiqui Hai* continues to spark controversy, with its title, casting, and storyline still shrouded in uncertainty. Despite the ongoing rumours, one thing is certain: the confusion surrounding the film's development will continue to make headlines as fans eagerly await further details. Will the project remain a part of the *Aashiqui* legacy, or will it carve its own path? Only time will tell.



## Ek Farzi Love Story on Jan 10

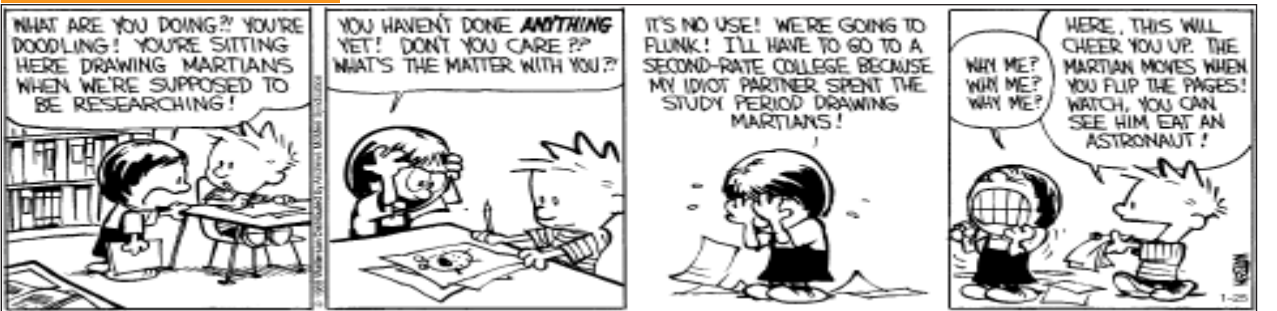
Amazon MX Player has unveiled its upcoming romance drama, *Ek Farzi Love Story*. Slated to premiere on January 10, the series delves into the complex interplay of love, ambition and the fast-paced world of social media. Written by Sumrit Shahi and Durjoy Datta, directed by Aarambh M Singh and produced by Dice Media, the show brings to life an engaging story of two contrasting individuals navigating the highs and lows of digital fame. The trailer introduces Kritika and Manav, played by Reem Sameer Shaikh and Anshuman Malhotra, whose lives take an unexpected turn when a playful banter between them goes viral online. Kritika, an ambitious content creator striving for fame, and Manav, a social media-averse Chartered Accountant, are thrust into internet stardom and pressured into maintaining a faux relationship to appease their growing online fanbase. As their digital personas flourish, the boundaries between real and reel blur, forcing the duo to confront their feelings, identities and the realities of their choices. The series features an impressive ensemble cast including Mansi Taxak, Mohit Hirnanandani and Abhishek Verma in pivotal roles. Anshuman Malhotra, portraying the reserved and principled Manav, shared his insights on the character: "Manav doesn't believe in the artificiality of social media, yet he finds himself drawn into this world for Kritika's sake. Playing Manav has been a rewarding experience and I can't wait for the audience to see how he evolves." Reem Sameer Shaikh, who breathes life into Kritika's ambitious and determined character, reflected on her role: "Kritika's story is one of growth and self-discovery. Her journey from chasing fame to facing the consequences of her choices was a rollercoaster to portray. Her relationship with Manav is central to the story and it's one that will resonate with anyone navigating love and identity in today's digital age."

### FUN

#### ARCHIE



#### CALVIN AND HOBBS



#### GARFIELD



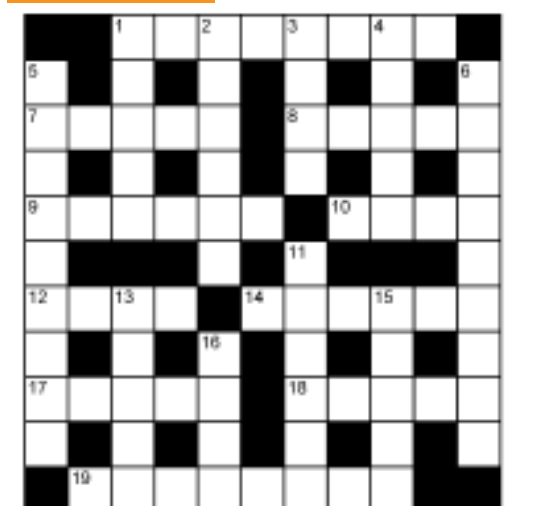
#### REALITY CHECK



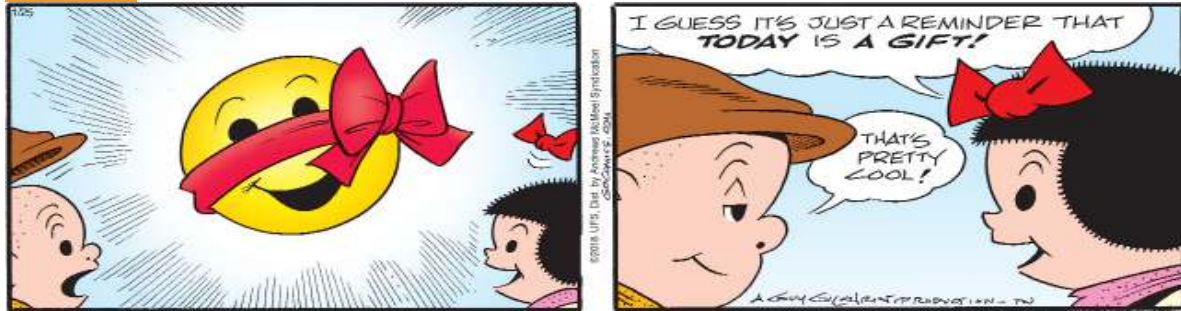
#### SPEED BUMP



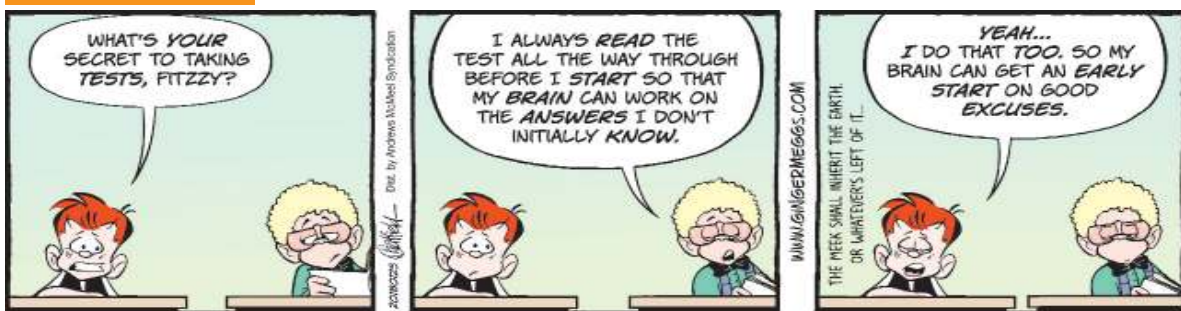
#### CROSSWORD



#### NANCY



#### GINGER MEGGS



#### SUDOKU

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

Yesterday's solution

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

- 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

- Expecting a baby
- Similar
- Eat soup with this
- Reply
- A large furry animal
- A snake's noise
- Overtakes
- A dentist repairs these
- Living
- A game of jumping a rope
- A skydiver wears this
- Without clothing
- Honolulu is the capital of this American island state
- Say something
- A wasp's weapon
- Cut with an axe

#### DOWN

- Sets of two
- The number of players in a cricket team
- Smell with this
- A rope loop



TRAVELOGUE

## 'Barefoot pilgrimages and deer sightings—Tirupati was pure magic!'



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Travelling is a profound experience that allows individuals to learn new languages, explore diverse cultures, discover unique traditions and savour new cuisines. It offers an escape from the hectic routines of daily life, providing adventure, peace and personal growth. For actress Nandini Rai, travelling is more than a hobby; it is an inspiring journey that pushes people out of their comfort zones, encouraging them to see, taste and try new things. While travelling presents challenges such as adapting to new surroundings and meeting unfamiliar people, it also creates cherished memories to share with loved ones.

Reflecting on her recent trips, Nandini shared her experiences of visiting the United States and Tirupati: "I recently visited the United States and as soon as I returned, I planned a trip to Tirupati within a day's time. Both destinations were amazing and I had a wonderful time!"

The *Varisu* actress described her visit to Tirupati, a city in Andhra Pradesh renowned for its spiritual significance and cultural heritage. The city is home to the famous Tirumala Venkateswara Temple, a sacred Hindu pilgrimage site. "My most memorable moment from the Tirupati trip was walking barefoot all the way up to Tirumala. The mantras playing on the speakers, the scenic beauty and spotting deer along the way created the most amazing feeling," she expressed.

During this trip, she discovered Japali, a serene spot nestled within the dense forest of Tirumala, famous for its Hanuman Temple. "I had to walk 4 kilometers through the jungle to have darshan, but it was a unique and enriching experience," she shared.

One place that stood out to Nandini was Assam, a northeastern state in India celebrated for its rich culture, natural beauty and warm hospitality.

"Assam felt unique to me. The cleanliness in the villages, the pristine lakes and the humble, down-to-earth people amazed me. It felt like stepping into a different world," she said.

For the *Metro Kathalu* fame, Rishikesh, in Uttarakhand, holds a special place in her heart. Known for its tranquil environment and spiritual significance, Rishikesh offers her solace and rejuvenation.

"Rishikesh is my go-to place for peace and rejuvenation. I've been there almost 20 times and every visit brings me immense peace. The sight of the Ganga flowing alongside the mountains makes me feel closer to God. It's where I go when I'm sad, happy, or simply need a break." While travelling offers joy and new experiences, it also has its challenges. For the *Astakamma* actress, travelling alone at night has been a frightening experience. "Walking alone on streets at night during trips can be daunting, especially for women. It's a challenge we face in today's times," she noted. To create meaningful travel memories, she encourages immersing oneself in the local culture, connecting with people, and being open to unexpected adventures.

"Capture moments through photos but also experience them fully without the lens. Be present in the moment," she advises. When asked about her next destination, she revealed her desire to visit Finland, a country known for its stunning landscapes and vibrant Northern Lights. She enjoys travelling in groups, as it offers opportunities to bond with friends and gain fresh perspectives.

"Group travel allows you to see different opinions and understand your friends better. It's a beautiful way to connect," she shared. Nandini believes travelling has transformed her approach to life.

"After my trips, I feel like a new person. My tensions, pressures, and sadness have faded away. Travelling has brought me immense happiness and changed my outlook on life in a positive way," she concluded.

Travelling is indeed a life-changing experience that helps individuals grow, heal, and embrace the world with an open heart. Her travel stories remind us to take time to explore, connect and create memories that enrich our lives.



From exploring the vibrant culture of the United States to finding spiritual solace in Tirupati, actress **Nandini Rai** takes *The Pioneer* through her recent trips that have been transformative. She also discusses her travels that have shaped her perspective and brought immense joy and peace to her life

## Bringing intersectionality and inclusivity to climate justice

PNS| HYDERABAD

Nature is queer and our approach to the world can benefit from queerness." For climate justice advocate Nivedita Bansal (she/they), these words are more than a philosophy—they are a way of life. A climate practitioner and community organiser, Nivedita's journey into environmental advocacy is deeply rooted in intersectionality, inclusivity and a personal connection to the natural world.

"With its sprawling mangroves and thoughtful urban planning, Navi Mumbai felt like the epitome of a sustainable city," she recalls. But as they grew older, watching the mangroves disappear and public infrastructure deteriorate was unsettling. "One of the lakes has even been cut off from its water source, making it uninhabitable for the pink flamingos that used to flock there every year," they lament.

Their commitment to climate justice began in high school with a research project measuring the environmental impact of Ganpati idol immersion on local water bodies.

"This project made me realise the profound effects human activities have on natural heritage. I became deeply invested in Mumbai's water ecosystems and knew that one day I would work in environmental advocacy," Nivedita



says. Nivedita pursued their passion for the environment through rigorous education. They attended summer school courses at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington and Mahindra United World College in Pune, where they explored the interconnectedness of

urban planning, ocean acidification, and climate change. Later, they earned a BSc in Global Sustainability Science (Hons) from Utrecht University, specialising in environmental governance. Their most cherished project, *Minecraft Mumbai* (Coast Custodians), was born during the controversial Mumbai Coastal Road Project.

"As I saw the project rapidly destroying the shallow seas, it broke my heart to think of all the sea stars, eels, octopi, and corals being killed. So I gathered a few friends, and we started *Minecraft Mumbai*," Nivedita explains.

Using open-source geodata, the team created a navigable digital replica of Mumbai, attempting to simulate the coastal road and highlight its flaws. While the project was ultimately halted, Nivedita learned the power of community.

Beyond raising awareness, she is leading an ongoing research project to compile Sustainable



Development Goal (SDG) data for Indian states, in line with international standards.

"No other organisation reports SDG progress at the state level in India. This one-stop resource will empower civil society to ask better questions of policymakers and industries," they explain. As a queer individual, she lived experiences shape their approach to climate leadership.

"Queerness is about self-acceptance and it's been instrumental in forming my leadership style. Nature is inherently queer—it exists in countless shapes, sizes, colours and patterns. Similarly, climate activism must embrace diversity in people, perspectives, and solutions," they say.

"The queer community strives to leave no one behind, and that's a value I carry into my work. So far, I've engaged over 50 young people in deep and meaningful ways, creating space for everyone's ideas and initiatives," she shares.

Currently part of the 2024 cohort of the Women Climate Collective (WCC), she credits the platform for helping them recover from burnout and tackle impostor syndrome.

"Through WCC, I met inspiring women leaders, attended COP 29, received capacity-building training and most importantly, learned to reflect. Thanks to them, I feel empowered to continue my work with confidence," they say.

Mindful of the emotional toll of climate advocacy, Nivedita ensures they make time for family, friends, their partner and pets. They also pursue art, photography, cooking and fitness to stay grounded.

For Nivedita, climate advocacy is about more than protecting the planet; it's about building a world that values inclusivity, diversity, and collaboration. Their work serves as a reminder that with determination and community, it's possible to create a sustainable and equitable future.

## Why cancer is a 'young person's disease'

Cancer has long been perceived as a disease that primarily affects older individuals. However, recent trends are challenging this notion, with cancer rates in young adults—those in their 20s and 30s—rising significantly. While this shift is alarming, understanding the reasons behind it and the importance of early detection can empower young people to take proactive steps toward better health.

### Changing face of cancer

Statistics reveal a concerning rise in cancer cases among younger populations. Cancers such as colorectal, breast, thyroid and melanoma are being diagnosed more frequently in millennials and Gen Z individuals compared to previous generations at the same age. This shift has left many young adults grappling with a diagnosis they never anticipated.

Medical oncologists attribute this increase to a combination of factors, including:

- **Lifestyle changes:** Sedentary behavior, poor dietary choices, obesity and increased alcohol consumption have been linked to cancer development.

- **Environmental exposures:** Growing up in an era of higher pollution levels, excessive screen time and potential carcinogen exposure may contribute to these trends.

- **Genetic predisposition:** While genetics play a role in some cases, external factors often act as triggers, accelerating the onset of the disease.

- **Delayed screenings:** Many young adults skip routine health checks, dismissing symptoms as minor issues due to a general perception of being too young for serious illnesses.

### Impact on young lives

A cancer diagnosis in early adulthood often brings unique challenges. Individuals in this age group are typically building their careers, relationships and families. The emotional, financial and social toll of treatment can disrupt these critical life milestones.

Moreover, young bodies tend to metabolise medications differently, making treatment more aggressive in some



cases. The psychological impact of navigating cancer during what should be the prime of life often requires additional mental health support, which can be overlooked in traditional treatment plans.

### Early detection is crucial

The key to combating this alarming trend lies in early detection and prevention. Cancer caught at an earlier stage is often more treatable, with significantly higher survival rates. Unfortunately, young adults are less likely to undergo regular screenings or report persistent symptoms to a healthcare provider.

### Here are some steps to improve awareness and early detection:

1. **Know the warning signs:** Be vigilant about unexplained weight loss, persistent fatigue, unusual lumps, changes in bowel or urinary habits, or prolonged pain.

2. **Adopt healthy habits:** Maintain a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and avoid smoking or excessive alcohol consumption.

3. **Stay informed about family history:** If certain cancers run in your family, discuss genetic testing and earlier screening options with your doctor.

4. **Advocate for yourself:** If you notice concerning symptoms, don't hesitate to seek medical advice, even if you feel too young to be at risk.

### Role of awareness

A crucial aspect of addressing this trend is raising awareness among younger generations. Campaigns that highlight the importance of regular health check-ups and early cancer detection can help dispel the myth that cancer is exclusively an older person's disease. Healthcare providers, too, play a pivotal role in this shift. By offering tailored screening recommendations and emphasising the importance of prevention, medical professionals can bridge the gap between awareness and action.

### Message of hope

Despite the rise in cancer rates among young adults, advancements in oncology offer hope. Improved diagnostic tools, targeted therapies, and personalised treatment plans are making it possible for many young patients to achieve full recovery and lead healthy lives. For millennials and Gen Z, the key takeaway is clear: cancer is no longer an age-restricted disease. By embracing proactive healthcare, recognizing potential risks and prioritising early intervention, young people can take charge of their health and reduce their cancer risk. Together, healthcare providers, young adults and communities can work toward a future where no one is caught off guard by a diagnosis they thought belonged to another age group.

(The author, **Dr Rajeev Vijayakumar**, Sr consultant-Medical oncologist and BMT physician, at **Gleneagles BGS Hospital, Kengeri, Bengaluru.**)

# Tottenham beats Liverpool 1-0 in English League Cup semifinals

PTI ■ LONDON

Lucas Bergvall's first goal for Tottenham secured a 1-0 win over Liverpool in the on Wednesday in a first-leg match notable for a serious-looking injury to Rodrigo Bentancur and the first in-stadium announcement by a referee in the English game. The 18-year-old Bergvall slotted home the winner in the 86th minute following a pass from Dominic Solanke, who thought 10 minutes earlier that he had given Tottenham the lead. That goal was ruled out after a VAR check for offside and referee Stuart Attwell communicated the decision via a wireless microphone to spectators inside Tottenham Hotspur Stadium and to TV viewers. In the sixth minute, Bentancur — the Uruguay midfielder who plays for Tottenham — fell to the ground and lay prone after landing awkwardly when

attempting a header from a corner. He was carried off on a stretcher, to applause from around the ground, after receiving treatment during a 10-minute delay and Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou confirmed after the game that Bentancur was "conscious" and talking. The second leg is at Anfield on Feb. 6. Newcastle leads Arsenal 2-0 after the first leg of the other semifinal match. Liverpool, the defending League Cup champion, saw its 24-match unbeaten run in all competitions come to an end and there was a hint of controversy about only the team's second loss of the season. Visiting players and manager Arne Slot were unhappy that Bergvall was on the field to score what proved to be the winning goal after he escaped collecting a second yellow card for a foul on Kostas Tsimikas moments earlier. Indeed, Tsimikas was off the field, waiting to come



back on having received treatment following Bergvall's tackle, when the Sweden midfielder tucked home his finish. Slot earned a yellow card himself for his protests, though he shook Attwell's hand after the final whistle. "The decision he made had a lot of impact on the result tonight," Slot said. Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk said it was "quite obvious" that Bergvall deserved a second yellow card. "And a minute later he scores the winner," Van Dijk said. "He (Attwell) made a mistake, in my opinion. And I told him that." It was a busy end to the match for Attwell, who took center stage after there was a video review following Solanke's strike in the 76th minute. After being notified that Solanke was offside, Attwell used the public address system to declare the goal had been ruled out, in an NFL-style announcement.

The League Cup semifinals were chosen to pilot a process in England that has been widely used in other sports, and in soccer at the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand in 2023 and other FIFA events. **Kinsky's dream debut** Three days after signing from Sparta Prague, Antonin Kinsky — a 21-year-old goalkeeper from the Czech Republic — was handed his debut by Tottenham and he kept a clean sheet after producing a string of great saves, notably from Liverpool substitute Darwin Nunez. His parents and sister were in the crowd to watch him play his first match in English soccer and he was emotional after the game. "I have never dreamed this," Kinsky said. Tottenham signed the highly rated Kinsky with first-choice goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario currently out injured.



## Aiming for hat-trick of SA20 titles: Markram

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Sunrisers Eastern Cape Skipper Aiden Markram says his side is pumped up to make it a hat-trick of titles at the SA20 as it faces MI Cape Town in its opening game. Markram's team has won both the editions of the competition so far. The tournament begins days after South Africa blanked Pakistan in a Test series at home. "Definitely still really pumped to try and get a third one this year. Obviously, (there are) no guarantees and it's a hugely competitive tournament, so hopefully in a month's time something cool can happen," Markram said during the Captains' Day press conference here. Former South Africa captain Faf du Plessis said his side Joburg Super Kings haven't got the ideal weather to finalise its preparations as it has rained for the last few days in Johannesburg, but his players are surely up for a fight. "From my side, the weather has been a bit of a downer down in Joburg, it's been pretty wet. But from a squad perspective, some great signings in Joburg too, and you know the likes of Jonny Bairstow, Devon Conway, (Matheesha) Pathirana," du Plessis said. "Those three guys and

(Tabraiz) Shamsi, obviously, have a lot of experience that comes with them. So, all in all, our squad are looking very balanced. Two injuries, that wasn't ideal for our pace attack for Nandre Burger and Lizaad Williams. But we still feel we have enough options to put out a well balanced team," he added. MI Cape Town's Rashid Khan said his side was determined to put a better show in the third edition. "I think from the first year we had some really close games and it just didn't go our way. We had some great cricket last year as well, some wonderful cricket," he said. "But it was just more about the result, it didn't come our way. In the fresh year, we'll go with a fresh mind. We have some new faces in the team. We're looking forward to the new challenges and hopefully this year it won't be the same in the last few years." Paarl Royals' captain David Miller said the competitiveness in the league has benefited South African cricket to a major extent. "It's been two special years for us, but also for the competition itself. Just playing with the competitive juices that we have, all the games are really fun to be a part of, as well as having incredible overseas players, all the coaches are around," he said.

## I think he will be the next captain: Gavaskar on Jasprit Bumrah

PTI ■ SYDNEY

The legendary Sunil Gavaskar is in awe of Jasprit Bumrah's leadership qualities and reckons the peerless fast bowler will succeed Rohit Sharma as the next captain of the Indian team following his extraordinary display in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Bumrah recently produced one of the best-ever bowling performances by an overseas pacer in Australia and picked 32 wickets over five Tests. He was also captain during India's only victory in the series, helping the visitors to a convincing win at the Optus Stadium in Perth in the opener. "He could be the next man. I think he will be the next man. Because he leads from the front, he has got a very good air about him, the air of a leader but not somebody who is going to pressure on you," Gavaskar



aired his views on Channel 7. "The batting great added, 'Sometimes, you have captains who put a lot of pressure on you. With Bumrah you can see that, he expects the others to do what their job is, why they are in the national team, but it doesn't seem to pressurise anybody.' Bumrah has been spearheading the Indian pace attack for some years now and his guidance has helped the

likes of Mohammed Siraj to grow as a fast bowler. "With the fast bowlers, he has been absolutely brilliant, standing at mid-off, mid-on and every time just being at hand to tell them. I think he was absolutely brilliant and I won't be surprised if he takes over very soon." Bumrah took his wickets at an incredible average of 13.06 and an even better strike rate of 28.37 before pulling up injured

midway through Australia's first innings at the SCG in the final Test. In Bumrah's absence, the home team chased down 162 on the third day to win the series 3-1. The lead pacer was handed the captaincy in the final Test after the out-of-form Rohit Sharma "opted out" but a back spasm prevented Bumrah from bowling on the crucial third day. Bumrah destroyed Australia in Perth with eight wickets, grabbed six wickets in the first innings at the Gabba, and nearly turned the Boxing Day Test on its head with his exploits on the fourth afternoon at MCG. In the series decider at SCG, Bumrah sent back Usman Khawaja and Marnus Labuschagne early in Australia's first innings but could only bowl one over after lunch on the second day when the game was evenly poised.



## McSweeney returns to Australia squad for Sri Lanka tour

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Nathan McSweeney was recalled to Australia's test squad on Thursday to tour Sri Lanka, less than three weeks after being dropped from the top order. Australia's selectors announced their squad Thursday for the two-test tour, with several fresh faces added to the group that played India in Sydney last week. Australia won the five-test series 3-1 and clinched a spot in the World Test Championship against South Africa at Lord's in June. Steve Smith will lead the squad to Sri Lanka while regular skipper Pat Cummins is on leave as his wife awaits the birth of the couple's second child. Australia's selectors concentrated on spin for the two Sri Lanka tests, with uncapped 21-year-old Cooper Connolly among the seven full or part-time slow bowling options in the 16-man squad. Connolly, a left-arm allrounder, has represented Australia in limited-overs cricket and has been called up for his maiden test campaign along with specialist spinners Todd Murphy and Matthew Kuhnemann. McSweeney scored 72 runs at an average of 14.4 in his first three tests against India, before being replaced by Sam Konstas for the Melbourne Cricket Ground test starting Dec. 26.

The 25-year-old McSweeney has batted at No. 3 for South Australia state this season — averaging 97 — but has previously batted further down the order. Cricket Australia also said Cummins was "focusing on an ankle issue which was managed through the test summer" and fellow paceman Josh Hazlewood was continuing his recovery from a calf injury. Mitchell Marsh was omitted for the tour, joining Hazlewood in focusing on the 50-overs Champion's Trophy in Pakistan which immediately follows the test tour. The first test begins Jan. 29 and the second Feb. 6, both at spin-friendly Galle International Stadium. A one-off one-day international is scheduled for Feb. 13, also at Galle. "Sri Lanka is a challenging and exciting place to tour given the different conditions players may be presented with," selector George Bailey said. "This squad provides several ways to structure the XI depending on what type of wickets we may encounter in each match." **Australia squad:** Steve Smith (captain), Sean Abbott, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Cooper Connolly, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Sam Konstas, Matt Kuhnemann, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Nathan McSweeney, Todd Murphy, Mitchell Starc, Beau Webster.

## Mandhana-led India eye dominant show in first-ever bilateral series against Ireland

PTI ■ RAJKOT

Riding high on a dominant performance against the West Indies, India under Smriti Mandhana will look to carry forward their winning momentum when they take on Ireland in the first-ever women's bilateral series, with the opening ODI scheduled here on Friday. India had swept the West Indies 3-0 in the ODI series, following a 2-1 triumph in the T20 series. Mandhana emerged as the top run-scorer across formats, scoring 148 runs in the ODI series, including two half-centuries, and 193 runs in the T20s, with three successive fifties. Notably, she scored five consecutive half-centuries, only missing out in the final ODI and Mandhana will look to bring the same form as she leads the team in the absence of regular captain Harmanpreet



Kaur, who has been rested alongside fast bowler Renuka Singh. With Kaur and Renuka missing, the responsibility shifts to the rest of the batters, including Harleen Deol, Pratika Rawal, and Jemimah Rodrigues, to step up. Deol was the top scorer in the ODI series with 160 runs, including a brilliant 115, while Rawal and Rodrigues also had solid

outings, scoring 134 and 112 runs, respectively, with a fifty each in the ODIs. In the bowling department, Renuka's absence will be felt as she was the leading wicket-taker with 10 wickets in the ODI series against the West Indies. The onus will now fall on newcomers Titas Sadhu and Saima Thakor to make their mark. Sadhu, 20, who has three wickets in ODIs and 13 wickets in T20s, will be expected to provide early breakthroughs, having impressed with her pace and swing in domestic and recent international cricket. Saima, 28, will also look to continue her good form after taking seven wickets in eight ODIs so far. Vice-captain and off-spinner Deepti Sharma will be crucial, especially after her career-best bowling performance of 6 for 31 in the third ODI against the West Indies. Priya Mishra and Tanuja Kanwar will play key roles in supporting Deepti.

## Australian Open 2025: Cases involving Jannik Sinner and Iga Swiatek make doping a top topic

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

It is a topic that shadowed tennis in 2024 and is still a talking point as the 2025 Grand Slam season opens at the Australian Open on Sunday (Saturday EST): doping and the cases involving Jannik Sinner — which actually is still not fully resolved — and Iga Swiatek. Both spent much of last year at No. 1, and Sinner still will hold that spot in the ATP rankings when he steps on court at Melbourne Park to begin the defense of his championship, one of two major trophies he won over the past 12 months. Swiatek, a five-time Slam champ and the woman leading the WTA rankings most of the past three seasons, is currently No. 2 behind Aryna Sabalenka, who will be chasing her third consecutive title in Australia. "Obviously, there are going to be some negative comments," Swiatek said. "You're not going to avoid that." Most current players prefer to remain silent when asked about the cases. But there are those who have been happy to weigh in, including 24-time major champion Novak Djokovic, raising questions about

whether Sinner and Swiatek were treated the same as other players facing similar circumstances and why their situations were kept under wraps for months. "I sit and wonder, Why such a big difference in treatment and judgment?" was two-time major champion Simona Halep's reaction to Swiatek's punishment. "I can't find, and I don't think there can be, a logical answer." Halep initially was banned for four years after testing positive for the banned drug Roxadustat at the 2022 U.S. Open, then had that penalty reduced to nine months on appeal — although she already had been off the tour longer than that. She was supposed to compete at Melbourne Park for the first time in three years, but withdrew from qualifying because of knee and shoulder pain. No one has been louder about the subject lately than Nick Kyrgios, the 2022 Wimbledon runner-up who missed nearly all of the past two seasons because of injuries. He has been commenting regularly, in real life and online, even taking a jab (that he said was in jest) at Cruz Hewitt after the 16-year-old son of Australian Davis Cup captain Lleyton posted a photo with Sinner



from a practice session. "It's been handled horrifically in our sport. Two world No. 1s, both getting done for doping, is disgusting for our sport," Kyrgios said at the Brisbane International, the first event of his comeback. "It's a horrible look."

Where do things stand with Jannik Sinner's positive drug tests? Sinner was the dominant player in men's tennis last year, and there's little reason to think that won't continue. In 2024, he went 73-6 with eight titles, including at the U.S. Open, and led Italy to the

Davis Cup. He heads into the Australian Open on a 14-match winning streak. Hanging over it all is this: Two positive tests for a trace amount of an anabolic steroid in March were made public in August; the International Tennis Integrity

Agency (ITIA) determined he shouldn't be suspended because the exposure to Clostebol was considered accidental — the result of a massage from a trainer who used the substance after cutting his own finger. The World Anti-Doping Agency was not entirely convinced about the exoneration and thinks a ban of one to two years would be appropriate. Its appeal, lodged in September, is still pending, and a final determination is expected after the Australian Open ends. "It's in (my) head a little bit," Sinner said, adding that he is confident everything will go his way. What happened with Iga Swiatek's failed doping test? Swiatek accepted a one-month suspension in late November after testing positive for a banned heart medication known as TMZ. She failed an out-of-competition test in August, and the ITIA accepted her explanation that it was caused by the contamination of a nonprescription medication, melatonin, that Swiatek was taking for jet lag and sleeping issues. She missed three tournaments — although the real reason wasn't revealed at the time — and finished serving her punishment after the

season was done. "This whole process was pretty abstract sometimes and hard to understand," Swiatek said, surely speaking for many observers. Which is why, perhaps, Dutch captain Paul Haarhuis said what he did after his team lost to Sinner's Italy in the Davis Cup finals. "Jannik, in my personal opinion, is an unbelievably nice guy (and) great player," Haarhuis said, "but we (might) never know what happened." Are there other noteworthy cases in tennis? While Sinner and Swiatek will compete in Melbourne, another player involved in a recent ITIA case won't: Max Purcell, who won men's doubles titles at the U.S. Open in September and Wimbledon in 2022 and was a two-time runner-up at the Australian Open. Purcell didn't test positive, though. Instead, he accepted a provisional suspension for, as he described it, having "unknowingly received an IV infusion of vitamins above the allowable limit." "I have no good words for it," said Jordan Thompson, Purcell's doubles partner in New York last year.

**IN HYDERABAD: THEY MAY PLAN AN EVENT IN CLOSED DOORS, AND IT IS NOT FOR FANS. THEY WILL COMMUNICATE THROUGH MEDIA CHANNELS**



## Pre-release event of Balakrishna starrer *Daaku Maharaaj* cancelled

The highly anticipated pre-release event of Balakrishna's upcoming film *Daaku Maharaaj*, which was scheduled to take place today in Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, has been cancelled. Directed by Bobby Kolli and produced by Suryadevara Naga Vamsi and Sai Soujanya, the event was set to feature Balakrishna's son-in-law and Andhra Pradesh Minister Nara Lokesh as the chief guest.

Arrangements for the grand event had been underway for several days, and the unit was fully prepared to head to Anantapur. However, a tragic incident in Tirupati led to a change in plans. On the previous night, a stam-

pede occurred in Tirupati, resulting in the loss of several lives. The unfortunate incident, which took place at a devotional site, deeply saddened the team. Considering the circumstances, the filmmakers decided it was inappropriate to proceed with the event.

In a heartfelt statement, the film team announced the cancellation: "Given the circumstances, we feel it is not appropriate to proceed with the *Daaku Maharaaj* pre-release event as planned. With a heavy heart and utmost respect for the devotion and sentiments of the people, we have decided to call off today's event. We hope for your understanding and support during this difficult time."

Some members of the unit had already left for Anantapur early in the morning but were asked to return after the cancellation decision was communicated.

Sources indicate that the team is now planning a smaller event in Hyderabad. However, this event will not involve fans and is likely to take place behind closed doors. "In Hyderabad, they may plan an event in closed doors, and it is not for fans. They will communicate through media channels," a source shared.

The film *Daaku Maharaaj* is slated for release on January 12, coinciding with Pragma Jaiswal's birthday and the Sankranti festival. Fans eagerly await further updates on the film's promotional plans.

# tollywood

PRAGYA JAISWAL:

## *Akhanda* is my life-changing film

**PRAGYA JAISWAL TALKS ABOUT HER UPCOMING FILM *DAAKU MAHARAAJ*, HER EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH BALAKRISHNA, HER ROLE AND HER BIRTHDAY PLANS**

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After a couple of years away from Telugu cinema, Pragma Jaiswal returns with *Daaku Maharaaj*, where she stars opposite Nandamuri Balakrishna. Interestingly, her last major Telugu hit, *Akhanda*, also featured Balakrishna. "Balakrishna is a lucky charm," said Pragma, who is overjoyed about her new film releasing on January 12—coinciding with her birthday and the Sankranti festival.

"Usually, when actors celebrate their birthdays, a teaser or poster is launched. But this time, my film is releasing on my birthday and I'm thrilled! When the producer announced the release date, I was the first to react because of this coincidence," she shared excitedly.

Pragma, who began her career nearly a decade ago, feels her journey is still fresh. "Every film is a new adventure with new characters to explore. There have been ups and downs, but I feel blessed. I've had the privilege to learn from some of the best filmmakers and actors. This journey has been incredible and I look forward to many more years in the industry," she reflected.

Speaking about her career-defining film *Akhanda*, Pragma recalled the unexpected way she landed the role. "During the pandemic, when most people had no work, I got a call from Boyapati Srinu sir. I flew to Hyderabad from Bombay with just a handbag and went straight from the airport to meet him. He narrated the story and finalised everything, including my remuneration, within a day. It was a life-changing opportunity for me and I'm forever grateful to Boyapati sir for trusting me with such a significant role," she said.

Pragma described *Akhanda* as a "proper commercial masala film" with substantial screen time for her character, which contributed to her career's biggest success.

"*Akhanda* was my life-changing film. It was the biggest hit of my career and I feel blessed to have worked with Boyapati sir and Balakrishna. I'm thrilled to collaborate with Bala Sir again in *Daaku Maharaaj* and the upcoming *Akhanda 2*," she added.

In *Daaku Maharaaj*, Pragma plays a unique character named Kaveri. "It's a completely different role for me and I'm very excited about it," she said. She revealed that she was shooting a Hindi film, *Khel Khel Mein*, when she got the offer for this project.

She also shared her long-standing connection with director Bobby. "I met Bobby even before I debuted with *Kanche*. We've stayed in touch over the years but never had a chance to work together until now. Watching the teaser of *Daaku Maharaaj* convinced me to take up this project. Working with Bobby has been an absolute blessing," she said.

Talking about her co-star Balakrishna, she expressed her admiration for his work ethic and personality. "This is my second film with Bala Sir and surprisingly, he hasn't changed a bit. He's as positive, energetic and full of life as ever. On set, he's always cracking jokes or sharing stories about his father's movies. But when the camera rolls, he transforms into a superhuman—especially during intense scenes like the Aghora character in *Akhanda*. His dedication and energy are unmatched," she said.

She also highlighted how much she has learned from him. "His discipline is incredible. He wakes up at 3:30 a.m. does his pooja, works out and is always on set before time. It's inspiring to see such commitment," she added.

Shooting for *Daaku Maharaaj* came with its own set of challenges. "Filming in Rajasthan was tough. The extreme heat, dust and propeller fans made it physically demanding. I fell sick on the second or third day, but the team's passion kept me going," she revealed.

As her film release coincides with her birthday, Pragma plans to stay in Hyderabad to celebrate both occasions. "I want to watch the film with the audience and experience the euphoria. Having my film release on my birthday, during Sankranti, feels like a sign from the universe. It's the best celebration I could ask for," she concluded.



## Ram Charan's make-or-break moment



The upcoming film *Game Changer* is poised to be a significant milestone in Ram Charan's career. Following his multi-starrer *RRR*, the actor is now set to appear in this film as a solo lead. Although he made a cameo appearance in *Acharya* after *RRR*, Ram Charan has high expectations for *Game Changer*. This film will be released not only in Telugu but also in other languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada.

This film is a crucial test for Ram Charan, as well as for director Shankar. Shankar's previous films did not perform well at the box office, particularly *Indian 2*, which tarnished his reputation. As a result, he is heavily invested in the success of *Game Changer*, which marks his debut as a director in Telugu cinema. On the other hand, producer Dil Raju is the most anxious person, having invested a substantial amount of money in this film.

At a promotional event, he stated, "This is a comeback film for me." Dil Raju added that he had seen the film and was confident that it would not only thrill fans but also appeal to a broader audience. "There are a few scenes where people will definitely applaud," he said. Dil Raju also managed to secure ticket price hikes in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. However, the Telangana government did not grant permission for benefit shows.

## Dialogue King Sai Kumar completes 50 yrs in film career

Popularly known for his iconic dialogues, Sai Kumar has completed 50 years of his illustrious journey in films. He debuted as a child artiste with the film *Devudu Chesina Pelli*, which was released on January 9, 1975. Since then, he has never looked back, continuing to act as a lead actor, character artiste, and hosting numerous TV shows.

Sai Kumar is extremely popular for his police films like *Police Story*, *Agni IPS*, *Police Story 2* and *Central Jail*. His dialogues from these cop films are still widely popular and often referenced. In addition to his acting career, Sai Kumar is also a renowned dubbing artist, having lent his voice to actors Rajasekhar and Suman in many films.

Born to a family of artists, Sai Kumar's father, P.J. Sharma, was a dubbing artist and actor, while his mother, Krishna Jyothi, was a renowned actress in the Kannada film industry. Although Kannada is his mother tongue, Sai Kumar has made a distinct mark in

the South Indian film industry.

Sai Kumar earned recognition as a great actor with the movie *Sneham*, directed by Bapu. He has acted in numerous evergreen films in both Kannada and Telugu. In 2006, he won the Nandi Award for Best Villain for his role in *Samanyudu* and again in 2010, he won the Nandi Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Prasthanam*. He also won Filmfare Awards for his acting in *Samanyudu*, *Prasthanam* and *Rang Tarang*.

Despite completing 50 years as an actor, Sai Kumar continues to be part of numerous high-profile projects, keeping him as one of the busiest actors in the industry. His son, Aadi Sai Kumar, is also an actor and busy with films.



## DIRECTOR SUKUMAR'S DAUGHTER DEBUT WITH *GANDHI TATHA CHETTU*

Director Sukumar, who recently delivered the blockbuster film *Pushpa 2*, has another reason to celebrate. His daughter, Sukriti Veni Bandreddy, is all set to make her debut with the film *Gandhi Tatha Chettu*. The trailer of this film was launched by superstar Mahesh Babu through his social media.

Padmavati Malladi has directed the film, while Naveen Yerneni, Yalamanchilli Ravishankar and Shesha Sindhu Rao have jointly produced it. Sukumar's wife, Tabitha Sukumar, is presenting the film. Interestingly, *Gandhi Tatha Chettu* has already won awards and appreciation at several international film festivals. Sukriti Veni also received the Best Child Artist award for her performance.

The movie is set for a worldwide theatrical release on January 24, announced the makers. Mahesh Babu launched the trailer and said

on his social media, "Happy to launch the trailer of *#GandhiTathaChettu*... Looks heartwarming and deeply touching... My best wishes to Sukriti and the entire team for their journey ahead." The story revolves around a girl named Gandhi, who, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's principles, strives to protect her grandfather's beloved tree and her village. The emotional narrative appears to be centered on how the girl follows the path of non-violence to achieve her goal. Sukumar himself plays a role in the film alongside his daughter Sukriti Veni.

Director Padmavati Malladi stated, "This film follows the story of a 13-year-old girl who, inspired by Gandhi's ideals, tries to save her village. It's a story every parent should show their children. The film conveys emotions that will touch every heart, leaving viewers with an indescribable feeling."

## GV Prakash Kumar's sea-horror adventure film promises chills

The breathtaking teaser of GV Prakash Kumar's *Kingston*, the nation's first-ever sea-horror adventure film, has been out now. Starring and produced by National Award-winning composer-turned-actor GV Prakash Kumar, the film promises to be a groundbreaking cinematic experience with director Kamal Prakash at the helm and Parallel Universe Pictures and Zee Studios as the producers. The film is all set to hit theatres on March 7, 2025.

With *Kingston*, GV Prakash Kumar is making a significant leap into the pan-India realm, not just as an actor but also as a producer. His production house, Parallel Universe Pictures, is at the helm of this ambitious trilogy project. The teaser, packed with spine-chilling visuals, haunting underwater

sequences and an immersive storyline, promises a thrilling adventure ride for the audience.

*Kingston* explores uncharted territory in Indian cinema by blending the horror and adventure genres with a gripping sea-based narrative. Set against the backdrop of the mysterious and vast oceans, the film promises to deliver edge-of-the-seat thrills, stunning visual effects, and an unforgettable cinematic experience. Known for his stellar contributions to Indian music and cinema, GV Prakash Kumar's venture into sea horror marks a new milestone in his illustrious career.

*Kingston* is designed to cater to a diverse audience, releasing in multiple languages, including Tamil, Telugu and Hindi.

