

ACROSS THE STATES



NIA arrests top leader of Naxal frontal organisation

Top leader of a frontal organisation linked to the banned CPI(Maoist) has been arrested by the National Investigation Agency...



Mann sets deadline to make Punjab drug-free state

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Friday convened a meeting with senior officials and set a deadline of three months to make the state drug-free.



BSF nabs 15 Bangladeshis from Tripura border

The Border Security Force (BSF) held 15 Bangladeshis, including seven children, along with three Indian youths in two separate operations in Tripura...

PUNE BUS RAPE INCIDENT

Request for water, food led to accused's arrest

PNS ■ PUNE

A request for food and water from a house led to the arrest of a 37-year-old man on the run after allegedly raping a woman inside a bus at Swargate bus station in Pune...

India 3rd largest startup ecosystem worth over \$354 million: Pradhan

PNS ■ CHENNAI

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Friday said India has emerged as the world's third-largest startup ecosystem...



The minister was virtually addressing the inaugural session of the third edition of IINventiv, a national research and development expo...

IINventiv is a flagship event of the Ministry of Education, which was first held in 2022 at IIT Delhi featuring exhibits only from Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs).

Pradhan also extended invitations to international representatives and sought to strengthen research ties to foster global start-up opportunities...

look at technology transfer, investors can look at avenues for funding and foster future collaboration. We have more than 180 exhibits from 39 participating institutions...

"These feature the latest Research and Development that have been happening in these institutions, startups that have arisen out of the R&D done at these institutions...

The thematic areas that would be covered during the two-day event include Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning technologies; Aviation, Defence and Space, Marine Technology; Medical and Healthcare Engineering; Rural Technology; Smart Cities and Infrastructure; Advanced Manufacturing (Industry 4. and 5.0) and Circularity and Sustainability (Energy and E-mobility).

The second edition of the event with participating institutions from the top 50 of NIRF, apart from IITs, NITs, IISc and IISERs, was held at IIT Hyderabad last year. "We are now bringing together a platform in which industry leaders can



'Take action against networks helping Bangla, Rohingya intruders'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah Friday directed the Delhi Police to take stringent action against the networks that help illegal Bangladeshis and Rohingyas entering India...

Chairing a meeting to review the national capital's law-and-order situation, he said strict action should also be taken against police stations and sub-divisions that consistently perform poorly.

Shah said it should be the Delhi Police's priority to eliminate interstate gangs in the city ruthlessly. Action must be taken with "top to bottom

and bottom to top approach" in narcotics cases, and such drug networks should be dismantled, he said.

"Strict action should be taken against the entire network that helps Bangladeshis and Rohingyas intruders enter the country, get their documents made and facilitate their stay here. The issue of illegal intruders is also related to national security, and it should be dealt with strictly. They should be identified and deported," he told the meeting.

The meeting was also attended by Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, Delhi's Home Minister Ashish Sood, Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora and other senior officials.

India's foundation lies in 'Sanatan Dharma': Dhankhar

PNS ■ KOLKATA

Underscoring India's deep spirituality and ancient civilisation, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Friday said that the country's foundation lies in Sanatan Dharma.

India, which has long been a guiding force for the world through its preachings of non-violence, peace and brotherhood, will one day become the 'vishwa guru' (world leader), Dhankhar said.

He was addressing a gathering at the closing ceremony of the 150th birth anniversary celebration of spiritual leader Acharya Sri Bhakti Siddhanta Saraswati Goswami Prabhupad, organised by Gaudiya Mission here.

Emphasising the unifying power of Sanatan Dharma, Dhankhar said, "Sanatan stands for inclusivity, universal values, patriotism and rising above caste, creed and economic divisions."

Reflecting on India's heritage, he asserted, "No other country in the world has a 5,000-year-old 'sanskriti'. India has been the spiritual centre of the world, and we have to carry this momentum forward."

Dhankhar, however, expressed regret over the setbacks India faced around 1,000-1,200 years ago when renowned universities like Nalanda and Takshashila—once attracting scholars from across the world—were

Fire erupts in Mumbai high-rise; over 50 people rescued

PNS ■ MUMBAI

More than 50 people stranded on the upper floors of a 57-storey residential building were rescued after a fire broke out in the high-rise in south Mumbai's Byculla area on Friday morning, officials said.

There was no report of casualty in the blaze that erupted around 10.45 am on the 42nd floor in one of the twin buildings of Sablete 27 on Babasahab Ambedkar Road, an official from the fire brigade said.



Teams from the Fire Brigade, Mumbai civic utility BEST, police, 108 ambulance services, and other agencies

were mobilised immediately, an official said, adding the cause of the blaze was yet to be ascertained.

After more than two-and-a-half hours of efforts, the Fire Brigade doused the blaze on the 42nd floor of the high-rise building around 1.10 pm, he informed.

They also rescued 50 to 60 people who were stranded on the upper floors of the high-rise with the help of the building's security guards, said the official.

'EXTREMELY UNFORTUNATE' SC laments suicides in IITs, IIMs, assures robust steps

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday said incidents of suicides in IITs and IIMs were "extremely unfortunate" and assured a robust mechanism to check such cases.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kottiswar Singh was informed by senior advocate Indira Jaising that in past 14 months, 18 suicides took place in Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). "It is extremely unfortunate what is happening. We will create a robust mechanism to check this situation. We will take this issue to the logical conclusion," it said.

Jaising, appearing for the mothers of students Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi, who allegedly died by suicide after facing caste-based discrimination, said universities and colleges hadn't given entire data on suicides taking place in their campuses despite a court



order. While Vemula, a PhD scholar at Hyderabad Central University died on January 17, 2016, Tadvi, a student at TN Topiwala National Medical College, died on May 22, 2019, after she was subjected to purported discrimination by three doctors in her college.

Solicitor general Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre, said the University Grants Commission (UGC) had formulated draft regulations, which took care of majority of the concerns raised by the petitioners, and were uploaded on its website inviting suggestions and objections from the public.

Cong brass discuss strategy with Kerala party leaders

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Top brass of the Congress along with party leaders from Kerala on Friday held a brainstorming session to discuss a strategy and the way forward ahead of next year's assembly elections, with party chief Mallikarjun Kharge asserting that the people will defeat the "oppressive" and "communal" fronts in the state.

The steps to be taken for strengthening the organisation and preparations for the assembly elections to be held next year were also discussed during the meeting, sources said. "Change is inevitable in Kerala. Congress has built the development paradigm and welfare model of Kerala, and we will do everything possible to bring our UDF to power. Next year, people will defeat both the oppressive and communal fronts in the state," Kharge said



in a post on X.

"We held a meeting of Kerala Congress leaders where we deliberated on our political strategy and the future of the state," he also said.

Besides Kharge, former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi, AICC general secretary K C Venugopal, Wayanad MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Kerala Congress chief K Sudhakaran and CLP leader in Kerala assembly V D Sathesan, and

AICC in-charge Deepa Dasmunshi were present at the meeting. Senior party leader Ramesh Chennithala, party's chief whip and MP K Suresh, besides MP Shashi Tharoor and Kerala Mahila Congress president and MP Jebi Mather also participated in the deliberations.

The meeting with senior leaders from Kerala comes amid a row over Thiruvananthapuram MP

Tharoor's recent article in a newspaper that drew criticism from some party leaders over his "praise" of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government in the state for boosting the investment climate.

Tharoor has also hit out at the media for 'misrepresenting' his remarks made in Malayalam in a podcast.

The Congress is the main opposition party in Kerala and is seeking to wrest power from the LDF. Assembly elections are set to take place in Kerala in March-April next year.

Tharoor's article kicked off a political storm in the state a week ago, with the Congress questioning the basis of it while the CPI(M) welcomed it.

Later, Tharoor's remarks in a Malayalam podcast were seen by many as pitching himself for leadership in the state, which did not go well and upset a section of the state leadership.

China increasing presence in IOR but India knows who goes where: Navy chief

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

China has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region over the past few decades with 6-8 naval ships of the People's Liberation Army Navy present there at any point of time but India knows "who goes where", which is more than half the battle won, Navy chief Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi said on Friday.

Speaking at The Chanakya Dialogues conclave here on the theme 'Bharat 2047: Aatmanirbhar in War', the Navy chief said India has not allowed China to come anywhere where "we don't want them to come".

"China has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) for some decades now, not only in the oceans but even on land. And the PLA Navy, which is now the largest navy going by numbers, has



been putting 6-8 very capable combatants at any point of time in the IOR, despite piracy having been obliterated. It is no longer there," Admiral Tripathi said.

"A lot of things are happening. The

good part is that we as the Indian Navy are fully aware of what is happening, and who is doing what, where and why," he added.

India has got the kind of maritime domain awareness where both

manned and unmanned technologies are being used, along with space-based monitoring and international linkages with various agencies through which information is received, the Navy chief said. "And that is more than half the battle won because we know who goes where," he said.

Stating that China had been claiming that their ships were in the Indian Ocean Region for anti-piracy operations, Admiral Tripathi said, "Their initial ruse of coming to the Indian Ocean Region was that 'we are fighting the anti-piracy battle'. But all that is history. Apart from that, they have also been putting a large number of research vessels."

"Again, we know what they are doing. Satellite tracking vessels, deep-sea fishing vessels... All of us are aware that they are doing something which they should not be doing, such as

unregulated, irregular fishing. But all that we cannot stop," the Navy chief said.

He added that India can only ensure China doesn't do anything in "our areas of interest". "And that we have been doing very effectively. We have not allowed them to come anywhere where we don't want them to come," he said.

Admiral Tripathi added that China has been supplying maritime equipment and systems to Pakistan for over two decades now.

"Since 2009, China has supplied Pakistan with three frigates, F-22s, Type 054... Four of them they supplied. They also supplied a satellite tracking ship, among others," the Navy chief said, adding that a recent deal between the two nations for eight submarines was a continuation of the process.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Lawbreakers as lawmakers

Eradication of the influence of criminality in politics must be taken up on priority

In recent years, the issue of criminalisation in politics has increasingly come under scrutiny. With more politicians facing criminal charges and convictions, questions have arisen about whether the legal framework governing their disqualification from contesting elections is adequate. The ongoing debate, highlighted by a recent Supreme Court case challenging the constitutional validity of limiting disqualification periods, brings to the fore not only legal interpretations but also the broader menace of criminal influences in our political system. A petition filed before the Supreme Court has argued for a lifetime ban on convicted politicians from contesting elections. The petitioner contends that limiting disqualification to a fixed period—currently six years after release for offenses under Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951—undermines constitutional provisions designed to keep criminals away from power. In response, the Centre has defended the existing provisions, arguing that a lifetime ban is “unduly harsh” and that it would amount to directing Parliament to frame a law in a particular manner—an overreach of judicial power. The government’s counter-affidavit emphasises that there are numerous penal laws that operate within a time-bound framework, ensuring that deterrence is balanced against the need to avoid undue severity.



This legal tussle highlights a crucial policy debate: should convicted politicians face an indefinite prohibition from electoral participation, or is a fixed term of disqualification both constitutional and proportionate? The government argues that the current system, which temporarily excludes convicted individuals,

respects the principles of proportionality and reasonability. In its view, the legislative choice to limit the disqualification period is designed to offer both a punitive and rehabilitative measure while preserving democratic participation. Beyond legal debates, the deeper issue remains the rising tide of criminality within political circles. Criminal elements entering politics not only threaten the integrity of democratic institutions but also erode public trust. Politicians with a history of criminal behaviour may be more likely to engage in corrupt practices, undermining the rule of law. As criminalisation in politics becomes more pronounced, the call for stringent measures intensifies. Addressing the criminalisation of politics requires a multi-pronged approach that extends beyond the question of lifetime bans. Parliament could consider revisiting and potentially tightening the eligibility criteria for political candidates. Whether through a longer ban or additional restrictions for those convicted of certain serious crimes, legislative reforms should aim to disincentivise criminal conduct. There may be strong arguments for and against the life ban of convicted persons becoming lawmakers but one thing all can agree upon is that we do not need them in our parliament or state assemblies. How to do it is not difficult but who will bell the cat?

PICTALK



Tourists at the Taj Mahal, in Agra

Strengthening public institutions in the digital age

Digital transformation is reshaping public policy, it is imperative that we embrace it without compromising our enduring commitment to integrity



O P SINGH



I am a civil servant passionate about governance, institutional resilience and public policy, exploring how institutions can adapt to the digital age. Imagine a world where policies are debated, revised and reshaped in real time—governance moving as quickly as a trending hashtag. That world isn’t coming; it’s already here. Public institutions, once the reliable backbone of governance, are now transforming rapidly. Social media, instant communication, and shifting public expectations have redefined how governments interact with citizens. Decision-making, once a structured process guided by expertise and long-term planning, now occurs in an environment where public sentiment can change overnight. This new landscape offers both opportunities and challenges. Increased public engagement promotes transparency and participation but also demands rapid responses. Today’s challenge isn’t just about efficient policy implementation—it’s about balancing speed with thoughtful deliberation and adaptability with established structure.

A New Era of Governance

Historically, governance followed a deliberate, structured path. Political leaders set broad directions, while institutions provided continuity, expertise, and safeguards. Decision-making

was data-driven and refined through expert consultation with a focus on long-term national interests. Then the digital revolution changed everything. Social media now plays a central role in shaping public discourse, often setting the agenda before formal institutions can respond. A 2023 Pew Research study noted that nearly two-thirds of adults in democratic nations now rely on social media for political news. This shift has empowered citizens and made governance more transparent and participatory, but it has also heightened expectations and pressured institutions to act swiftly.

Adapting Without Losing Purpose
The solution is not to resist change but to adapt strategically. Governments worldwide are using digital platforms to improve service delivery and civic engagement. For instance, India’s Digital India initiative has streamlined public services online, while Singapore’s Smart Nation program uses data analytics to enhance urban planning and governance. These examples show that when technology is integrated thoughtfully, it can boost both effectiveness and accessibility. Adaptation goes beyond dig-

ital tools—it requires maintaining the integrity of governance. Institutions must prioritise expert-driven decision-making to ensure that policy shifts are well-considered rather than merely reactive. Preserving institutional memory through thorough documentation and continuous training ensures that experienced civil servants provide continuity, anchoring governance in expertise rather than short-term trends. **The Importance of Public Trust**
At its core, governance depends on public trust. Institutions thrive when they are seen as credible, reliable, and fair. Trust is built through transparency, efficiency, and ethical practices. Governments that openly communicate their policies and decision-making processes foster confidence among citizens. Estonia’s e-Governance model, which gives citizens real-time access to government records, is a prime example. Efficiency is equally critical. Reducing administrative delays, streamlining processes, and making governance accessible are key to maintaining public trust. When institutions deliver results fairly and efficiently, they not only function better—they strengthen democracy.



DECISION-MAKING, ONCE A STRUCTURED PROCESS GUIDED BY EXPERTISE AND LONG-TERM PLANNING, NOW OCCURS IN AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE PUBLIC SENTIMENT CAN CHANGE OVERNIGHT

Finding the Right Balance
The digital age demands a balance between responsiveness and deliberation. Institutions must embrace innovation without becoming reactionary, listening to public sentiment while ensuring that policies are grounded in data, analysis, and long-term planning. Quick decision-making should never come at the expense of depth and foresight. This balance distinguishes effective governance from mere administration. Institutions that thoughtfully adapt are not just keeping pace with change—they are actively shaping the future of governance. **Looking Ahead**
Public institutions are more than policy enforcers; they are the foundation of national stability and progress. As governance continues to evolve, these institutions must lead through innovation, efficiency, and an unwavering commitment to public trust. The digital age presents both challenges and opportunities. Institutions that adapt wisely will define the future of governance—not solely through speed or efficiency, but with foresight, trust and enduring strength. (The writer is DGP & Head of Haryana State Narcotics Control Bureau; views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP’S GOLD CARD PLAN

Madam — US President Donald Trump has announced a new visa program that will offer a ‘gold card’ with a potential pathway to US citizenship for \$5 million (approx Rs 43 crores), which could significantly benefit Indian graduates and investors. It seems like a sale of citizenship for money. He is not even asking them to start a business, create jobs, or anything. Moreover, why should one spend 5 million dollars to go to the USA? With that money, they can lead a royal life (invest 5 million in India and get 14 per cent annualised ROI compared to 5 per cent in the US) in India itself, with their own thriving business and stay close to near and dear ones, which is a much better place now than the US. This is a simple sale of citizenship. This is nothing, but this Trump statement looks a bit stupid! Because, how many students in India will have 5 million dollars to buy a gold card? And which company will be ready to pay 5 million dollars for hiring an Indian employee in the US on a gold card? Is Trump thinking logically, or is he just high on the dose of fake nationalism? This far-right politics is turning the politicians into real fools. Whatsoever, Golden Visa is very expensive.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

BRUTAL MURDERS SHOCK NATION

Madam — The nation is shocked at the brutal and spine-chilling crime of a 23-year-old man, who killed as many as five people, including his close relatives and girlfriend, within a few hours at various places in a radius of 15 kilometres in Thiruvananthapuram. By using a simple mallet, he has repeatedly hammered and finished the victims and then coolly surrendered at the police station on his own. It was by sheer luck that the sixth victim, his own mother, survived the attack, though she is still in serious condition. Even though the family was reportedly facing financial hardship, what prompted the man to commit such a heinous

CBSE clarifies language policy



Refers to Editorial ‘Simmering Linguistic Tension’ (February 28), first Tamil Nadu and now Punjab is raising unnecessary controversy over regional languages, that too owing to the CBSE draft norms (not final) for conducting the 10th class board exams. The Punjab government’s hasty decision of imposing the Punjabi language on all 10th class examinations in the state of all

boards, whether Central or State, is uncalled for. This irrational decision has been announced without taking stakeholders—students and teachers—into confidence. It is nothing else but the imposing of the state’s will and Punjabi language on innocent students.

How can a student who has never studied Punjabi suddenly take an examination of the same language in the 10th class? It is impossible and irrational. The CBSE was quick to clarify and assure that all regional languages, including Punjabi, will be included in the class 10 board exam. After this clarification and assurance, the Punjab government should immediately withdraw its decision of making Punjabi a mandatory language in all boards’ examinations in Punjab.

Vinay Kr Malhotra | Ambala Cantt

crime was nothing but the grave impact of drugs. In fact, Kerala has been reeling under the threat of drugs for quite some time now.

All kinds of drugs have been flowing into the state purportedly with the connivance of those in authority. It is a painful truth that a large number of youngsters, including students, are under the influence of drugs. However, the government has not taken any concrete steps to contain this serious menace. The present situation in the state is bound to ruin the young generation completely. As such, the government must take prompt and stern action against the drug mafia.

T T Sakaria | Delhi

AFGHANISTAN STUNS ENGLAND

Madam — Afghanistan pulled off a historic eight-run victory over England, proving once again that cricket is a game of glorious uncertainties. The hero of the night was 23-year-old Ibrahim Zadran, who played a breathtaking knock of 177 off 146 balls, the highest individual score by any Afghanistan batsman in ODIs. His

fearless stroke play propelled Afghanistan to a challenging total of 325 for 7 despite England’s experienced bowling attack. England’s chase was anchored by Joe Root, who counterattacked with a brilliant 120 off 111 balls, keeping his team in the hunt.

However, Afghanistan’s fiery fast bowler Azmatulla Omarzai turned the game on its head with a sensational 5/58. This is the second time in a row that Afghanistan has beaten England in an ICC tournament. This and Zadran’s pedigree once again advertised Afghanistan’s evolution as a rapid cricketing force. Despite a late fightback, England fell short by eight runs, handing Afghanistan one of their most significant victories in cricket history. This match will be remembered as a testament to Afghanistan’s rising stature and the sheer unpredictability that makes cricket a thrilling spectacle.

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Rupee depreciation calls for structural reforms

Despite notable gains such as a reduced trade deficit, emerging challenges including global tariff tensions highlight the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms

Over the past decade (2014-2024), the compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of India’s exports of goods and services in USD terms has fallen sharply to about 5 per cent, compared to 17.9 per cent during 2004-2014 and 12.7 per cent in the period 1994-2004. This decline in export growth has coincided with a significant depreciation of the Rupee, which now trades at roughly Rs 86/87 per USD, a stark contrast to the Rs 60.50 per USD seen in 2013-14. In contrast, between 2000 and 2012, the Rupee remained relatively stable—with occasional appreciation driven by robust export growth at an impressive 19.5 per cent CAGR in USD terms.

This historical perspective demonstrates that a strong, stable Rupee is not an inherent barrier to export performance. In fact, the key to sustained export growth lies in enhancing overall economic efficiency. This efficiency is shaped by a broad range of policies and regulations that affect factors such as capital, energy, logistics and raw materials. By improving these inputs, India can propel



exports forward while maintaining Rupee stability. A weak Rupee, however, tends to deter global investors. Given that domestic savings alone cannot fulfill India’s vast investment requirements, a steady inflow of global funds remains essential until the country transitions into a “Trade-Surplus Nation.” Recent changes in US leadership have sparked a tariff war, adding another layer of complexity to India’s export environment. Despite the sluggish export performance in the past decade, the country achieved a notable reduction in its trade deficit—from 4.3 per cent of nominal GDP in 2004-2014 to an average of 2.5 per cent in 2014-2024—primarily due to lower import volumes. In 2024, inward foreign remittances surged to \$129 billion, the highest globally, which

played a crucial role in reducing the current account deficit (CAD) from 1.7 per cent of GDP in 2013-14 to about 0.7 per cent. Consequently, Forex reserves swelled to 18.3 per cent of nominal GDP, underscoring the positive impact of these remittances.

Looking ahead, potential challenges loom. Aggressive deportation policies by the US could discourage migration, thereby diminishing remittance flows. Moreover, if India shifts its oil and gas import sources from Iran, Gulf nations, and Russia to the US, the resulting higher import bill may widen the trade deficit. In response, India must marshal all available policy tools to boost exports, reduce imports, and eventually become a trade-surplus nation. Facilitating legal migration remains crucial until domestic job creation can sustain remittance inflows, which are vital for curbing the CAD.

To further stimulate export growth, targeted export incentives for manufactured and agro-based goods should be implemented, while the untapped potential of service exports—ranging from

tourism and healthcare to education and professional consultancy—must be unlocked through dedicated policies. Additionally, reducing petroleum imports requires massive investments in railway infrastructure and expanded public transportation to lower fuel demand, and increased spending on petroleum exploration is the need of the hour.

Enhancing domestic production of thermal coal and adopting innovative measures to reduce gold imports, such as a revised gold deposit scheme, are also essential steps. Finally, attracting global funds through measures like reducing capital gains tax on foreign portfolio investments (FPIs) and encouraging long-term borrowing via bonds backed by sovereign guarantees will help meet India’s investment needs. Overcoming outdated colonial-era business and taxation laws remains critical. A second wave of structural reforms is needed to stabilise the Rupee, secure higher GDP growth, and elevate India’s stature on the global stage.

(The writer is an industrialist; views are personal)



R P GUPTA





FIRST COLUMN

THREE LEVELS OF CONTROL

Beyond our inner self, natural and material limitations shape our behaviour and outcomes



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We, human beings, are under control at three levels. The first one is at the level of self. We have been blessed with faculties such as mind, intelligence, etc. And we have free will to decide what we would like to think, decide and do. However, thinking and deciding are in our control, but being able to do is not. Our actions are limited by circumstances, instruments we have, how much we can apply ourselves and providence of course. Then, there are constraints like limited knowledge, facilities, nature, etc. Knowledge is unlimited, but we can have very limited knowledge only. Even good knowledge of a subject is difficult, never mind of countless subjects. This restricts us greatly. Nature is another limiting factor. The three modes of material nature, which are goodness, passion and darkness, determine how we would act manner. For example, a man predominantly in the mode of goodness will generally act wisely. The same cannot be said about persons under the control of the modes of passion and darkness. They make many mistakes. And we all generate 'karmas' (deeds) by minds, words and bodies (senses). These actions of ours, both good and bad put us in the control of the Divine Authority, appointed by God; it works under the superintendence of God. (The Bhagavad-Geeta 9.10) Imagine the extent of their work.



They have to be alert to record all our actions 24x7. This is nothing compared to what they have to do to decide our rewards and punishments, their timings, etc. In this, they have to correlate how these will impact others associated with us. Therefore, the Divine Authority may delay the punishment to make its effect on the family a little less harsh.

But the guilty person has no hope of reprieve even if the punishment is to be delayed to the next life. Our 'karmaphalas' (fruits of actions) are carried from life to life. If the job of the Divine Authority is mind-boggling, what God does is simply unimaginable. God has to watch the interest of all His devotees, no matter where they are. Then, He must appropriately respond to our prayers every time. He must also guide us if we sincerely seek it. Additionally, God must help if we deserve to come out of troubles we have gotten into due to our past 'karmas'. This is nothing compared to what God does for the Creation; He has to keep it going for millions of years for us souls. Imagine if there was dissolution every hundred years or so. How will we feel?

Then, God has innumerable galaxies to control. He has many planets where we can go to from the earth planet. There is heaven, where pious acts take us for limited periods. This is like going on a vacation to a dream place. There are many such planets which are higher and higher ending in the 'Vaikuntha' planet, which is the abode of God. Only those, who have been liberated reach there. They get freed from the cycle of birth and death. They remain there for good. Knowing all this, we must become wise, really wise. We must seek the shelter of God beginning now, not later. We must follow dharma to please God. God will guide and help. The divine Authority will be giving us more rewards than punishments, which we can tolerate easily. And we will be our best friends.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

Finding money for 'freebies': BJP faces an uphill task



UTTAM GUPTA

The challenge now is not just about delivering on electoral promises but also about balancing an already precarious fiscal equation that could see deficits skyrocket



Having swept the polls in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi with a clinching 2/3rd majority, Rekha Gupta-led BJP - government faces the daunting challenge of having to find money to fulfil its poll promises. Amongst others, the BJP had promised Rs 2,500 a month to women under Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY); Rs 21,000 to pregnant women; LPG cylinders for Rs 500 and free cylinder on Holi and Diwali; a stipend of Rs 1000 a month to SC students pursuing technical and vocational courses; free education for needy students from KG to PG; free travel for students on Delhi Metro; Atal Canteens in Jhuggi Basti clusters providing nutritional meals for Rs 5 only; implementation of Ayushman Bharat scheme and additional cover of Rs 5 lakh for senior citizens. BJP had also vowed to continue all existing schemes such as free electricity and free water (for monthly consumption up to a specified threshold) run by the erstwhile AAP - dispensation under the then Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal.

How much will these freebies cost?
Let us look at the Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY) under which the party has promised to give cash assistance of Rs 2500 per month to every woman. The number of women above the age of 18 years in Delhi is around 6700,000. @ Rs 2500 per month or Rs 30,000 annually to each woman, giving cash assistance to them all will require Rs 20,100 crore per annum (0.67x30,000). The assistance to pregnant women @Rs 21,000 per woman, taking a total of about 1500,000 pregnant women will cost around Rs 3150 crore annually.

As for subsidy on LPG, take consumption of 4 cylinders (14 kg each) per household (HH) in a year. The current cost of supplying a cylinder is around Rs 1000. For two cylinders (Holi and Diwali) promised to be given free, the subsidy will be Rs 2000 whereas for the other two to be given @ Rs 500 each, the outgo will be Rs 1000. This gives an annual subsidy of Rs 3000 per HH. The current population of Delhi is 330 lakh. Taking an average of 4 members per HH,



NOW, CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF BJP PROMISES. MODI HAS GUARANTEED THAT EXISTING SCHEMES WON'T BE DISCONTINUED. SO, FREE ELECTRICITY/WATER COSTING RS 11,000 CRORE WILL STAY. ADD TO THIS, THE FRESH GUARANTEES WHICH WOULD BE AT LEAST ABOUT RS 30,000 CRORE

we get a total of over 82.5 lakh HHs. Multiplied by Rs 3000 being the subsidy per HH, the annual outgo comes to Rs 2500 crore. Look at free education for needy students from KG to PG. According to the latest data available, around 10 per cent of Delhi's population was considered below the poverty line in 2011-12. On this basis, the number of poor persons comes to 33 lakh (330x0.1). About one-third of this or 11 lakh would be persons in the studying age 4 - 25 years. Taking the average expense of educating a child in India at the bare minimum of Rs 20,000 per annum, the total annual expense on "needy students" in the city would be about Rs 2200 crore (0.11x20,000). The additional burden of these four promises alone on the Delhi government's budget is Rs 27,950 crore (20,100+3150+2500+2200). Other freebies would bloat this figure by several thousand crore. Let us take the total to be around Rs 30,000 crore.

What is the current state of Delhi's finances?

For the current financial year (FY) 2024-25, the total expenditure of the Delhi government is estimated at Rs 76,000 crore. This includes revenue expenditure (RE) of Rs 61,000 crore and capital expenditure (CE) of Rs 15,000 crore. Against this, the total revenue receipts or RR (tax plus non-tax receipts including transfer from the Central government) is estimated at around Rs 58,000 crore. That leaves a revenue deficit or RD (RR - RE) of Rs 3000 crore. This is disconcerting when seen in the backdrop of Delhi's potential to generate substantial surplus given two fundamental factors working to its advantage.

First, due to its special status of being NCT, three major functions namely law and order, police and land

come under the Centre's jurisdiction hence, the latter foots the bill for expenses on those functions. Second, Delhi being a major hub of economic activity, its propensity to garner its tax revenue in terms of higher GST collection besides VAT on petrol and diesel and excise duty and VAT on alcohol (these products are outside the GST regime) is greater.

The RD will increase drastically when we consider the cost of servicing the loans taken by various departments of the Delhi government such as the Delhi Jal Board (DJB); over Rs 70,000 crore and Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC): Rs 60,000 crore (according to the CAG, these are cumulative losses of DTC as at end of FY 2021-22 and would have ballooned further during the following three FYs till end March 2025).

The liability for servicing those debts is vested entirely in the NCT government and should be reflected in its balance sheet. Look at the fiscal deficit (FD) which is the excess of total receipts over total expenditure. For FY 2024-25, it is estimated at Rs 18,000 crore which is 80 per cent higher than the FD during FY 2023-24 at Rs 10,000 crore. The surge is despite a steep reduction of over 30 per cent in CE from the budget estimate (BE) of Rs 22,000 crore for FY 2023-24 to Rs 15,000 crore for FY 2024-25.

If interest payments on loans taken by DJB and DTC (Rs 130,000 crore plus) which are merely adding to the mountain of debt on the books of those departments year after year are also included, the FD would be much higher. The situation had come to such a pass that the then CM Atishi had approached the Centre seeking a loan of Rs 10,000 crore from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). The precarious

ness of the state's finances has a lot to do with the galloping freebies and irregularities and mismanagement in running various schemes and overall governance on a monumental scale. During 2024-25, the cost of free electricity and free water alone is estimated to be about Rs 11,000 crore. According to CAG, during 2015-16 and 2021-22, the losses of DTC went up by Rs 35,000 crore and that was due to both free bus rides and misgovernance.

Now, consider the impact of BJP promises. Modi has guaranteed that existing schemes won't be discontinued. So, free electricity/water costing Rs 11,000 crore will stay. Add to this, the fresh guarantees which would be at least about Rs 30,000 crore. This takes the RE from Rs 61,000 crore during FY 2024-25 to Rs 91,000 crore during FY 2025-26 (assuming all other things remain unchanged). The RR is Rs 58,000 crore, we get RD of Rs 33,000 crore - up from Rs 3000 crore budgeted for FY 2024-25.

The incumbent government has also promised to clean Yamuna River, clean the air, renovate/build roads, cleanse the drainage systems, build and renovate hospitals and schools in fact, take up and complete a host of physical and social infrastructure projects needed for ensuring a good quality life for Delhiites. That means even if CE is restored to 2023-24 level Rs 22,000 crore, that won't be enough. Even with this insufficient level, the total expenditure will be Rs 113,000 crore. Minus RR of Rs 58,000 crore, we get FD of Rs 55,000 crore. Put simply, the Centre will have to arrange for at least Rs 55,000 crore to enable the BJP to live up to its promises for Delhi.

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

India's solar surge: Powering the journey to net zero 2070

India is charting an ambitious course toward Net Zero 2070, with solar energy emerging as the mainstay of its renewable revolution

India's steadfast commitment to achieving Net Zero by 2070 is catalysing a dramatic shift in its energy sector, with solar power emerging as the principal driver of this transformation. Abundant sunlight, rapidly decreasing technology costs, strong government support, and an expanding skilled workforce have combined to place solar energy at the heart of India's renewable strategy. While the country has celebrated significant milestones in solar adoption, it also faces multifaceted challenges that require innovative policy interventions and strategic foresight to sustain its momentum. Over the past decade, India has achieved remarkable progress in solar energy. The nation not only met its ambitious renew-

able targets but exceeded them, with solar power now accounting for over 60 per cent of its renewable energy mix. By 2024, India surpassed the 100 GW milestone, establishing itself as a global leader in solar energy. For example, Rajasthan's solar capacity exceeds 24 GW. Rapid expansion is evident in a 19 per cent increase in solar generation from 2023 to 2024, with solar installations making up over two-thirds of new renewable capacity. India's role in the International Solar Alliance underscores its commitment to global solar collaboration, as the initiative seeks to mobilise over \$1 trillion in investments for developing countries. National agencies, particularly the Solar Energy Corporation of India,



DISHYA SHARMA

have been vital in driving the development and implementation of solar projects under the National Solar Mission. Despite these impressive achievements, significant obstacles remain on the path to full solar integration. One major challenge is the limited connection of solar installations to the national grid, with only 16 per cent of capacity currently integrated. This gap

restricts the country's ability to fully exploit its vast solar potential. Moreover, there are stark regional disparities in solar development. While states like Rajasthan and Gujarat lead the charge, many eastern and northeastern regions lag behind, resulting in an uneven distribution of renewable resources. Financial hurdles also pose serious challenges. Although government subsidies help reduce costs, the high initial capital required for large-scale installations, coupled with elevated interest rates and delayed payments, discourages private investment. Manufacturers struggle with a shortage of competitively priced solar cells, a problem compounded by strict Domestic Content Requirements that strain pro-



duction capabilities. These financial constraints not only hinder current project deployment but also threaten future expansion in the sector. Another critical issue is India's heavy reliance on imported components. Despite having a domestic module production capacity of around 11 GW, India still depends on global supply chains for essential items such as polysilicon,

wafers, and solar cells. This dependency leaves the country vulnerable to supply chain disruptions, particularly amid geopolitical tensions and trade imbalances, as China continues to dominate global solar manufacturing. Furthermore, the scarcity of critical minerals like cobalt, nickel, and lithium—vital for solar panel production—further complicates efforts to build a self-sufficient solar industry. Local challenges add another layer of complexity. Land acquisition for solar projects often faces resistance from local communities and farmers, leading to protests, legal disputes, and, in some cases, violent confrontations. In Rajasthan, disputes over land rights have led to project cancellations, highlighting the

need for transparent and inclusive processes that respect local interests and ensure fair compensation. Addressing these local concerns is essential for fostering community support and facilitating smoother project implementation. To overcome these challenges, India must adopt a multifaceted strategy. Strengthening policy frameworks to provide long-term stability is crucial, as is enhancing inter-state cooperation and ensuring reliable access to energy data for effective monitoring. Public-private partnerships can expand solar adoption in underserved regions by providing risk mitigation instruments to attract investment. Promoting domestic manufacturing of solar panels and key compo-

nents will reduce import dependency and bolster energy security. Additionally, investing in workforce development to build a skilled labor pool for solar installation, maintenance, and manufacturing will be vital for sustaining industry growth. By focusing on robust policy support, financial innovation, domestic manufacturing, and community engagement, India can significantly unlock the full potential of its solar resources. With sustained government backing and strategic collaboration between public and private sectors, the nation is well-positioned to lead the global solar revolution.

(The writer is assistant professor IIM Mumbai; views are personal. Inputs from Supriya Kaushik and Asmita Tewari)

ANJINI DHAWAN'S DREAM COME TRUE WITH HER DEBUT IN SIKANDAR

Actress Anjini Dhawan is all set to make her highly anticipated big screen debut in the upcoming drama *Sikandar*, starring Salman Khan in the lead. The movie, directed by AR Murugadoss, is one of the most awaited films of 2025 and Anjini is excited to share the screen with the superstar.

Reflecting on the incredible opportunity, Anjini shared that working with Salman Khan was a dream come true. "It was literally a pinch-me moment! I've been such a big fan, and then to be working with him was so special," she said. Her excitement is palpable as she makes her debut alongside one of Bollywood's biggest names.

Beyond the glitz and glamour of shooting with a Bollywood icon, Anjini also recalled the bonding moments that made her experience on set even more memorable. She revealed that the entire cast and crew were brought closer together by their shared love of food.

Anjini fondly remembered the delicious meals that were prepared daily by Salman Khan's personal chef. "Special memories were everyone bonding over the tasty food Salman sir's chef made for us every day," she shared. The warm, welcoming environment on set made the entire experience even more enjoyable for the debutante.

The excitement surrounding *Sikandar* intensified with the release of the highly anticipated teaser, which gave audiences a glimpse into the high-energy drama. The teaser showcases Salman Khan in his signature larger-than-life style, delivering a powerful introduction to his character with the line, "Dadi ne naam Sikandar rakha tha, Dada ne Sanjay aur Praja ne Rajasahab." The action-packed sequences highlight Salman Khan's intense presence as he effortlessly takes on enemies. In addition to the action, the teaser also hints at a romantic storyline, introducing Rashmika Mandanna as Salman Khan's love interest in the film. The teaser has sparked immense curiosity, with catchy one-liners like "Kayde mein raho, fayde mein rahoge" and "Insaaf nahii, hisab karne aaya hun" adding to the buzz surrounding the film.

The teaser, released on social media, was accompanied by the caption, "Sikandar aa raha hai, this Eid! Here's presenting the film teaser of *Sikandar*! #SajidNadiadwala's #Sikandar Directed by @a.r.murugadoss." Directed by AR Murugadoss and produced by Sajid Nadiadwala under his banner Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, *Sikandar* is set to make its grand debut in theaters this Eid, 2025.

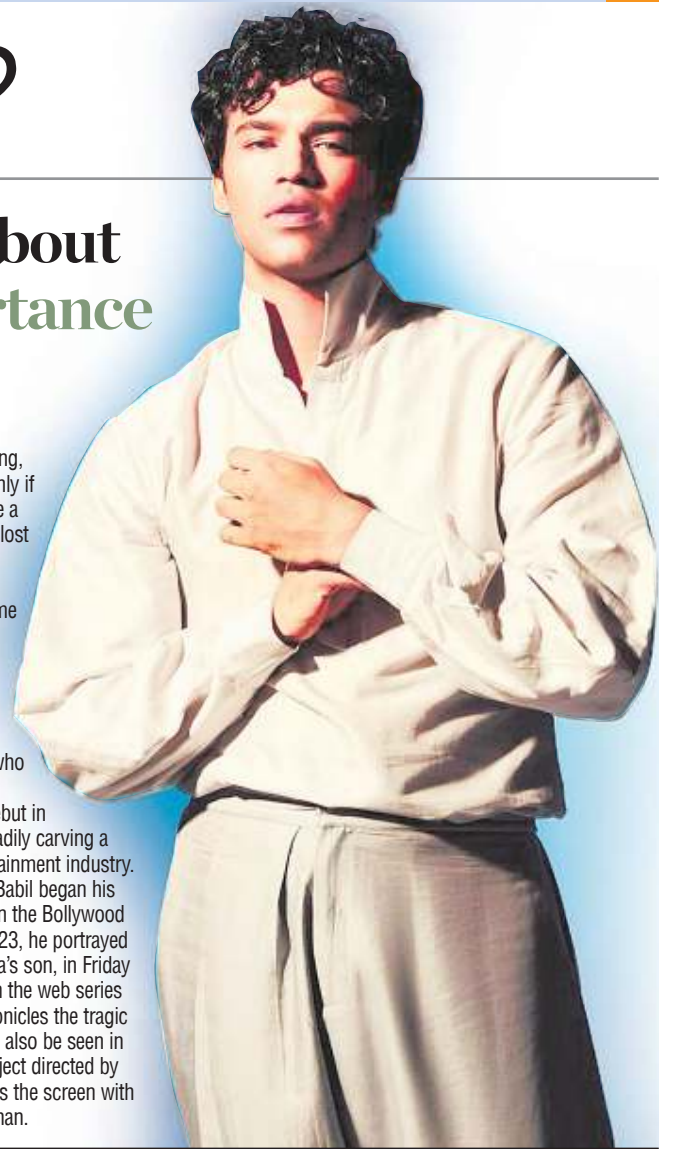


Babil Khan opens up about personal losses & importance of expressing love

Babil Khan, the son of the late iconic actor Irrfan Khan, has shared his deep reflections on the importance of expressing one's feelings to loved ones before it's too late. Through a heartfelt post on Instagram, Babil opened up about personal losses in relationships, emphasising that regret often stems from things left unsaid rather than unachieved goals. The young actor, known for his emotional depth, encouraged his followers to take a moment to cherish and express their love to those who matter most. In the post, Babil shared a series of striking photos from a latest photoshoot, where he was seen dressed in a monochromatic ensemble—a loose-fitting long-sleeved shirt paired with draped, pleated pants, blending modern flair with a traditional touch. The gradient blue backdrop added a serene contrast to his contemplative message. He captioned the post: "It is not the things that you couldn't achieve in your life that you will regret, it is the things that you did not say to the ones you wanted by your side, it is the things you CHOSE to not say to the ones you loved." Babil's words resonated deeply with many, urging them to express love and affection while they still have the chance. Reflecting on his own experiences, Babil shared

his pain over the personal relationships he has lost, stating, "Action trumps thought but only if thought leads to inaction. Take a moment. But take this in. I've lost too much when it comes to personal relationships and I don't want you to lose the same way. Kiss your loved ones today." His vulnerable words served as a powerful reminder of the fragility of life and the importance of seizing the moment with the people who matter most.

Babil, who made his acting debut in 2022 with *Qala*, has been steadily carving a name for himself in the entertainment industry. After completing his studies, Babil began his career as a camera assistant in the Bollywood film *Qarib Qarib Single*. In 2023, he portrayed Siddharth Menon, Juhi Chawla's son, in Friday *Night Plan* and later starred in the web series *The Railway Men*, which chronicles the tragic Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Babil will also be seen in *The Umesh Chronicles*, a project directed by Shoojit Sircar, where he shares the screen with the legendary Amitabh Bachchan.

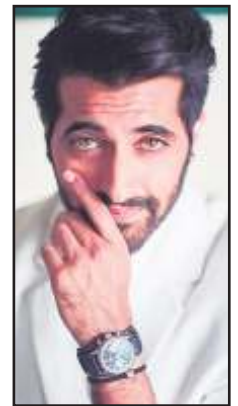


Akshay Oberoi gears up for four dance sequences in SSKTK

Actor Akshay Oberoi has revealed that his upcoming film *Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari* will showcase his dancing skills in a way he has never done before. The film, which stars Varun Dhawan and Janhvi Kapoor in the lead roles, features Akshay in four dance sequences, a first for the actor. He shares that the script of the film demanded multiple peppy numbers, allowing him to explore a side of himself that he had not fully showcased on screen until now. In an interview, Akshay shared his excitement about this unique opportunity. "I've always enjoyed dancing, but this is the first time I'll be seen grooving to 4 songs in a single film," he said. Akshay, who previously danced alongside Hrithik Roshan in the song *Sher Khul Gaye* from *Fighter*, described that experience as "incredible." However, the actor expressed that the upcoming project would be a new level of dancing for him, as he gets to work with talented dancers like Varun Dhawan, Sanya Malhotra and Janhvi Kapoor.

"Dancing with Hrithik Roshan in *Sher Khul Gaye* was an incredible experience, but that was just one song. We have Varun, Sanya and Janhvi—they are all great dancers. With *Sunny Sanskari*

Ki Tulsi Kumari, I get to truly explore this side of me, and it's such an exhilarating feeling," Akshay said, sharing his excitement about the dance sequences in the film. He further explained that the script of *Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari* required such a heavy focus on dance. "I have never had this opportunity to be part of a role that demanded displaying so much dancing on the big screen, until now. I'm excited to see how this shapes out. I, for one, have had a blast shooting for



these numbers," he added. The film, directed by Shashank Khaitan, will see Varun Dhawan and Janhvi Kapoor play the lead pair. Alongside them, Sanya Malhotra, Rohit Saraf, Abhinav Sharma, Maniesh Paul and Manini Chadha will also play key roles, contributing to the film's dynamic cast. Produced by Karan Johar, Hiroo Yash Johar, Apoorva Mehta, and Shashank Khaitan, the romantic-comedy promises to offer an entertaining and energetic cinematic experience.

Preity Zinta clears air about entering politics, reveals why she declined offers

Bollywood actress Preity Zinta, who made a name for herself in the 2000s with memorable roles, has been away from the film industry following her marriage to Gene Goodenough and relocation to Los Angeles. However, she is now gearing up for her grand comeback with the much-anticipated film *Lahore 1947*. Fans have been eagerly asking her about her return to the big screen, as well as her future plans, during recent interactions on social media. During an Ask Me Anything (AMA) session on X, one fan praised Preity for her work and asked if she had any aspirations to enter politics, given her strong public presence and patriotism. The fan wrote, "You are truly a 'Soldier' dear Preity!! Hats off to you! Just curious. Any plans to join politics?"

To this, Preity Zinta quickly responded, making it clear that politics is not her calling. She said, "No! No politics for me. Over the years, various political parties have offered me tickets & Rajya Sabha seats, but I have politely declined as it's not what I want."

Preity, who comes from a military background, further explained her

connection to patriotism and her identity. "Calling me a soldier is not completely wrong because I am a soldier's daughter and a soldier's sister," she wrote. "We fauji kids/army brats are wired different. We are not North Indian or South Indian or Himachalis or Bengalis, etc. We are just Indians and yes, patriotism and national pride is in our blood. If you know, you know Ting!" Her response highlights her deep-rooted love for the country and her connection to her military family, while also clarifying that politics is not a path she wishes to pursue. With *Lahore 1947* marking her return to the industry, fans are excited to see Preity Zinta back on the big screen, where her captivating performances once earned her widespread admiration.



FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



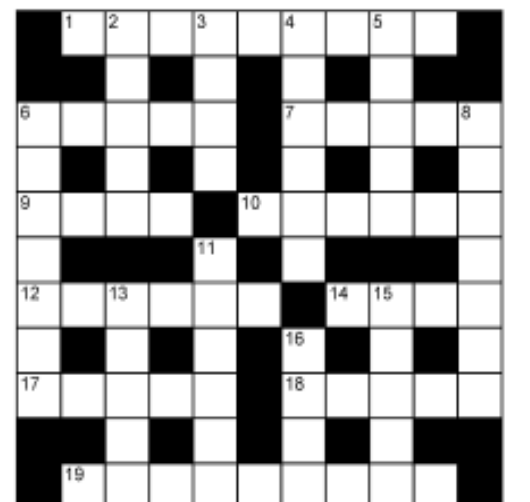
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



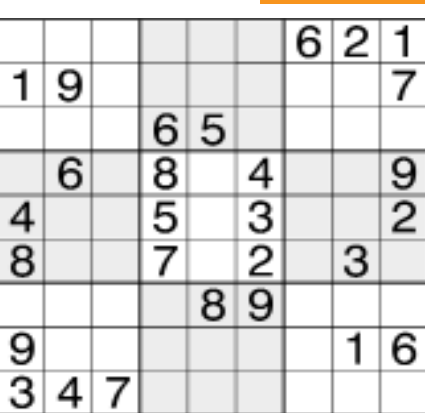
CROSSWORD



NANCY



SUDOKU



Yesterday's solution

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

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

ACROSS

- Underwater transport
- A breakfast meat
- Steals
- A large farm building
- Cross a river on this
- Not married
- A stringed instrument
- Attempted
- Reflection in a mirror
- Scientific study of the stars and planets

DOWN

- A sore in your mouth
- To look after something for someone
- Go back to a place

MOVEMENT

3	F	O	E	O	9
C	U	R	R	I	Y
A	R	A	T	E	V
R	E	S	I	G	N
F	E	V	E	N	
C	U	R	E	P	A
R	A	T	C	R	E
O	L	D	E	R	
W	I	A	N	E	N
H	O	S	P	I	T

'Hyderabadis are slow to act, which affects promotion of MMA'

In an exclusive chat with **The Pioneer**, Shaikh Khalid, the head coach of the MMA India team, shared his journey from a passionate martial arts enthusiast to one of the key figures in India's MMA landscape. He also reflected on the lack of awareness and infrastructure for MMA in Hyderabad



TEJAL SINHA
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Shaikh Khalid, the head coach of the MMA India team, has been an influential figure in the growth of mixed martial arts (MMA) in India. His journey into the sport began in his childhood when he was captivated by martial arts movies, particularly those starring Mithun Chakraborty.

Despite his growing passion, Khalid's parents, like most, wanted him to focus on academics. But his love for martial arts only intensified, eventually leading him to make the bold decision to leave school and train full-time. He started his martial arts journey with Indian mud wrestling before transitioning to Karate, where he trained for nearly eight years. Over time, he also picked up Judo, Muay Thai and Kickboxing, participating in several national-level competitions. However, it was Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) that truly sparked a transformative change in his career. "Shaikh Khalid, based in Hyderabad, India, is a highly accomplished martial artist and MMA coach with 24 years of experience. As an IMMAF Black Belt and one of the world's top 10 MMA coaches, he has dedicated his career to shaping the future of Indian MMA. Khalid is the founder and head coach of TAMMA and serves as Joint Secretary and Board Director of MMA India,

playing a pivotal role in the sport's development nationwide. Leading one of India's most dominant MMA teams—known as the "House of Champions"—Shaikh Khalid has consistently guided his fighters to remarkable success. His team is a top contender at national events, frequently securing top-three rankings and clinching first-place finishes multiple times. Under his leadership, the team has produced numerous national and international champions, including gold medalists at the IMMAF World and Asian Championships.

Since 2015, Khalid has represented India in various IMMAF events as a coach and not long ago, as an official Cutman after completing the IMMAF Cutman course in 2024. His debut as a Cutman



at the MMA India National Championship 2025 showcased his versatility and commitment to the sport.

Recognised with the MMA India Best Coach Award for 2023-2024, Shaikh Khalid continues to lead and inspire, cementing his legacy as a driving force in Indian MMA.

For Khalid, MMA is more than just a physical sport. "MMA isn't just about fitness or fighting—it builds discipline, resilience, and self-defense skills," he explains. It's precisely these aspects of the sport that motivated him to make MMA more accessible to people, especially in a region where awareness of the sport was still limited. Being a proud Hyderabad, Khalid takes immense pride in his city's growth and transformation over the years. "We are a generation that has witnessed tremendous development in the city. We've seen everything grow—from infrastructure to the attitude of people. The 'Nawaabi' vibe that once defined Hyderabad is now more educated, and people are participating in sports." However, he also notes some challenges in the local promotion of MMA. "Compared to other states, there's not much awareness of MMA in Hyderabad and Telangana. Other states conduct several MMA events, but that's not the case here," he adds. Despite this, he acknowledges the role that social media has played in increasing awareness of MMA. "I would say that social media's credit is 70% for the growth of MMA," he affirms, recognizing the potential of online platforms to spread knowledge about the sport.

Khalid also shares a lighthearted reflection on the Hyderabad approach to work. "Hyderabadis never do their work on the same day and try to do it by the time," he laughs. "We wait a lot for the time. I believe this could also be a reason why MMA is not

much promoted or recognized here. Everyone thinks they'll do it at some point, but not right now."

Despite these challenges, there are aspects of Hyderabad that Khalid misses dearly when traveling. "One thing I always miss is the 'sukoon', the 'apnanan' and the culture. It's something we don't find in other places," he says with affection. He also shares his fondness for the local cuisine, although he notes that the city's food culture is evolving. "Over time, there's been a shift from Biryani to Mandi. The Hyderabad way of eating food and a lot of things have changed," he reflects, noting that there's now a variety of food options available in the city.

Khalid's concerns extend beyond just MMA; he believes there's a lack of support for sports in Hyderabad. "In other states, MPs and MLAs, no matter which party they belong to, put their best efforts into supporting sports. But in Hyderabad, I haven't seen anyone step forward to provide that kind of support," he observes.

This lack of infrastructure and government backing is something that affects all sports, not just MMA. "Many of the stadiums are in poor condition. Take LB Stadium, for instance—it has been around since the time of the Nizams, but today it's in a pathetic state," he laments. Khalid emphasises that proper development is needed to bring sports in Hyderabad up to par with other states and countries. "If youngsters get into sports, they won't fall into bad habits," he adds.

On the global stage, MMA continues to gain recognition. Khalid points out that MMA has even been included in the Youth Asian Games, a feat that many are unaware of. "Recently, MMA was included in the Youth Asian Games, but not many people are aware of it. It doesn't even include Karate, but it includes MMA," he points out. As someone who has represented India as a coach in about 14 countries, Khalid has witnessed firsthand the immense support and infrastructure these nations provide to their athletes. "The infrastructure and support from governments abroad are immense, but here in Hyderabad, it's almost nonexistent," he says, highlighting the disparity in sports development between India and other countries.

Despite these challenges, Khalid remains hopeful about the future of MMA and sports in Hyderabad. He believes that if the sport receives proper support and recognition, it can help shape the future of many young individuals. "There's a saying in Lucknow—'Muskuraiye, aap Lucknow mein hain,' Khalid smiles. "Similarly, I would say for Hyderabad, 'Hyderabad aaye aur yahan ki Biryani aur chai zaroor pee ke jaayein.' I love Hyderabad," he concludes, proudly reiterating his deep connection to his city.

HYDERABAD BOND

DIL DOSTI AUR DOGS: A HEARTFELT TALE THAT WAGS BUT DOESN'T HOWL

Plot

Set in Goa, *Dil Dosti Aur Dogs* follows multiple interconnected stories revolving around the bond between humans and their pet dogs. A struggling couple, played by Sharad Kelkar and Keerti Kelkar, adopt a female dog, hoping it will bring joy into their lives after years of failing to conceive. Their world changes when the dog unexpectedly gets pregnant, giving them a new perspective on parenthood. Meanwhile, hotel manager, played by Kunaal Roy Kapur insults a dog, which later drowns, leaving him guilt-ridden. In an attempt to make amends, he grows close to Tridha Choudhury's character, who runs a pet adoption center. Elsewhere, a lonely young girl played by Aarohi Patel, is searching for her lost dog, struggling to connect with her stepfather, played by Ehan Bhat, in the process. Their journey of finding the dog helps them bridge their emotional gap. There's also a subplot about a dog-smuggling racket, adding an element of suspense. Finally, Neena Gupta's character, a traumatised elderly woman, finds comfort in adopting a stray dog, only to later face the heartbreaking realisation that it won't be with her forever. These lives cross paths throughout the film, each reflecting different aspects of companionship, love, and loss.

Highlights

The film's strongest moments are those that explore the unconditional love between humans and their pets. The emotional depth, especially the traumatised elderly woman's storyline is especially moving, as Neena Gupta brings grace to her role of a woman who finds new meaning in life through her dog, only to later deal with inevitable grief. Similarly, the bond of Arohi's character with her missing pet tugs at the heartstrings, as does the couple's journey of rediscovering happiness through their adopted dog. The Goa setting adds visual charm, and the film's heartfelt intent is evident throughout. Most importantly, the dogs themselves steal the show with their natural, unfiltered presence, making every scene featuring them delightful to watch.

Drawbacks

Despite its emotional core, the film suffers from weak execution and an inconsistent tone. Kunaal's character redemption arc feels rushed, and his



REVIEW

romance with Tridha's character lacks depth. Some storylines are unnecessarily exaggerated, such as the over-the-top action sequence in the climax, which feels completely out of place in a film centered on human-animal relationships. The screenplay struggles to balance realism with dramatisation, often leaning into outdated tropes that make certain moments feel forced. Additionally, the film's attempt to blend multiple genres—romance, drama, suspense—results in an uneven narrative.

Performances

Neena Gupta stands out with a heartfelt performance, elevating the film's emotional quotient. Sharad Kelkar brings sincerity to his role, while Keerti Kelkar matches his energy. Kunaal Roy Kapur's portrayal is decent, though his character arc lacks depth. Tridha Choudhury and Ehan Bhat are charming but don't get enough screen time to fully develop their characters. Aarohi Patel is impressive, capturing the innocence and determination of a child longing for her lost pet. Tinnu Anand makes an appearance but is underutilised. Ultimately, the real stars of the film are the dogs, whose presence brings authenticity and warmth to the narrative.

Technical Aspects

The cinematography captures Goa's scenic beauty well, but the film's overall visual appeal is hampered by average production quality. Editing is inconsistent, with some scenes stretched unnecessarily while others feel abruptly cut. The background score attempts to heighten emotions but is forgettable, and the songs fail to leave a lasting impact. The biggest

weakness lies in the screenplay, which lacks polish and often resorts to cliché storytelling. If the writing had been more refined and the emotional beats more naturally integrated, the film could have been far more effective.

Verdict

Dil Dosti Aur Dogs is an emotionally driven film that has its share of touching moments but ultimately lacks the storytelling finesse needed to make a lasting impact. While dog lovers will find certain scenes deeply moving, the film's inconsistent tone, unnecessary melodrama and scattered execution prevent it from being truly memorable. The heart of the film is in the right place, but its narrative flaws dilute its emotional potential. If you're a pet lover looking for a feel-good watch, this film offers some sweet and sentimental moments—but don't expect it to match the emotional depth of classics like *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* or *Old Yeller*.

DIRECTED BY:

Viral Shah

PRODUCED BY: Jyoti

Deshpande, Masumeh Makhija, and Viral Shah

CAST: Neena Gupta, Masumeh Makhija, Sharad Kelkar, Kunaal Roy Kapur, Keerti Kelkar, Tinnu Anand, Ehan Bhat, and Tridha Choudhury

Streaming on: JioHotstar

RATING: 2.5/5

Navigating new tax landscape

The government of India has presented the Income Tax Bill 2025, which has significantly changed India's taxation system. The amendment seeks to simplify tax laws, minimise confusion and promote economic growth. Under new regulations and amendments, taxpayers must be aware of these amendments to comply well with the new system.

Among the bill's most innovative aspects is streamlining taxation law by removing obsolete provisions and restructuring sections to facilitate better comprehensibility. It also introduces one "Tax year" in place of the current financial year and assessment year arrangement, with the advantage of compliance ease for companies as well as taxpayers.

The bill extends the renovated tax slabs of the Union Budget 2025-26 and provides more enhanced income tax exemptions and reliefs to salaried taxpayers. Certain other significant modifications include the modifications in HRA tax relief, enhanced TCS limits and relief on education loans.

With such modifications, taxpayers need to be alert while making wise financial choices. As a worker, a freelancer, or an entrepreneur, if you are aware of the 2025 income tax regime, you will be able to plan and optimize tax savings.

Simplification of tax laws

Another of the major objectives of the Income Tax Bill 2025 is simplification of tax laws and making them less complex to adhere to. The bill abolishes obsolete provisions and repeals comparable sections, thereby making the tax code simpler. Unlike the archaic Income Tax Act of 1961, which was a colossal 52 chapters and 823 pages long, the new law is relatively short, with only 23 chapters and 16 schedules on 622 pages. The new structuring aims at dispelling misunderstandings and alleviating the stress on individuals and businesses to lodge their taxes.

Standard tax year enforced

The important change includes enacting a uniform "Tax Year," which shall replace the former financial and assessment year configuration. The new 12-month block makes it easy for business enterprises and individuals to keep accounts and taxes. In the case of new entrepreneurs or professionals, the tax year would begin from when they set out or commence earnings, and thereby tax filing would become easy.

Updated tax slabs and rates

The new bill keeps the tax slabs and rates that were introduced in the Union Budget 2025-26, providing some stability for taxpayers. Now, individuals earning up to INR 12,00,000 won't have to pay any income tax. Plus, salaried taxpayers will get a standard deduction of INR 75,000, raising the non-taxable income limit to INR 12,75,000. Taxpayers can pick between the old and new tax systems based on what works best for them.

Eyes on the new tax regime: FY 2024-25 vs. FY 2025-26

When we put side by side the income tax you will pay under the new tax regime in FY 2024-25 and FY 2025-26, it's quite clear that the latter holds the guarantee of paying less tax. For the ones with incomes up to INR 12 lakh, there will be no tax to pay in FY 2025-26, that is, more savings in your pocket. However, even if your income is more than that, you'll gain the tax savings ranging between INR 36,400 and INR 1,43,000.

Optimising tax with HRA: A strategy for couples

With the new tax slabs, the taxpayer has to analyse which regime provides the most savings. Married couples can employ tactical tax planning to avail themselves of the maximum benefits. A couple can select the old tax regime for claiming HRA and deductions by one spouse and the new regime by the other.

For instance, Disha and Rohan, a couple working in Mumbai, pay INR 60,000 as rent and earlier divided the amount equally to avail HRA deductions. By moving Rohan to the new regime and allowing Disha to claim the entire HRA deduction under the old regime, they can save INR 1.13 lakh in taxes. Such planning optimizes the use of exemptions and deductions.

Increase in TCS limits & education loan benefits

In an attempt to make compliance with tax smoother, the government has enhanced TCS ceilings as well as presented relief to loan repayments against education.

Prime TCS revisions:

• **Higher TCS level for foreign remittances:** The LRS-driven threshold of TCS has increased from INR 7 lakh to INR 10 lakh, reducing tax



consequences in the event of regular overseas transactions.

• **Relief on education loan:** Return of education loans availed from recognized financial institutions is exempt from TCS, thereby encouraging overseas education.

IMPACT ON PERSONAL FINANCES

Salaries and disposable income

The new tax system is meant to raise take-home pay for a wide range of taxpayers. Through the increase in non-taxable income levels and the scaling down of tax rates, individuals will feel lower tax burdens, which might boost spending and economic growth as a whole.

Housing and real estate benefits

• **Relief from tax on multiple houses:** Two self-occupied houses can now be claimed by homeowners as tax-free. The tax was earlier levied on the notional rent of the second house.

• **Higher TDS Limit on Rent:** The TDS limit on rental income has been raised from INR 2,40,000 to INR 6,00,000 per year. Tenants should deduct TDS only when rent is higher than this amount, lessening the compliance burden for both landlords and tenants.

Investment and capital gains revision

The Income Tax Bill 2025 continues with the current capital gains tax structure but makes certain revisions:

• **Taxing High-Premium ULIPs:** ULIPs with premium payments of over INR 2,50,000 in a year will now be subject to capital gains taxation. Long-term gains (over one year) are taxed at 12.5% after an exemption of INR 1,25,000, while short-term gains are taxed at 20%. This aligns the taxation of high-premium ULIPs with that of equity mutual funds.

• **Debt Mutual Funds:** Investors in debt mutual funds purchased after April 2023 can claim a tax rebate of up to INR 60,000 under the new regime, reducing tax burdens on fixed-income investments.

Cryptocurrency regulations

The Union Budget 2025-26 did not extend tax relief to crypto investors. The 30% tax on virtual digital asset (VDA) profits and the 1% TDS on transactions remain in place. However the Income Tax Bill 2025 makes reporting of cryptocurrency transactions obligatory on designated reporting entities for greater market transparency and compliance.

Other Tax Updates

• **NPS Vatsalya:** A taxpayer can now claim exemption of tax on NPS Vatsalya, along with a further INR 50,000 deduction under Section 80CCD(1B) in the previous tax regime. Withdrawals continue to be 60% tax-free, with 40% compulsorily utilised for annuities.

• **NSS Withdrawals:** From August 29, 2024, withdrawals from the National Savings Scheme (NSS) will be tax-free, including principal and interest, even if previous deductions were claimed.

• **Extended ITR Filing Deadline:** Taxpayers now have four years instead of two to file updated Income Tax Returns (ITRs).

(The author, Ajay Kumar Yadav, is the CEO and CIO of Wise Finserv.)

Hockey India unveils performance-based system for national championship

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hockey India on Friday unveiled a new format with a promotion and relegation system for the Senior Women's National Championship to be held in Panchkula from March 1 to 12. The competition will feature 28 teams divided into three divisions titled 'A', 'B' and 'C'. The new format aims to enhance competition but also provides a pathway for teams to ascend to higher divisions or risk relegation based on their performances. "The introduction of the promotion and relegation system is a significant step in raising the standard of hockey across the country," Hockey India President Dilip Tirkey said. "It ensures that every match in the Championship holds importance, whether it's a battle for the title or to avoid relegation. We look forward to an exciting tournament where teams can showcase their skills and aim for the top." The top 12 teams will compete in Division A which will be further split into four



pools of three teams each and will play in a league format within their respective pools. The top two teams from each pool will advance to the quarterfinals, scheduled for March 9, followed by the semifinals on March 10 and the final and 3rd/4th place play-off on March 12. The bottom two teams will be

relegated to Division B for the next edition. Nine teams will compete in Division B, with the goal of earning promotion to Division A. Here, five teams are in Pool A and four are in Pool B. "The top two teams will earn promotion to Division A for the next season, while the

bottom two will be relegated to Division C. No knockout rounds will be held in Division B; the league standings will determine promotions and relegations," HI said. Seven teams in Division C will vie for promotion to Division B which will have three teams in Pool A and

four in Pool B. Division C will also only play league matches, with the top two teams securing promotion to Division B. During the league stage, teams in all three divisions will earn points based on their performance. Each team will be awarded three points for a win, one point for a draw, and

no points for a loss. In 'Division A', the league stage will culminate with the knockout rounds, while Divisions B and C will conclude with final standings determined solely by league matches. **Division A:** Hockey Haryana, Hockey Association of Odisha, Hockey Karnataka **Pool B:** Hockey Maharashtra, Manipur Hockey, Hockey Punjab **Pool C:** Hockey Jharkhand, Hockey Mizoram, Hockey Unit of Tamil Nadu **Pool D:** Hockey Madhya Pradesh, Hockey Bengal, Uttar Pradesh Hockey **Division B:** **Pool A:** Telangana Hockey, Hockey Uttarakhand, Assam Hockey, Hockey Rajasthan, Hockey Association of Bihar **Pool B:** Delhi Hockey, Chhattisgarh Hockey, Hockey Chandigarh, Hockey Himachal Pradesh **Division C:** **Pool A:** Kerala Hockey, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu Hockey, Hockey Gujarat **Pool B:** Hockey Andhra Pradesh, Le Puducherry Hockey, Hockey Arunachal, Hockey Jammu and Kashmir.



Praggnanandhaa draws against Gurel Ediz

PTI ■ PRAGUE

Grandmaster Praggnanandhaa played out a second straight draw against Turkey's Gurel Ediz while Aravindh Chithambaram crashed through the defences of Germany's Vincent Keymer in the second round of the Prague Masters here. Chithambaram, who has been knocking hard on the doors of elite circles, scored his first victory with black pieces after squeezing himself out of danger zone in his first-round game against Czech Grandmaster Nguyen Thai Dai Van. The Indian was involved in the sole decisive game of the day in the 10-players round-robin format, while the other matches ended in draws. Dai Van drew his second game on the trot with Sam Shankland of the United States, top seeded Wei Yi from China opened his account after splitting the point with Dutchman Anish Giri, and Quang Leim Le of Vietnam achieved the same result against Navara David from Czech Republic. With seven rounds to go, Chithambaram joined Shankland in lead on 1.5 points out of two games. They are followed by Giri, Le, Dai Van, David, Keymer and Praggnanandhaa. Ediz and Wei Yi share the last spot on a half point apiece from their two games. On a day when world champion Boris Spassky breathed his last, Chithambaram's victory had traits of the Russian's style of play to go for the kill at the first opportunity and not let it slip. The Queen's gambit accepted may have a solid reputation with black pieces but the young Indian cavalry is all out to breakout of that stereotype. How else could one explain Chithambaram's choice of move order that gave white the



WPL: RCB looks for victory against DC

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Defending champions Royal Challengers (RCB) Bengaluru will be determined to give their home fans a parting victory over a fatigued Delhi Capitals (DC) outfit here on Saturday, before the Women's Premier League (WPL) moves to Lucknow for its third leg. RCB had begun the third season of WPL with two wins in Vadodara, but their fortunes have nosedived since the tournament caravan shifted to their home ground M Chinnaswamy here. Three consecutive defeats, including a heartbreaking loss in the Super Over to UP Warriorz, have left them reeling. Placed third on the table and winless at home so far, RCB will be desperate to bounce back against a Delhi Capitals side facing the challenge of playing back-to-back games before the WPL heads to Lucknow. The Meg Lanning-led Capitals will have little recovery time as they take on Mumbai Indians in a top-of-the-table clash on Friday before locking horns with RCB the very next day. RCB's struggles have been glaring in both batting and bowling. Their batting unit collapsed in the defeat against Gujarat Giants on Thursday, with skipper Smriti Mandhana's form being a major concern. Her 81 against DC remains her only notable

knock in five innings, as spin continues to be her Achilles' heel. Her opening partner, England's Danni Wyatt-Hodge too has been inconsistent, while Australian veteran Ellyse Perry, despite being in sensational touch, suffered a rare failure with a maiden WPL duck against Gujarat Giants. The bowling department has been equally underwhelming. Frontline pacers Renuka Singh and Kim Garth have lacked consistency, often erring in line and length. Spinners Georgia Wareham, Ekta Bisht, and Kanika Ahuja have struggled to exert control in the crucial middle overs, compounding RCB's woes further. Delhi Capitals, too, have endured an inconsistent campaign, with two losses sandwiched between three wins. Their batting lineup has finally started firing with Shafali Verma and Jess Jonassen finding form. However, skipper Lanning continues to struggle at the top. Jemimah Rodrigues and Annabel Sutherland have provided occasional fireworks in the middle order, but DC will seek more consistency from their batting unit. In Shikha Pandey, Marizanne Kapp, young Titas Sadhu, Sutherland, and Minnu Mani, DC boast a formidable bowling attack, making them a dangerous opponent despite their inconsistencies.

New Zealand excited to play in different conditions: Bracewell

PTI ■ DUBAI

New Zealand off-spinner Michael Bracewell on Friday brushed aside any talks about India getting an unfair advantage in the ongoing Champions Trophy by playing all their games in Dubai, simply saying that his team was "excited to try and play in different conditions". Rohit Sharma's team is playing all its matches in Dubai, and even the final will be held here if India goes the distance. New Zealand will be playing their first match of the tournament here – against India on Sunday – after their last two games were held in Pakistan. Some cricketers, including South African top-order batter Rassie van der Dussen and former Australia skipper Pat Cummins, have said India are in an advantageous



position as they have played all their games at one venue while other teams have had to travel to different venues in Pakistan. India had refused to travel to Pakistan for the tournament citing security reasons. "Look, it is what it is. It's been decided, and that's the way it is, and there's no point dwelling on that," said Bracewell, when asked if India have unfair advantage in Dubai.

"It's part of what makes it exciting. I personally think it's coming to a different ground and trying to figure out those different conditions. Yeah, not much more to say on that other than we're excited to try and learn and play in different conditions," added the 34-year-old off-spinner. The New Zealander opined that the pitches here would aid spin and it would be a good idea to train hard before

the game against India. "The wickets here have looked like they've taken a bit of a spin. So, it'll be good to try and get used to the wickets as quickly as we can. We've obviously enjoyed the pitches in Pakistan. And I think we've got a pretty well-balanced side to play in any condition. So hopefully, we can continue to do that and adjust to what's in front of us. I think that's been the strength of our side, adjusting to the surface. So, hopefully, we continue to do that as a side," he added. He said New Zealand doing consistently well against India in ICC tournaments was because of his players not putting themselves under pressure. New Zealand recently inflicted a humiliating 3-0 Test defeat on India, becoming the first touring side to seal a series win in India in 13 years.

UTT sixth season to begin from May 29

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The sixth edition of Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT), the sport's premier league in India, will be held from May 29 to June 15 in Ahmedabad, the organisers announced on Friday. The state-of-the-art EKA Arena, a venue that has staged the 2016 Kabaddi World Cup and 2019 Intercontinental Cup (football), will be the venue for the event that will be in Ahmedabad for the first time. As UTT continues to grow, eight teams featuring top Indian and international table tennis stars will battle for the crown, with defending champions Goa Challengers looking to claim a historic

third title. "Ultimate Table Tennis has been instrumental in transforming the table tennis landscape in India, providing our players with an unparalleled platform to compete against top international talent," Table Tennis Federation of India Secretary Kamlesh Mehta said. The upcoming season will feature eight teams split into two groups of four for the draw, with each team playing five ties in the league stage -- facing all three opponents in their group once and two randomly drawn teams from the other group. The top four teams at the end will advance to the knockout rounds, leading to the grand finale on June 15.

West Ham beats Leicester in Premier League

PTI ■ LONDON

West Ham handed relegation-threatened Leicester its fourth straight Premier League loss by beating Ruud van Nistelrooy's team 2-0. Leicester failed to score in each of those defeats – and allowed a total of 12 goals – to remain 19th in the standings, five points from safety. The Foxes have lost 11 of their past 12 league games. Tomas Soucek scored in the 21st minute for the home team at London Stadium and the Hammers doubled the lead when Jarrod Bowen's strike deflected off Jannik Vestergaard for an own goal just before halftime. Leicester shook up its coaching staff after Friday's 4-0 home loss to



Brentford but kept Van Nistelrooy in charge. In 14 Premier League games under the Dutch manager,

Leicester has two wins, one draw and 11 losses. "We were way too passive," Van Nistelrooy told TNT

Sports. "Of course we're in a situation where we're not winning games and we're in a situation where we are in the bottom three, and the pressure's on. But I think the way to get out of it is to literally move forward – on the pitch as well. We have to take initiative." West Ham moved past Everton into 15th place and has recorded back-to-back Premier League wins for the first time this season. Graham Potter, who replaced the fired Julen Lopetegui as manager seven weeks ago, said Thursday's victory was a "professional performance," following up from a 1-0 victory at Arsenal last Saturday. "For us, we're just delighted with two wins, two clean sheets and six points," he said of the mini-run.

Champions Trophy: South Africa eyes semifinal spot against England

PTI ■ KARACHI

As the battle for the semifinals intensifies in Group B, top-ranked South Africa will aim to assert their dominance and secure a spot in the final four when they face a struggling England in a high-stakes Champions Trophy (CT) clash here on Saturday. Unlike Group A wherein two best sides – India and New Zealand – have sailed through with ease into the knockouts, Australia, Afghanistan and South Africa in Group B are locked in for an intense battle over the two days for the remaining two semifinal berths. A crushing loss by eight runs to Afghanistan not only sent England out of the contention for the semifinals but also kept the Asian team's hopes alive of making to the final four, which has kept both South Africa and Australia on tenterhooks. Afghanistan will take on Australia on Friday in Lahore riding on the big wave of confidence from their

last outing between the two teams in the 50-over format. The Afghans had pushed Australia to the brink in their last meeting in the 2023 ODI World Cup before Glenn Maxwell's sensational 201 not out turned the tables. While there are possibilities of the contest being affected by rain, a win for Afghanistan will be enough for them to seal a spot in the semifinal, as Australia's defeat will leave the Steve Smith-led side locked in for a battle with South Africa for the second and final spot from this group. South Africa (3 points, 2.140 NRR) are likely to progress if Australia (3 points, 0.475 NRR) beat Afghanistan (2 points, -0.990 NRR), even if the Proteas lose to England because of their healthy NRR. A favourable result should not be too difficult for South Africa who have all their bases covered and more importantly, have their key players in-form compared to a misfiring England, who are overly



dependent on Joe Root. In their only completed contest so far – South Africa split points with Australia after a washout in

Rawalpindi – the Proteas had crushed Afghanistan by a massive 107 runs. Ryan Rickelton struck a century while skipper Temba

Bavuma, Rassie van der Dussen and Aiden Markram hit a half-century each to power South Africa to a formidable 315/6

batting first, following which the bowlers produced a unified show to bundle out Afghanistan for a mere 208. While on-paper, South Africa are a formidable unit and have been the team to beat in recent ICC events, their overall form over the last one year or so doesn't inspire confidence as South Africa have lost eight of their last 12 ODIs and won only four since January 2024. South Africa had also failed to make the tri-series final in Pakistan also involving New Zealand, prior to the Champions Trophy, and Bavuma's side will be required to find consistency against a hurting England who will be determined to sign off on a high. Barring Root, England do not inspire much confidence as they are amid a losing streak which began with a 0-3 hammering by India before this tournament. Root's 120 was the only bright spot for England against Afghanistan as the venerable batter was the only one to convert

his start and show the promise to do the job for his side, which ideally should have been completed but the 2019 World Cup winners lacked the gumption. England, who had begun the tournament with a defeat to Australia, are likely to go through changes in terms of leadership but before all that unfolds, Jos Buttler would be keen to rally his troops around for one final laugh. **Teams (from):** **England:** Jos Buttler (c), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Tom Banton, Harry Brook, Rehan Ahmed, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood. **South Africa:** Temba Bavuma (c), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen, Corbin Bosch.

Sabdham is nothing but noise pollution in disguise

SURESH KAVIRAYANI
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Actor Aadhi is well-known to both Telugu and Tamil audiences, having played lead roles in several Tamil films before taking on character roles in Telugu films like *Sarrainodu*, *Ninnu Kori*, *Rangasthalam* and *Warrior*. His first commercial breakthrough came with *Eeram* (2009), a Tamil supernatural thriller directed by Arivazhagan, which was later released in Telugu as *Vaishali* and became a hit. Eeram used water as its central supernatural element, and now, 16 years later, Aadhi and Arivazhagan reunite for *Sabdham*, where sound takes centre stage as the film's supernatural force. Released simultaneously in Tamil and its Telugu-dubbed version, *Sabdham* attempts to create a gripping horror-thriller but falls short.

STORY:

Three medical students from a college in Munnar commit suicide, but the college authorities try to cover it up, avoiding media and police intervention. The students suspect supernatural involvement behind these deaths. To dispel these fears, the college dean hires paranormal investigator Vyuma Vaidyalingam (Aadhi Pinisetty), known for using a special sound kit to communicate with spirits and solve cases.

During his investigation, Vyuma suspects a lecturer and house surgeon, Avanthika

(Lakshmi Menon) and discovers a disturbing history—42 mysterious deaths in the college library. Avanthika, who does not believe in ghosts, somehow has a deep connection to these events. Meanwhile, former chairman Diana (Simran) remains in a coma, adding another layer of mystery. Who is Nancy Daniel? What dark past is hidden within the library walls? And how are these deaths connected to Avanthika? To find out, you'll have to watch *Sabdham*.

ANALYSIS:

Arivazhagan, who made a strong debut with *Eeram*, once again explores the supernatural genre, this time using sound as the key element. While there have been studies on the impact of sound in warfare and its therapeutic use in medicine, *Sabdham* takes the concept further, using it as a medium for paranormal investigation.

The first half is engaging, even though there are no chilling horror moments. The concept of a paranormal investigator communicating with spirits using sound might seem odd at first, but Aadhi's performance makes it somewhat believable. However, the film takes a predictable turn in the second half. As the mystery unfolds, the suspense vanishes, making the plot feel repetitive and uninspired.

PERFORMANCES:

Aadhi delivers a convincing performance as the paranormal investigator. Although the concept of such a character



might seem unrealistic, his portrayal adds credibility to the role. Lakshmi Menon as Avanthika gives a solid performance, while Simran and Laila appear in brief but notable cameos. Redin Kingsley provides some comic relief, offering a few laughs in between the tension. The supporting cast, primarily from the Tamil industry, does well in their respective roles.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS:

Thaman's music, while effective in parts, becomes overwhelming in several scenes, diminishing the intended impact. A horror-thriller does not always need loud, jarring sounds to create fear—sometimes, a subtle score or silence works better. Arun Bathmanaban's cinematography is commendable, capturing eerie visuals well, but the film's overall execution doesn't do justice to its concept.

For a film titled *Sabdham* (which translates to "sound"), the excessive use of loud background music ironically becomes its biggest flaw. While thrillers and horror films

rely on sound to build tension, sometimes silence can be far more effective. Unfortunately, in *Sabdham*, the overuse of sound effects leads to irritation rather than suspense. The screenplay falls apart in the second half, with the linking of the deaths, suicides and the library's past executed in a routine and outdated manner. The antagonist's introduction just before the climax feels abrupt and forced. Despite an intriguing premise, *Sabdham* ultimately suffers from weak storytelling and missed opportunities.

VERDICT:

While *Sabdham* attempts to deliver a supernatural thriller with an innovative concept, it fails to maintain suspense and originality. The excessive use of sound, a predictable second half and outdated storytelling weigh the film down. Although Aadhi's performance is commendable, the film does not match the gripping tension of *Eeram*. *Sabdham* ends up as a routine supernatural thriller with only a few genuinely engaging moments.

Cast: Aadhi, Lakshmi Menon, Simran, Laila, Redin Kingsley, Rajiv Menon, and others

Cinematographer: Arun Bathmanaban **Music Director:** S. Thaman

Producers: Siva, S. Banupriya Siva **Director:** Arivazhagan

Rating: 2/5



Vishwambhara faces delay as makers opt for re-shoots

It's not great news for *Vishwambhara*, the upcoming Chiranjeevi-starrer, as the film is currently undergoing re-shoots for some key scenes, according to sources. This fantasy-themed film was supposed to be completed long ago, but production is still ongoing at various locations.

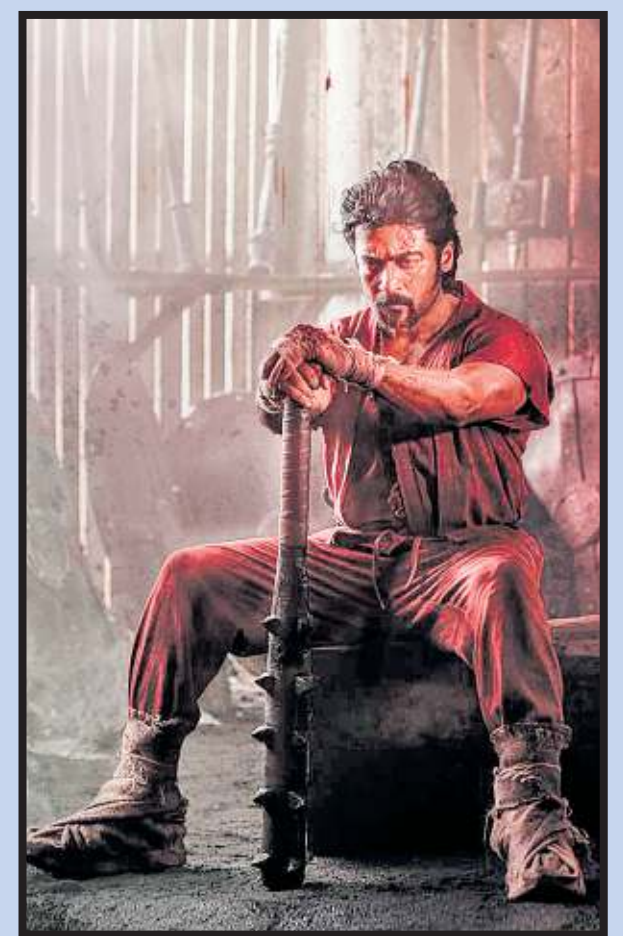
Bollywood actor Kunal Kapoor plays the antagonist in this film, which is directed by *Bimbisara* fame Mallidi Vassista. Trisha, who plays the female lead, completed her portions long ago. However, the makers decided to reshoot certain scenes and requested her to return for additional filming.

Sources reveal that Trisha was displeased with the decision, citing

scheduling conflicts. Despite initial reluctance, she eventually agreed and came to Hyderabad, allotting a few hours for the re-shoots.

The teaser, released during the Dasara festival last year, faced criticism due to substandard CGI. Even Chiranjeevi was reportedly dissatisfied with the teaser's visual effects. Despite this, the makers continue to rely heavily on CGI and early footage has not received positive feedback from those who have seen it.

With the team now planning to announce the release date, promotions will begin soon after. However, concerns about the film's visuals and production delays remain a talking point among fans and industry insiders.



Anurag Kashyap's makes his Telugu debut with *Dacoit*



Bollywood director and actor Anurag Kashyap has been actively appearing in South Indian films lately. He recently played a villain in Vijay Sethupathi's Tamil film *Maharaja* and also appeared in *Viduthalai Part 2* (Tamil) and a Malayalam film. Now, Kashyap is set to make his Telugu debut with *Dacoit*, starring Adivi Sesh in the lead role. The film is being made simultaneously in Hindi, prompting the makers to cast Kashyap in a key role. Mrunal Thakur plays the female lead.

Anurag Kashyap has joined the project in a powerful role, portraying a fearless police inspector who is a staunch Ayyappa devotee and has zero tolerance for corruption. According to the makers, his character is sharp-minded, witty and sarcastic, adding depth to the film's intense narrative filled with action, emotion and drama. *Dacoit* follows the journey of a convict seeking revenge on his ex-girlfriend, who betrayed him. As he devises a dangerous plan to trap her, the story unfolds into an emotionally charged saga of love, betrayal, and vengeance.

"Playing a police officer who is an Ayyappa devotee is both fun and challenging. The conflict between duty and dharma, and his approach to the job with a dry sense of humor, makes the character fantastic," said Kashyap about his role in *Dacoit*. He also expressed excitement about the bilingual shoot, saying, "Getting the same impact in both languages is a challenge, but I'm thoroughly enjoying it."

The film marks the directorial debut of Shaneli Deo, with Supriya Yarlagadda producing and Suniel Narang co-producing. The story and screenplay have been jointly crafted by Adivi Sesh and Shaneli Deo.

Sithara Entertainments acquires Telugu rights for Suriya's *Retro*

Of late, Telugu audiences have seen a surge in dubbed releases from Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada industries. Some dubbed films are even securing major theatrical releases, sometimes clashing with multiple new releases on the same day.

In response to this growing demand, Sithara Entertainments has acquired the Telugu theatrical rights for *Retro*, the much-anticipated Suriya-starrer. The film, which has already garnered attention with its powerful teaser, is set to release on May 1.

Not long ago, Sithara Entertainments has distributed films like *Leo* (Tamil), *Devvara*

(Telugu) and *Brahmayugam* (Malayalam), further expanding its reach across industries. Now, with *Retro*, the production house is bringing another high-profile Tamil film to Telugu audiences.

Directed by Karthik Subbaraj, *Retro* stars Pooja Hegde as the female lead, with music composed by Santhosh Narayanan. The film is produced by Suriya and Jyotika under their production banner.

With Sithara Entertainments backing the Telugu release, *Retro* is expected to make a strong impact in both Tamil and Telugu markets. Fans are eagerly waiting to see Suriya in this much-hyped project.

Kiara Advani, Sidharth Malhotra to welcome their 'greatest gift' soon

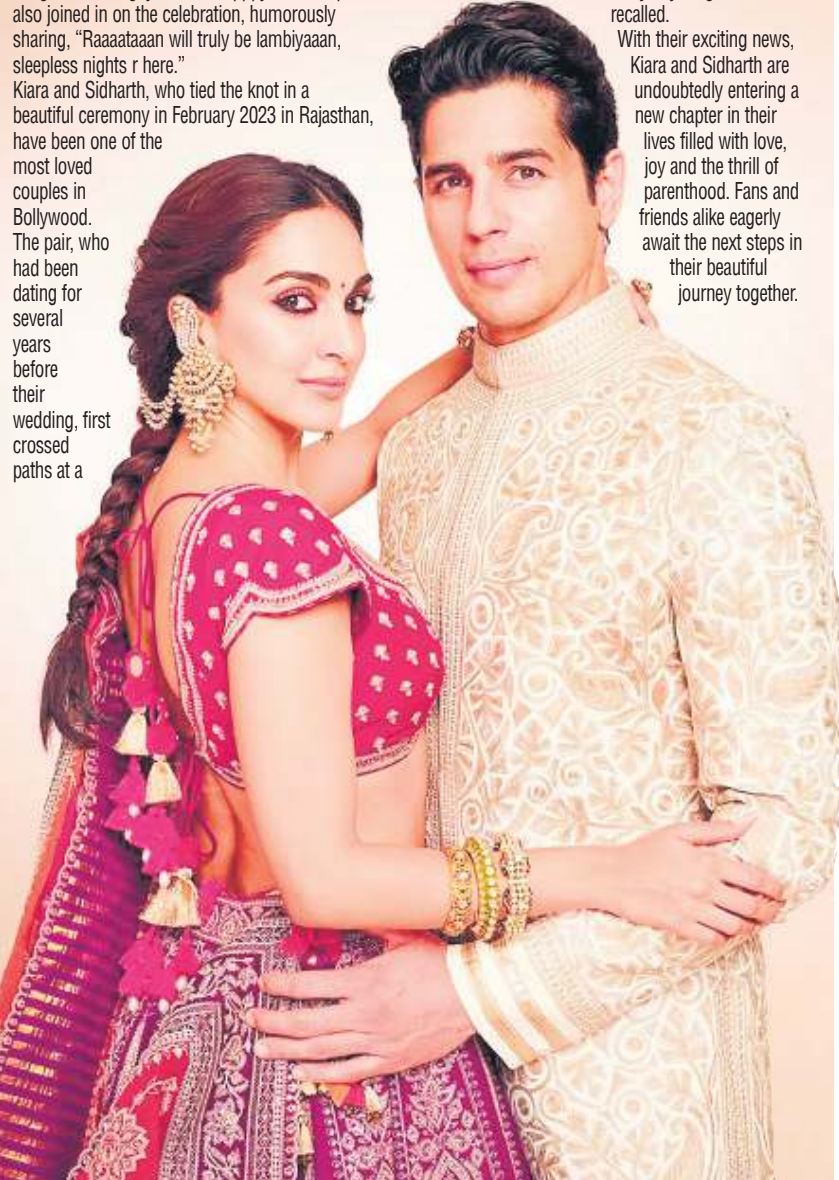
In a joyful revelation, Bollywood power couple Kiara Advani and Sidharth Malhotra took to social media on Friday to share some wonderful news: they are expecting their first child. The couple posted an adorable picture of baby socks held in their hands, accompanied by a heartwarming caption that read, "The greatest gift of our lives. Coming soon."

Their announcement was met with an outpouring of love and congratulations from celebrities and fans alike. Shilpa Shetty expressed her excitement with a sweet "Awwwww congratulations are in order," while Rakul Preet Singh couldn't contain her happiness, commenting, "Omggggggg congratulations guys. so so happy." Ekta Kapoor also joined in on the celebration, humorously sharing, "Raaaataaan will truly be lambiyayaan, sleepless nights r here."

Kiara and Sidharth, who tied the knot in a beautiful ceremony in February 2023 in Rajasthan, have been one of the most loved couples in Bollywood. The pair, who had been dating for several years before their wedding, first crossed paths at a

party after Kiara wrapped up filming for *Lust Stories*. During a memorable appearance on *Koffee with Karan*, Kiara shared a heartfelt and romantic story about Sidharth's proposal. She revealed that he popped the question during a special dinner at a Michelin-star restaurant in Rome. "He planned the works. He had done this candlelight dinner. We go back after dinner and he takes me up for a walk. We go up and suddenly the violinist comes out of the bushes playing and sweetly, his little nephew is taking our video from behind the bushes. He then goes on one knee and proposes. I was not expecting it that night, so I was so overwhelmed, I didn't say anything," Kiara recalled.

With their exciting news, Kiara and Sidharth are undoubtedly entering a new chapter in their lives filled with love, joy and the thrill of parenthood. Fans and friends alike eagerly await the next steps in their beautiful journey together.



Sankranthiki Vasthunnam to stream on ZEE5 from March 1

Among recent Telugu releases, *Sankranthiki Vasthunnam* stands out as the only unanimously declared blockbuster. Starring Venkatesh, the film became the highest-grossing Telugu film at the regional level, marking a major milestone for the veteran actor at the age of 65. Directed by Anil Ravipudi and produced by Dil Raju, the film not only earned critical acclaim but also helped the producer recover losses from *Game Changer*.

Now, this family entertainer is gearing up for its OTT and satellite premiere after a sensational theatrical run. It will have a unique dual premiere on Zee Telugu and ZEE5 on March 1 at 6 PM. Additionally, the film will be available in multiple languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam.

Aishwarya Rajesh and Meenakshi Chowdhary play the female leads, while child artist Revanth delivers a hilarious performance, which is considered one of the film's highlights.

The story revolves around retired police officer YD Raju (Venkatesh), who leads a peaceful life in the Godavari region with his wife, Bhagyalakshmi (Aishwarya Rajesh). However, his quiet life is disrupted when his ex-girlfriend, Meenakshi (Meenakshi Chowdhary), re-enters his life, pulling him into a high-stakes rescue mission involving a renowned entrepreneur.

Blending family emotions with comedy, *Sankranthiki Vasthunnam* has been widely praised for its engaging narrative and humor.

