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QUOTE OF THE DAY

The pioneer

Rising above politics the government should continue the BRS's decade-long journey of progress with focus on farmers' welfare. The BRS admin spent nearly Rs 4.5 lakh crore on agricultural development in the last 10 years

- K. Chandrasekhar Rao, BRS chief



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'Modi keeps his promises, right things will happen at right time'

'KALP' YOUR EMOTIONS

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Director Nakkina's Cheap talk creates a FLUTTER

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DON'T MISS...

Giant Sankranti feast for son-in-law

The Sankranti festival, a time for family gatherings and celebrations, brings with it age-old traditions. In the Godavari districts, one such tradition stands out - a grand feast for the son-in-law. This unique custom, which has earned the region a reputation for its elaborate festivities, adds a special touch to the festivities each year.

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From humble start to cutting-edge tech

From a few rain gauges in 1875 to rivaling the world's best weather agencies, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has weathered its way to becoming a global leader in forecasting. Born out of calamities - a devastating cyclone in 1864 and monsoon failures in 1866 and 1871 - the IMD, turning 150 on January 15, has transformed from a humble setup into a cutting-edge hub of weather science.

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Scope for Reserve Bank's rate cut

Retail inflation declined to a four-month low of 5.22 per cent in December, mainly on account of easing of prices in the food basket, including vegetables - according to government data released on Monday - giving headroom to the Reserve Bank to reduce the key interest rate in upcoming monetary policy reviews.

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'Can't compare two generations'

It is needless to compare two generations of players and pass a judgement on who was better, legendary cricketer Kapil Dev said on Monday and refused to get into a debate if BCCI selectors were right in excluding Yashasvi Jaiswal and Rishabh Pant from the T20I squad for the five-match series against England.

-SPORTS



CM UNVEILS SWATANTRA TV's 2025 CALENDAR

TIRUPATI: Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu unveiled the 2025 New Year calendar of Swatantra TV during his visit to Naravaripalle on Monday. Known for championing the voice of the common people, Swatantra TV has earned recognition for its relentless focus on public issues and advocacy.

Speaking on the occasion, the Chief Minister emphasised the crucial role of media in creating awareness about the welfare and development schemes implemented by the State government. He highlighted the media's responsibility in bridging the gap between the government and the

people, ensuring that benefits reach every corner of society. Representatives of Swatantra TV, who were present at the event, expressed their gratitude to the Chief Minister for his support and reiterated their commitment to amplifying public concerns and government initiatives.

CM celebrates Sankranti in native village

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu celebrated the Sankranti festival with his family in his native village, Naravaripalle. Despite the festive occasion, the CM remained actively engaged in public service initiatives.

In the morning, after celebrating Sankranti with local leaders, he participated in foundation stone-laying ceremonies for several development projects, including roads, schools, and power substations across various villages in Chandragiri Mandal. The government has partnered with Easy Mart to supply affordable and quality daily essentials to women's self-help groups. During the event, women were trained to purchase these items online through Easy Mart.

Takes part in public service initiatives



the Tirupati district. Later, the CM distributed subsidised electric autos to 15 women for self-employment, highlighting that these vehicles could save up to Rs 12,000 monthly on fuel costs.

An agreement was also signed with the Care and Grow organisation to enhance the physical, mental, and behavioural development of children at Anganwadi centres. Initially, this programme will be implemented in eight centres in the Naravaripalle region.

The Chief Minister noted that the initiative has been well-received, with children, mothers, and Anganwadi teachers expressing satisfaction.

From Naravaripalle, the Chief Minister laid the foundation stones for multiple development projects. In Rangampeta of Chandragiri Mandal, he launched a Rs 1.10 crore District Council High School with digital classrooms.

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UGC-NET scheduled for tomorrow postponed

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The UGC-National Eligibility Test (NET) scheduled for January 15 has been postponed on account of festivals, including Makar Sankranti and Pongal, the National Testing Agency (NTA) announced on Monday.

The exam for admission to PhD programmes, awarding Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and appointment as assistant professors is being conducted from January 3 to January 16 for 85 subjects in the Computer Based Test (CBT) mode. "The NTA has received representations to postpone the exam on January 15 on account of festivals, including Pongal and Makar Sankranti. In the interest of the aspirants, the exam has been postponed and a new date will be announced later," Rajesh Kumar, Director (Exams), NTA, said.

Cockfights continue despite ban; crores change hands

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Defying explicit directives from the Andhra Pradesh High Court and warnings from police and revenue officials, organisers supported by political influence have commenced three days of cockfights during the Sankranti festivities across the NTR and Krishna districts. Despite the sport's illegality and associated gambling, it continues unabated, with crores of rupees reportedly exchanged in various arenas on the first day.

Cockfighting arenas sprang up across the erstwhile Krishna district, including NTR, Krishna, and Eluru districts, ignoring legal restrictions against tying knives to the roosters - an act strictly prohibited by law. Police and revenue officials made attempts to dismantle the arenas, but



political interference from influential leaders rendered these efforts ineffective.

NTR District Police Commissioner SV Rajasekhar Babu and Krishna District SP R Gangadhara Rao were reportedly

unable to take effective action against organisers who acted with backing from politically powerful cabinet MLAs. Allegations have surfaced accusing police and revenue officials of colluding with organisers by accepting bribes to

turn a blind eye to the events. No significant preventive measures were observed on the first day of the Sankranti celebrations, raising questions about the role of law enforcement in curbing such activities.

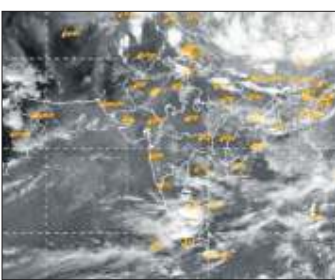
Continued on Page 2

Rain likely in south coastal AP, R'seema

PNS ■ GUNTUR

Thunderstorms, accompanied by lightning, are likely to occur at isolated places in South Coastal Andhra Pradesh and Rayalaseema during the next 48 hours, the Meteorological Centre said on Monday.

In its daily weather report, the Centre stated that light to moderate rain or thundershowers is expected at one or two places in South Coastal Andhra Pradesh and Rayalaseema during the next 48 hours and on January 19. Dry weather is likely to prevail in North Coastal Andhra Pradesh and Yanam over the next seven days, and in South Coastal Andhra Pradesh and Rayalaseema from January 15 to 18. Rainfall occurred at one or two



places in Coastal Andhra Pradesh, Yanam, and Rayalaseema during the last 24 hours. The lowest minimum temperature of 15.1 degrees Celsius was recorded at Kalingapatnam in the plains of Coastal Andhra Pradesh on the intervening night of Sunday and Monday, the report added.

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The fog was thick, the cold intense and the waters freezing as the Maha Kumbh, the world's largest gathering, began on Monday with 1.5 crore people taking a dip in the Sangam in their quest for 'moksha' and the belief it will cleanse their sins.

Spirituality and astrology, culture and religion, tradition and modern-day technology... it all fused into one in the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati in Prayagraj.

More than 40 crore people, including many from abroad, are expected over 45 days in the mela being held after 12 years. Besides, seers claim the celestial permutations and combinations for the event are taking place after 144 years, making the occasion even more auspicious for the faithful.



And so it was that a sea of people converged in Prayagraj for the fabled Maha Kumbh. Ash smeared sadhus from their abode in the Himalayas,

the religious from across the country and abroad and those just curious to take in the sights and sounds of the biggest religious spectacle of

all, the Maha Kumbh beckoned them all. Thirteen Akharas of seers from different sects are participating in the Maha Kumbh.

And as the famed mela formally began in the darkness of pre-dawn on the occasion of Paush Purnima to the sound of conch shells and bhajans, the excitement was palpable in the sprawling Sangam area as devotees - mostly in groups - walked towards the waters chanting "Jai Ganga Maiyya"; "Har Har Mahadev" and "Jai Shri Ram". Former US Army soldier-turned-ascetic Michael joined the Juna Akhara and is now known as 'Baba Mokshapuri'.

Sharing his journey of transformation, he said, "I was an ordinary man with a family and career. But I realised that nothing in life is permanent, so I embarked on a quest for salvation. This is my first Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, and the spiritual vibes are extraordinary."

Continued on Page 2

No rift with EO, says TTD chief

Promises joint and unanimous decisions for the betterment of TTD and pilgrims



PNS ■ TIRUMALA

Condemning rumours circulating on social media about a rift between the TTD Chairman and Executive Officer (EO), TTD Chairman BR Naidu appealed to devotees not to believe in such false propaganda. Addressing a joint press conference at Annamaiah Bhavan in Tirumala on Monday, he reassured devotees that the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) board and officials are working together cohesively for the betterment of devotees and the institution.

Speaking about the tragic incident on January 8, the Chairman described it as heart-wrenching and expressed grief over the mishap, which shocked people worldwide. He dismissed allegations that the incident was due to a lack of coordination between the TTD board and officials, stating, "We are moving forward with complete coordination and unity."

He added, "Except for the unfortunate stampede, we made all arrangements to ensure devotees had a comfortable darshan through Vaikuntha Dwaram from January 10 to 19. Proper medical assistance was provided immediately, and ex gratia payments were distributed to affected individuals. Those who recovered were given hassle-free Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam and transported back home using TTD vehicles. The devotees appreciated the arrangements, who expressed

Minor electrical spark near laddu counter put out

TIRUPATI: A minor electrical spark that caused slight smoke at a laddu counter in the Lord Venkateswara temple was quickly extinguished, a TTD official said on Monday. The spark occurred after rainwater dampened a wall near the counter, leading to the incident, the official added. "It was a minor issue, and the electrical staff on-site immediately handled and extinguished the spark," the official said. TTD operates 60 laddu counters at the shrine.

gratitude to the Honourable CM of Andhra Pradesh and TTD." However, he criticised certain social media platforms for spreading misinformation and hurting the sentiments of devotees.

TTD EO J Syamala Rao highlighted the many initiatives introduced over the past six months to improve the experience of pilgrims. "We have enhanced the quality of laddus, Annaspradams, and ghee. Over 40,000 brokers were eliminated from online systems. Vision documents for master plans of Tirumala and Tiruchanoor are also underway," he said. He emphasised that arrangements in Tirupati schools were made in consultation with the District Collector and SP, but crowd management falls under the purview of the police.

Continued on Page 2

HAPPY SANKRANTI

The Pioneer wishes its readers, advertisers, suppliers and agents a happy Sankranti.

As our offices remain closed today (14-01-2025), there will be no issue of the newspaper on 15-01-2025.

RESIDENT EDITOR



15 hurt in bus mishap on Tirumala ghat road



PNS ■ TIRUMALA

At least 15 pilgrims were injured when an APSRTC bus rammied into a protection wall and came to a precarious halt on the second ghat road.

According to the police, the accident occurred when the driver of the ill-fated bus lost control while descending the ghat road, causing the vehicle to crash into the protection wall. After the impact, the bus came to a stop. Authorities mentioned that if the bus had moved forward even a few more meters, it could have fallen off the road, leading to a major tragedy.

The injured pilgrims were initially shifted to various hospitals. After receiving initial treatment, they were later transferred to the SVIMS hospital for better care.

The accident caused a disruption in traffic on the second ghat road, leaving hundreds of vehicles stranded on either side. The police took a couple of hours to regulate the traffic flow.



# Three-day Sankranti festivities commence at Durga Temple

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Sankranti festivities have commenced on a spiritual and traditional note at the Sri Malleswara Swamy Varla Devasthanam atop Indrakeeladri in Vijayawada. On Monday, in-charge Executive Officer (EO) K Ramachandra Mohan inaugurated the celebrations by lighting the Bhogi Mantalu (sacred bonfire), marking the beginning of the three-day festival. The Bhogi Mantalu symbolises the burning of old and unwanted items to welcome new beginnings, reflecting the festival's essence of transformation and renewal. The hill shrine witnessed a gathering of devotees who participated in the traditional festivities, enhancing the spiritual fervour of the occasion.

Indrakeeladri, a prominent pilgrimage site, holds special significance during Sankranti,



Sri Kanaka Durga Temple Executive Officer K Ramachandra Mohan inaugurating the Sankranti festivities by lighting the Bhogi Mantalu at the temple in Vijayawada on Monday

as devotees flock to the temple to seek blessings and participate in the rituals. The temple administration's efforts to uphold these traditions contribute to the vibrant cultural heritage of Vijayawada.

EO Ramachandra Mohan observed 'Bommala Koluvu', 'Gangireddula Play', 'Haridasulu' and other cultural programmes in front of the Rajagopuram on the seventh floor of the Mallikharjuna Maha Mandapam on the temple premises. Also, on the occasion of Pournami, he inaugurated 'Indrakeeladri Giri Pradakshina' at the Sri Kamadhenu Ammavari Temple at the Ghat Road entrance. The Vedic Committee members and priests performed special rituals.

Earlier, the EO and Deputy EO Ratna Raju participated in the closing ceremony of Sri Sivakama Sundari Sametha Nataraj Swamy Vari Arudrotsava Kalyana Utsavams. They offered Pournahuti as per the temple's etiquette and concluded the Utsavams.



EVE Friends Circle chairman Eda Vedadri inaugurating the three-day Open Badminton Tournament at Kothuru Tadepalli near Vijayawada on Monday

## Open Badminton Tournament kicks off at Kothuru Tadepalli

Aim of the tourney is to discourage youths from participating in cockfights and gambling during Sankranti celebrations

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Eda Vedadri, a civil engineer in Vijayawada and the Managing Director of Eda Vedadri Engineers (EVE), actively organises sports activities during the three-day Sankranti festivities every year. His intention is to divert youths from participating in cockfights and gambling games in Kothuru Tadepalli, located in the Vijayawada Rural mandal of NTR district. For the past 12 years, he has been hosting an Open Badminton Tournament for young people at his mango garden, promoting a healthier alternative to the risky activities associated with cockfights.

Eda Vedadri kicked off the three-day Open Badminton Tournament for seniors and juniors at his mango garden beside the Polavaram River

Main Canal in Kothuru Tadepalli in NTR district on Monday. A large number of youngsters from Vijayawada, Vijayawada Rural, Ibrahimpatnam, G Konduru, and other mandals are taking part in the tournament.

Meanwhile, the Andhra Pradesh High Court has issued directives to the Police, Revenue, and Panchayat Raj officials to prevent cockfights from taking place. So, there is no cockfight arena in Kothuru Tadepalli this year. Many young individuals participated enthusiastically in the Badminton Tournament. Compared to the previous years, the number of participants has increased this time.

Speaking on the occasion, Vedadri said that there are many talented players in the villages, however, they are unable to participate in various tournaments due to a lack

of proper coaching. So, he is planning to provide a special coaching facility for interested players this year onwards. "Youths staying away from cockfights and gambling games during the Sankranti festivities is my dream. For that, I have been conducting the EVE Open Badminton Tournament for the past 12 years. I am happy with the number of participants this year," he added.

Further, he mentioned the names of international players, who secured Deputy Collector positions in the State government, such as PV Sindhu, Kidambi Srikanth, and Vennam Jyothi Surekha. They performed well at the international level and the government appointed them as Deputy Collectors. He opined that both education and sports are important for every student.

## Collector launches 14-day campaign against leprosy

PNS ■ PARVATHIPURAM

District Collector A. Shyam Prasad has launched a 14-day awareness campaign against leprosy, scheduled to run from January 20-February 2. The campaign aims to educate the public about the symptoms of leprosy and ensure early detection and treatment of cases.

The Collector, in a statement issued on Monday, highlighted key symptoms to watch for, including insensitive spots on the body, copper-coloured patches on the skin, swollen and painful nerves, muscle weakness in the limbs, and numbness in the hands and feet. He emphasised the importance of spreading awareness through local organisations such as DWCRA, MEPMA, and Anganwadi programmes, urging officers and staff from relevant departments to actively participate.

Programme to educate public on symptoms, early detection, and treatment

The Collector, in a statement issued on Monday, highlighted key symptoms to watch for, including insensitive spots on the body, copper-coloured patches on the skin, swollen and painful nerves, muscle weakness in the limbs, and numbness in the hands and feet. He emphasised the importance of spreading awareness through local organisations such as DWCRA, MEPMA, and Anganwadi programmes, urging officers and staff from relevant departments to actively participate.



As part of the campaign, ANMs and volunteers will visit every household in the district to raise awareness and address misconceptions about leprosy. The Medical and Health Department

will conduct a thorough door-to-door survey to detect cases at an early stage. Collector Prasad stressed that with prompt treatment, leprosy can be completely cured within six months.

In addition to community surveys, medical tests will be conducted on children in schools and students residing in welfare department hostels. The Collector called for widespread publicity of the programme in all villages, encouraging active community participation. The survey will be conducted with the help of ANMs and ASHA workers, overseen by mandal-level medical officers and cluster-level CHOs. Medical staff are required to submit detailed reports on leprosy cases registered in the district.

To further combat the spread of the disease, families of identified leprosy patients will receive a list of precautions and guidance on effective disease management. This comprehensive approach aims to ensure early identification and treatment, ultimately eradicating leprosy from the region.

## Andhra Loyola College restricts campus entry for walkers

College declares premises as private property; walkers' protests continue

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Loyola College, a prestigious educational institution in Vijayawada, has formally announced restrictions on the entry of unauthorised people using its campus as a walking track. The college management clarified that the premises are private property, and any entry without prior permission constitutes trespassing.

In an official statement issued by the college Secretary/Treasurer on Monday, the management called for public cooperation to uphold the integrity and safety of the campus. They emphasised that the grounds are designated for students and academic purposes, and access by outsiders, including walkers, is not permitted.

**Safety and security concerns**

The management stated that these measures aim to ensure the safety and security of students, particularly female students, and staff members. "Unlawful entry, including walking or jogging in restricted areas without permission, will attract legal consequences," warned the statement. The college also highlighted its commitment to maintaining its property for academic use and safeguarding it against misuse.



"We recognise the significance of outdoor activities for the health and well-being of the public. However, Loyola College's campus is primarily a space for learning and student welfare. We request the public to respect our policies and avoid unauthorised access," a college spokesperson said.

**Response to walkers' protests**

The announcement comes amid protests by the ALC Walkers Association, which has been urging the management to allow access to the premises. Addressing these protests, the management expressed disappointment over continued trespassing by some walkers despite repeated requests to refrain from doing so.

"Some individuals, including retired officers, are spreading false information through certain media channels and social media. We urge them to desist from such activities and respect the college's regulations," the statement read.

**Call for public support**

The college authorities also appealed to residents and authorities to report any suspicious or unauthorised activities on the campus. "Maintaining law and order on the premises is essential to provide a secure environment for our students and staff," the statement added.

Andhra Loyola College reiterated its dedication to academic excellence while ensuring a safe and secure atmosphere for the campus community.



## Home Minister Anitha extends Bhogi wishes

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Home Minister Vangalapati Anitha has warmly greeted the people of Andhra Pradesh on the occasion of Sankranti, wishing that the festival would bring renewed hope and happiness into their lives. She also expressed her excitement to celebrate this festival, deeply embedded in Telugu tradition, alongside the lively residents of the Payakaraopeta constituency.

The Sankranti celebrations, magnificently organised under Minister Anitha's guidance, unfolded at her residence in Saripallipalem, Nakkapalli mandal. The event was a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, featuring the sacred Bhogi bonfire mantas, exhilarating Gangireddu games, soulful Haridasu songs, intricate Rangoli art, lively Kolatas, and a feast of local delicacies. The Minister inaugurated the festivities with the lighting of the traditional Bhogi bonfire, followed by the energetic Gangireddu

dance, enveloping the gathering in festive joy. With grace, she showered the children with Bhogi Pallu (Indian jujube), blessing them with abundance, prosperity, and joy for the year ahead.

A special three-way Rangoli competition for women added a burst of colour to the occasion, with 150 participants showcasing their artistic flair. Anitha presented cash prizes to the winners, deepening the festive cheer and fostering a spirit of encouragement among the participants. The celebrations also included enchanting Kolattam dance performances, accompanied by the rhythmic beats of Tappeta Gullu, infusing the air with an infectious energy. The delightful array of local delicacies tantalised the taste buds, adding flavour to the already vibrant occasion. This festive gathering was more than just a celebration; it was a beautiful blend of tradition, culture, and community spirit.

## Dr NTR UHS cricket team selected

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Dr NTR University of Health Sciences has selected the men's cricket team to participate in the South Zone Inter University Cricket Tournament, to be held at the University of Madras in Chennai from January 16-21. Dr NTR UHS Sports Board Secretary Dr E Trimukthy announced the squad here on Monday.

Vice-Chancellor Dr DSVL Narasimham, Registrar Dr V Radhika Reddy and others appreciated the team members and extended their wishes.

**Men's Cricket Team:** Ch Siva Charitesh, Ch Tejavardhan (Narayana Medical College, Nellore), N Nithin, P Nikhil (Siddhartha Medical College, Vijayawada), D Prakash, N Bhanu Satish (Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam), A Ajay Kumar (Guntur Medical College, Guntur), Sachin Choudhary (Government Medical College, Ongole), K Aravind (ASRAM Medical College, Eluru), D Vinay Babu, K Adithya (PES Institute of Medical Sciences, Kuppam), V Sailesh (Great Eastern Medical School, Srikakulam), Syed Abdul Rahman, R Ranjith Kumar Naik (Government Dental College, Vijayawada), V Pavan (Nimra College of Nursing, Ibrahimpatnam), V Sai Chandu (Konaseema Institute of Dental Sciences, Amalapuram), Dr M Sattar Khan, Manager (Nimra Institute of Medical Sciences, Ibrahimpatnam), Physical Director), T Gurunatham, Coach (NRI Medical College, Chinnakani), Physical Director).

## Rare wild buffalo spotted in Cheemalapadu

The animals were believed to have vanished centuries ago

PNS ■ ANAKAPALLI

Sighting of a rare species of wild buffalo has sent shockwaves of excitement through the local community in Chimalapadu panchayat limits of Ravikamatham mandal. These animals, believed to have vanished from the region centuries ago, have made a surprising reappearance, captivating villagers and wildlife experts alike. The sighting occurred along the route connecting Kalyanapulova Reservoir and Bangaru Bandar village, where a group of these animals was observed

by local residents. The wild buffaloes were seen freely roaming the area.

A driver passing through the region around 11.30 pm on Sunday was the first to notice the buffaloes. Initially, he mistook them for ordinary domestic buffaloes. However, as he approached, he was struck by their sheer size and imposing presence, realising these were far larger and more intimidating than any domestic breed he had encountered. Experts are now urging further investigation to confirm the identity of these buffaloes and to ensure their protection.

## Small farmers embrace drone technology

Women increasingly involved in drone operations



PNS ■ VIZIANAGARAM

Vizianagaram district is witnessing a remarkable agricultural transformation, with drones becoming an integral part of farming practices. Smallholder farmers, recognising the potential of this technology, are pooling their resources to form collective farming groups, a trend that is not only boosting efficiency but also empowering women.

Villages like Mudapaka and Vijnigiri are leading the way in this drone-powered agricultural revolution. By collaborating, farmers can meet the minimum five-acre requirement for drone operations, making this technology accessible to even small landholdings. This collaborative approach ensures efficient and cost-effective spraying while fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility.

"Women are increasingly involved in drone operations, reflecting a growing trend of empowerment and modernisa-

tion within these rural communities," observed P. Sai Lalitha, a DGCA-certified drone pilot and trainer.

The process typically begins with demonstrations conducted by mandal agriculture officers. "Farmers approach the officer to request a demonstration, which helps them understand the benefits of drone spraying," explains Pilla Manohar Sainath, another DGCA-certified drone pilot and trainer. "Once convinced, they collaborate to determine the total area and submit their requests as a group."

To operate drones, farmers must register on the Digital Sky platform under the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). Sai Lalitha emphasised the potential of this technology, stating, "Drone technology opens new avenues for farmers of all sizes. By working together, even smallholders can benefit from efficient and accurate spraying, leading to increased productivity and sustainability."

## NSM hosts Montfortian schools alumni meet of Hyd Province

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

NSM Public School organised the 3rd Alumni Association of Hyderabad Province (ASHP) meeting on Sunday, uniting alumni from Montfortian Schools across Telangana, Hyderabad, and Nagpur. The event commenced with a flag hoisting ceremony, led by School Principal Brother Rayappa Reddy, Hyderabad Province Superior Brother Shine Alex, and representatives from various alumni groups. Principal Brother Rayappa

Reddy highlighted the transformative potential of alumni associations in contributing to society. ALCC Executive Member Kasturi Shiva Shankar and Management Consultant MC Das delivered insightful speeches, emphasizing the responsibilities and contributions of alumni towards societal progress.

NSM Old Students Association (OSA) president Venkat Jagadish expressed immense joy in supporting his alma mater and working for the betterment of society. Alumnus Sreemanth played a key role in



ensuring the smooth execution of the event.

The gathering also featured presentations by alumni, showcasing their notable contributions and initiatives, which served as an inspiration to all attendees. In celebration of the Sankranti festivities, students performed the lively Sankranti Sambaralu dance, adding a vibrant cultural element to the occasion.

The meeting concluded with the ceremonial handover of the ASHP flag to the next year's host, symbolizing the continuation of this collaborative tradition.



ACROSS THE STATES



'No Helmet, No Fuel' from 26: Lucknow DM

Starting January 26, riders of two wheelers may not get fuel at filling stations in Lucknow if they are found without helmet or protective headgear. In light of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's recent directives and Transport Department's initiative to curb road fatalities caused by two-wheeler accidents, Lucknow District Magistrate Surya Pal Gangwar on Monday instructed strict enforcement of the 'No Helmet, No Fuel' policy. Petrol pumps across Lucknow have been directed to deny fuel to riders and pillion passengers without helmets starting January 26, according to an order issued by the DM. "The move aligns with the Uttar Pradesh Transport Commissioner's directive issued on January 8. It is imperative to raise awareness about road safety and address deaths caused due to the non-use of helmets," said Gangwar. Under this directive, petrol pump operators have been given a seven-day timeline to install large signboards highlighting the new policy at their premises.



Singapore prez to begin 5-day visit from today

President of Singapore Tharman Shanmugaratnam will be on a five-day visit to India beginning Tuesday with an aim to give new momentum to the ties between the two countries. It will be Shanmugaratnam's first visit to India as Singapore president. Shanmugaratnam will hold discussions with President Droupadi Murmu, who will also host a banquet in his honour, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said in statement, announcing the visit. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will meet with the Singaporean president. "The President of the Republic of Singapore Tharman Shanmugaratnam will pay a State visit to India from January 14-18. He will be accompanied by a high-level delegation, including ministers, members of parliament and officials," the MEA said. Shanmugaratnam will be accorded a ceremonial welcome at the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhavan on January 16.



Union Min demands dedicated ministry for OBC welfare

Union Minister Anupriya Patel on Monday demanded the establishment of a dedicated ministry for the welfare of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). At a press conference here, she said her party has consistently raised this demand both at the ministry level and in Parliament. Patel, whose party has been an NDA partner since the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, also voiced her support for a caste-based census. When asked about former party MP Pakauri Lal Kol forming a new political outfit, she said, "In a democracy, everyone is free to form their own party." She emphasized that her party had given Kol and his family significant opportunities. "We made him an MP, his son Rahul Kol an MLA. After Rahul's untimely demise, his wife was made an MLA and later a candidate for the Lok Sabha elections," Patel said. "We have fulfilled our responsibilities, and the public is well aware of Pakauri Lal's activities during and after the elections," Patel added.

'Modi keeps his promises, right things will happen at right time'

PNS ■ SONAMARG

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday asserted that he would keep promises he made to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, in an oblique reference to the demand for restoration of statehood voiced strongly by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah.

Modi was addressing a public meeting after inaugurating a strategic 6.4-km tunnel here connecting Kashmir with Sonamarg and constructed at a cost of Rs 2,700 crore.

Speaking earlier at the function, Abdullah pressed for restoration of statehood to Jammu and Kashmir as promised by the prime minister before the assembly elections in September last year and said, "My heart believes that you will fulfil this promise soon."

Without making a direct reference to the issue of statehood, Modi told the gathering, "You have to believe that this is Modi and he keeps his promises." "There is a right time for everything and right things will happen at the right time," he said. Abdullah, while welcoming Modi, referred to his speech made on International Yoga Day last year and said, "You gave three very important points in your programme. You talked about 'dil ki duri'



Modi was addressing a public meeting after inaugurating a strategic 6.4-km tunnel here connecting Kashmir with Sonamarg and constructed at a cost of Rs 2,700 crore

(distance between hearts) and 'Dilli se duri' (distance of people of Jammu and Kashmir with Delhi) and said you are trying to eliminate both these things." He said it was an honour to have the prime minister inaugurating two important projects in Jammu and Kashmir within a span of 15 days. Last week, Modi virtually inaugurated the Jammu rail-



way division. "With such projects, not only the distance of the heart but the distance from

Delhi is also reduced," Abdullah said, thanking the PM for staying true to his words.

The chief minister said that people often meet him and ask when Jammu and Kashmir's statehood would be restored. "My heart says that very soon, prime minister, you will fulfil your third promise to the people of Jammu and Kashmir. And Jammu and Kashmir will once again get the status of a state," he said. Modi said that Jammu and Kashmir is the crown of the country and he wants it to be beautiful and prosperous.

"There is an atmosphere of peace in Jammu and Kashmir and we have seen its effect on tourism. Kashmir is writing a new saga of development today," he said. He said the Kashmir valley will soon be connected by train and there is enthusiasm among people about it.

Modi also paid tributes to the seven people who were killed in a terror attack near the tunnel here on October 20 last year.

After inaugurating the project, the prime minister went inside the tunnel and interacted with the project officials. He also met the construction workers who worked meticulously amid harsh conditions to complete the tunnel.



Infra development key to achieve Viksit Bharat goal: Gadkari

PNS ■ SONAMARG

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari on Monday said infrastructure development is imperative to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat, as the economy depends on good transport and communication facilities.

"The Prime Minister has given us a mission of developed and prosperous India. If we have to achieve a Viksit Bharat, we will have to improve the country's infrastructure. "Until water, power, transport, and communication do not develop, industry, business, and tourism will not get a boost," Gadkari said, addressing a rally after Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Sonamarg tunnel here. The Union Minister said Modi has taken a pledge to develop J-K along with the country. "He has given us the task of developing this infrastructure.

"Until water, power, transport, and communication do not develop, industry, business, and tourism will not get a boost," Gadkari said, addressing a rally after PM Narendra Modi inaugurated the Sonamarg tunnel here.

Good roads make a country developed and prosperous. We are working on a mission to make J-K developed and prosperous so that industries are established here, tourism increases, employment opportunities are created for the youth and poverty is eradicated. With that view, we are developing the infrastructure in J-K," he added.

'BJP pushing youngsters into quagmire of unemployment'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress slammed the BJP on Monday over protests being held by teachers, whose jobs are reportedly in danger, in Chhattisgarh and alleged that the Narendra Modi government is responsible for pushing youngsters into the "quagmire of unemployment".

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge shared a video on X, in which the protesting teachers are seen prostrating repeatedly on the road in a unique protest against their removal. "Only the Modi government and BJP are responsible for pushing the youth into the quagmire of unemployment. Watch this heartbreaking video from Chhattisgarh, how these female teachers are forced to protest in the bitter cold. The BJP government has fired 3,000 teachers from their jobs," Kharge alleged in a post on the



microblogging platform.

On the other hand, BJP-ruled Haryana is becoming number one in paper leaks and the latest example of it is the MBBS paper-leak incident in Rohtak, he said.

"Double engine government is attacking the youth with double power. First attack -- the paper is leaked by the mafia in connivance with the government and there is no accountability of the government! Second attack -- in the BJP-ruled

states, jobs are not available, reserved seats are not filled and dreams of youth are shattered," the Congress chief said.

The biggest curse of the BJP on youngsters is that of unemployment, he added.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also slammed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the teachers' protests in Chhattisgarh and alleged that the ruling party has pushed the future of youngsters into darkness.

Cong selling lies about UGC hiring norms: Pradhan

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan Monday attacked the Congress, accusing it of "selling lies" about the draft recruitment norms rolled out by the UGC and said the practice of governors appointing university vice-chancellors has been going on even before Independence.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) released the draft regulations last week, proposing a major overhaul in the recruitment of assistant professors and vice-chancellors. Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge had alleged that the UGC draft regulations, 2025, give state governors extensive control over vice-chancellor appointments and allow non-academics to hold these posts and termed it a "direct attack on federalism and state rights".

According to the draft regulations, industry experts, as well as senior professionals



from public administration, public policy and public sector undertakings, might soon be eligible for appointment as vice-chancellors. The draft norms have also given power to chancellors or visitors to constitute the three-member search-cum-selection committee to appoint vice-chancellors. "Whether it is UGC Regulations 2010, 2018 or current UGC Regulations of

2025, it is clear in all that the chancellor or visitor appoints the vice-chancellor. As far as the discharge of the responsibilities of appointing vice-chancellors by the governors is concerned, this is a practice that has been going on even before Independence. "The selection committee structure of UGC Regulations 2025 is actually the format of UGC Regulations 2010.

Pakistan epicentre of terrorism: Army chief

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Pakistan is the "epicentre" of terrorism and the cycle of violence in Jammu and Kashmir is being "orchestrated" from that country, Army Chief Gen Upendra Dwivedi said on Monday even as he described the overall situation in the Union Territory as "firmly" under control.

Gen Dwivedi, addressing a press conference ahead of the Army Day, also said that the "theme" of terrorism to tourism is gradually taking shape in Jammu and Kashmir. The Army has also been given go ahead for emergency procurement for counter-terror operations, he said. The Chief of Army Staff said that the 2021 "ceasefire" with the Pakistan



military is holding up along the Line of Control (LoC) but infiltration attempts from the Pakistani side are continuing.

In a significant move aimed at reducing tensions, the Indian and Pakistani armies on February 25, 2021 announced

that they would cease firing across the LoC while recommitting themselves to a 2003 ceasefire agreement. The violence level in Jammu and Kashmir is being "orchestrated" by the "epicentre of terrorism that is Pakistan", Gen

Dwivedi said. Jammu and Kashmir witnessed a series of terror attacks in the last few months. "Last year, 60 per cent of the terrorists eliminated were of Pakistan origin. As of today, whatever is a remnant in the (Kashmir) Valley and Jammu area, we feel that around 80 per cent or more are of Pakistani origin," the Army chief said.

Gen Dwivedi asserted that the situation in the Union Territory is "firmly under control". He said the terror infrastructure on the Pakistani side remains "intact".

"In recent months, increased terrorist activities were seen in North Kashmir and Doda-Kishtwar belt," he said, adding the "overall violence parameters" are under control.

India's development closely tied to North East: Khandu

PNS ■ ITANAGAR

Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Monday said India's development is closely tied to the progress of the North East, and the region's growth will depend on the development of Arunachal Pradesh and its villages.

Inaugurating the SARAS Fair here, Khandu said state self-help groups (SHGs) and federations collectively manage a corpus pool of about Rs 300 crore, which, he said, is a testament to the scale and impact of the collective effort within the difficult terrains of Arunachal Pradesh. The fair, held annually by the state government, serves as a vital



link between talented rural artisans and national as well as international markets.

The fair showcases the cultural heritage, handicrafts, handlooms, and organic products from villages while promoting sustainable livelihoods. SHGs from across the state display and sell their goods at the fair, an official statement said here.

From humble start to cutting-edge tech

The IMD's key advancements include rapid severe weather assessments (2015), 6-minute cyclone scans (2018) and upgraded satellite systems. Its advanced numerical weather prediction models now deliver seamless forecasts from a few hours to an entire season

IMD LEADS WEATHER RACE AT 150

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

From a few rain gauges in 1875 to rivalling the world's best weather agencies, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has weathered its way to becoming a global leader in forecasting.

Born out of calamities -- a devastating cyclone in 1864 and monsoon failures in 1866 and 1871 -- the IMD, turning 150 on January 15, has transformed from a humble setup

into a cutting-edge hub of weather science. "HF Blandford, the first Meteorological Reporter to the government of India, prepared the first rainfall map of the country (undivided India) using data from 77 rain gauges... The IMD has come a long way since its modest start,"

IMD Director General Mrutyunjaya Mohapatra told PTI. According to its 2023 report, the IMD operates 39 Doppler Weather Radars, INSAT 3D/3DR satellites pro-

viding 15-minute cloud updates, and a robust network of 806 Automatic Weather Stations, 200 Agro-AWS, 5,896 rain monitoring stations, 83 lightning sensors and 63 Pilot Balloon Stations.

The IMD's key advancements include rapid severe weather assessments (2015), 6-minute cyclone scans (2018) and upgraded satellite systems.

Its advanced numerical weather prediction models now deliver seamless forecasts from a few hours to an entire season, backed by high-resolution global models and seasonal forecast systems introduced

between 2016 and 2021.

Mohapatra said improvements in observations, communication, modelling and infrastructure have significantly enhanced weather and climate services. "Forecast accuracy for severe weather events improved by about 50 per cent in 2023 compared to 2014. This has significantly reduced the loss of lives and property during extreme weather events," he said. By 2023, the accuracy of five-day forecasts matched the one-day forecast accuracy of 2017. Cyclone landfall forecasts have become highly precise, with zero error in most cases (20 km for 24-hour forecasts).







## FIRST COLUMN

## AN ODE TO MY MOTHER

A woman of immense strength and boundless compassion, she dedicated her life to healing



RAVI VALLURI

Always be associated with people who are good at heart, said Swami Vivekananda. My mother shared her birthday with Swami Vivekananda (12th January). She nurtured strong bonding with spiritually inclined stalwarts. I recall her association with Sathya Sai Baba, Ganapathi Sachchidanda Swamiji, Raghavendra Swami Mutt, Swami Chinmayananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Mahesh Yogi and Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. She wanted to pursue medicine but life did not take that trajectory. So, she upended the pyramid and became a qualified medical social worker and worked diligently at the Rajan Babu TB (RBTB) Hospital, in Delhi.

Gurudev says, "Open your hands and sky is in your hands." To combat and challenge the disease of tuberculosis she initiated several rehabilitation projects. This included a creche for the children of those afflicted with this malady, a Stitching Centre, candle and match-making units. She used to tell patients and their children that "Fear is only as deep as the mind allows." Thus, patients afflicted with TB, but not bedridden participated in the projects. This was what she called "Diversionsary Therapy". Climate changes, civilisations collapse, governments change, political affiliations alter and even the best possible model collapses.

This is inevitable. It was extremely traumatic for my mother and she became a patient of Paroxysmal Atrial Tachycardia (PAT). This is a type of arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat). Paroxysmal means that the episode of arrhythmia originates and terminates abruptly. Atrial implies the arrhythmia starts with atria or in the upper chambers of the heart. The tachycardia results in a significant increase in the heartbeat per minute. It is accompanied by severe sweating, dizziness, palpitations, angina, and



acute breathlessness. Normally a patient suffers from such a condition owing to emotional upheavals, physical exhaustion, deep anxiety, and consumption of caffeine or alcohol. She was administered medication but it worked only to an extent. The real help came in the form of a pentagon-shaped talisman. That is through Siddha Healing, Pranik Healing, the 10-day Vipassana Course and the Part 1 and Part 2 Art of Living courses.

Indisputably it is the infinitesimal and scientific power of breath. Breathing techniques, meditation, medication and proper diet changed the trajectory of the life of the patient and brought back the mojo in her life. The year 2020 A virulent virus that is assumed to have originated in the dragon land of China assumed monstrous proportions and spread like a pandemic across the swathes of the globe. The robust lady, a woman of substance contracted the disease on the 23rd of December that year, a day after I was detected positive with the pestilence.

Six days before when she would have celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday, and despite testing negative for COVID, life was snuffed out and she entered the empyrean. She was on the ventilator, something my mother would have abhorred as the lethal virus had entered her lungs. Strangely at 7:30 a.m. that morning, though enfeebled by the pernicious disease, I was performing Sudarshan Kriya and had a premonition that my mother had entered Vaikuntha. A few minutes later my wife knocked on the door and with misty eyes and a choked voice conveyed the news. We are yet to recover from the body blow. My mother used to get up at twelve in the night and followed a strict regimen that included Vipassana meditation, Pranik Healing, Siddha Healing, Mudra Pranayama and then Sudarshan Kriya. This lasted for almost six hours. She was also religious in taking her short walks... how did she contract the disease and leave for her heavenly abode? Destiny or Karma?

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

## Deciphering the concerns in State of Forests Report 2023



V K BAHUGUNA

While the total forest and tree cover rose by 1,445.81 sq km since 2021, the findings reveal deeper concerns about the health and sustainability of India's natural forests



The Forest Survey of India (FSI) has a few weeks ago released its 2023 state of Forest report which shows an increasing trend in forest and tree cover in the country. The current assessment has shown a very meagre increase in forest cover by 156.41 sq km compared to the past assessment of 2021. However, the total forest and tree cover of the country has increased by 1445.81 sq km compared to the last assessment of 2021.

The results are good to show to the nation that its forest machinery is doing a good job in maintaining and also increasing the resources it is managing and controlling. This also is a good political tool in the hands of the Central government to show its success in conserving the forest resources and the overall environment. However, as the saying goes 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. The benchmark of any such professionally well-prepared report can be judged only if it shows the correct picture.

This year the team of the FSI brought out several key features like decadal changes in the various forest parameters and tree cover/ agro-forestry by preparing a change matrix, growing stock calculations both inside and outside the forest cover, information on canopy density of different classes of forests, carbon stock calculation, changes in western ghat eco-sensitive zone, fires and grazing status and status of natural regeneration, division wise forest cover for 16 states etc. The FSI officers have put up the data collected and analysed in the public domain and it is necessary that as professional administrators people like me bring some of the urgent issues that need the attention of the Prime Minister who is keen to see the success of conservation in the country, because the health of the forest of the country is not good rather the natural forests are in bad shape and



THE CONDITION OF FORESTS SHOULD NOT BE ASSESSED BY CARBON GROWTH OR TREE NUMBERS BUT BY THE CONDITION OF RESERVE AND PROTECTED FORESTS WHICH ARE THE SOURCE OF MORE THAN 450 RIVERS AND RIVULETS OF OUR COUNTRY AND SOURCE OF RECHARGING THE AQUIFERS, BINDING THE SOIL AND CONTROLLING THE HYDROLOGY

overall scenario demand a serious rethink on the way we manage our forest bio-diversity, even though India is ranked 3rd in top ten countries for an average net gain in the forest area. Let us discuss some of the points for action by the professionals/ administrators as well as the political leaders.

Before I flag the issues let us accept the fact that Trees outside the recorded forests are to the tune of 30.7 million ha which is 37.11 per cent of the total forest and tree cover of the country. All kinds of plantations like rubber, coconut, palm, areca nut etc are also included in it have saved the foresters from criticism with around 1289.40 sq km increase in tree cover between 2021 and 2023 and 20,286.57 sq km almost a 20 per cent increase since 2013.

On Paris's commitment to carbon stock India had compared to 2005 had already reached 2.29 billion tonnes of carbon capture. One of the issues of serious concern is the fact that the canopy density of over 40,709.28 sq km has shifted from high-density (70 per cent) and medium (40 per cent and above) density forests to open-category forests (10 per cent or less canopy density).

A major portion of this must be in recorded forests and catchments of major rivers and the habitat of Tigers. Apart from this 5573 sq km of good or open forest forests have become scrub and refractive wastelands. Thus almost 46707 sq km of forests have become non-forest inside the recorded forests as per page 73 of the report. Apart from this glaring forest /tree cover losses are in major forested states like Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra

Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Tripura, Telangana, Ladakh and Nagaland, North-eastern states and Himalayas.

However, some states reported an increase also and among them are Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh but the question today is how healthy is our forests. Now let us take the condition of regeneration. Only 48 per cent of the recorded forests have adequate natural regeneration 24 per cent have inadequate regeneration and another 9 per cent have no regeneration at all and for the last 10 years, there has been a severe loss of regeneration.

The condition of forests should not be assessed by carbon growth or tree numbers but by the condition of reserve and protected forests which are the source of more than 450 rivers and rivulets of our country and source of recharging the aquifers, binding the soil and controlling the hydrology so vital for sustaining the food, nutritional, climate, livelihoods and water security of millions of people of the country. So in a nutshell, we may feel happy to have a figure of 82 million ha of forest and tree cover (25.17 per cent of geographic area) which covers 71 million ha of forest cover (21.76 per cent) and 3.4 per cent Tree cover.

But the fact is we have only 9 million ha of very dense forests with 70 per cent canopy density and 24.35 million ha of forest with 40 per cent and above density. Another 18.5 million ha is with 10 per cent density or above and this includes the Green Wash area outside the recorded forests on private lands adjacent to recorded forests. Thus only 33 million ha of forest

cover is worth good density in the recorded forests compared to 30 million ha of trees outside the forests. Thus the real good forest is only around 10 to 11 per cent of the geographic area and it must give a wakeup call to foresters and political leaders. One of the reasons is the poor implementation of the Forest Right Act 2006 which has become an apolitical tool in the hands of competitive politics.

The Director General of Forests who is the Chief Technical Advisor of the government of India must tell the Prime Minister and Forest minister of the real situation in natural forest management as a professional like the then Army Chief Gen Vij told Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when he asked him to make adjustments in Siachin area and do not be hawkish. He told him firmly that being a professional he would never agree and after his presentation the Prime Minister supported him.

The IFS lobby should propose immediate remedial measures and one of the measures should be to change the format of the future State of Forest Report of FSI. The first part should only deal with the assessment of forests in recorded forests, the second part should deal with Trees outside forests and the third part should deal with fire management, carbon and change matrix etc. Hope the powers that be will notice the suggestion given here and stop the hotchpotch reporting.

(The writer is former Director-General of ICFRE in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change; views are personal)

## India and Afghanistan: Navigating a complex diplomatic landscape

The Taliban's return to power and Pakistan's enduring influence have created a multifaceted challenge for India

The evolving relationship between India and Afghanistan presents a multifaceted diplomatic challenge. India's engagement with Afghanistan, particularly after the Taliban's return to power, is closely linked to its broader strategic interests in the region, especially its rivalry with Pakistan.



K S TOMAR

The Taliban's close ties with Pakistan and its association with terrorism pose a serious security threat, making India's diplomatic engagement a complex but necessary endeavor. While seeking to safeguard its regional influence and counter Pakistan's dominance in Afghanistan, India must carefully navigate the Taliban's authoritarian rule, human rights concerns, and the risk of further destabilizing the

region. **India's Diplomatic and Developmental Footprint** India's involvement with Afghanistan extends beyond diplomatic posturing and is driven by long-term strategic and developmental goals. Through substantial investments in infrastructure, education, and humanitarian aid, India has positioned itself as an important partner to

Afghanistan. Projects such as the construction of the Afghan Parliament, the Salma Dam, and educational scholarships for Afghan students have significantly enhanced Afghanistan's infrastructure while fostering goodwill between the two nations. India's developmental efforts have had a direct positive impact on Afghanistan's stability and growth, providing a counterbalance to Pakistan's attempts to exert control over Afghan affairs. Strengthening ties with Afghanistan offers India significant strategic benefits, including access to Central Asia. By bypassing Pakistan, India secures a direct route to Central Asia's markets and resources, reducing Pakistan's monopoly over Afghanistan's

trade routes. This economic advantage is coupled with enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, as both nations share concerns about the proliferation of extremist groups. This collaboration not only bolsters India's position as a responsible regional power but also contributes to regional stability.

**Pakistan's Strategic Setback:** India's strengthened relationship with Afghanistan poses a significant challenge to Pakistan's strategic objectives. Historically, Pakistan has viewed Afghanistan as a strategic depth, crucial for its security and regional influence. Any shift in Afghanistan's alliances toward India directly undermines this narrative. The development of an India-Afghanistan trade corridor,



particularly through Iran's Chabahar Port, bypasses Pakistan entirely, diminishing its leverage over Afghanistan's trade routes. This economic shift erodes Pakistan's ability to influence Afghan policy, further isolating it in the region. Security concerns compound Pakistan's challenges. The increasing Indian presence in Afghanistan is perceived as a potential avenue for intelligence-gathering and support

for nationalist movements within Pakistan, particularly in its Pashtun and Baloch regions. **The Taliban's Role:** Despite Pakistan's close ties with the Taliban, India's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan has the potential to empower elements within the country that resist Pakistan's control. This could shift power dynamics within the Taliban or exacerbate internal divisions. The Taliban's governance and its approach to extremism remain critical factors in shaping the future of India-Afghanistan relations. India's diplomatic strategy hinges on the Taliban's willingness to adopt inclusive governance and curb extremism, which could open avenues for constructive engagement.

**Regional Stability** Regional stability remains precarious as tensions between India and Pakistan persist, coupled with the Taliban's uncertain governance. Proxy conflicts could spill over into Afghanistan, exacerbating instability. **The Road Ahead:** India's long-standing commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction, particularly through investments in infrastructure and humanitarian aid, has been central to its regional strategy. India has invested over \$3 billion in Afghanistan, supporting projects such as the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, the Afghan Parliament building, and the Salma Dam. These initiatives have directly contributed to Afghanistan's economic and social develop-

ment. Other contributions include power transmission lines, healthcare programs, educational scholarships, and food aid, reflecting India's commitment to Afghanistan's well-being and stability. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 cast uncertainty over the future of these projects. Despite the political upheaval, India has maintained a humanitarian approach, continuing to provide support where possible. However, the Taliban's restrictive policies and authoritarian rule complicate these initiatives. India's cautious engagement seeks to balance its strategic interests with the need to uphold humanitarian values. (Writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist; views are personal)

## MONEY MATTERS



### Net direct tax kitty swells to Rs 16.90 lakh crore

The net direct tax collection grew 15.88 per cent to about Rs 16.90 lakh crore so far this fiscal, according to government data released on Monday. As per the data by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), mop-up from net non-corporate taxes, which include mainly personal income tax, stood at over Rs 8.74 lakh crore. The net corporate tax collection between April 1, 2024, and January 12, 2025, was around Rs 7.68 lakh crore. Net collections from securities transaction tax (STT) stood at Rs 44,538 crore so far this fiscal. Refunds worth over Rs 3.74 lakh crore were issued during the period, a 42.49 per cent increase over the year-ago period. Gross direct tax mop up between April 1 and January 12 grew 20 per cent to over Rs 20.64 lakh crore. The government has budgeted to collect Rs 22.07 lakh crore in the current fiscal from direct taxes. This includes Corporate tax collection of Rs 10.20 lakh crore, personal income tax and other taxes of Rs 11.87 lakh crore.



### Centre extends soybean procurement deadline

The Centre has extended the soybean procurement deadline in Maharashtra to January 31, and in Rajasthan to February 4, following requests from state governments, Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said on Monday. The previous deadlines were January 12 for Maharashtra and January 15 for Rajasthan. "Procurement is underway. We have extended the deadline for procurement in both Maharashtra and Rajasthan on state governments' requests," Chouhan told reporters. The government has also permitted additional procurement of 25,000 tonnes from Telangana, which has already reached its initial target of 59,508 tonnes. Total soybean procurement across the country has reached 13.68 lakh tonnes so far, Chouhan said. The procurement in Maharashtra and Rajasthan is being conducted under the Price Support Scheme (PSS), with the government purchasing soybean at a Minimum Support Price (MSP) of Rs 4,892 per quintal. Chouhan said he would hold weekly Monday meetings at Krishna Bhavan to review crop conditions, procurement progress, price trends and weather conditions.



### Gold maintains rising streak for 5th straight session

Gold prices rallied for a fifth straight session, rising Rs 110 to Rs 80,660 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal had settled at Rs 80,550 per 10 grams in the previous session on Friday. In the past five trading sessions, gold prices appreciated Rs 1,660, or 2.1 per cent, to Rs 80,660 per 10 grams. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity rose Rs 110 to Rs 80,260 per 10 grams against the previous close of Rs 80,150 per 10 grams on Friday. "Gold prices advanced as the rupee weakened by touching 86.61, driven by elevated crude oil prices. The rise in crude prices came on the back of fresh sanctions imposed on Russia by US President Joe Biden, escalating geopolitical tensions," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said. The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices.

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The new regime in the US is unlikely to affect the business of Indian IT company HCLTech as it is very less dependent on H1B visas, a senior company executive said. "About 80 per cent of our people in the US are all locals, so our dependence on the H1B is one of the least in the industry. And it is not just now if I look back over the last 4 odd years, we have been pretty locally self-sufficient. "And that reflects in the number of H1Bs that we go through every year. It ranges

## HCLTech not dependent on H1B: Co exec

between 500-1,000 in a year max...so it is minimal dependence," said Ramachandran Sundararajan, Chief People Officer, HCLTech. HCLTech on Monday reported a 5.54 per cent rise in consolidated net profit to Rs 4,591 crore for the December quarter. The H1B visa programme allows US companies to temporarily employ foreign workers in speciality occupations. Indian companies have been



### 'Optimistic about higher agri growth in on good monsoon'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India's agriculture sector is poised for stronger growth in the 2024-25 fiscal year, driven by favourable monsoon conditions, according to Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister P K Mishra. "Monsoon has been good...I am very optimistic this year," Mishra told PTI in an interview. The agriculture and allied sector had seen a reduction in growth rate to 1.4 per cent in FY24. However, agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan had recently indicated that the sector could see 3.5-4 per cent growth this fiscal year, riding on good monsoon. Mishra said between 2016-17 and 2022-23, agriculture and allied sectors saw an average annual growth rate of 5 per cent,

supported by strong performance in livestock and fisheries. The sector also proved resilient during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing significantly to overall economic growth. However, challenges remain in pulses and oilseeds production. While pulses output has increased to 24-25 million tonnes from 14 million tonnes a decade ago, India is not yet self-sufficient, Mishra said. "A lot of research is going on and we should be making significant progress." Asked about high taxes on farm inputs and equipment, Mishra said agricultural issues cannot be viewed in isolation from broader tax policy considerations. "There are many tax issues and that need to be looked at more holistically," he said.

### CBIC: GST officers must explain 'grounds of arrest' to offenders

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

GST officers will now have to explain to offenders about the "grounds of arrest" and obtain a written acknowledgement from them, the CBIC said on Monday. Modifying the guidelines for arrest and bail in relation to offences punishable under the GST Act, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) said. "The grounds of arrest must be explained to the arrested person and also furnished to him in writing as an Annexure to the Arrest Memo. Acknowledgement of the same should be taken from the arrested person at the time of service of the Arrest

Memo." As per the earlier guideline issued in August 2022, GST officers were required to explain to the arrested person the grounds of arrest, and note the same in the arrest memo. The instructions follow the Delhi High Court order in the case of Kshiti Ghildiyal versus DGGI (Delhi). The Delhi High Court has relied on the judgements of the Supreme Court which made a distinction between "reasons for arrest" and "grounds of arrest". The Supreme Court held that there is a "significant difference" in the phrases "reasons for arrest" and "grounds of arrest".

## Market slump wipes out Rs 24.69L cr of investors' wealth

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Investors lost Rs 24.69 lakh crore in market valuation in the last four days of severe drubbing in the equity market. Spike in global crude prices, unabated foreign fund outflows, a strong US jobs data diminishing early rate cut expectations, and the rupee logging its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years dampened investors' sentiment. The BSE Sensex tanked

1,869.1 points, or 2.39 per cent, in the past four trading sessions. Falling for the fourth straight session on Friday, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tumbled 1,048.90 points, or 1.36 per cent, to finally settle at 76,330.01. During the day, it plunged 1,129.19 points, or 1.45 per cent, to 76,249.72. The market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms eroded by Rs 24,69,243.3 crore to Rs 4,17,05,906.74 crore (USD 4.82 trillion) in four days. With



Monday's sharp fall in equities, the market cap of BSE-listed firms dived below the USD 5-trillion mark. On Monday alone, investors' wealth dropped Rs 12.61 lakh

crore. "Continued foreign institutional investor selling crossed Rs 20,000 crore this month, contributing to the negative sentiments. Indian rupee touched a fresh low against the dollar during the session, pressured by stronger-than-expected US non-farm payrolls data which further dampened the sentiment, resulting in a firm dollar index. "Meanwhile, oil prices hit their highest level in over three months amid expanded US sanctions dis-

rupting Russian crude supplies, further adding to global uncertainties," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said. From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Zomato cracked over 6.50 per cent. Power Grid, Adani Ports, Tata Steel, NTPC, Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra, Asian Paints, Tech Mahindra, UltraTech Cement, and Sun Pharma were the other major laggards.



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Growing complexity in the cyber landscape is further exacerbating cyber inequity, deepening the divide between developed and emerging economies, and widening the gap between large and small organisations, the World Economic Forum said on Monday.

## Growing complexity widening cyber inequity: WEF report

In its Global Cybersecurity Outlook 2025, the WEF said nearly 54 per cent of large organisations have identified supply chain interdependencies as the greatest barrier to achieving cyber resilience. About 45 per cent of cyber leaders were also found to be concerned about disruption of operations and business processes. It further found that geopolitical turmoil has affected the perception of risks, with one in three CEOs citing cyber espionage and loss of sensitive

information or intellectual property theft as their top concern. The WEF report said that the rising complexity in cyber space arises from the rapid growth of emerging technologies, prevailing geopolitical uncertainty, the evolution of threats, regulatory challenges, vulnerabilities in supply chain interdependencies and the growing cyber skills gap. "Cyberspace is more complex and challenging than ever due to rapid technological advancements, growing cyber-

criminal sophistication and deeply interconnected supply chains," WEF Managing Director Jeremy Jurgens said, calling for collaborations between public and private sector stakeholders to secure the benefits of digitalisation for all. The study found that 66 per cent of organisations expect AI to have a major impact on cybersecurity in 2025, but only 37 per cent reported having processes in place to assess the security of AI tools before deployment.



### Indian realty sector attracts 6 pc more PE investment: Anarock

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Private equity investment in Indian real estate rose 6 per cent to USD 2.82 billion during the April-December period of this fiscal, driven by a surge in fund inflow in industrial & logistics parks, according to Anarock. Real estate consultant Anarock data showed that the Private Equity (PE) investment in real estate rose 6 per cent to USD 2.82 billion during the April-December period of this fiscal from USD 2.66 billion in the year-ago period. The number of PE deals dropped to 24 during the first nine months of the 2024-25 fiscal from 30 in the year-ago period. As per the data, foreign funds contributed 82 per cent to the total PE investments during April-December 2024,

while domestic only 18 per cent. Among assets class, the industrial and logistics sector accounted for 62 per cent of the total investments, housing 15 per cent, office 14 per cent and mixed-use projects 9 per cent. Shobhit Agarwal, MD and CEO, Anarock Capital, said, the top 10 deals comprised 93 per cent of total PE transactions in the first nine months of this fiscal year. He noted that the total PE investment was led by the Reliance-ADIA/KKR warehousing deal which was worth USD 1.54 billion. "This deal, along with the USD 204 million Blackstone-LOGOS equity deal, significantly boosted the logistics and warehousing sector, which captured 62 per cent of total investment," Agarwal said.

## RETAIL INFLATION EASES TO 5.2 PC

# Scope for RBI's rate cut

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Retail inflation declined to a four-month low of 5.22 per cent in December, mainly on account of easing of prices in the food basket, including vegetables -- according to government data released on Monday -- giving headroom to the Reserve Bank to reduce the key interest rate in upcoming monetary policy reviews. The inflation-based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) eased for the second month in a row after it breached the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) upper tolerance level of 6 per cent in October. The annual rate of inflation was 5.48 per cent in November and 5.69 per cent in the year-ago period. "During the month of December 2024, significant decline in inflation is observed in vegetables, pulses and products', sugar and confectionary',



'personal care and effects', and cereals and products,' the National Statistics Office (NSO) said while releasing the CPI data. The top five items showing highest year-on-year inflation in December 2024 were peas (89.12 per cent), potato (68.23 per cent), garlic (58.17 per cent), coconut oil (45.41 per cent), and cauliflower (39.42 per cent). The key items having lowest year-on-year inflation in

December were jeera, ginger, dry chillies, and LPG (excluding conveyance). "The CPI (General) reached its lowest point during this period in July 2024. However, the CPI (General) and food inflation in December, 2024 is the lowest in the last four months," NSO said. Inflation in the food basket was at 8.39 per cent in December, down from 9.04 per

cent in the preceding month and 9.53 per cent in December 2023. The RBI, which has been tasked by the government to ensure inflation remains at 4 per cent (+/- 2 per cent), has kept the key short-term lending rate (repo) at 6.5 per cent since February 2023. The Reserve Bank's rate setting panel -- Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) -- is scheduled to meet in February. Commenting on the data, Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist and Head -- Research and Outreach at ICRA -- said while the CPI inflation declined in December 2024 from 5.5 per cent in November 2024, the pace of the correction was narrower than expected. In sequential terms, the dip was driven by food and beverages, even as the year-on-year inflation for fuel and light, and pan, tobacco and intoxicants recorded mild upticks, she said.

## Sensex, Nifty join global selloff on spike in crude oil prices, FI outflows

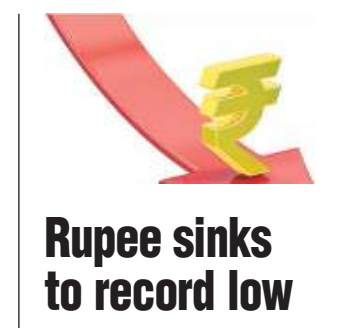
PNS ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark Sensex cracked over 1,000 points to dive below the 77,000 level on Monday, tracking heavy selling in global equities and a spike in international crude prices. A strong US jobs data erasing early rate cut expecta-



tions, the rupee logging its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and unabated foreign fund outflows also dampened investors' sentiment. Falling for the fourth straight session, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tanked 1,048.90 points or 1.36 per cent to settle at 76,330.01. During the day, it plunged 1,129.19 points or 1.45 per cent to 76,249.72. As many as 3,562 stocks declined, while 555 advanced and 131 remained unchanged on the BSE. Also, 508 stocks hit their 52-week lows while 120 stocks reached the one-year high level. Tata Motors, Tech Mahindra, Mahindra & Mahindra, Asian Paints, Sun Pharma and UltraTech Cement were the other major laggards. In contrast, Axis Bank, Hindustan Unilever, Tata Consultancy Services and IndusInd Bank were the gainers.

The BSE midcap gauge dropped 4.17 per cent, and smallcap index tanked 4.14 per cent. All BSE sectoral indices ended lower. Realty slumped 6.59 per cent, utilities (4.38 per cent), services (4.35 per cent), power (4.23 per cent), industrials (4.09 per cent), consumer discretionary (4.04 per cent), consumer durables (3.96 per cent) and commodities (3.69 per cent). Meanwhile, retail inflation slowed to a four-month low of 5.22 per cent in December against 5.48 pc in November, mainly due to easing of prices in food basket, according to government data released on Monday.



### Rupee sinks to record low

The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.12, and moved 1 paise during intraday to 86.11 before closing the session with a loss of a staggering 58 paise at its lowest-ever level of 86.62 (provisional) against the greenback. The fall of 58 paise, or 0.67 per cent, in one session was the steepest since February 6, 2023 when the unit had lost 68 paise. The Indian currency has witnessed the deepest plunge of more than Re 1 in the past two weeks from the closing level of 85.52 on December 30. Rupee had breached the 85-per-dollar mark for the first time on December 19, 2024. On Friday, the local currency had declined 18 paise to settle at 86.04 against the US dollar, a day after registering a marginal gain of 5 paise. In the preceding back-to-back sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday, it had plunged 6 paise and 17 paise, respectively.



## SAIE TAMHANKAR ALL SET TO DOMINATE 2025 RELEASES



Saie Tamhankar, one of Marathi cinema's most celebrated stars, is making her presence felt in the Hindi film industry. After gaining much love and appreciation from the fraternity and audiences for films like *Hunter*, *Love Sonia*, *Mimi*, *Bhakshak* and recently released *Agni*, 2025 is shaping up to be her busiest and most exciting year yet.

With multiple releases lined up across leading OTT platforms and a feature film, Saie's star is shining brighter than ever.

The year kicks off with *Secrets of Shiledars*, a gripping *Hotstar* release directed by Aditya Sarpotdar (who previously directed the celebrated horror-comedy *Munjiya*), streaming on January 31.

This will be followed by Netflix's much-anticipated series *Dabba Cartel*, produced by Excel Entertainment and directed by Hitesh Bhatia along with a film set to release on OTT.

Adding to her packed schedule, mid-year will see the release of her feature film *Ground Zero*, also backed by Excel Entertainment.

Directed by Tejas Deoskar, the film stars Saie opposite Emraan Hashmi, and the combination of these two actors coming together is going to be a treat for her fans. Saie's recent success in *Agni* has already created ripples in the industry. Her portrayal of Rukmini, a strong-willed homemaker standing by her husband (played by Pratik Gandhi) in a story of resilience and survival, earned widespread acclaim.

Saie noted, "Playing Rukmini was emotionally intense, yet incredibly rewarding. To see viewers connect with her struggles and resilience is truly heartwarming. The response motivates me to continue taking on challenging and meaningful roles." Having already cemented her legacy in Marathi cinema, Saie's journey into Hindi films and series has demonstrated her versatility and magnetism as an actress. With *Secrets of Shiledars*, *Dabba Cartel*, *Ground Zero*, and more on her horizon, Saie's 2025 promises to be a year of trailblazing performances, further bridging her star power in Hindi commercial cinema.

Reflecting on her jam-packed schedule, Saie shares her gratitude: "I know that 2025 will be a busy year for me. I am glad that my plate is full when it comes to the work front. This is a blessing, and I'm excited to bring diverse and impactful stories to the audience."



## Vicky Kaushal and Ananya Panday in Talks for Gully Boy 2

Zoya Akhtar's 2019 directorial *Gully Boy* remains one of Bollywood's most acclaimed films, starring Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt in career-defining roles. The movie, which captured the journey of an underground rapper, earned widespread praise for its storytelling, music and performances. Now, speculation about a sequel has surfaced, with reports suggesting that Vicky Kaushal and Ananya Panday might lead the cast for the second installment.

According to a recent report by *Filmfare*, discussions about *Gully Boy 2* have been ongoing. Sources reveal that Vicky Kaushal has been attached to the project for quite some time, while Ananya Panday has recently joined the conversation. The report also states that Arjun Varain Singh, who helmed *Tiger Baby* Films and Excel Entertainment's upcoming *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan*, has been finalised as the director for the sequel.

Arjun Varain Singh previously worked with Ananya Panday on *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* and reportedly believes she is the perfect fit for the sequel. The collaboration between Arjun and the two actors is expected to bring a fresh perspective to the narrative.

While fans of the original *Gully Boy* might hope to see Ranveer Singh, Alia Bhatt and Siddhant Chaturvedi reprising their roles, reports suggest that it's unlikely. A source close to the project stated, "If *Gully Boy 2* turns out to be a success, there could be a reunion in a potential third installment. But let's not get ahead of ourselves; that's a possibility that's way too uncertain right now."

The sequel is expected to explore new characters and themes within the world of underground music, with Vicky Kaushal and Ananya Panday taking the story in a fresh direction.

## 'Struggling to make a living', confesses Djimon Hounsou

Two-time Oscar nominee and known for playing character roles, Djimon Hounsou revealed that he still struggles to make a living in Hollywood despite gaining fame and receiving critical acclaim from small and big films.

In a recent interview on CNN's *African Voices Changemakers* as quoted by *Deadline*, Djimon, who is mostly known for his performances in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, *Blood Diamond* and *In America*, which also got him two Oscar nominations, said he is often low-balled when it comes to financial compensation for his work.

"I'm still struggling to make a living. I've been in this business making films now for over two decades with two Oscar nominations, been in many blockbuster films, and yet, I'm still struggling financially. I'm definitely underpaid."

Hounsou, whose recent credits include *A Quiet Place: Day One*, *Gran Turismo* and *Shazam! Fury of the Gods* has previously talked about the roadblocks he faced.

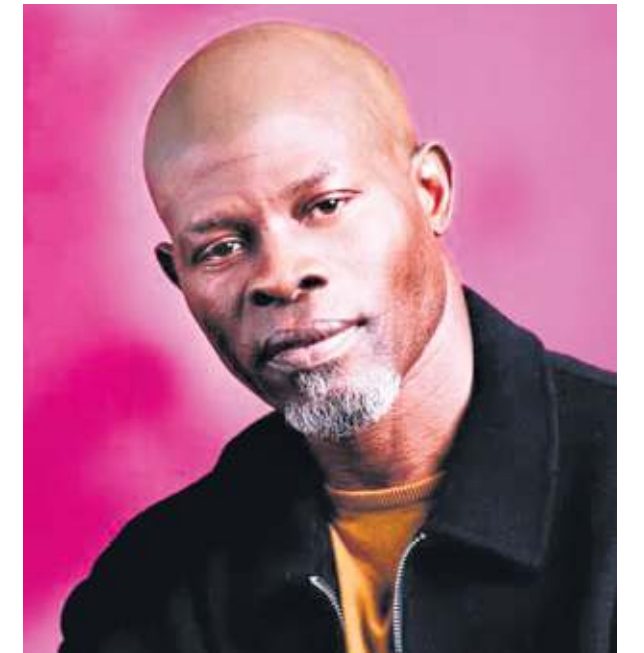
As per the *Deadline* report, while talking to *The Guardian* in 2023, the actor said he has "yet to meet the film that paid me fairly." "I'm still struggling to try to make a dollar! I've come up in the business with some people who are absolutely well off and have very little

of my accolades. So I feel tremendously cheated, in terms of finances and in terms of the workload as well. I've gone to studios for meetings and they're like: 'Wow, we felt like you just got off the boat and then went back [after *Amistad*]. We didn't know you were here as a true actor.' When you hear things like that, you can see that some people's vision of you, or what you represent, is very limiting. But it is what it is. It's up to me to redeem that."

In his conversation on CNN, the actor also alleged that he was passed over for an Oscar nomination because of xenophobia and racism.

"I was nominated for the Golden Globe, but they ignored me for the Oscars, talking about the fact that they thought that I had just came off the boat and off the streets," he claimed. "Even though I successfully did that [film], they just didn't feel like I was an actor to whom they should pay any respect. This conceptual idea of diversity still has a long way to go. Systemic racism doesn't change like that anytime soon."

Hounsou will be next seen in a horror film *The Monster* from Saw franchise Darren Lynn Bousman, a shark movie opposite Phoebe Dynevor called *Beneath the Storm* and a thriller *The Zealot* with Kodi Smit-McPhee.



'THE ARTIST IN ME IS THE HAPPIEST'

## Ashish Chanchlani on his horror-comedy directorial project

Ashish Chanchlani has amassed a massive fan following over the years, and many have enjoyed resonating and journeying through his fun videos. Now, he's set to make his directorial debut with his upcoming project. Ashish will showcase his multifaceted talent, as he will not only direct but also act, write and produce the project.

In an interview, Ashish Chanchlani shared that he took a six-month break due to health struggles, and personal challenges. This break, however, sparked a new creative direction for him. He said, "I was tired of doing parodies and relatable sketches. I wanted to create something fresh." He further added, "It's the most challenging thing I've ever done, but the artist in me is happiest."

Ashish emphasised that it's okay for everyone to take a break when things get overwhelm-

ing. He shared how stepping back allowed him to recharge and discover a fresh perspective on his creative journey. Ashish added, "It's okay to take a break. You're not a machine. Treat yourself like a human being. Relax, analyse and don't rush."

Ashish Chanchlani unveiled the thrilling first-look poster for his upcoming horror-comedy project, featuring dark silhouettes of figures holding lanterns, hinting at multiple actors and a supernatural narrative. Exclusively to release on the ACV Studios YouTube Channel, the project blends suspense with spine-chilling elements. Ashish's sneak peek of ACV Studios' return has sparked immense fan anticipation, elevating excitement for this much-awaited venture.



## FUN

### ARCHIE



### CALVIN AND HOBBS



### GARFIELD



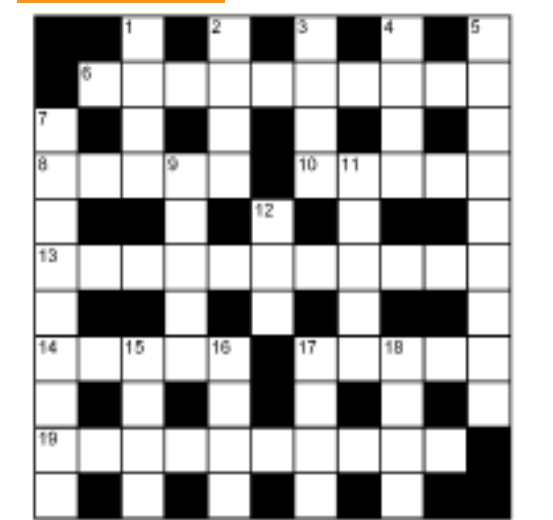
### REALITY CHECK



### SPEED BUMP



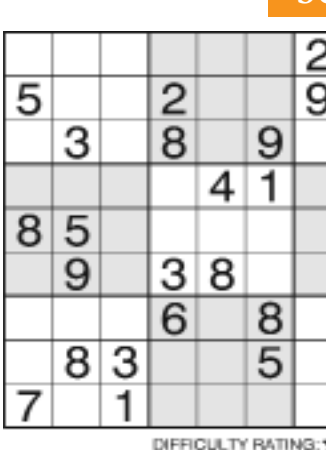
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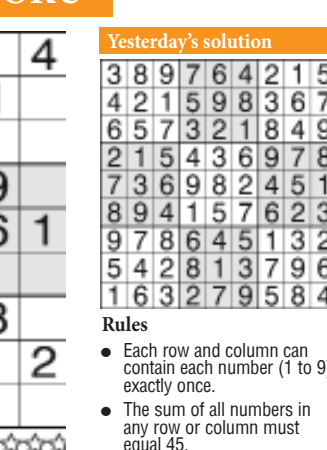
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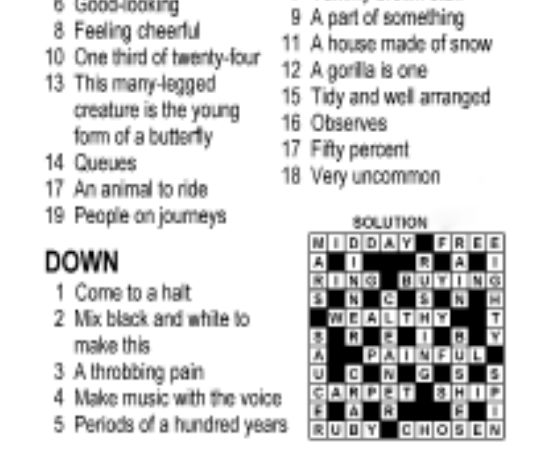
### SUDOKU



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



### ACROSS



### GINGER MEGGS



## Preserving emotions, experimenting with elegance

Once seen as an old-fashioned décor choice, dried flowers have made a stunning comeback, capturing the attention of designers, homemakers and event planners as well. The Pioneer connects with a city expert, Dr Mahalaxmi Reddy, who discusses how these long-lasting blooms have become a popular alternative to fresh flowers, offering eco-friendly appeal, affordability and versatility



VAISHNAVI TIKKA  
vaishnavi.tikka@gmail.com

**D**ried flowers are making a grand comeback, blending old-world charm with contemporary aesthetics. Their eco-friendly nature and long-lasting appeal have captured the hearts of many, offering a sustainable alternative to fresh flowers. Whether used for home décor, gifting or special events, dried flowers bring a unique touch of colour, texture and warmth to any space. Thanks to social media, their versatility and beauty are now celebrated worldwide, inspiring people to explore creative ways to incorporate them into their lives.

In an exclusive conversation with The Pioneer, Dr Mahalaxmi Reddy, an entrepreneur and retired faculty member in agricultural research, shared her insights on the rising trend of dried flowers and her accidental journey into entrepreneurship post-retirement. A former research scientist specializing in preserving eternal flowers, Dr Reddy provided fascinating details about the art and science of drying flowers, their growing popularity and the role of social media in reviving their appeal.

**Dried flowers through the ages**  
Describing the historical use of dried flowers, Dr Reddy said, "Dried flowers have been used for centuries. They are particularly popular in countries like Japan and Europe, where the market for them is thriving." She emphasised that fresh flowers, though beautiful, are expensive and require careful maintenance, making dried flowers a more practical choice.

She explained that dried flowers can be preserved through special treatment, extending their usability and appeal. "Flowers can be treated to ensure they last much longer. This makes them an excellent option for those looking to add timeless beauty to their spaces."

**Social media and the rising trend**  
Dr Reddy revealed that dried flowers have gained significant popularity in recent years, largely due to the influence of social media. "Social media has played a major role in making dried flowers trendy. People now see them as a stylish and aesthetic addition to interior spaces," she said.



Platforms like Instagram have showcased innovative ways to use dried flowers, making them accessible and appealing to a broader audience.

She added, "People are less aware of how to use these flowers in different ways."

**The beauty and adaptability of dried flowers**  
Dr Reddy explained why dried flowers are a preferred choice for décor. "Flowers are an eco-friendly resource that bloom and wither naturally. They add a soft touch of colour and texture to interiors, which is hard to achieve through other mediums."

She highlighted the visual appeal of dried flowers, saying, "Dried flowers enhance beauty through either natural dehydration or artificial methods. They are easy to handle with and retain their charm for a long time."

**The art of freeze drying**  
One of the most innovative techniques Dr Reddy discussed was freeze-drying, a process that preserves flowers in their original form. She elaborated, "Freeze drying retains the natural quality of flowers, making them eternal. This method is especially useful for preserving flowers gifted as gestures of love or significant emotions."

Explaining the process, she said, "Moisture is removed from the flowers to retain their cell structure and they are processed in a floral freeze-dryer. While the fragrance may be lost, the appearance remains almost identical to fresh flowers."

**A passion for experimentation**  
Dr Reddy also shared her personal passion for experimenting with dried flowers. "I try to dry every flower, especially exotic ones and preserve them in materials like aluminum. Each flower has its own unique beauty and I enjoy exploring different preservation techniques."

She emphasised that naturally dried flowers remain the most popular option among enthusiasts due to their simplicity and timeless appeal.

**A growing trend**  
Thanks to the creative presentations on the social media, dried flowers have reached a wider audience and become a trend. Dr Reddy concluded by expressing her optimism about their future, saying, "Dried flowers have endless possibilities and social media continues to inspire more people to appreciate and explore their beauty."

## 'KALP' YOUR EMOTIONS

**I**n the world of contemporary art, few exhibitions offer a more intimate and profound insight into an artist's personal evolution than Poonima Dayal's new exhibition, KALP, held in Delhi. This dynamic collection, which spans five distinct phases, takes viewers on a visual journey of self-discovery, emotional growth, and transformation, all explored through Dayal's unique use of colours, textures and abstract forms.

KALP, a word derived from the Sanskrit term for "imagination" or "creation," delves deep into the various stages of life and the emotional landscapes that accompany them. The five series within the exhibition—Out of the Box, Exploration, Resonance, Impressionist and Cityscapes—each represent a significant phase in her personal and artistic growth. Through these phases, she not only reflects on her internal journey but also invites viewers to join her on a path of introspection and discovery.

The journey begins with the Out of the Box Series, where she introduces the viewer to a vibrant world full of expressive strokes and rich symbolism. This series opens with a tribute to The Ramayana, honoring the divine, before evolving into powerful depictions of strength and warriors that celebrate life's exuberance. As the colours and forms unfold, deeper layers of the artist's personal transformation emerge, revealing the intricate processes behind her artistic and emotional development.

The Exploration Series represents a turning point in her work, as she begins to experiment with textures and symbolism to capture the essence of inner discovery. The cityscapes in this phase are abstract, metaphorical representations of her internal world—her evolving understanding of herself and her surroundings. This series

invites the viewer to reflect on their own journey of growth, humility, and exploration.

Moving into the Resonance Series, the tone shifts towards serenity. Through soothing blues and greens, she paints landscapes of emotion, evoking peace, clarity, and calm. The quiet introspection in these pieces mirrors the artist's own search for emotional tranquility, marking a peaceful departure from the intensity of earlier works.

Following the emotional depth of the Resonance series, she presents her Impressionist Series, where abstract forms and strokes capture the essence of life's progression. The work here speaks to the impermanence of moments—what has been learned, what remains uncertain, and the continual process of transformation. These pieces allow the viewer to feel the artist's ongoing evolution, creating an emotional connection to the universal journey of change.

Finally, the Cityscapes Series presents a conceptual reimagining of urban landscapes. Though the cities depicted in this series are



entirely fictional, they serve as potent symbols of emotional states and personal interpretations of the world around her. The works on canvas and paper, created during different phases of her artistic exploration, invite the audience to consider not just physical spaces but also the emotional landscapes we inhabit throughout our lives.

In an exclusive media statement, Poonima Dayal shared: "KALP is a deeply personal journey through my own life, expressed in the language of colors, textures and abstract forms. Each phase represents a different aspect of my inner evolution, from the vibrant beginnings of the Out of the Box series to the tranquil exploration of emotions in the Resonance series. Through this exhibition, I invite viewers to walk alongside me on this path of discovery, introspection, and growth."

Her artistic career spans over three decades. A graduate of the Delhi College of Art, she has evolved from using traditional oils to experimenting with acrylics, allowing her work to take on a new depth and vibrancy. Her art has been featured in prestigious galleries worldwide, including exhibitions in New York, Paris and London.

Speaking about the exhibition, curator Kishore Labar described KALP as "a compelling visual narrative that captures the essence of human transformation. Through her innovative use of color, texture, and abstraction, Poonima not only reflects her personal journey but also invites the audience to reflect on their own life phases. It's an immersive experience that transcends traditional art, becoming a personal and emotional dialogue between the artist and the viewer."

Poonima Dayal's work has earned her numerous accolades, including Talent Prize Awards and special mentions in international art exhibitions. With this exhibition, she continues to challenge boundaries, offering a transformative experience for both herself and her viewers.

For art enthusiasts and those interested in exploring the profound emotional journey that art can provide, KALP promises to be a thought-provoking exhibition.



## How mental health impacts teen skin health

**A**s teens navigate the emotional ups and downs of adolescence, their skin often becomes an unwitting battlefield. But did you know the connection between mental and skin health is more than skin-deep?

The first signs of stress often appear on the skin. Understanding this intricate relationship is crucial in helping teens maintain both their mental and physical well-being.

At times like this, parents should create a supportive environment where teens can develop a positive self-image beyond appearances.

### Effect on Self-Esteem:

The influence of skin health on self-esteem significantly impacts adolescent mental health. Understanding this intricate relationship is crucial in helping teens maintain both their mental and physical well-being. Parents can support their teens by creating a safe space for them to discuss their feelings and encouraging them to look beyond their skin's surface. This approach helps motivate teens to feel comfortable and confident in their skin.

### Social Pressure and Anxiety:

Adolescents are highly influenced by peer pressure and beauty standards often promoted by the media. For teens, this pressure can be overwhelming, especially when it comes to appearance. To address this issue, it's important to educate early on the mindful use of social media and to understand that not everything online is real.

### Skin Picking Disorder:

Skin problems can have a greater negative influence on a teen's mental health than just social anxiety and low self-esteem. Skin-picking disorder, or dermatillomania, is a condition in which a person picks at their skin obsessively, frequently to the point of injury. Stress, anxiety, or a sense of being in the dark may lead to this behaviour. Teens who suffer from skin disorders such as acne may be at a higher risk of developing this disorder because they may pick at imperfections to make them look better.

### Role of Skincare Routines:

Encouraging healthy skincare routines can help teens feel more in control of their skin health, potentially reducing anxiety. A consistent rou-



tine tailored to their needs can also improve skin conditions, leading to a boost in confidence and self-esteem.

### Tips for Parents:

- Provide a secure environment where teenagers can discuss their emotional health and skin issues. Building confidence and self-esteem is vital so they can embrace their individuality, make informed choices about their well-being, and develop a positive self-image.
- Encourage teens to follow healthy skincare routines and avoid popping or squeezing pimples. It's also important to teach them that this is a part of life and that there are avenues they can explore to be more comfortable in their skin.
- Stress is another factor that contributes to both physical and mental health. Promote stress-relieving pursuits for the teen, such as physical activity, meditation, and interest-based hobbies.
- Encourage a healthy body image and self-esteem by highlighting their strengths and attributes. Boosting their self-esteem is the first step in ensuring that they can see that they are more than just the surface of their skin.

(The author, Prasanna Vasandanu, is a Parent Educator and Founder of Tikitoro.)

## Policymakers drive towards sports revolution

**I**n 2024, young champions like Manu Bhaker and Gukesh Dommaraju rewrote history. 18-year-old Dommaraju became the youngest world chess champion ever while Bhaker became the first Indian woman shooter to win an Olympic medal and the first Indian to win two medals in a single Olympic Games. These two achievers had access to a sturdy support system as well as urban resources to reach their full potential but rural India too has vast reservoirs of

untapped sporting talent. Gumla in Jharkhand for instance, is not only known for its scenic beauty but also boasts a rich history of producing exceptional athletes in Hockey, Football, Athletics and Badminton. In fact, in 2022, five women hockey players, hailing from remote regions like Simdega, Khunti and Gumla travelled to the US after being chosen for an immersion programme.

Through the efforts of Transform Rural India's PPIA (Public Policy in Action) Fellows, the next generation of champions

is being nurtured in Jharkhand. Over 20 sports talent hunts have also been conducted at block and district levels in the past year while two indoor stadiums for badminton have also been established using Special Central Assistance (SCA) funding.

The PPIA Fellowship is a key enabler in driving systemic change, empowering young athletes and nurturing tribal talent. The Jharkhand government has also launched sports schemes aimed at providing resources and opportunities to youth in insurgency-affected areas but it is not always possible

to disseminate them at the grassroots level. This is where Transform Rural India's PPIA Fellows step in to tackle the challenges of inter-departmental coordination. They strive to create seamless synergy between different stakeholders so that tribal and rural aspirants have access to requisite infrastructure and more. The far-reaching impact of the work done by the PPIA Fellows has hence not just facilitated individual success but also led to the economic and social upliftment of underserved communities in Jharkhand.

# Barcelona thrashes Real Madrid 5-2 to win Spanish Super Cup final

PTI ■ MADRID

Real Madrid came out looking for some payback in the latest "clasico" against Barcelona but ended up being embarrassed again. Madrid lost 5-2 to Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Sunday. That followed a 4-0 loss at home to Barcelona in the Spanish league in October. Kylian Mbappé put Madrid ahead early in his second clasico, but Barcelona then ran away with goals by Lamine Yamal, Robert Lewandowski, Raphinha — who scored twice — and Alejandro Balde. Rodrygo scored for Madrid on the hour mark after Barcelona goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny was sent off early in the second half. It was the third straight win for Barcelona in 2025 after it

lost two games in a row to end last year. "The Christmas break helped us reflect on what we had done wrong," Lewandowski said. "Now we can look forward to the run of games that we have until the end of the season." Madrid lost for the first time after a run of five consecutive victories. "It was a bad night," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "It's a disappointment, we won't hide it, but it's soccer... You have to try to learn from the losses. We have to look forward to what's ahead." Mbappé had been contained when the rivals met in October but scored a superb goal five minutes into the match at King Abdullah Sports City stadium after picking up the ball just inside Madrid's half, running at the defense and then finding the net with a clever finish. But Yamal evened the match with



a nice run in the 22nd and Lewandowski, who scored twice in the earlier clasico, put the Catalans ahead in the 36th. Raphinha added goals in the 39th and 48th minutes, while Balde scored in first-half stoppage time. Rodrygo scored from a free kick in the 60th after Szczesny was sent off for a

foul outside the area to stop a breakaway. Lewandowski has 26 goals in 27 appearances across all competitions for Barcelona, while Raphinha has scored 19 times and Yamal eight. Barcelona was able to count on Spain midfielder Dani Olmo after the Spanish government stepped in to provisionally allow the club to register him with the league. The final came after Mallorca fans said they were harassed by local men who support Madrid after Thursday's semifinal. Two wives of Mallorca players said they were groped. The Spanish Super Cup has become a moneymaker for the federation and competing clubs since the federation struck a deal in 2019 to hold it in Saudi Arabia. ATLETICO'S RECORD Atletico Madrid set a club

all-time record of 14 straight victories with a 1-0 win over Osasuna on Sunday and went top of the Spanish league at the halfway stage. Julián Alvarez scored in the 55th minute at the Metropolitan stadium to give Atletico the milestone victory and a one-point lead over second-place Madrid. Diego Simeone's team has a six-point gap to third-place Barcelona. Atletico has won all of its matches across all competitions since October. Its last setback was a 1-0 loss at Real Betis in the Spanish league on Oct. 27. Eight of the victories have come in the league. "It's an important streak to show the growth of this club," Simeone said. "We have been working really hard." It was the seventh consecutive league game without a win for Osasuna, which is in 11th place.



## Cummins, Hazlewood in Australia CT squad despite injury concerns

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Pat Cummins was on Monday named captain of Australia for next month's Champions Trophy while fellow pacer Josh Hazlewood too was included in the squad despite lingering injury concerns surrounding both players. Cummins was managing an ankle injury throughout the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India, which played a part in him missing the upcoming tour to Sri Lanka along with the pacer wanting to stay back at home to welcome his second baby. "I don't really have any more information than what I shared when we announced the Test squad (for Sri Lanka series) a few days ago," said Chair of Selectors George Bailey. "I believe he's had the scan, I have no idea what the scan said. But we want to give him a little bit of space at the back end of the Border-Gavaskar; obviously baby pending. "We'll work through that with Pat and obviously the selection panel and the medical team... But I know he's very keen," he added. Hazlewood, side lined from the Melbourne and Sydney Tests due to a calf niggle, was similarly not picked for the Sri Lanka series but has been named in the preliminary 15-player Champions Trophy squad.

Under ICC guidelines, Australia needed to name a squad by Monday, but can change it for injuries at any time before the tournament starts. The Aussies, a two-time winners in the event and the reigning ODI world champions, also picked all-rounder Mitchell Marsh, who was dropped for the fifth Test at SCG against India after mediocre outings in the first four matches. "This is a balanced and experienced squad with the core having been involved in the previous one-day World Cup, the West Indies series, last year's successful tour of the UK and the more recent Pakistan home series," Bailey said. "It offers a variety of options for touring management depending on opposition and the conditions that may present in Pakistan," he added. The squad will assemble, prepare and play a one-off ODI against Sri Lanka following the Test series before heading to Pakistan for the group stage matches of the ICC showpiece. Australia gave prominence to all-rounders in the squad selection as Matthew Short and Aaron Hardie were drafted in ahead of out-of-form Jake Fraser-McGurk. Adam Zampa is the lone specialist spinner in the squad. He will be supported by part-timers Short and Glenn Maxwell.

## You cannot compare one generation of cricketers with another, says Kapil Dev

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

It is needless to compare two generations of players and pass a judgement on who was better, legendary cricketer Kapil Dev said on Monday and refused to get into a debate if BCCI selectors were right in excluding Yashasvi Jaiswal and Rishabh Pant from the T20I squad for the five-match series against England. Kapil bowled nearly 300 overs during the 1991-92 Test series against Australia and in the same rubber he became the first Indian to take 400 wickets in the traditional format apart from contributing with the bat in the team's cause. India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah could not bowl in the second innings of the fifth Border-Gavaskar Test recently because of back spasms. India lost the five-match series 1-3. The 31-year-old Bumrah bowled



more than 150 overs and emerged the highest wicket-taker on both sides with 32 scalps. "Please don't compare. You cannot compare one generation with another. That is not required. Today, players are scoring 300 runs in a day. It didn't happen during our time. So don't compare the two (generations)," said Kapil during an event hosted by the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI) of which he is

the president. The 1983 World Cup-winning skipper also added that one should not question the judgement of the selectors as they would have arrived at the decision to not play Jaiswal and Pant after giving it a thought. The two cricketers played all five Tests during the gruelling Australia series, with Jaiswal (391) emerging the second-highest run-getter, second only to Travis Head (448).

Asked if it was the right decision to drop two for the home series, Kapil said, "How can I comment on the judgement of others? I think the selectors would have thought about it." "So, if I say something it would be criticising them. I don't want to criticise them. They (selectors) are a group of people who must have planned and thought about that." With batting stalwarts Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli dishing out below-par performances in Australia, and talks of whether it's time for them to retire swirling, Kapil said the decision should be left to them. "They are very big players. Let's hope when they think it's the right time to play, when they think it's not, they will call it off," said Kapil, in response to a question whether they should be there for the Test series in England later this year.



## Gauff starts her Australian Open with a straight-sets win over Sofia Kenin

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Coco Gauff had a little difficulty adjusting to the sun at one end of Rod Laver Arena and dropped an early service game but quickly settled into a rhythm to start her Australian Open with a 6-3, 6-3 win Monday over 2020 champion Sofia Kenin. Third-seeded Gauff won the title at the WTA Finals last November and started this season by helping the U.S. to victory at the United Cup last week, a run that gives her a chance to move atop the rankings. The 2023 U.S. Open champion is wearing a Marvel-inspired bodysuit and skirt at Melbourne Park and she's radiating confidence and calm. "I knew going in it was going to be difficult, but you know I'm happy with how I played," she said of the 1-hour, 20-minute win over Kenin, who at No. 81 is a much tougher opponent than her ranking suggests. "I mean (I) could serve better, but like on that side I was struggling to see the ball," Gauff said, pointing to one baseline on the main show court that was bathed in sun. "So I'm just happy that I was able to manage through that." Another 20-year-old American, Alex Michelsen, produced the biggest win of his young career with a 7-5, 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 first-round upset of 2023 Australian runner-up

Stefanos Tsitsipas. Michelsen's three booming service returns in the ninth game of the fourth set helped him earn a vital break against the 11th-seeded Tsitsipas and, after shaking off jitters on his own serve, he closed out for his first ever victory over a player ranked in the top 20. Gauff went into her opening round on a streak of winning 33 matches against players ranked outside the Top 50, dating to a loss to Kenin at Wimbledon 2023. It was tough going early, with Gauff converting an early break before Kenin got back on serve at 2-2, hitting deep ground strokes and getting good bounce off the hard court. But Gauff, who had five aces and four double-faults in her first two service games, lifted her tempo, started taking the ball earlier and won four of the next five games. She finished the match with 12 aces and nine double-faults, and saved seven of the eight breakpoints she faced. She also had 28 winners, including two rifling backhands on key points in the second set, and 13 unforced errors. The draw presented another tough trip to Australia for Kenin. It was the third straight year Kenin faced a Grand Slam champion in the first round in Australia, and her fourth consecutive first-round exit here.

## SA include Ngidi, Nortje in CT squad

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

South Africa on Monday included Lungi Ngidi and Anrich Nortje in the Temba Bavuma-led squad for next month's Champions Trophy after the pacers recovered sufficiently from their respective injuries. Nortje sustained an injury on his big toe last month which ruled him out of the series against Pakistan while a groin strain in November forced Ngidi to miss the series against Sri Lanka and Pakistan. South Africa, the semifinalists of the 2023 ODI World Cup, are placed in group B of the Champions Trophy. They will start their campaign against Afghanistan in Karachi on February 21 before meeting Australia in Rawalpindi on February 25 and their final group game is against England on March 1. However, frontline pacer Gerald Coetzee was not picked because of the groin injury that he suffered during the first Test against Sri Lanka in Durban last year. Subsequently, he missed the second Test at Gqeberha and the entire home



rubber against Pakistan. Pacer Nandre Burger, who suffered a a lumbar stress reaction, ahead of the ODI series against Ireland in early October too was not considered for selection. However, the Proteas trusted the improving fitness of all-rounder Wiaan Mulder, who broke his middle finger in the series against Sri Lanka, but he played in the second Test against Pakistan after the physios gave the green signal.

Keshav Maharaj and Tabraiz Shamsi are the specialist spinners, who will be assisted by Aiden Markram's part-time off-spin. South Africa squad: Temba Bavuma (captain), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen.

## India Open: Spotlight on Satwik-Chirag as jumbo Indian contingent eyes end to two-year title drought

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The contingent is the biggest ever but focus would be on a handful of tried-and-tested names, especially the men's doubles team of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, when Indian shuttlers go up against a world-class field in the India Open Super 750 tournament beginning here on Tuesday. Despite the name, Indian success at the tournament hasn't been particularly regular with none from the host nation winning any title in the past two editions. The 21-strong group that will take the court this week would be desperate to change that statistic and make some amends after an ordinary Olympic campaign six months ago. The expectations would be especially high from Satwik and Chirag, who claimed the doubles title in 2022, the same year in which the currently erratic Lakshya Sen notched the men's singles top honour. The tournament will feature 18 of the world's top-20 men's singles players and 14 of the top-20 women's singles shuttlers.

Chirag and Satwik, who are former world number ones, have made a good start to the season by reaching the semifinals of the Malaysia Super 1000 last week. Despite the Paris Games disappointment, they have emerged as India's most reliable performers over the last two years by regularly making the deep end of the draws. They would be expected to do the same in the USD 950,000 event to be held at the KD Jadhav Indoor Stadium here. Satwik and Chirag, semifinalists at the 2024 China Masters, will face Malaysia's Wei Chong Man and Kai Wun Tee in their opening round. While the Indians have shown impressive form, they will be seeking improvement in quick rallies and service variations in a bid to better their runners-up position in the tournament last year. However, the Indian pair will face stiff competition from top names such as China's Olympic silver-medallists Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang. Also there in the field are Paris bronze-medallists Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik of Malaysia,



Denmark's Kim Astrup and Anders Rasmussen, and the Indonesian combination of Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Rian Ardianto. Sindhu back in action Despite an underwhelming 2024,

one can never discount two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu, who would be back in action after missing the season-opener in Kuala Lumpur due to her wedding. The 29-year-old Hyderabadi

returned to winning ways, lifting the Syed Modi International title, although it was against a predominantly Indian field. Sindhu will begin her campaign against compatriot Anupama Upadhyaya and is drawn to face

Japan's rising star Tomoka Miyazaki in a potentially intriguing second round. MKiyazaki is a 2022 world junior champion and Sindhu's conqueror at last year's Swiss Open. Sindhu last won this event in 2017. The very exciting but equally inconsistent Lakshya Sen would be aiming to replicate his 2022 success at the event. He can draw confidence from his Syed Modi title win and a third-place finish at the Kings Cup a few days ago. He faces a tough opening test against Chinese left-hander Hong Yang Weng. HS Prannoy, returning after a five-month break following a pre-quarterfinal exit at the Paris Olympics, stumbled in the second round in Malaysia last week. However, the 32-year-old veteran showed signs of his vintage form during the short campaign. He will look to build on that when he faces Chinese Taipei's Li Yang Su in the first round. A victory could set up a showdown with second seed Jonatan Christie of Indonesia. With marquee players like Olympic champions Viktor

Axelsen (men) and An Se Young (women), and world No. 1 Shi Yuqi leading the competition, it would be no stroll in the park for the Indians in fray. But being on home turf could prove to be the morale-booster that helps them go over the line in difficult situations. Young names eye glory Some promising youngsters will also be eager to make a mark. Among them is Priyanshu Rajawat, who faces a tough challenge in his opening round against sixth-seeded Japanese Kodai Naraoka. Malvika Bansod will take on third seed Chinese Yue Han, and Aakarshi Kashyap will face eighth-seeded Thai Pornpawee Chochuwong. In women's doubles, India's hopes will rest on fifth-seeded team of Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who will face Japan's Arisa Igarashi and Ayako Sakuramoto in the first round. Meanwhile, Guwahati Masters-winning pair of Tanisha Crasto and Ashwini Ponnappa, will take on the British duo of Chloe Coney and Estelle Van Leeuwen. The Indians are seeded seventh here.

# DIRECTOR NAKKINA'S CHEAP TALK CREATES A FLUTTER

Nakkina Trinadha Rao is a successful director with films like 'Cinema Chupista Mama', 'Nenu Local' and 'Dhamaka'. He is now coming up with another film titled 'Mazaka' that stars Rao Ramesh, Sundeeep Kishan, Anshu and Ritu Varma as the lead actors. The teaser of this film was released on Sunday and the director is successful in his career, but when it comes to speak about the film and actors, he acted very cheaply. His cheap comments on Anshu, the way he imitates Allu Arjun for forgetting the Chief Minister's name, is now going viral on the social media and the Internet. Netizens are now trolling him for his cheap behavior and talk.

Talking about Anshu and her film 'Manmadhudu', Nakkina said he watched the film many times. "When I was young I watched because of Anshu as she was looking like a 'laddu' in the film," said Nakkina, in a very cheap way. He didn't stop there and went on talking about her physical attributes. He added that she is in a range in this film and the next level. "So, that girl is now the heroine in my film and I can't believe myself. She is still like that. She is now

**The director, who delivered successful films with actors like Nani and Ravi Teja, talks very cheaply about actress Anshu and also imitates Allu Arjun, at the live event of his upcoming film promotion**

thin and I asked her to eat more and put on big sizes," said Nakkina, in a cheap way. He added that she improved (in the sense of weight) and next time she will improve more, said a laughing Nakkina about Anshu.

The director said that he was very happy to cast Anshu in his 'Mazaka' film. He said that she speaks only Queen's English. "I understand only 'Good Morning' and nothing more, when she talks," said Nakkina.

The director didn't stop there and wanted to talk about the other actress Ritu Varma. Here he imitated Allu Arjun where he forgot the name of the Chief Minister of Telangana Revanth Reddy at a press meet. Nakkina deliberately said that he forgot her name and asked for some water. He clearly wanted to imitate Allu Arjun here and then told Ritu Varma's name. This is another cheap talk and act by a director, who delivered some good hits with actors like Nani and Ravi Teja.

Now, the Telangana Women Commission Chairman has taken his comments very seriously and may ask him to appear in front of the Commission, according to a source.

## NAKKINA APOLOGIZES

Director Nakkina Trinadh Rao released a video apologising for his comments at the Mazaka teaser event. "At the 'Mazaka' teaser event for my comments, I came to know that many women were hurt. My sincere apologies to all of them. I wanted to make people laugh, so I did it and I didn't do it wantonly," said the director. He added that in his home also women are there, so he understands. "My personal apologies to Anshu and for the other heroines. I just wanted to tease her, so I imitated that scene. My aim was to provide some laughs at the event. I didn't know that these two became a big issue, many people's feelings hurt, so my sincere apologies to everyone," said Nakkina.



## Makers say there's a conspiracy against Game Changer



messaging platforms like WhatsApp. They demanded money from the producers and if they didn't pay them, they threatened to leak the pirated version of this film. Two days before the release, important plot twists were spitefully shared on the social media. After the release, an HD pirated print was leaked on various Internet platforms and Telegram.

The 'Game Changer' team now officially filed a complaint with Cybercrime police and provided evidence against the 45 individuals involved in these criminal activities. An investigation is going on to find out whether this group committed these crimes independently or as a group or had any external support.

Apart from the piracy, there was a campaign conducted on the Internet and also different social media platforms, to spread negativity about this 'Game Changer'. A few key clips and important sequences from the film were intentionally leaked to destroy audience enjoyment. The team lodged formal complaints against these pages and has been assured that necessary action will be taken soon.



Ram Charan and Shankar's combination 'Game Changer' was released with high expectations on January 10. This is one of the high budget films in Telugu Cinema and also Shankar's first Telugu film as a director. Dil Raju is the producer and he nearly spent Rs 450 crore on this film, according to a source. The makers expected huge openings, but to disappoint them, the openings are not good. Even the film got so much of negative talk after the release. Now, the makers are alleging that there is a conspiracy behind the negative talk and also the film unofficially leaked in some social media platforms deliberately.

Despite investing crores of rupees and over three years of relentless effort, the film became an unfortunate victim of piracy. On its release day during Sankranti, a pirated version of the film was leaked online by a group reportedly consisting of around 45 individuals, say the makers.

Not only the film was leaked, but the producers also got threatening calls. Before the release, the film's producers and a few team members were threatened through social media and

## RAO RAMESH PRAISES SUNDEEP KISHAN

The teaser of 'Mazaka' was released on Sunday evening at a function in Hyderabad. The teaser is filled with a lot of fun and it shows that the film is going to be a hilarious one, especially by Rao Ramesh. Bezawada Prasanna Kumar is the writer and provided the story for this film, while Nakkina Trinadh Rao directed it. On this occasion, Rao Ramesh praised Sundeeep Kishan as he accepted the son's role in this film with a big heart.

"The story revolves around a father and son. Prasanna Kumar wrote a very good story and I play the father's role and my character throughout the film. But for this story, someone accepted to play the son's role, and Sundeeep Kishan accepted it and he has a very big heart. If he wouldn't have accepted, the film may not have taken place. Once after he boarded, the project started. My sincere thanks to Sundeeep Kishan," said Rao Ramesh at the function. Ramesh said that the scenes between him and Sundeeep are very hilarious and come out very nicely. "Writer Prasanna Kumar wrote very humorous dialogues and his association with director Nakkina Trinadh Rao is a musical combination. The film shaped up well and I am confident, audience liked it very much," said Rao Ramesh. Anshu and Ritu Varma are playing the female leads opposite Rao Ramesh and Sundeeep Kishan respectively. Razesh Danda is the producer.



## We are planning a prequel to Daaku Maharaaj: Producer Naga Vamsi

Nandamuri Balakrishna starrer 'Daaku Maharaaj' film was released on Sunday and it is going with a positive note. Producer Suryadevara Naga Vamsi is very happy about the result and said the film is getting good revenue because of the festival. "Our pre-release event was supposed to be held at Anantapur, but

cancelled due to the stampede at Tirupati. Now, we are planning the success meet at Anantapur this week," said Naga Vamsi. The producer said that he is very sure that the film gets so much positive talk and especially Balakrishna fans are enjoying it. "When asked about the sequel to this film, he said, "We are planning a prequel to this one." Director Bobby Kolli is on cloud nine. "Last year Sankranti, my film

'Waltair Veerayya' became a super hit and now this Sankranti, 'Daaku Maharaaj' is going to be another hit. Now, Sankranti is very special for me," said the director. He said that music director Thaman and Cinematographer Vijay Karthik stand out as the main pillars. "If we work sincerely and wholeheartedly, the audience definitely encourages the films," said the director.

## Virat Karnna's Rudhra look from Nagabandham

Many supernatural and fantasy genres are successful in Telugu cinema; 'Nagabandham' is another film of the same genre. Virat Karnna is the lead actor in this film, while Abhishek Nama is the director. The first look of Virat's Rudhra was unveiled by Rana Daggubati on Monday. The first look poster presents Virat Karnna in a striking and rugged appearance. He is in an audacious avatar, fearlessly battling a menacing crocodile in the ocean. The first look poster is interesting and curious. 'Nagabandham' is shaping up to be an epic adventure, with its tagline 'The Secret Treasure hunting at the thrilling journey ahead. Abhishek Nama also brings his own vision and expertise to both the story and screenplay. Kishore Annapureddy is producing this film along with Abhishek Pictures.

The film is going to be released in all languages that combines spiritual mysticism with thrilling adventure. Nabha Natesh and Iswarya Menon are the female leads. The story is written with some true events that happened recently, where a treasure was discovered at temples like Padmanabhaswamy and Puri Jagannath. The story dives into the captivating mythology surrounding these divine locations and the enigmatic rituals designed to safeguard them.

