

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

Revanth silenced by Modi's helping hand

What's the most trusted method for flailing Chief Ministers of non-NDA (National Democratic Alliance) ruled states to divert public attention from their failures? Seek an appointment with the Prime Minister - which the Prime Minister usually grants as he believes in cooperative federalism, submit him a wish list, come out of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), organise a press conference, and claim Prime Minister Modi and the central government discriminate against their state because an opposition party rules it. This tactic always succeeds because Prime Minister Modi does not stoop to issue a direct rebuttal to the Chief Ministers' false accusations. Former Telangana Chief Minister Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR) of the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) and current Congress

Chief Minister Revanth Reddy have repeatedly used this script to their satisfaction. But to the utter shock of Revanth Reddy, this tried and tested script failed him this time. The Chief Minister's silence for two days after meeting PM Modi on Wednesday proves that the Prime Minister has called his bluff. Though the Prime Minister quickly granted an appointment and received Chief Minister Revanth Reddy and his ministerial colleague Sridhar Babu with the usual grace, he did not let Revanth Reddy turn the meeting into a political stunt. While accepting Revanth Reddy's wish list for consideration, Modi presented him with a list of projects the central government had already approved for the state but faced hurdles and delays in implementation due to a lack of cooperation from the

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state government.

The Prime Minister subtly conveyed two messages to Revanth Reddy. First, the central government has always been proactive regarding Telangana's development and welfare needs. Second, KCR then and Revanth now are insincere about the state's needs. Their only purpose in meeting with the prime minister was to serve their political needs, not the needs of the citizens of Telangana. The list of sanctioned but pending projects in the state, provid-

ed by the PM to Revanth, stands as testimony to both.

A quick glance at the list of central projects suffering from the state government's non-cooperation exposes the disregard for Telangana's security, welfare, and development by both the earlier BRS and the current Congress rulers. The list includes three irrigation projects: the Devadula and Bhima lift irrigation schemes and the Sri Ram Sagar Project Stage II. Two mega, world-class hospitals: the Shamshabad ESI and the



KISHORE POREDDY

Bibinagar AIIMS. Two railway projects: Manoharabad to Kothapalli new line and Kazipet-Vijayawada third line with electrification. Mobile connectivity projects in Left Wing Extremism (LWE) or Naxalism-affected areas of the state.

Even more egregiously, both the BRS and the

Congress governments deceived the homeless poor in the state. The Prime Minister pointed out that the central government had granted 70,674 houses under the Awas Yojana scheme when KCR was in power. But instead of utilising the funds provided by the Center under the scheme, KCR returned the funds, depriving Telangana's poor of a pucca house. He also pointed out that the Revanth government requested funds under the same scheme for the 2024-25 financial year, which the central government approved. However, even as the end of the financial year looms, it has not taken steps to identify beneficiaries, thus letting the funds for the year go to waste.

The Prime Minister had always treated his meetings with the Chief Ministers as opportunities to foster cooperative federalism. He saw

them as a way to improve coordination and goodwill between the central and state governments. Modi never saw these meetings through a politically partisan prism. He meets the Chief Ministers of opposition-ruled states more often than the CMs of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ruled states. One can easily verify this by counting the times he met opposition Chief Ministers like Revanth Reddy, KCR and Jagan Mohan Reddy during their tenures. Yet, Revanth and KCR, especially during his second term, only saw the meetings with the PM as a tactic to deflect attention from their failed promises and the resulting anti-incumbency.

Taking the Prime Minister's request to cooperate on pending central projects as an opportunity to prove his sincerity and ability would have encouraged a result-oriented

Prime Minister to take up Revanth's new requests enthusiastically. Given the dire financial straits of Telangana's coffers, this becomes even more important now. But instead of accepting his failures, he tried to deflect the blame onto Kishan Reddy, a senior minister in the Modi cabinet, falsely accusing him of not working for the state's cause.

Revanth's silence for almost two days after meeting the PM and his belated public letter to Kishan Reddy prove that he is more focused on playing politics than on governance. Voters elected Revanth so that he could work to better their lives, not to provide excuses and divert their attention. If he does not heed, they will teach him the same lesson they taught KCR.

(The author is BJP Telangana spokesperson)

Tourism allocations satisfactory: Durgesh

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Tourism, Culture, and Cinematography Kandula Durgesh has expressed satisfaction over the allocation of Rs 469 crore for youth, tourism, and cultural sectors in the recent budget. He reiterated the coalition government's commitment to strengthening the tourism industry as a key driver of economic growth and employment generation.

Durgesh stated that the budget prioritises infrastructure development at tourist destinations, enhancing Andhra Pradesh's appeal as a travel hub. He thanked the central government for funding iconic projects like



The budget prioritises infrastructure development at tourist destinations, enhancing Andhra Pradesh's appeal as a travel hub. He thanked the central government for funding iconic projects like 'Akhandha Godavari' and Gandikota and expressed confidence in continued support for the tourism sector.

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The minister also highlighted special allocations for the promotion of the Telugu language, underscoring the gov-

ernment's focus on preserving cultural heritage. Criticising the previous administration for neglecting the Telugu language, he asserted that the coalition government would intensify efforts to elevate its significance.

Rs 820 cr earmarked for 'Swachh Andhra'

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh government has allocated Rs 820 crore in the state budget for the 'Swachh Andhra' initiative, aimed at realising the 'Swarnandhra - Swachh Andhra' vision. Swachh Andhra Corporation Chairman K Pattabhi Ram expressed gratitude to Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and Finance Minister P Keshav for prioritising cleanliness with substantial funding.

Pattabhi Ram noted that no other state has allocated such a significant budget for cleanliness. He highlighted that 'Swachh Andhra Day' is observed on the third Saturday of every month, uniting communities to promote hygiene and sanitation. The corporation plans to organise Swachh Andhra events in Maidukuru and Kandukuru and



aims to clear 8.5 million tonnes of waste left by the previous government by October 2. Steps are also being taken to set up waste processing units in every town and city to separate wet and dry waste and convert waste into useful resources.

Pattabhi Ram assured that the allocated funds would be utilised effectively to mobilise public participation in making Andhra Pradesh cleaner. He thanked CM Chandrababu Naidu, Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan, and Finance Minister Keshav for their support.

AP Chambers hails AP budget

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Federation (AP Chambers) has welcomed the Andhra Pradesh State Budget 2025-26, presented by Finance Minister Payyavula Keshav.

AP Chambers President Potluri Bhaskara Rao and General Secretary B. Raja Sekhar praised the budget for its emphasis on developmental activities and alignment with the 'Super Six' manifesto promises.

They stated, "The budget has laid the foundation for realising the Swarna Andhra Vision 2047. It is growth-oriented while also ensuring allocations for welfare initiatives."

They particularly highlighted the allocation of Rs 42,635 crore for capital

expenditure, which they noted is significant compared to the combined capital expenditure of less than Rs 40,000 crore over the past four years.

Key allocations include Rs 6,000 crore for Amaravati, Rs 6,705 crore for the Polavaram project, and Rs 3,165 crore for industries and commerce. Additionally, Rs 300 crore has been earmarked for IT and electronics incentives, Rs 4,220 crore for road development, and Rs 605 crore for ports and airports.

They further noted, "The budget also includes Rs 2,000 crore for viability gap funding under the PPP model, Rs 837 crore for industrial corridors, Rs 13,600 crore for energy projects, and Rs 10 crore for the Ratan Tata Innovation Hub, all of which will undoubtedly stimulate

industrial activity in the state."

AP Chambers commended the government for its proactive industrial policies and operational guidelines, emphasising that the budgetary allocations will support these initiatives and foster industrial growth.

They also appreciated the government's allocation of Rs 1,400 crore for long-pending incentives in food processing and industries, calling it a significant relief for businesses.

"The budget is pragmatic and progressive," they asserted, adding that it aims to boost the state's revenue.

The development of Amaravati, industrial corridors, ports, and airports, along with the completion of the Polavaram project, is expected to drive the state's economic growth.

57 trapped...

Continued from Page 1

Mana, three kilometres from Badrinath, is the last village on the India-Tibet border at a height of 3,200 metres. Visuals from Mana showed rescuers trudging through high piles of snow in a grim landscape bathed in white.

Rescue operations were stopped in view of continuing bad weather and the impending danger of more avalanches in Mana. Two mild avalanches had followed the main one.

The avalanche hit around 7.15 am, burying the workers inside eight containers and one shed, the Army said. Its swift response teams, comprising more than 100 people from the Ibez Brigade, especially trained in high altitude rescue operations, were immediately mobilised. The team included doctors and ambulances. According to Disaster Management and Rehabilitation Secretary Vinod Kumar Suman, the situation is critical with the containers buried under six to seven feet of snow. The bad weather continues.

Teams of the NDRF and SDRF left for the spot, about 300 km from the state capital Dehradun, amid continuing snowfall and rain.

TODAY

ALMANAC

Month & Paksham: Sukla Paksha

Tithi: Dwitiya: Mar 01 03:16 AM to Mar 01 11:22 AM

Tritya: Mar 02 12:09 AM to Mar 02 09:02 PM

Nakshatram: Purva Bhadrapada: Feb 28 01:40 PM to Mar 01 11:22 AM

Uttara Bhadrapada: Mar 01 11:22 AM to Mar 02 08:59 AM

Rahukalam: 9:33 AM to 11:00 AM

Yamagandam: 1:56 PM to 3:23 PM

Variyam: 08:01 PM to 09:27 PM

Gulika: 6:38 AM to 8:05 AM

Amritakalam: 04:40 AM to 06:06 AM

Ahijit Muhurtham: 12:05 PM to 12:51 PM

VIJAYAWADA WEATHER

Forecast: Mostly Sunny

Temp: 34°

Humidity: 70%

Sunrise: 6:25 AM

Sunset: 6:14 PM

Updated: February 28, 2025 5:00 PM

Modern wilderness park to come up in Amaravati

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Amaravati Development Corporation (ADC) has initiated plans to develop a Wilderness Park in Shakhammur village, with officials directed to prepare a detailed project report (DPR). ADC Chairperson and Managing Director D Lakshmi Parthasarathi held a meeting at the corporation's head office in Vijayawada on Friday to discuss the project.

The 20-acre park, to be developed in Central Park, Shakhammur, aims to promote eco-tourism by featuring native flora and enhancing environmental sustainability. The project also envisions



nature-friendly resorts alongside rare native plants, offering essential amenities for visitors.

Parthasarathi stressed that the DPR should highlight diverse natural attractions to draw tourists. She suggested allowing free public entry and proposed incorporating sacred

trees, aligning with community traditions during major festivals. The meeting was attended by P Suresh Babu, Head of Urban Planning and Architecture at ADC; Senior Urban Planner K Lavankumar; Pragati Chairman GBK Rao; and Managing Director G Ajay.

AP budget: Thrust...

Continued from Page 1

He also announced a doubling of financial relief to Rs 20,000 for fishermen during the fishing ban period.

Keshav told the House that the TDP-led NDA government is planning to implement insurance-based health coverage of Rs 25 lakh per family in the next fiscal. The budget of over Rs 3.22 lakh crore encompasses an estimated revenue expenditure of Rs 2.51 lakh crore and capital expenditure of Rs 40,635 crore.

Keshav, while presenting the budget said the estimated revenue deficit is around Rs 33,185 crore (1.82 per cent of the Gross State Domestic Product) and the fiscal deficit is around Rs 79,926 crore (4.38 per cent of the GSDP). The budget proposed an allocation of Rs 31,805 crore for school education and Rs 19,264 crore for the Health, Medical and Family Welfare Department.

The Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department, a portfolio held by Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan, got Rs 18,847 crore.

Allocating Rs 13,862 crore to the Municipal Administration and Urban Development Department, Keshav asserted that the greenfield capital city Amaravati has proved to become a self-financing project without state budget assistance as the financing has been secured through the Centre from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and HUDCO.

For the Energy Department, he proposed a sum of Rs 13,600 crore. According to Keshav, AP's energy sector is undergoing a transformative revival, with the state aiming to emerge as a green hydrogen hub.

Other major allocations included Rs 8,785 crore for the Department of Transport, Roads and Buildings and Rs 8,570 crore for the Home Department.

For the Deepam-2 scheme, which offers three free gas cylinders per year to over 90 lakh eligible beneficiaries, Keshav allocated Rs 2,601 crore. In his speech, Keshav said the government was presenting the budget in the backdrop of the "financial destruction caused by the previous (YSRCP) regime".

A new recipe for stability...

Continued from Page 1

To strengthen the agricultural sector, Rs 18,019 crore has been earmarked for irrigation, and rural development has received Rs 18,890 crore in line with Mahatma Gandhi's vision that "villages are the backbone of the nation." The gov-

ernment has also pledged to revive the Jal Jeevan Mission, which has been extended by the Centre until 2028.

As part of its focus on the aqua sector, the budget includes provisions to reduce electricity tariffs for aqua farmers to Rs 1.50 per unit. Pawan Kalyan expressed his

gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his support and lauded Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's leadership. He also thanked Finance Minister P. Srinivasa Rao and Agriculture Minister K. Achanna Naidu for presenting a budget that prioritises welfare and development.

A mere jugglery of numbers...

Continued from Page 1

He also questioned the alleged exaggeration of debt figures by the ruling coalition, stating that its claims of Rs 15 lakh crore in loans had been drastically revised downward.

Buggana criticised the budget's allocations for schemes like 'Talliki Vandanam', 'Deepam', and 'Annadata Sukhibhava', stating that the funds allotted were insufficient. He remarked that while the budget booklet appeared visually appealing, it lacked transparency and substance.

He further alleged that the government had failed to implement a proper procure-

ment policy, forcing farmers to sell produce at lower prices to private buyers. Employees expecting benefits such as DA and leave encashment have also been left disappointed, he added.

He also raised concerns over the sharp rise in Stamps and Registration fees, noting that even remote areas like Paderu saw an exorbitant 73% hike. Additionally, he criticised the government for increasing off-budget borrowings and presiding over a negative GSDP growth.

Summing up, Buggana asserted that the budget figures do not add up and fall far short of the actual requirements for welfare schemes and governance.

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Labour Minister Vasamshetti Subhash has termed the 2025-26 Andhra Pradesh Budget as the first step towards realising the 'Swarnandhra 2047' vision and fulfilling the "Super Six" promises. Drawing a parallel to Japan's post-World War II recovery, he emphasised the need for strong leadership, like that of Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, to rebuild the state after the challenges of the past five years. He highlighted the overwhelming

mandate received by the NDA coalition, which secured 93% of seats with 57% of the vote share.

The minister outlined key budget initiatives, including the allocation for the National Agriculture Development Scheme and annual financial assistance of Rs 20,000 for farmers under the Annadata Sukhibhava scheme. The government has sanctioned Rs 7,564 crore for paddy procurement for the 2024 Kharif season. The NTR Bharosa pensions will be increased from Rs

4,000 to Rs 15,000.

Other initiatives include financial aid of Rs 15,000 for mothers under the 'Talliki Vandanam' scheme, free textbooks and uniforms for students, a Rs 25 lakh health insurance cover per family, and support for artisans and traditional craftsmen.

The budget also includes provisions for the Amaravati self-sustainable project, plans to complete the Polavaram project by 2027, and a new approach to municipal waste management.

A sound foundation laid for State's future: Varma

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Union Minister for Steel and Heavy Industries Bhupatiraju Srinivasa Varma hailed the NDA coalition government's budget as people-centric, calling it the best financial blueprint designed to meet the aspirations of the poor and middle class.

Reacting to the budget presented in the Assembly, he emphasised the government's commitment to uplifting marginalised communities, highlighting the Rs 3.2L cr allocation for the welfare of SC, ST, BC, and minority groups. He also noted the Rs 10 cr provision for the promotion of the Telugu language and full funding for various welfare schemes.

DECLARATION FORM IV (SEE RULE 8)	
1. Place of publication	D. No. 40-4-11, Flat No. 501, Sujatha Citadel, Jasti Venkata Ratnam Street, Behind D.V. Manor Hotel, Vijayawada, Dist. Krishna-520010, Andhra Pradesh
2. Periodicity of Publication	Daily
3. Printer's Name (Whether citizen of India)	B. Krishna Prasad
Address	Flat 502, 5th Floor, Diamond Block, Lumini, Rockdale, Somajiguda, Hyderabad-500062, Telangana
4. Publisher's Name (Whether citizen of India)	B. Krishna Prasad
Address	Flat 502, 5th Floor, Diamond Block, Lumini, Rockdale, Somajiguda, Hyderabad-500062, Telangana
5. Editor's Name (Whether citizen of India)	Shobori Ganguli
Address	Yes H-33A, Sainik Farms, Lane W 10C, New Delhi-110062
6. Name and address of individuals who own the newspaper and partners or shareholders holding more than 1% of the total capital	(1) IDBI Indian Red Cross Building Society 1, Red Cross Road New Delhi-110001 2. Opinion Expressa Communication & Entertainment Pvt. Ltd. 3. Sanchar Holding Pvt. Ltd. H-33A, Sainik Farms, Lane W 10C, New Delhi-110062 4. Zweig Securities Pvt. Ltd. 5. Arvind Kumar Parasaramka 6. Krishnam Parasaramka 7. Keshav Parasaramka 8. Avaritha Holdings Ltd. 9. JEM Fiscal Ltd. 10. Chandan Mitra & Joint Shareholder 11. Symphony Tradelines Pvt. Ltd. 12. Starting Infotech Ltd. 13. Samarth Securities Pvt. Ltd. 14. Udar S. Sinha 15. Ramesh Gandhi 16. Rainbow Productions Ltd
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Place: Vijayawada Dated: March 1st, 2025	B. KRISHNA PRASAD PUBLISHER THE PIONEER

Free power for govt schools

‘Talliki Vandanam’ scheme to be launched in 2025-26 academic year

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Education, IT and Electronics, Nara Lokesh, has said that the Andhra Pradesh government is taking significant steps toward establishing a model education system in the State. In the budget presented by Finance Minister Payyavula Keshav in the Legislative Assembly, several key decisions aimed at revitalising the public education sector were announced.

In a revolutionary move, the government has decided to provide free electricity to over 44,000 government schools across the State. This initiative not only reduces the financial burden on local bodies, but also creates a more conducive teaching environment for educators. It is expected to relieve pressure on teachers and students, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes.

As part of the Super-6 initiative, the government has also committed to implementing the "Talliki Vandanam"



scheme starting in the 2025-26 academic year. Under this programme, each student from Classes 1 to 12 will receive ₹15,000. Additionally, the Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan Vidya Mitra scheme will provide free uniforms, shoes, books and nutritious meals through Dokka Sitamma midday meal programme to 35.69 million students studying in government schools.

Last year, the Jagan Mohan Reddy government allocated ₹29,909 crore for school education, while this year's budget under the coalition government has increased that allocation to ₹31,805 crore. The government is focusing on

a results-oriented education system and is taking steps to incorporate advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence into the curriculum.

Moreover, to emphasise innovation and research in higher education, the government has decided to establish the Ratan Tata Innovation Hub in Amaravati. This initiative aims to prepare students for future challenges and provide Andhra Pradesh students with international opportunities. The government plans to equip students with international-standard education through multidisciplinary education, research, credit-based systems in polytechnics, advanced classrooms, laboratories, and digital libraries. As part of this effort, ₹2,506 crore has been allocated to higher education and an additional ₹1,228 crore for skill development and training sectors.

In line with the Prime Minister's Jan Vikas programme, four new industrial training institutes have been proposed specifically for BC (Backward Classes) students in the budget.

Amaravati works to begin after March 10

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Municipal Administration and Urban Development Minister Ponguru Narayana has criticised the previous government for pushing the state into severe financial turmoil. He stated that from April onwards, municipal funds would be utilised exclusively for the development of respective municipalities.

Addressing a press conference, Narayana clarified that tender prices would be determined based on the recommendations of the engineers' committee. He noted that the election code had delayed work on Amaravati and announced that construction would commence after March 10.

The minister blamed the previous government for diverting funds from the 15th Finance Commission, which, he said, had hampered the state's development. He thanked Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu for allocating substantial funds to the



Narayana asserted that the government was systematically fulfilling its electoral promises, citing the implementation of the NTR Bharosa pension scheme and Deepam Scheme-2. He revealed that Rs 27,518 crore had been allocated for NTR pension plans and Rs 2,600 crore for the Deepam scheme. Additionally, he stated that Rs 9,407 crore had been budgeted for 'Talliki Vandanam', providing Rs 15,000 for each eligible child

municipal sector and the CRDA (Capital Region Development Authority), with Rs 13,862 crore earmarked, including Rs 6,000 crore specifically for the CRDA.

Narayana asserted that the government was systematically fulfilling its electoral promises, citing the implementation of the NTR Bharosa pension scheme and Deepam Scheme-2. He revealed that Rs 27,518 crore had been allocated for

NTR pension plans and Rs 2,600 crore for the Deepam scheme. Additionally, he stated that Rs 9,407 crore had been budgeted for 'Talliki Vandanam', providing Rs 15,000 for each eligible child.

He further highlighted allocations for various welfare programmes, including Rs 20,280 crore for SC welfare, Rs 8,159 crore for ST welfare, Rs 47,456 crore for BC welfare, and Rs 5,434 crore for minority develop-

ment, underscoring the government's commitment to the welfare of the underprivileged.

Expressing anger over the previous administration's failure to utilise Rs 8,500 crore allocated under the Centre's AMRUT scheme due to a lack of matching funds, Narayana also criticised the media for spreading misinformation regarding the costs of IAS officers' bungalows and construction expenses.

SRM-AP hosts first Water Elixir Meet

Experts gather to explore innovative solutions to water-related challenges

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

SRM University-AP hosted the inaugural Water Elixir Meet (WE Meet 2025), a three-day international conference aimed at tackling one of the world's most critical issues: water sustainability and security. Organised by the Department of Environmental Science and Engineering, the conference gathered global experts to explore innovative solutions to pressing water-related challenges.

The event was inaugurated by Prof Rajasekhar Balasubramanian, a prominent figure in hydraulics and climate resilience from the National University of Singapore. In his opening address, he highlighted the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to water issues, stating, "The available water quantity is decreasing, and the water quality is declining. We must address these parameters holistically."

With over 150 research abstracts presented and a distinguished lineup of international speakers, WE Meet 2025 served as a platform for sharing pioneering insights on water resources, hydrogeology, and environmental sustainability. Notable keynote speakers included Prof Kwang Ho-Choo from Kyunpook National University in South Korea, Prof Shiao-Shing Chen from National Taipei University of Technology in Taiwan, and Prof Fulvia Chiampo from Politecnico di Torino in Italy.

Prof Manoj K Arora, Vice-Chancellor of SRM University-AP, emphasised the conference's dual purpose: advancing academic research and fostering global partnerships. He remarked, "WE Meet 2025 is timely in addressing critical issues like water resource management and conservation. At SRM University-AP, we have established the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, where innovative solutions to urgent water sustainability challenges are developed."

MP Sivanath: Budget is a reflection of Naidu's vision

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Local MP Keshineni Sivanath lauded the State budget presented by Finance Minister Piyyavula Keshav, stating that the Rs 3.22 lakh crore budget, under the leadership of Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, aligns with the aspirations of the people.

In a statement released on Friday, Sivanath said the budget is designed to meet public expectations and facilitate the rapid rebuilding of the state, which has suffered severe financial setbacks over the past five years. He noted that



funds have been allocated across all sectors for the fiscal year 2025-26, ensuring a balanced approach to development and welfare.

The MP described the budget as a testament to CM

Naidu's vision and administrative capabilities. He emphasised that it includes welfare initiatives like the Super Six scheme and reflects the objectives of the Vision Document 2047, aiming for comprehensive progress. By addressing the needs of both the poor and the middle class, the budget has received a positive response from the people, he added.

Sivanath also expressed gratitude to CM Chandrababu Naidu, Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan, and Finance Minister Piyyavula Keshav for their efforts in shaping the budget.

‘Friday Dry Day’ conducted

Malaria control staff create awareness among residents

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In an initiative to curb the increasing mosquito population in the city, the Vijayawada Municipal Corporation, under the directives of Commissioner HM Dhyanchandra, conducted its weekly "Friday Dry Day" in the 28th Division, Bhanu Nagar. This awareness drive was executed by malaria control staff to educate the community about

mosquito prevention.

During the event, the malaria control staff not only demonstrated the breeding grounds of mosquitoes found in stagnant water around residential areas, but also provided guidance on how to eliminate these water sources. Residents were informed about effective methods to dispose of small water accumulations in their surroundings every Friday, thereby reduc-

ing the risk of mosquito-related illnesses. In addition to community awareness, the team undertook practical measures as part of their mosquito control efforts. They cleared debris and stagnant water in the drainage at Jakkampudi Colony using a tractor, and the malaria control staff also sanitised the Budameru stream at Madhuramgar using boats to ensure uninterrupted water flow.

Siddhartha Mahila College students urged to enhance skills



PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

As part of its Golden Jubilee (1975-2025) celebrations, Siddhartha Academy of General & Technical Education organised a National Level Commerce and Management Fest titled Lakshya 2025 on Friday.

TV Ramana, FCA, of Brahmaya & Co, attended as the chief guest and encouraged students to enhance their knowledge to stay competitive and excel in their careers. He emphasised that such programmes help students develop their skills and urged them to turn challenges into opportunities to achieve success.

N. Lalitha Prasad, Joint Secretary of Siddhartha

Academy, who was the guest of honour, highlighted the importance of such fests in improving students' communication skills.

He noted that these events not only provide academic enrichment but also offer a much-needed break from routine studies.

He further stressed that students should work hard to understand financial systems and utilise their innate talents effectively.

College Principal Dr. S. Kalpana spoke about the role of AI and digital commerce, while College Special Officer Dr. R. Madhavi and Commerce & Management HoD Dr. V. Sandhya Lakshmi were also present at the event.

Historic budgetary allocation for BC welfare, says Minister

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for BC Welfare S Savitha has hailed the state budget presented by Finance Minister P Keshav, calling it a major boost for the welfare of Backward Classes (BCs). She highlighted that the budget earmarks Rs 47,456 crore for BC welfare—the highest allocation in the state's history.

Savitha pointed out that over the past two years, Rs 86,464 crore has been allocated for BCs under Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu's leadership, compared to Rs 1,36,379 crore during the previous five years under former CM YS Jagan Mohan Reddy. She accused Jagan of diverting funds meant for BC welfare.

The minister also announced the revival of the Aadharana Scheme with an allocation of Rs 1,000 crore to support traditional occupa-



tions. Additionally, Rs 4,890 crore has been set aside for the Kapu communities, while Rs 10,619 crore has been allocated for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS).

She further assured that free electricity would be provided to weavers, Nai Brahmans, and fishermen, as promised during the elections, with Rs 450 crore allocated for the initiative. Moreover, Rs 138.08 crore has been earmarked for the development of the handloom sector.

Regional Grand Lodge annual meet from today



PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Regional Grand Lodge of Southern India will hold its annual Investiture meeting in Vijayawada, for the first time in 20 years. Over 1,200 members of the Freemason fraternity from across India are expected to attend, according to Regional Grand Master T.N. Manoharan. The two-day event is scheduled for March 1 and 2 at the SS Convention Hall.

During a press conference on Friday, Manoharan explained that each region holds its annual meeting locally, and this year, Vijayawada has been selected to host the Regional Grand Lodge of Southern India. He mentioned that the Grand Lodge has

been established in four regions to oversee Masonic activities throughout the country.

Notable historical figures who were Freemasons in India include Swami Vivekananda, C. Rajagopalachari, Motilal Nehru, Dr Rajendra Prasad, Fakruddin Ali Ahmed, actor Ashok Kumar, and Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi.

Over the decades, Freemasonry in India has grown significantly, with the country currently having 470 lodges and 160 Royal Arch Chapters, along with Mark Lodges and Royal Ark Mariner Lodges. These lodges are spread across 172 cities, contributing to a total membership of approximately 25,000 Freemasons.

Visakhapatnam poised for transformation: VMRDA Commissioner

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

KS Viswanathan, Commissioner of the Visakhapatnam Metropolitan Region Development Authority (VMRDA), has emphasised that Visakhapatnam is poised for a significant transformation, fuelled by the innovative 'Growth Hub' concept developed in collaboration with NITI Aayog. Addressing the 'Swarnandhra Vision 2029: Visakhapatnam Region Leading Growth and Innovation' conference, organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) Visakhapatnam Chapter on Friday, he elaborated on the city's ambitious development strategy and infrastructure expansion initiatives.

"Visakhapatnam is strategi-

cally positioned to leverage its diverse strengths... for holistic development," Viswanathan stated, emphasising the city's crucial role in bridging existing developmental gaps. Key initiatives include a shift from generic drug production to AI-driven drug innovation, the establishment of a new steel complex, and the development of novel tourism opportunities. Addressing concerns over rising land costs, Viswanathan revealed that the government is exploring

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) and allocating Rs 200 crore for 15 priority road projects this year.

A revised master plan, incorporating feedback from



stakeholders and a decongestion strategy, is also underway in anticipation of the Bhogapuram Airport's full operation. Sustainability remains a core focus, with ini-

tatives to rejuvenate ancient water bodies, mitigate urban flooding, and address climate change-related urban planning challenges.

Dr. V. Murali Krishna,

Chairman of CII Andhra Pradesh, outlined a vision to establish Visakhapatnam as a global AI talent hub, highlighting initiatives such as the 500-acre Data City and the

University of Innovation. He stressed the importance of AI adoption across sectors, aiming to transform Andhrapreneurs into 'Alpreneurs.' Rajesh Grandhi,

The Vizag-Raipur and Raipur-Dhanbad economic corridors are expected to further enhance opportunities. Chevuru also highlighted the need to diversify education beyond STEM and adopt models like Transfer of Technology (ToT) and Infrastructure Investment Trusts (InvIT) for highway development.

The event concluded with a panel discussion on "Building Organisations Fit for the Future," where industry leaders shared insights on fostering innovation, ensuring business resilience, and driving leadership in an evolving economic landscape. The discussion underscored the importance of embracing technological advancements and adaptive strategies to maintain competitiveness.

Promote natural farming and help ryots with marketing facilities: DC

PNS ■ BHIMAVARAM

West Godavari District Collector Chadalavada Nagarani has stressed the need to promote natural farming and ensure proper marketing facilities for farmers. Speaking at a workshop on 'Natural Farming – Annual Action Plan 2025-26' on Friday, she highlighted the benefits of avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

The Collector noted that natural farming was practised on 13,000 acres in the district in 2024-25, and plans have been set to expand it to 50,000 acres this year. "The cost of pesticides will be significantly reduced, and the market value of naturally grown crops will be higher. Farmers will adopt natural farming on a larger scale only when they receive both encouragement and proper marketing support," she said. Plans are also being devised to convert hyacinth creepers into compost fertilizer for agricultural use.

Organic farm products,



including vegetables, curry leaves, rice, jaggery, and plant infusions, are sold at the Collectorate every Monday. The Collector urged people to take advantage of this initiative. She also instructed the District Agriculture Officer to set up organic produce sales points at two key intersections in Bhimavaram—Prakasam Road and Juvvalapalem Road.

She suggested that surplus organically grown vegetables could be supplied to welfare hostels and mid-day meal schemes to improve children's nutrition. The Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming (AP CNF) scheme is currently being implemented in 76 out of 383 gram panchayats in the district. Of the 409 Rythu Seva Kendras (RSKs) in

West Godavari, 97 are implementing this scheme. Additionally, 175 Village Organizations (VOs) in 76 gram panchayats are involved in the initiative. The Collector urged Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and village organizations to secure loans for producing PMDSN (Navadhanya) and kitchen garden seed kits and sell them at

affordable prices to farmers and SHG women. She also led a pledge with farmers and officials to promote natural farming.

District Agriculture Officer Z. Venkateswara Rao, PD DRDA MSS Venugopal, Natural Farming DPM Nookaraju, and District Horticulture Officer P. Devanand were among those present.

Anantapur district police recover 11,378 lost/stolen mobile phones

PNS ■ ANANTAPUR

The Anantapur district police have achieved a significant milestone by recovering 11,378 lost or stolen mobile phones, worth Rs 21.08 crore.

Superintendent of Police P. Jagadish informed the media on Friday that the district police had recently recovered 1,183 mobile phones, valued at Rs 2.95 crore. Some of these were handed over to their rightful owners at a programme held at the parade grounds.

The SP stated that special police teams had traced and retrieved lost or stolen mobile phones from various states, including Karnataka, Telangana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Rajasthan, Odisha, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Punjab, and Delhi.

He cautioned the public against purchasing second-hand mobile phones from unknown sources and advised them to register their lost or stolen devices on the CEIR



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portal. The SP commended CI Sk. Jakhir and his team for their efforts in recovering the missing phones.

People can report lost or

stolen mobile phones by filing complaints on the cybercrime website www.cybercrime.gov.in, the CEIR portal here, or by calling the helpline 1930.

Debt burden on DISCOMs easing with green energy push: Gottipati

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Energy Minister Gottipati Ravi Kumar has stated that the financial burden on DISCOMs is being significantly reduced through the promotion of green energy initiatives in the state. He virtually participated in a key meeting organised by the Union Ministry of Power in Mumbai to discuss strategies for strengthening DISCOMs across various states. The meeting was attended by Union Minister of State for Power Shripad Yesso Naik, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, and power ministers from four other states. Discussions focused on revitalising debt-ridden DISCOMs, minimising losses, and improv-

ing debt recovery mechanisms from the Centre and state governments. Minister Ravi Kumar asserted that DISCOMs in Andhra Pradesh are becoming financially stable under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu. He highlighted that the state would effectively leverage Central government schemes like PM Suryagarh and PM Kusum to ease the financial strain on DISCOMs.

"The coalition government, under the leadership of CM Chandrababu, is prioritising large-scale adoption of green energy. This has significantly reduced power purchase costs compared to the past. Our focus is on promoting renew-

able energy while ensuring quality electricity supply to farmers and consumers," he said. During the meeting, the Minister urged the Centre to increase the state's battery storage capacity from 1,000 MW to 2,000 MW, as previously requested. He also sought an enhancement in grants for the Green Energy Corridor and an increase in the number of sanctioned pump sets from one lakh to 4.5 lakh, citing the urgent need for additional support.

Ravi Kumar also pointed out the financial distress faced by DISCOMs under the previous government, stating that the debt burden increased from Rs 17,000 crore to Rs 67,000 crore during Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's tenure.

Budget only to mislead people: CPI

PNS ■ ELURU

The Communist Party of India (CPI) has criticised the Andhra Pradesh Budget for 2025-26, presented by Finance Minister Payyavula Keshav in the Assembly on Friday, stating that it misleads the public with its figures.

Speaking to the media here on Friday, CPI State Secretary K Ramakrishna expressed dissatisfaction, questioning how the government plans to bridge the revenue deficit. He demanded clarity on whether the government intends to sell public properties, take loans, or impose additional financial burdens on the people.

He pointed out that over 60 per cent of the state's population depends on agriculture, yet the budget allocation for the sector is inadequate. "The government has allocated Rs 11,314



crore to the irrigation sector, which is insufficient. At least 10 per cent of the total budget should be earmarked for irrigation," he said.

Ramakrishna criticised the allocation, calling it a grave injustice to the irrigation sector. He noted that several irrigation

projects initiated four decades ago remain neglected. He also blamed the Central government for reducing the height of the Polavaram project from 45.72 metres to 41.15 metres.

He further objected to Finance Minister Payyavula Keshav's praise for Prime

Minister Narendra Modi, stating that the Centre had done injustice to the state. He also accused the government of neglecting tenant farmers and failing to allocate funds for schemes promised by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) leaders.



Village panchayat secretary in ACB net, arrested

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

The Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) sleuths caught a village panchayat secretary red-handed while accepting a bribe of Rs 50,000.

According to ACB officials, T. Dinesh Reddy had undertaken contract works in the Chandragiri village panchayat limits, incurring an additional expenditure of Rs 6 lakh. He later claimed the amount from the village panchayat.

However, village panchayat secretary G. Maheshwaraiah allegedly demanded a bribe of Rs 50,000 to process the necessary documents for sanction. Following a complaint from Dinesh Reddy, the ACB officials laid a trap and caught Maheshwaraiah while accepting the bribe.

A case has been registered under Section 17(RCT-TPT)/2025, u/s PC (Amendment) Act 2018. The bribe amount was recovered from the accused, who was arrested and produced before the ACB court in Nellore.

Parvathipuram aims to cover 94,000 acres under natural farming

PNS ■ PARVATIPURAM

In a push for sustainable agriculture, Parvatipuram District Collector A. Shyam Prasad has directed primary sector officials to expand natural farming practices across the region. Speaking at a one-day District-Level Orientation and Convergence Meeting focusing on the Andhra Pradesh Community Natural Farming (APCNF) activities and the NITI Aayog initiative for the Kharif 2025 action plan, Prasad outlined ambitious targets for the district, citing its inherent suitability for natural farming.

Collector pushes for sustainable agriculture and targets 75,000 farmers

Held at the Collectorate meeting hall on Friday, the meeting brought together officials from Agriculture, Horticulture, Sericulture, the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), and other allied sectors. Prasad emphasised the district's long-standing tradition of traditional farming methods and set a target of covering 94,000 acres under natural farming this year, involving 75,000 farmers.

"Parvatipuram district is



highly conducive to natural farming and its products," Prasad stated, highlighting the region's existing agricultural heritage. He also stressed the importance of promoting finger

millets (ragi), a staple crop, and called for interventions to further expand natural farming practices. Acknowledging the success of existing natural farming practitioners, the Collector suggested utilising their experiences to motivate others. Currently, approximately 74,000 acres are under natural farming, involving 55,000 farmers.

Beyond agricultural output, Prasad also called for an in-depth analysis of the health impacts of natural farming, particularly its role in combating anaemia, malnutrition, and Vitamin A deficiency in the region.

YSRCP MLA announces padayatra over 'neglect' of Veligonda project

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

YSRCP MLA Tatiparthi Chandrasekhar has criticised Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu for neglecting the Veligonda Project in the 2025-26 state budget, alleging bias in allocating only Rs 359 crore to a project crucial for western Prakasam.

The project aims to provide drinking water to 25 lakh people and irrigation to 4.5 lakh acres. While two tunnels have



been completed, no funds have been released for minor works in the past nine months. The Rehabilitation and Resettlement (R&R) package, which requires Rs 1,000 crore,

has received only Rs 116 crore, leaving displaced families without adequate compensation.

Chandrasekhar called the Veligonda Project a lifeline for the region and questioned the government's indifference, suggesting that the YSRCP's strong local support could be a reason for the neglect. He also criticised TDP leaders from Prakasam, including MLAs and ministers, for failing to secure adequate funds.

Measures taken to mitigate drinking water scarcity: DC

PNS ■ RAJAHMUNDRY

East Godavari District Collector P. Prasanthi has stated that all necessary measures are being taken to address drinking water scarcity in various areas during the summer.

Chief Secretary M. Vijayanand held a video conference from the Secretariat, which was attended by the Collector, Joint Collector S. Chinna Ramudu, and other officials.

The Chief Secretary reviewed key issues, including pension distribution, the summer action plan for drinking water supply, public transport, distribution of essential commodities, real-time governance, public awareness initiatives, the establishment of 175 MSME parks—one for each Assembly constituency—the feeder-level solarisation scheme on government-allocated land, and MSME surveys.



Following the meeting, Collector Prasanthi directed officials to ensure an uninterrupted drinking water supply during the summer. She instructed the Rural Water Supply (RWS) and municipal departments to implement an action plan and submit a comprehensive report on the drinking water supply system over the next four months.

The Collector also asked officials to gather feedback from passengers in each RTC depot regarding public transport services and take steps to resolve complaints received through IVRS.

Additionally, she informed that a meeting was held with gas agencies regarding cash demands for the delivery of Deepam gas cylinders. She urged officials to address complaints related to the distribution of MDUs for essential goods and conduct an MSME survey in coordination with relevant agencies and associations.



IIM-Visakhapatnam launches India's first student-run startup fund

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

In a novel initiative to reshape startup funding and nurture student entrepreneurship, the Indian Institute of Management (IIM)-Visakhapatnam has launched India's first student-managed venture capital initiative, EPI Funds Private Limited. This pioneering programme immerses students in the venture capital ecosystem, offering them real-world investment experience.

India's aspiring entrepreneurs often face challenges in securing funding and connecting with investors. IIM-Visakhapatnam seeks to bridge this gap through its incubator, IIMV Field, which selects and trains students to manage a dedicated fund. "Through IIMV Field, we are supporting the launch of seed-stage startups by students with innovative ideas," said Hesh Ramanathan, Chief Executive of IIMV Field. "This programme introduces a unique approach, directly involving students in the investment process and equipping them with expertise in fundraising and sector-specific investment strategies."

The selection process for EPI Funds is highly competitive, with only eight students chosen from 150 applicants in the first

EPI Funds empowers students with hands-on investment experience



phase. With the upcoming academic session in June, 10 to 15 additional students will be inducted, further expanding the programme's scope. The initiative has received strong backing from the Centre, with a 50-million-rupee allocation to IIMV Field under the Startup India Seed Fund programme. This funding, set to be disbursed over three years, will provide vital seed capital to promising startups. Students involved in EPI Funds will undertake key responsibilities, including startup selection, investor identification, legal documentation, and investment management. Additionally, they will offer incubation support and conduct in-depth market analysis, ensuring

a well-rounded investment education. Beyond fostering entrepreneurial skills, the programme enhances students' career prospects, particularly during campus placements, by providing hands-on experience in investment strategies. IIM Visakhapatnam is also engaging with prominent investors, real estate firms, and business leaders to secure additional funding, with potential private investments of up to 50 million rupees anticipated.

By leveraging the expertise of IIM alumni—many of whom are already analysts in venture capital firms—this initiative aims to inspire and support students in launching their own startups while pursuing their studies.

Super Six promises remain unfulfilled, alleges YSRCP

Accuses coalition of misusing the public mandate

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The YSR Congress Party has slammed the coalition government's State budget as a "deceptive numbers game," filled with self-praise and criticism of the previous regime, lacking a solid development plan, and leaving the Super Six promises unfulfilled.

Botsa Satyanarayana, Opposition Leader in the AP Legislative Council, accused the coalition of misusing the public mandate, prioritising praise for CM Chandrababu Naidu and Lokesh over public needs.

He highlighted unfulfilled promises, including inadequate allocations for Talliki Vandanam (Rs 15,000 for school-going children), with only Rs 9,400 crore allocated for 81 lakh students against a required Rs 12,000 crore, and Annadata Sukhibhava, promised at Rs 20,000 for farmers, offering no clarity on the scheme. Market intervention funds dropped from Rs 3,000 crore to Rs 300 crore, with no support for chilli farmers. He pledged a thorough budget review to expose its flaws.

Kavitha warns those harassing BRS workers

PNS ■ NAGAR KURNOOL

BRS MLC Kavitha issued a strong warning against harassment of BRS activists stating that those responsible – be they politicians or officials – would not be spared.

Addressing a gathering in Nagar Kurnool, she emphasised that a 'Pink Book' was being maintained to record all such incidents. "We will note everything down. Our time will come, and then we will settle scores," she declared.

Kavitha, who was in Nagar Kurnool to attend a roundtable discussion organised by the Telangana Jagruthi with BC organisations, visited the Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple at Singot before addressing the media.

She accused Minister Jupally Krishna Rao of targeting BRS

workers, alleging that even minor criticisms were met with false cases. She cited the murder of BRS worker, Sridhar Reddy, and said that the police have derailed the investigation while Congress leaders are shielding the suspect.

"Jupally ordered an attack on our activist Parameshwar for just displaying our flex banners. Is this democracy? Why are Congress leaders afraid of us?" she asked. Kavitha criticised the Congress leadership for neglecting the relief operation at the SLBC tunnel disaster site, where several workers are trapped. She pointed out that while the situation demanded immediate action, ministers instead attended a Congress party meeting, showing their total disregard for workers' lives.

"Not even a single minister stayed at the disaster site. Their absence proves that Congress does not care about people's lives," she said.



ACROSS THE STATES



NIA arrests top leader of Naxal frontal organisation

A top leader of a frontal organisation linked to the banned CPI(Maoist) has been arrested by the National Investigation Agency, according to a statement issued on Friday. Raghu Midiyami, a leader of Moolwasi Bachao Manch (MBM), was taken into custody by the NIA on Thursday in connection with its probe into the Chhattisgarh terror funding case. MBM is also banned by the Chhattisgarh government. "The outfit has been engaged in collection, storage and disbursement of funds for CPI (Maoist) to further their anti-India agenda. NIA probes revealed that Raghu Midiyami was the nodal person for the distribution of the funds at the local level for staging and sustaining CPI(Maoist)-led protests," said the statement issued by the probe agency. Subsequent investigations revealed Midiyami to be a leader of MBM, it said. The Chhattisgarh Police in November 2023 arrested two accused in the case that was taken over by NIA in February last year.



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. To give a renewed push to the state's anti-drug campaign, Mann said the government will set up special courts that will ensure speedy trial in drug cases and conviction of those found guilty. The meeting was held a day after a five-member sub-committee of Cabinet ministers was formed to monitor the ongoing drive against drug menace in the state. The sub-committee -- headed by Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema and comprising state ministers Aman Arora, Balbir Singh, Laljit Singh Bhullar and Tarunpreet Singh Sond -- has been tasked with overseeing the measures taken by the police and the health department to tackle the menace of drugs and implement de-addiction programmes.



BSF nabs 15 Bangladeshis from Tripura border

The Border Security Force (BSF) held 15 Bangladeshis, including seven children, along with three Indian touts in two separate operations in Tripura, officials said on Friday. Acting on a tip-off, the BSF laid a trap in the border areas and managed to nab the Bangladeshis hailing from Moulvibazar, Sunamganj, Netrakona and Barisal districts of the neighbouring country. In an operation, three men, three women and seven children, all from Bangladesh, were arrested on Thursday from the international border at Kailashahar in Unakoti district, the officials said. BSF personnel also nabbed three Indian touts for facilitating the Bangladeshis to enter Indian territory, they said. The BSF also held two Bangladeshis in another raid on the same day when they were attempting to cross the border to return to their home country. In another operation, the BSF along with the Government Railway Police (GRP) raided the Agartala station and managed to apprehend two Indians, who were allegedly engaged in the illegal transportation of goods to the neighbouring country

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, police said on Friday. The police used drones and sniffer dogs to track down the accused, Dattaray Ramdas Gade, who was hiding in a paddy field in his native Shirur tehsil and apprehended him around midnight, an official said. A senior police officer said, "Gade was brought to Pune by 2 am. He was sent for a medical examination and formally arrested. The accused will be produced in court later in the day." Gade, a history-sheeter, fled to his native place in Shirur after allegedly sexually assaulting a 26-year-old woman inside a state transport bus at Swargate bus station in Pune in the early hours of Tuesday.

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 with a combined valuation exceeding USD 354 million.

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

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. "As of 2025, India has emerged as the world's third-largest start-up ecosystem, with a combined valuation exceeding USD 354 million. Tamil Nadu has always been a



land of innovation, entrepreneurship and excellence and has given India some of the brightest entrepreneurs, innovators, scientists and researchers who have made significant contributions to nation building," the minister said.

Minister of State for Education Sukanta Majumdar, who was here to attend the inauguration, said with the significant participation of representatives from higher education institutes and the industry, IINventiv is set to emerge

as an iconic brand in the innovation sector.

"I am sure that the industry leaders attending the event will find many of the technologies on display useful, leading to further technology transfers in the near future," he said.

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

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," said IIT Madras Director V Kamakoti.

"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 as well as technology that is now available for commercialisation in the industry," he added.

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).

A coffee table book on



‘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, saying it is an issue of national security and should be dealt with strictly.

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 Bangladeshi and Rohingya 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.

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 Salette 27 on Babasaheb 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.

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 Prabhubhad, 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

'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 Kotiswar Singh was informed by senior advocate Indra 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 Satheesan, 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 conclude 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 rise 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.

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

PTI

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

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-



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

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.

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

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

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

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

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)

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 renewable



DISHA 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)

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)

IN BRIEF



Forex reserve jumps to USD 640.479 billion

India's forex reserve jumped by USD 4.758 billion to USD 640.479 billion in the week ended February 21, the Reserve Bank said on Friday. In the previous reporting week, the overall reserves had dropped by USD 2.54 billion to USD 635.721 billion. The reserves have been on a declining trend for the past several weeks due to revaluation along with forex market interventions by RBI to help reduce volatility in the rupee. The forex kitty had increased to an all-time high of USD 704.885 billion in end-September 2024. For the week ended February 21, foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, increased by USD 4.251 billion to USD 543.843 billion, the latest data showed. Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves. Gold reserves increased by USD 426 million to USD 74.576 billion during the reporting week, the RBI said. The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) were up by USD 73 million to USD 17.971 billion, the central bank said.



FretBox aims to reach 100 universities

Hostel management solutions provider FretBox on Friday said it is targeting to triple operations to over 100 universities in 2025 and assist around 1.25 lakh students. FretBox provides AI-driven hostel management solutions to enhance convenience and security for students while streamlining administrative tasks for university staff. Since its inception in 2023, FretBox has seen rapid adoption across 13 states, with 35 universities using the platform. The user base has grown significantly, increasing from just 5,000 users in March 2024 to 60,000 in February 2025. The platform enables faster resolution of student complaints, allows students to share direct feedback with university administrators, and provides automated leave approvals, late entry tracking, and security alerts. "FretBox aims to expand to 100 plus universities by 2025, creating an ecosystem that enhances the university experience for students, wardens, and administrators," Fretbox CEO Ashish Gupta said.



India, Japan renew currency swap agreement

India and Japan have renewed the USD 75 billion bilateral currencies swap agreement, the Reserve Bank said in a statement on Friday. The Bilateral Swap Arrangement (BSA) is a two-way arrangement where both authorities can swap their local currencies in exchange for the US dollar. The Bank of Japan, acting as agent for the Minister of Finance of Japan, and the Reserve Bank of India signed the Second Amendment and Restatement Agreement of the BSA, the central bank said. The renewed BSA is effective Friday (February 28, 2025). The size of the BSA remains unchanged -- up to 75 billion US dollars, the RBI said. It further said that Japan and India believe that the BSA, which aims to strengthen and complement other financial safety nets, will further deepen financial cooperation between the two countries and contribute to regional and global financial stability.

‘India needs to grow at average 7.8 pc to become high-income economy’

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India will need to accelerate reforms to achieve an average annual growth rate of 7.8 per cent for becoming a high-income economy by 2047, a World Bank report said on Friday.

To achieve this goal India would require reforms in financial sector as well as in land and labour market, the World Bank said in its India Country Memorandum titled 'Becoming a High-Income Economy in a generation'.

Recognizing India's fast pace of growth averaging 6.3 per cent between 2000 and 2024, the report notes that India's past achievements provide the foundation for its future ambitions.

"However, reaching the ambitious target of becoming a high-income economy by 2047 will not be possible in a business-as-usual scenario... for India to become a high-income economy by 2047, its GNI (gross national income) per capita would have to increase by nearly 8 times over the current levels; growth would have to accelerate further and to remain high over the next two decades, a feat that few countries have achieved.

"To meet this target, given the less conducive external

environment, India would need to not only maintain ongoing initiatives but in fact expand and intensify reforms," the World Bank report said.

In recent years, India has introduced a host of structural reforms to transform the country into a global manufacturing hub, to boost infrastructure, improve human capital, and leverage digitization, while at the same time bolstering macroeconomic stability.



"To reach high income by 2047, India's growth rate needs to average 7.8 per cent, in real terms, over the coming decades... Only an 'accelerated reforms' package would put India on track to become high-income by 2047," the report said.

World Bank India country director Auguste Tano Kouame said lessons from countries like Chile, Korea and Poland show how they have successfully made the transition from middle to high-income countries by deepening their integration into the global economy.

Investors become poorer by Rs 9 lakh cr as markets see free fall

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Investors' wealth tumbled by Rs 9 lakh crore on Friday, in tandem with a sharp decline in the domestic equity market, where the benchmark Sensex plunged 1,414 points following a bearish trend in global equities.

Fresh tariff threats that ignited global trade war fears and relentless foreign fund outflows dented investor sentiment, analysts said.

The 30-share BSE benchmark gauge tumbled 1,414.33 points or 1.90 per cent to settle at 73,198.10. During the day, it cracked 1,471.16 points or 1.97 per cent to 73,141.27. Following the sharp decline in equities, the market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms eroded by Rs 9,08,798.67 crore to Rs 3,84,01,411.86 crore (USD 4.39 trillion).

Falling for the eighth straight day, the NSE Nifty slumped 420.35 points or 1.86 per cent to 22,124.70.

From its record peak of 85,978.25 hit on September 27 last year, the BSE benchmark index is down 12,780.15 points or 14.86 per cent. The Nifty



dropped 4,152.65 points or 15.80 per cent from its lifetime high of 26,277.35 hit on September 27, 2024.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms eroded by a whopping Rs 93.91 lakh crore from last year September's record high of Rs 4,77,93,022.68 crore.

"Domestic investors went into a panic mode and offloaded equities at will, as weak global market cues sparked a major sell-off causing benchmark indices to crash nearly 2 per cent. There is a lot of discomfort amongst the investors over Trump announcing imposition of import levies on several nations.

"Also concerns over slowing

economic growth, earnings coming in below expectations, and lingering foreign investors selling have been driving bearish trends at regular intervals," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

From the Sensex pack, Tech Mahindra slumped over 6 per cent followed by IndusInd Bank which tanked more than 5 per cent.

Mahindra & Mahindra, Bharti Airtel, Infosys, Tata Motors, Titan, Nestle, Tata Consultancy Services and Maruti were also among the major laggards.

HDFC Bank emerged as the only gainer from the pack. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled with deep cuts. European markets were trading mostly lower. US markets ended sharply lower on Thursday.

"US President Donald Trump's announcement of a 25 per cent tariff on imports from Canada and Mexico, effective March 4, along with additional proposed tariffs on China, intensified fears of escalating trade tensions.

India, EU set deadline to conclude mega FTA

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Friday agreed to conclude an ambitious India-EU free trade deal by this year amid fears that the Trump administration's threat of higher tariffs could adversely impact the global economy.

In their talks, both the leaders also decided to expand two-way defence cooperation, especially in the Indo-Pacific with Vonder Leyen announcing that the European Union (EU) was looking at firming up a security and defence pact with India in line with its partnerships with close allies Japan and South Korea.

The deadline for concluding the trade deal that would be the largest of its kind globally came over 17 years after the two sides first began negotiations for it. The negotiations for the pact was relaunched in June 2022 after they were suspended in 2013 due to a gap in ambition.

"Today, we have decided to create a bold and ambitious roadmap for the India-EU partnership for the period beyond 2025. It will be launched during the next India-EU summit," Modi said. India is set to host the summit later this year.



The negotiations for the deal were not moving forward ostensibly in view of the EU's persistent demands that New Delhi cut tariffs on cars, wine and agricultural products.

The EU Commission president, accompanied by the College of Commissioners or senior political leaders of the bloc's member nations began her two-day India visit on Thursday. It is the first such visit after the European parliamentary elections in June last.

In his media statement, Modi indicated resolve by the two sides also to move forward

on negotiations for an investment protection pact as well as on geographical indications as part of broader efforts to boost investments.

"We have prepared a blueprint for collaboration in the areas of trade, technology, investment, innovation, green growth, security, skilling and mobility," he said.

"We have directed our teams to conclude a mutually beneficial bilateral free trade agreement by the end of this year," he said.

Echoing Modi, Von der Leyen said: "We have tasked our teams to build on this

momentum and finalise our free trade agreement before the end of this year.

"We are expecting a lot of our trade negotiators, we told them they should surprise us," she said.

The prime minister described the growing India-EU cooperation on defence and security as a symbol of "mutual trust" and that both sides will take forward the engagement in areas of cyber security, maritime security and counter-terrorism.

"Both sides agree on the importance of peace, security, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region," he said, welcoming the EU's decision to join the India-backed 'Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative'.

"We will work together on triangular development projects for sustainable and inclusive development in the Indo-Pacific region and Africa," Modi said.

Von der Leyen argued that now is the time to step up India-EU security and defence cooperation on land, sea and in space.

She called the Indian Ocean as a "lifeline for global trade" and said ensuring its security is vital, not just for India but for the whole world.

The remarks came amid China's increasing forays into the region.

Growth in personal loans slows down to 14.2 pc: RBI data

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Personal loan growth slowed down to 14.2 per cent in the fortnight to January 24, 2025, mainly due to subdued credit offtake of vehicle loans and credit card outstanding, according to the Reserve Bank data.

The RBI on Friday released data on sectoral deployment of bank credit for January 2025 collected from 41 select commercial banks, accounting for about 95 per cent of the total non-food credit deployed.

On a year-on-year (y-o-y) basis, non-food bank credit as of the fortnight ended January 24, 2025, grew at 12.5 per cent (a three-month high) as compared to 16.2 per cent for the corresponding fortnight of the previous year (January 26, 2024), the RBI said.

"Credit to personal loans segment registered a growth of 14.2 per cent (y-o-y) as on the fortnight ended January 24, 2025, as compared with 18.2 per cent a year ago, largely due to decline in growth rate in

'other personal loans', 'vehicle loans' and 'credit card outstanding' segments," it said.

It further said that loan to agriculture and allied activities registered a growth of 12.2 per cent (y-o-y) as on the fortnight ended January 24, 2025 (20.0 per cent for the corresponding fortnight of the previous year).

Bank advances to industry recorded a growth of 8.2 per



cent (y-o-y) as on the fortnight ended January 24, 2025, compared with 7.5 per cent for the corresponding fortnight of the previous year.

Among major industries, outstanding credit to 'petroleum, coal products and nuclear fuels', 'basic metal and metal product', 'chemicals and chemical products' and 'all engineering' recorded an accelerated growth, RBI said.

EPFO retains 8.25 pc interest rate on deposits

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Retirement fund body EPFO on Friday decided to retain an interest rate of 8.25 per cent on employees' provident fund (EPF) deposits for 2024-25, as provided in the previous fiscal, benefitting over seven crore subscribers.

In February 2024, the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) had increased the interest rate on EPF marginally to 8.25 per cent for 2023-24, from 8.15 per cent in 2022-23.

A labour ministry statement said, "CBT (Central Board of Trustees) recom-

mended 8.25 per cent annual rate of interest to be credited on EPF accumulations in members' accounts for the financial year 2024-25."

The ministry informed that the interest rate would be officially notified by the government, following which EPFO would credit the rate of interest to the subscribers' accounts.

According to the statement, the decision on interest rate was taken at the 237th meeting of the CBT of the EPFO chaired by the Union Minister for Labour & Employment Mansukh Mandaviya in New Delhi on Friday. The ministry

stated that compared to many other fixed-income instruments, the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) offers relatively high and stable returns, ensuring steady growth of savings.

The interest earned on EPF deposits is tax-free (up to a specified limit), making it a highly attractive investment option for salaried individuals.

The CBT, under the chairmanship of Mandaviya, took a series of decisions including enhancement of insurance benefits under Employees' Deposit-Linked Insurance (EDLI) Scheme.

Following the actuarial val-

uation of the EDLI scheme, the Board approved key modifications in scheme to provide greater financial security and support to the family of members. The ministry stated that the CBT approved the introduction of a minimum benefit for death within one year of service. A minimum life insurance benefit of Rs 50,000 will be provided in cases where an EPF member dies without completing one year of continuous service, it informed.

This amendment is expected to result in higher benefits for more than 5,000 cases of deaths in service, every year, it stated.

Govt says achieved goal of setting up of 10,000 FPOs

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Friday said it has achieved the target of establishing 10,000 farmer producer organisations (FPOs) under a flagship central scheme.

The 10,000th FPO, registered in Khagaria district in Bihar, focuses on maize, banana and paddy and was launched recently by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The central scheme for "Formation and Promotion of 10,000 FPOs" was launched on February 29th 2020 with a budget outlay of Rs 6,865 crore till 2027-28. According to the agriculture ministry, the successful formation of 10,000 FPOs marks a "transformative milestone for the agriculture sector."

This achievement not only boosts agricultural productivity and income but also contributes to rural job creation and economic resilience. "As India moves forward, the continued support and expansion of FPOs will be

instrumental in shaping a self-reliant, efficient, and prosperous agricultural ecosystem," the ministry said in a statement.

Since the launch, Rs 254.4 crore in equity grants has been released to 4,761 FPOs and credit guarantee cover worth Rs 453 crore has been issued to 1,900 FPOs.

Approximately 30 lakh farmers in the country are connect-



ed to FPOs, with around 40 per cent of them being women. These FPOs are now conducting business worth thousands of crores in the agricultural sector, it said.

Under the scheme, new FPOs were given handholding support for five years and financial assistance of Rs 18 lakh each towards management cost for three years.

‘India a beacon for confidence in global trade’

PNS ■ MUMBAI

India is not just a key market but a beacon and an opportunity for confidence in global trade, shipping giant Maersk said on Friday amid its plans to invest around USD 5 billion in ports, terminals, and land-side infrastructure development.

The Danish firm, which for the first time named one of its vessels, Albert Maersk, at an Indian port, also said that it was ready to invest more in developing ports with low emissions and great efficiency. The name-giving ceremony

of the newest dual-fuel methanol container vessel took place at the APM Terminal at Jawaharlal Nehru port as a part of the vessel's maiden voyage to India.

Albert Maersk is the eleventh vessel in Maersk's fleet capable of operating on methanol.

"India is the world's fastest-growing major economy, with a thriving manufacturing sector, a booming e-commerce industry, and expanding exports. This economic momentum stands in contrast to the stagnation of many other parts of the world, mak-



ing India not just a key market, but a beacon and an opportunity for confidence in global trade," said Vincent Clerc, CEO, A.P. Moller - Maersk at the event here.

Union Ports, Shipping and Waterways Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, Raksha Khadse, Minister of state for Youth Affairs in the Maharashtra Government and

Keith Svendsen, Chief Executive Officer at APM Terminals were also present at the event.

Stating that India has a 1.40-billion population and an "unmatched" geographic strength, and depends on a strong supply chain network to keep every corner of the country connected, he wondered that how the company could not be fully committed to a country that has such immense potential to shape the future of global commerce.

Over the years, Maersk has made significant investments in India, in ports, terminals,

warehouses, offices, technology, and global capability centres, he said, adding recent expansion at this very important port terminal (Jawaharlal Nehru Port) here now allows us to accommodate larger vessels, while new developments at the company's APMT facility in Kerala will enhance capacity and efficiency, he said.

"Looking ahead, our commitment to India will only grow. We see an investment opportunity pipeline of around USD 5- billion in ports, terminals, and land-side infrastructure development," Clerc said.

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 nahi, hisab karne aaya hum" 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



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



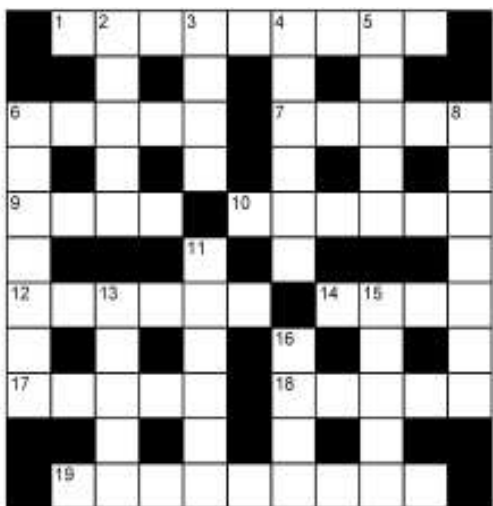
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



SUDOKU

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

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

5 With no clothes on

- Look after someone else's children
- Church spire
- An unpowered aeroplane
- These grow on fingers
- A warning sound
- A potter's oven



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 intends to provide 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
Pool 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
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 R 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

luxury of a dynamic centre? It was an inch-by-inch invasion that won Chithambaram a pawn in the middle game and the trade of queens was later forced by the Indian to harp on the better possibilities for his troupe.

Chithambaram was quite unstoppable as he kept increasing the pressure till Keymer walked in to a lost rook and pawns endgame — it took 45 moves in all.

Praggnanandhaa has shown his ability to play all openings with either colour and his choice of French defence turned out to be a good one guaranteeing an equal game.

The lone problem was to make something out of an equal position and the 16-year old Turk proved why he is hailed as one of the brightest among young Europeans, as he gave a little away.

The players signed the peace on move 46 when it was evident the rook endgame did not offer chances for either of them.

In the challengers' section which is being held simultaneously, Divya Deshmukh broke out of her shackles to score an impressive victory over Richard Stalmach of Czech Republic.

The adage about the King being a strong piece in the endgame came right for Divya, even though her position oscillated between better and winning.

In the end, Divya had two connected passed pawns in the middle of the board, well aided by her marching king. The game lasted 50 moves.

Results (round 2): Vincent Keymer (GER, 1) lost to Aravindh Chithambaram (IND, 1.5); Wei Yi (CHN, 0.5) drew with Anish Giri (Ned, 1); Nguyen Thai Dai Van (CZE, 1) drew with Sam Shankland (USA, 1.5); Gurel Ediz (TUR, 0.5) drew with R Praggnanandhaa (IND, 1); David Navara (CZE, 1) drew with Le Quang Leim (VIE, 1).



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

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 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 last 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 *Sarainodu*, *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 Vassishtha. 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

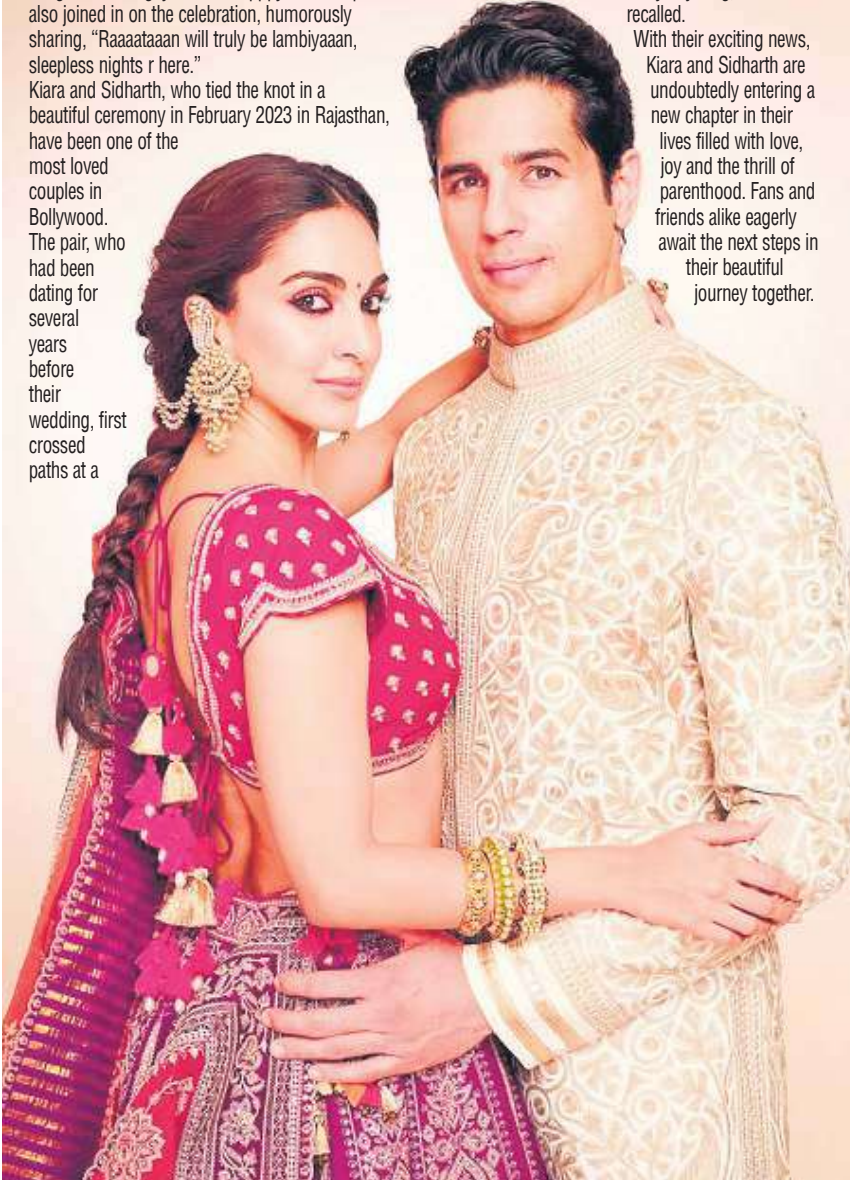
scheduling conflicts. Despite initial reluctance, she eventually agreed and came to Hyderabad, allotting a few hours for the re-shoots. The teaser, released during the Dasara festival last year, faced criticism due to substandard CGI. Even Chiranjeevi was reportedly dissatisfied with the teaser's visual 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.



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, "Omngggggg congratulations guys. so so happy." Ekta Kapoor also joined in on the celebration, humorously sharing, "Raaaataaan will truly be lambiyyaan, 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.



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), *Devara*

(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.

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.

