

Monday Mirchi

RAMAKRISHNA RAO'S UNIQUE DISTINCTION

Call it a lucky streak or whatever; Finance Secretary K Ramakrishna Rao has had the unique distinction of preparing nine Budgets for Telangana State. For newbies, he was appointed as the Finance Secretary on February 29, 2016. The whispers in the corridors of power are that the recent exercise to help the state government seek a Vote-on-Account could be the Finance Secretary's swan song. For, going by the writing on the wall, long-standing bureaucrats may be moved out once their important tasks are accomplished or immediately after the Lok Sabha elections. Anyway, ahead of the presentation of a full budget, the Congress government has had hands-on experience with the state's economy through the Vote-on-Account.

NO POSITIVE RESPONSE TO SPECIAL CHIEF SECRETARY'S REQUEST

When it comes to official matters; going strictly by the rule book counts regardless of the niceties in administration. No babu can afford to throw the baby out with the bathwater at the behest of political masters. Special Chief Secretary Arvind Kumar had sought from the Municipal Administration & Urban Development Department certain files related to the Formula E race so as to be in a position to reply to the Memo issued by the Chief Secretary. However, the MA&UD did not provide him the details. Yet, he replied, giving details based on his memory. Currently the portfolio of MAUD is held by Chief Minister Revanth Reddy. Bureaucratic circles doubt whether there would be a positive response to Arvind's request. It appears that, going forward; things would be made difficult for the senior bureaucrat. As for the issues surrounding Formula E race; when media persons had

approached Revanth, he said that officials were probing the issue. Responding to the same issues, former MU&UD minister K T Rama Rao said: "Let them probe officials".

METRO CHIEF GETS TO STAY

Regime change does not necessarily override family bonds. HMRL MD NVS Reddy is likely to continue in his position even in the Congress government. Although the new government is keen on sacking officers continuing in various positions post their superannuation, NVS Reddy is likely to be an exception. NVS was closely associated with former Union Minister Jaipal Reddy; both having played a pivotal role in realising Hyderabad Metro. Revanth Reddy's bonds with Jaipal Reddy run deep. For starters, Jaipal's niece is Revanth's wife.

BRS TURNS TABLES ON EX-DGP MAHENDER REDDY

When political fortunes change, those who used to hang on to the coattails of their political masters must also be prepared for the worst. Ex-DGP Mahender Reddy was no doubt among highly regarded persons in the erstwhile KCR govt during his term of service. Even just before his retirement, KCR had expressed his hope that Mahender could be roped in as an Advisor. During his multiple trips to Palair, KCR had made specific references to Mahender while envisioning the official's potential to develop the place. However, after Mahender Reddy was appointed as TSPSC chairman, the BRS demanded a judicial probe against him over amassing assets. These out-of-the-blue allegations have taken bureaucratic circles by surprise. Pink party and other circles are wondering which one is right: KCR's praise of Mahender's satta or the latest allegations.

-- Yours truly

Jagan to intensify...

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In preparation for the polls, CM Jagan has reportedly devised a comprehensive action plan, intending to immerse himself in public engagements from February 16 to April 14. Despite discontent among some sitting MLAs, MPs, and aspirants over ticket distribution, CM Jagan has been personally engaging with each aspirant to mitigate tensions and ensure party cohesion.

Confident of a prolonged tenure for the YSRCP, CM Jagan is strategically selecting candidates, aiming to secure a continued grip on power. Analysts suggest that the continuation of existing welfare schemes in the party's manifesto could bolster its electoral prospects, though proposed additions such as free bus travel for women may pose fiscal challenges.

Reflecting on past electoral strategies, political analyst Kommineni Srinivas noted similarities to previous elections, emphasising the importance of sustaining and adopting successful welfare schemes to maintain public support.

Sidiri dares Lokesh to prove Naidu's claims on job creation

PNS ■ SRIKAKULAM

The political climate intensified on Sunday as Ministers were involved in a heated exchange with opposition leaders. The war of words focused on claims of development, job creation, and leadership, further raising tensions ahead of the 2024 elections.

During a press conference in Palasa, Minister Sidiri Appalaraju directly challenged opposition leader Lokesh to substantiate claims made by former Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu regarding specific achievements, particularly job creation figures for teachers. Appalaraju questioned Lokesh's understanding of ongoing projects like Bhogapuram Airport and asserted Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy's superior commitment to generating government employment opportunities.

Appalaraju contrasted the current administration's record with the previous one, claiming the YSRCP government has facilitated significantly more



Revenue Minister Dharmana Prasada Rao inaugurated new facilities in Sri Puram and utilised the platform to urge opposition leaders to acknowledge the state's evident development.



job creation than the TDP regime. He dismissed attempts by the opposition to sow doubt among the public and urged them to present concrete plans that match the current government's efforts. Additionally, Appalaraju raised concerns about the TDP's track record in Uttarandhra, suggesting Lokesh's actions were driven by personal motives rather than genuine development aspirations.

Meanwhile, Revenue Minister Dharmana Prasada Rao inaugurated new facilities

in Sri Puram and utilised the platform to urge opposition leaders to acknowledge the state's evident development. He expressed scepticism towards critics who fail to recognise the improvements underway and questioned Chandrababu Naidu's dedication to Andhra Pradesh, highlighting his residence outside the state.

Rao defended the current government's achievements, citing advancements in education, infrastructure projects, and dispute resolution with

neighbouring states. He challenged the opposition to present evidence of their own accomplishments during their tenure and emphasized Chief Minister Jagan's dedication to various welfare programs, healthcare initiatives, and agricultural support measures. Rao reiterated the government's commitment to farmers' welfare and overall community development under the leadership of Chief Minister Jagan, further adding to the charged political atmosphere in Andhra Pradesh.

Free health camp organised



PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

A mega free health camp was organized by Lions Club of Vijayawada East, Chutchugunta in association with the Indian Medical Association, Saujanya Hospitals, Lines Club of Vijayawada East and Garimella Lakshmi Sameera East Lines Eye Hospital, Andhra Pradesh Private Hospitals and Nursing Homes Association on Sunday.

During the health camp Orthopedics, Gynecology, Paediatrics, hypertension and diabetes tests were conducted free to those who visited the camp. Appropriate medical tests

were conducted and medicines were distributed free of cost.

Dr D Srihari Rao, National Vice President, IMA was the chief guest of the camp and inaugurated the health camp in the presence of District Lions Governor Shankar Gupta, Dr G Hanumaiah and others.

On the occasion, Dr Srihari Rao heaped praise for organizing a health camp and congratulated all the doctors who are supporting the cause. He said that more such camps should be organized to provide free health camps to the needy and the poor. He said that such free medical camps will greatly benefit the health of com-

mon and poor people.

Lion Shankar Gupta informed that under their leadership, such free medical camps and service programmes are being conducted regularly somewhere in the district. Gupta said that as part of the service programmes by Lions, many service activities are being carried out such as food distribution programmes, distribution of essential items to the elderly, distribution of books to poor students, sewing materials useful for the livelihood of single women, distribution of artificial limbs to the disabled and distribution of tricycles are being carried, he added.

Major copper theft rocks Malkapuram HPCL facility

CISF constable under investigation

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

A significant security breach at the Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) facility in Malkapuram has resulted in the theft of copper bundles valued at approximately Rs 4 crore, marking the largest such incident in the company's history. Investigations have been launched to recover the stolen materials.

The missing copper, critical for temperature monitoring in oil refining units, was discovered during a routine CCTV review conducted by joint teams of CISF officials and HPCL personnel. Subsequent investigations revealed a collaboration between a CISF constable and a relative of a local company owner, who allegedly orchestrated the heist.

The perpetrator, armed with a forged pass, gained unauthorized access to the HPCL premises. On January 28, they facilitated the removal of the copper bundles in a van, raising red flags for security personnel. The discovery trig-



gered an immediate response from law enforcement agencies. A formal complaint filed with the Malkapuram Crime Police on the night of the incident initiated a comprehensive investigation. Multiple individuals suspected of involvement are currently under interrogation. However, a debate regarding the case's jurisdiction has emerged.

While some advocate for the police to handle the matter due to the fraudulent nature of the theft, others argue for the Crime Branch's involvement given the severity of the offense.

Both CISF and HPCL officials have emphasised the urgency of a thorough investigation to ensure the swift apprehension of the perpetrators and prevent similar security breaches in the future. They are working closely with law enforcement agencies to strengthen security measures at the facility. As of today, the law-and-order police are leading the investigation, meticulously examining all available evidence to unravel the intricacies of the crime. The community awaits further developments as the pursuit of justice unfolds.



69.3 million cats and dogs homeless in India: Study

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

About 69 per cent (69.3 million) of cats and dogs in India are homeless as per the largest ever international study on pet homelessness - 'State of Pet Homelessness Project' released by a global coalition of animal welfare experts in partnership with Mars Petcare India on Wednesday. The project sets out to understand the scale of pet homelessness in 20 markets, and factors that contribute to pets being on the streets or in shelters, shining a light on the needs of a sizable hidden population of pets. The report reveals that one in three pets are homeless in the world, estimating almost 362 million pets are still waiting to find a home. The global average of homeless pets across 20 markets is pegged at 35 per cent of the total dog and cat population.

The findings from India

reveal a stark picture with 69 per cent of all cats and dogs without a home. Most homeless pets (60.5 mn) in India are living on the streets, while others (8.8 mn) are in shelters waiting to find a home. In India, 2,565 experts were interviewed from urban (1,402) areas and rural (1,163) areas for the Project. The project also included interviews with pet professionals from nine metro and non-metro cities in the country. About 60.5 million (71 per cent) dogs live on the street or in shelters in India, accounting for approximately 39 per cent of the global homeless dog population. 8.8 million cats live on the street or in shelters, accounting for 4.25 per cent of the global homeless cat population. While adoption from shelters is still low, 53 per cent of respondents from urban and rural areas would recommend adopting from shelters in the future.

TDP representation in...

Continued from Page 1

Consequently, the Election Commission conducted elections in 2020 to fill the vacancies left by the defections, resulting in three seats for TDP and one for YSRCP from the state quota.

With the terms of Vemireddy Prabhakara Reddy (YSRCP), CM Ramesh (BJP), and Kanakamedala Ravindra Kumar (TDP) set to expire by April 2, the Election Commission is expected to

issue a notification for elections to fill these vacant seats by the end of February or the first week of March. Given the numerical supremacy of YSRCP in the Legislative Assembly, these three positions are all but assured to bolster the party's representation.

This will elevate YSRCP's tally in the Rajya Sabha to 11, securing all seats in the state quota and leaving TDP with no representation, effectively signalling its political eclipse.

Helpline for complaints on water contamination in....

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She reiterated the importance of the control room's effective functioning and the newly launched helpline, urging residents to be aware that water tankers are supplying fresh water to affected areas. The Minister urged individuals experiencing symptoms of vomiting and diarrhoea to contact the

helpline at 8341396104, available round-the-clock for medical assistance.

Additionally, Minister Rajini informed that water samples from suspected areas have been collected for testing. She clarified that the affected cases are dispersed across the city, with the situation under control since morning, and no new cases reported.

Urgent measures are being implemented in affected areas, with plans to enhance round-the-clock medical services at all UPHCs in the city. Minister Rajini announced another review meeting at the Collectorate on Monday with senior Medical and Health Department officials, reiterating the continuation of the state of emergency until the situation stabilizes.

Addressing opposition parties, the Minister cautioned against politicizing the situation and criticized their dissemination of misinformation regarding the diarrhoea outbreak. She emphasized the importance of awaiting confirmed test results before labelling cases as diarrhoea, citing the 2018 outbreak during the Telugu

Desam regime, which resulted in 24 deaths and affected 2400 individuals due to alleged negligence.

Present at the review meeting were Guntur Collector Venugopal Reddy, Mayor Kavati Manohar Naidu, Commissioner Keerthi Chekuri, DM&HO Vijayalakshmi, GGH Superintendent Dr. Y Kiran Kumar, and other officials.

Says YSRCP is...

Continued from Page 1

Lokesh said that TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu and Jana Sena Chief Pawan Kalyan introduced the Super-Six initiative to alleviate the public's hardships. He pledged to provide 20 lakh employment opportunities within five years once the TDP-Jana Sena coalition assumes power, along with a monthly unemployment allowance of Rs 3,000 until individuals secure employment.

Lokesh promised Rs 15,000 stipends for students attending school, annual payments of Rs 20,000 to farmers, and the distribution of three free cooking gas cylinders to every household. He reiterated commitments to provide free bus travel for women and other pledges made to various segments of society under the forthcoming TDP-Jana Sena administration.

Criticising CM Jagan's alleged misappropriation of public funds for personal projects, including the construction of a palace in Visakhapatnam, Lokesh asserted that the Chief Minister had neglected crucial public interests. He highlighted CM Jagan's failure to allocate land for the Visakha Railway Zone and revive sugar factories as promised.

"It is the TDP that fostered the development of North Andhra, making strides in the interlinking of the Vamsadhara and Nagavali rivers," Lokesh said. He cited initiatives such as establishing mineral water plants under NTR Sujala Sravanthi to address drinking water shortages and setting up dialysis centres for kidney patients in North Andhra.

Manohar promises jobs...

Continued from Page 1

"Except for plundering of sand and damaging roads, there is development during the YSRCP regime. Jagan Reddy kissed people before the 2019 elections and now he is kicking them," Manohar slammed.

"Except for pushing buttons, there is no major development in the state and no construction of roads. The investments will help to churn out jobs," Manohar asserted.

The JSP leader assured of generating jobs locally to prevent migration if the JSP was voted to power in the next elections. Nowadays unemployed youths are migrating to faraway places to earn just Rs 15,000 and that should be avoided by generating jobs here itself, he observed.

Meanwhile, JSP Chief Pawan Kalyan will resume his district visits on February 14. A release from the JSP office said that Pawan Kalyan would visit Bhimavaram on February 14 and participate in various programmes and addressing meetings. Pawan Kalyan would also participate in various meetings in Amalapuram, Kakinada and Rajahmundry till February 17 and address meetings.

Parties intensify efforts to form...

Continued from Page 1

The Pakistan Peoples Party of Bilawal Zardari Bhutto got 54 seats, and the Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) of Urdu-speaking people who migrated from India during the Partition, got 17 seats. Other smaller parties won the rest of the 12 seats.

To form a government, a party must win 133 seats out of 265 contested seats in the National Assembly.

Overall, 169 seats are needed to secure a simple majority out of its total 336 seats, which include the reserved slots for women and minorities which will be decided later.

The PML-N was leading the push to form the coalition government on the pattern of one it set up after Khan, 71, was removed as prime minister

through a no-confidence vote in April 2022. Party supreme Sharif, 74, tasked his younger brother former premier Shehbaz Sharif to hold talks on the issue.

The PML-N leaders on Sunday held a meeting with MQM-P leaders in Lahore.

After an hour-long meeting, they have reached a "principle agreement" to work together in the upcoming government, according to a statement released by Sharif's party.

"We will work together in the interest of the country and public," the statement said, adding that basic points had been agreed upon by the two parties.

MQM-P leader Haider Rizvi earlier told Geo News in an interview that his party would be more comfortable with the PML-N as the "two parties don't compete in Karachi" unlike the PPP or other parties.

PML-N President Shehbaz on Saturday met senior PPP leaders Asif Ali Zardari and his Bilawal on Friday night and discussed the future coalition.

Shehbaz told the party leaders that former president and PPP leader Asif Zardari has demanded the prime minister's slot for PPP Chairman Bilawal and major ministerial portfolios in exchange for support for the PML-N to form the government, sources said. Party sources added that so far making a coalition with Zardari was the first option the PML-N was exploring but didn't want to give away the slot of prime minister.

Sources claimed the meeting decided that in case the negotiations with the PPP failed, the PML-N would make a coalition government with MQM, JUI-F and other smaller parties, including independents.

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WATER CONTAMINATION

537 samples collected in Guntur city

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Addressing the pressing issue of alleged drinking water contamination in Guntur, the Guntur Municipal Corporation (GMC) has taken proactive steps by inaugurating a dedicated call centre reachable at 0863-2345103. This initiative is part of a comprehensive effort to ensure the delivery of safe drinking water to the residents. GMC Commissioner Keerthi Chekuri reassured the public, emphasising that stringent measures have been implemented to guarantee clean drinking water within the jurisdiction of the Guntur Municipal Corporation.

Following an unfortunate incident where one woman lost her life and 19 others fell ill due to suspected consumption of contaminated drinking water last Saturday in Guntur city, the GMC promptly mobilized resources to address public health concerns.

Commissioner Keerthi, accompanied by GMC officials, commenced a thorough inspection of various residential areas in Guntur city starting from 4 am on Sunday. Visits were conducted to locations such as Srinagar, Sarada Colony, Vasantarayapuram, IPD Colony, and Sangadigunta, among others. Collaborating with the Regional Lab and



The GMC remains vigilant as engineering and public health officials are instructed to remain on high alert for the next two days to address any emerging concerns promptly.

Engineering Officers of the Guntur Government Medical College, samples of drinking water were collected from households to assess chlorine levels. Initial findings indicated that the chlorine levels were within acceptable limits.

To ensure prompt response to water-related issues, a specialized call centre (0863-2345103) has been established at the GMC headquarters. Additionally, three Deputy Commissioners - Ch Srinivas, T Venkata Krishnaiah, and D Venkata Lakshmi - have been

designated as special officers to oversee areas suspected of water pollution, including Srinagar, Sarada Colony, and Sangadigunta.

A comprehensive inspection of the pipeline from Undavalli to Takkellapadu Head Water Works will be conducted by EE Konda Reddy, while responsibilities related to chlorination, filtration, and laboratory testing at Sanganjagaramudi water works have been assigned to DEE Hanif. Drinking water supply management from the

head water works falls under the purview of EE Srinivas and AE Babar, who will oversee Sarada Kalani, Srinagar, and Sangadigunta areas, ensuring inspection and immediate repair of any pipeline leaks.

In light of the situation, Commissioner Keerthi emphasized the importance of obtaining prior permission before taking leave. On Sunday morning, a specialized team comprising 53 amenity secretaries conducted chlorine sampling across various locations including BR Stadium, Sarada Colony, IPD Colony, Nalla Cheruvu, and other reservoirs. A total of 537 samples were collected and analyzed, confirming that chlorine levels were maintained at appropriate levels.

Furthermore, Commissioner Keerthi personally interacted with victims and their families undergoing treatment at the Sarada Colony Urban Health Centre, ensuring necessary support and guidance. Residents are advised to boil drinking water before consumption as an additional precautionary measure.

The GMC remains vigilant as engineering and public health officials are instructed to remain on high alert for the next two days to address any emerging concerns promptly.

Lorry driver electrocuted

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

A 35-year-old man working as a lorry driver died of electrocution after his lorry came in contact with high-tension electric wires near Velvadam village in Mylavaram mandal in NTR district on Saturday night.

According to police, the incident happened when the driver was unloading the gravel load from the lorry near Shiva temple in the village. On Saturday night, lorry driver Sairi Narsaiah (35) of Kothagudem was unloading the gravel brought in the lorry and in a bid to unload the gravel, the body of the tipper came in contact with the electric wires passing through the lane and was electrocuted. To save himself, he jumped off the lorry. Meanwhile, as electricity passed to the engine, the vehicle caught fire.

Narsaiah, who was unconscious, was shifted to a government hospital in an ambulance by locals. Doctors declared Narsaiah was brought dead. Firefighters rushed to the spot and doused the fire. Police reached the spot and are investigating.

Developmental projects neglected in Anakapalli: CAG

Key infrastructure initiatives like irrigation schemes, road constructions abandoned



PNS ■ ANAKAPALLI

A recent report by the Comptroller Auditor General (CAG) for the fiscal year 2022-23 has exposed critical development projects in Anakapalli lying incomplete and neglected. Despite allocated funds and promises of progress, key infrastructure initiatives like irrigation schemes and road constructions have been abandoned due to mismanagement and lack of funds.

Despite an allocation of Rs 2.02 crore for surplus works for Palagedda reservoir in Madugula mandal, only 43 percent of the intended work has been completed since its sanctioning in 2019. Delayed progress has led to cost overruns, further exacerbating the issue. Emergency repairs for the Vaddadi groin in Butchayyapeta mandal, sanctioned at Rs 83.21 lakh during the TEDPA regime, have been left unfinished. While 80 per

cent of the work remains incomplete, only a fraction of the allocated funds has been utilised.

Sanctions for repairs in S. Rayavaram mandal have seen minimal progress, with only 15 percent completion for Penugollu Groins and 30 percent for Moolapalem Groin. Flooding and erosion have hindered construction efforts, leaving farmers grappling with irrigation issues. Despite a substantial allocation of Rs 4.48 crore for ELBP Agrahara Uplift Scheme in Butchayyapeta mandal in 2016, 88 percent of the works have been completed, leaving farmers in limbo.

Despite an estimated value of Rs 84 crore for road widening from Narsipatnam to Sileru, none of the packages, divided and assigned in 2019, have been completed as per schedule. Delays in completion and minimal progress signal a dire situation for drivers nav-

igating these roads. A sum of Rs. 208.06 crore was sanctioned for road development in the joint Visakha district as part of the AP Roads and Bridges Reconstruction Project (APR RP). However, only 5 percent of the sanctioned works have been completed in four years. Contractors have expressed reluctance due to concerns over payment from the government.

The CAG report highlights systemic failures in project management and financial oversight, raising concerns about the efficient use of public funds. Citizens are demanding accountability and swift action from the Chief Minister's administration to address the issues and prioritize the development needs of Anakapalli. On the third day of the Gunadala Feast, Information and Public Relations Commissioner T Vijaya Kumar Reddy visited the shrine and offered prayers.

Visakhapatnam gearing up for CM's visit



PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

In a bid to ensure a flawless and successful visit by Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, Principal Secretary PS Pradyumna has called upon district officials to collaborate and pool their efforts. The directive was issued during a comprehensive review meeting held at the Dr. Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium on Sunday, led by District Collector Dr. A. Mallikarjuna.

The meeting focused on meticulous planning as officials toured various sections of the stadium to assess preparations ahead of the scheduled evening programme on February 13. Pradyumna highlighted the significance of leveraging modern technology for the event, marking the first of its scale in the State.

"We are making sure arrangements," affirmed

District Collector Dr. A. Mallikarjuna, expressing confidence in the coordinated efforts between district administration and police. Addressing concerns beyond the core event, Mallikarjuna assured provisions for spectators, including food, water, and enhanced security measures. To ensure seamless proceedings, the district administration, police, and SAP will each appoint an in-charge official. Mallikarjuna underscored the importance of maintaining order within the stadium premises, where a dedicated main stage awaits the Chief Minister's address.

Preparations extend beyond the event grounds, encompassing arrangements for electricity, parking, traffic control, medical facilities, and sanitation management. Following the stadium meeting, officials inspected the helipad set up at IT Hills, Madhurawada.

‘Prerana’ empowers tribal women with job opportunities

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Recognising the pressing issue of unemployment amongst tribal communities, the district police, led by SP Tuhin Sinha, have launched the ‘Prerana’ initiative. This programme aims to provide meaningful employment opportunities and self-sufficiency avenues for tribal women, directly addressing the economic challenges faced by these communities.

Spearheaded by ASP K Pratap Siva Kishore, recruitment drives for technical assistant positions at Tata Electronics were held across the district. The initiative witnessed an enthusiastic response with 450 tribal



women participating, demonstrating a strong desire for skilled employment. Notably, 400 candidates were successfully selected, marking a significant step towards economic empowerment within these communities. Building upon the success of a similar pro-

gramme in 2023, which placed 74 women at Tata Electronics, Prerana is poised for continued impact.

In collaboration with the Prashanthi Educational Society, four recruitment rallies are scheduled across the district, further expanding the reach of Prerana. These rallies, focusing on filling technical assistant positions at Tata Electronics, will be held in Chinthapalli, Paderu, Ramp achodavaram, and Yetapaka in the near future. Comprehensive outreach efforts, utilising posters, pamphlets, and banners, are underway to ensure maximum awareness among tribal women about these promising .

Sleep apnea meet sheds light on snoring disorders

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In a bid to address sleep apnea, a conference was convened in Vijayawada, featuring renowned Padma Shri Awardee, Dr Mohan Kameswaran, as the keynote speaker. The event, hosted by the Indian Association of Surgeons for Sleep Apnea (IASSA) at Sagar Super Specialty Hospital, drew attention to the global research efforts aimed at mitigating snoring disorders.

Dr. Kameswaran, in his keynote address, underscored the importance of understanding the respiratory origins of snoring and its potential to escalate into



significant health challenges, particularly impacting mental well-being. Highlighting obesity as a contributing

factor exacerbating snoring-related issues, Dr. Kameswaran emphasised the critical role of up-to-date medical practices in combating sleep disorders, including Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA).

Distinguished experts such as Dr. Deen Dayal from Hyderabad emphasized the necessity of clinical evaluation for individuals experiencing daytime drowsiness, a potential symptom of underlying sleep disorders. The conference provided a platform for fruitful discussions among medical professionals, encouraging collaboration to enhance snoring prevention strategies.

Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple goes digital

Digital payment services are in progress in 175 temples in State

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The revered Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Devasthanam is set to revolutionise the donation process by introducing a digital payment system. This initiative aims to facilitate seamless transactions for devotees and enhance the overall temple experience. As a pivotal step towards this modernisation, Executive Officer S Srinivasa Murthy engaged in discussions with bank officials, notably HDFC State head Uday Gudipati. The collaborative effort culminated in a detailed presentation, shedding light on the integration of digital payment services in various areas of the temple.

Aligning with the government's Endowments Department's broader vision, digital payment services are already in progress in 175 temples (6A) across the State. This move signifies a broader shift towards a cashless and convenient donation process for the devotees. Srinivasa Murthy revealed that the introduction of swiping machines will occur in two phases. In the



first phase, devotees can make digital donations at key locations such as Annadanam, the PRO office, and a designated area within the temple. The second phase will encompass additional areas to ensure comprehensive coverage.

To streamline the process, 22 special counters have been designated for devotees uphill. The initial focus will be on installing swiping machines at essential locations, including Annadanam and the PRO office. Devotees will have the option of making permanent, small donations at Annadanam, while another machine will be allocated for

Goshala contributions. Additionally, three counters will facilitate online donations.

HDFC has committed to providing the necessary swiping machines free of charge for the online counters. Looking ahead, the temple plans to establish an ATM counter on the premises, further enhancing the convenience for devotees and visitors. This move towards digital payments reflects the temple's commitment to embracing technology for the benefit of its devotees and signifies a significant leap forward in modernising traditional practices.

Guntur city is being beautified

PNS ■ GUNTURU

Minister for Health Vidadala Rajini said that Guntur city is being beautified and parks are being developed. The Minister inaugurated the Raghavaiah Park at Srinivasa Rao Pet here on Sunday. The park was beautified at a cost of Rs 37 lakh.

Speaking on the occasion, she said that all the parks in Guntur are being developed to the full extent, adding that in the next five years, they would work to make Guntur the most developed city in all sectors.

The Minister said that the credit for developing Gandhi



Park in Guntur city belongs to his government, stating that all the parks are being developed so that they can be used for exercise as well as sharing fun. City Mayor Kavati Manohar Naidu said that his administration is going on with the aim

of development and welfare.

Steps are being taken to have parks in all the key areas of Guntur, he added. Corporator Gedela Nagarangmani and other leaders and activists participated in the programme.

Spa raided, eight arrested

Three women rescued by police

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Patamata police raided a spa near Benz Circle in Vijayawada and nabbed eight persons for their involvement in a prostitution racket. They also seized Rs 11,000 and two mobile phones.

According to Patamata Inspector Mohan Reddy, they received credible information that a woman named Dichen Tamanka (30)

of Delhi had been running a Thai spa centre in Nara Chandrababu Naidu Colony near Benz Circle for one week. The police raided the spot and arrested the organiser and four punters hailing from Vijayawada on Sunday.

They rescued three women, who are hailing from Delhi, Nagaland and Vijayawada. The CI said that a case has been registered and investigation is underway.

‘Fish Andhra’ stalls face hiccups

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Nallapadu police of Guntur district found an unidentified woman's body on the outskirts of Etukuru. The police noticed severe blood injuries on her body and found a tattoo on her hand -- written ‘Durga’ in English.

According to the police, the body was found in residential plots beside the road with injuries on her head. They suspect that she was abducted, killed somewhere with a boulder and the body was abandoned in Nallapadu.



PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The Andhra Pradesh government's 'Fish Andhra' initiative, aiming to invigorate the local fishing industry through dedicated stalls, is facing significant roadblocks in the Visakhapatnam district. Despite initial excitement, the programme has encountered numerous issues, leaving stakeholders disillusioned and progressing far below expectations.

The Department of Fisheries envisioned a network of 150 stalls across the district, but only 20 currently operate. Selecting and securing suitable locations has proven problematic. Of the 400 applicants, only 150 were chosen, leaving many aspiring entrepreneurs in limbo despite promised financial incentives

and equipment discounts.

Identifying appropriate sites within Visakhapatnam has been arduous. The fish pier, a seemingly ideal option, presented ownership and zoning challenges. Attempts to secure space in commercial complexes also proved unsuccessful. Ultimately, only 23 stalls were established in rural areas, where they struggled with low footfall and concerns regarding odour and environmental impact from residents.

These roadblocks have resulted in Visakhapatnam's dismal ranking of 28th among districts participating in Fish Andhra, falling far short of the government's aspirations. Despite extensive publicity and financial support, the Visakhapatnam case exemplifies the complexities of revitalising local economies.

9th Quran Memorisation Competition held in city

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Mohammad Dawood, chairman of the United Forum for Quranic Studies, has said that the Holy Quran has solutions to all kinds of problems in daily life. He inaugurated the grand final programme of the ninth Quran Memorisation Competition under the auspices of the United Forum for Quranic Studies at the Autonagar Technicians Association Hall in Vijayawada on Sunday. Dawood said that Quran recitation competitions were held in four groups in which a dozen children got first, second and third places.

Dawood stated that in Group -A, first prize was won by Ayesha Ahmed, second prize by Mohammad Aahil and third prize by Afiya Tehreem. In Group- B, Attar Zulfiqar won the first prize, Mohammed Ameena bagged the second prize and Sk Sanober won the third prize.

In Group- C, first prize went to Md Aneeqah Iffath, second prize to S Aafiya Anjum and third prize to Sk Abdul Muhaimin. In Group-D, first prize was won by Md Anas Hussain, second prize by Ayman Mariyam and third prize by K Ibrahim.

Dawood said that moral values are decreasing in society with the development of technology and the result is that poisonous seeds are being spread from childhood. He said that the United Forum for Quranic Studies is trying to make them read the Quran from childhood as part of an effort to bring them to the right path. He said that for the past nine years, they have been working hard to develop moral values by organising competitions for children, for memorising verses of the Quran. Dawood added that State-level prizes were given to winning children.

Autonagar Technicians Association president Rajanala Venkata Ramana Rao.

BCs given priority in all sectors: Minister

PNS ■ ELURU

Minister for Civil Supplies Karumuri Venkata Nageswara Rao has reiterated that the Jagan Mohan Reddy government is giving priority to the backward communities in all sectors.

The Minister, along with former deputy Chief Minister and MLA Alla Kalikrishna Srinivas and MP Beeda Mastan Rao, inaugurated the newly constructed Yadav Welfare Community Hall here on Sunday.

Speaking on the occasion, the Minister said that the backward caste leaders were accommodated in important positions in the YSRCP regime.

"The Jagan Reddy government is committed to the welfare of not only BCs but all sections of the underprivileged. The Government while implementing welfare schemes for the poor, is carrying out development works. The government is giving equal importance to the implementation of welfare schemes and carrying out development," the Minister claimed.



Because of the welfare schemes implemented by the Jagan Reddy headed the government, the poverty had come down to 6% from 12%, the Minister asserted.

The education and medical sectors were given top priority in the YSRCP regime, he said, adding that under the

Nadu-Nedu scheme, the government schools are being modernised.

MP Beeda Mastan Rao said that the government had sanctioned Rs 15 lakh for the construction of the first floor of the Yadav community hall, adding that Rs 25 lakh would be allocated from the MPLAD funds for the construction of the BC integrated community hall here.

MLAs Alla Kalikrishna Srinivas and K Abbayya Chowdary also spoke. Agriculture Market Committee chairman N Chiranjeevi Yadav donated Rs 1 lakh for the construction of the community hall. Mayor Shaik Noorjahn, ZP chairperson Ghanta Padmasri, EUDA B Srinivas, deputy mayors and a host of other leaders were present.



ITBP cop falls to death from train

PNS ■ KADAPA

An ITBP head constable was killed when he accidentally fell off a running train at Nandalur railway station in Annamayya district on Sunday. Police said that the deceased Shekat Vijen Kovat (41) was working as head constable at the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. He belonged to Kerala state.

He tried to alight from the train when it was moving. He accidentally fell and crashed under the wheels. He died instantaneously. The accident took place when the deceased constable was going to Kalikiri camp located.

KP Paul to contest from Visakhapatnam

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Evangelist-turned-politician and Praja Santhi Party chief KA Paul has announced his candidacy for the Visakhapatnam constituency in the upcoming elections.

Speaking at a Meet-the-Press programme organised by the local Press Club on Sunday, Paul urged the public to support his candidacy.

Accusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, MP GVL Narasimha Rao, and BJP state president Daggubati Purandeswari of orchestrating a campaign against him, Paul alleged that a staggering sum of Rs 1,200 crore was allocated to thwart his electoral ambitions. He further claimed that Botsa Satyanarayana was also planning to undermine his candidacy in Visakhapatnam with a budget of Rs 1,000 crore.



In a bold challenge, the Praja Santhi Party leader invited both Chandrababu Naidu and Narendra Modi to contest against him in Visakhapatnam. Paul revealed that he had approached former CBI Joint Director JD Lakshminarayana to join forces, but alleged that Lakshminarayana demanded an exorbitant sum of Rs 1,000 crore to collaborate.

Expressing his views on recognising leaders with prestigious awards, Paul called for conferring the Bharat Ratna upon TDP founder and former chief minister NTR. He questioned the omission of GMC Balayogi from being conferred with the Bharat Ratna award. Interestingly, Paul asserted that he had been offered the Bharat Ratna award but declined to accept it.

Balineni decries 'misleading info' on distribution of house sites

PNS ■ ONGOLE

MLA and former Minister Balineni Srinivasa Reddy vented his anger against the publishing of misleading news items in a section of media on the process of distribution of house sites to the poor.

Addressing a press conference here on Sunday, Balineni Srinivasa Rao announced that house sites would be distributed by Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy in Ongole on or before February 25.

Balineni said that he was determined to distribute house sites to the poor in the constituency. If irregularities were found in the process of distribution of house sites to the poor, he could be questioned, he stated.

"Misleading and false news was published in two newspapers. We will lay siege to the newspaper offices. Cases can be registered against me but I can not be prevented from distributing house sites in my constituency. I will not tolerate if misleading news is spread on the process for the distribution of house sites," Balineni slammed.



Balineni said that he was determined to distribute house sites to the poor in the constituency

He claimed that he was even ready to sacrifice his political life for the distribution of house sites to the poor.

Collector M Venugopal Reddy, Superintendent of

Security steps for CM's programme inspected



PNS ■ GUNTURU

The security arrangements, being made for Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy's programme, were inspected by the district Collector and Superintendent of police on Sunday.

Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy will participate in the 'Volunteer Ku Vandanam' programme to be organized at Phirangipuram near here on February 15.

Collector M Venugopal Reddy, Superintendent of

police Tushar Dudi, MLC and Chief Minister's programme coordinator Talasila Raghuram, and Joint Collector G Rajakumari visited the venue.

They saw the erection of barricades, the construction of a helipad and parking place, and a gallery. They also inspected the construction of the dais. They gave directions to the officials on arranging park slots in the area. Guntur RDO P Sekhar and R&B engineers were among those who accompanied the Collector.

Govt Arts College NCC cadets make impact at national level

PNS ■ RAJAHMUNDRY

In a dazzling display of talent, the NCC female cadets from Government Arts College, Rajahmundry, have etched their names on the national and state canvases.

Principal Dr. Ramachandra R K said that K Sowmya, a final year B.Sc. student and senior under officer, not only participated in the Republic Day camp in New Delhi but also secured a coveted spot in the Guard of Honour Team.

Sowmya graced the PM's Rally and clinched the DG NCC's Medallion, a testament to her exceptional dedication. Adding to the accolades, Ch Neerisha left her mark at the Andhra Pradesh State-level Republic Day celebrations in Vijayawada.

Amidst cheers and applause, the college's NCC officers, Lt Dr Esub Basha Shaik and Dr K Anusha, staff, and Principal came



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together to extend warm congratulations to these remarkable cadets, acknowledging their extraordinary

achievements that have elevated the college's reputation on both the national and state fronts.

Centre for Cardiac Sciences inaugurated

PNS ■ BHIMAVARAM

Former MLA Dr Satyanarayana Murthy inaugurated the Centre for Cardiac Sciences here on Sunday.

Satyanarayana Murthy appreciated the management of Ramesh Hospitals for establishing Cardiac Sciences in Bhimavaram.

Ramesh Hospital Managing Director Dr.Potineni Ramesh Babu said that providing emergency treatment is imperative for cardiac patients. Keeping in view the provision of emergency services to cardiac patients, the Centre for Cardiac Sciences was established here.

Two cardiologists, with a medical team of clinical cardiologists, have been made available to provide angiogram, stent angioplasty, pacemaker, heart attack and emergency treatment for all heart problems in the



Satyanarayana Murthy appreciated the management of Ramesh Hospitals for establishing Cardiac Sciences in Bhimavaram

Cardiac Centre here, Dr. Ramesh said.

Dr.Krishnam Raju and Executive Chairman Dr.Gopalraju also spoke. Cardiologists Dr. Mahesh, Dr. G.V. Satyanarayana Raju, and Ramesh were present at the inaugural function. Hospitals Medical Director Dr. Pavuluri Srinivasa Rao, Deputy Managing Director Dr. Rayapati Mamata, Business Development Head Dr. Karthik Chaudhary, city dignitaries and doctors were present.

Gunadala Mary Matha fete ends on a grand note

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

A multitude of devotees converged at the Gunadala Mary Matha shrine on Sunday, marking the culmination of the three-day festival celebration. With Sunday coinciding with the final day of the festival, the influx of devotees surged significantly. The roads leading to the temple were adorned with a carpet of devotees, prompting authorities to impose traffic restrictions on the main Eluru road to ease the flow of pilgrims.

The esteemed presence of Leopoldo Girelli, the Ambassador of India-Nepal to the Pope Vatican, graced the occasion as the chief guest on the third day. Girelli expressed reverence for Gunadala Mary Matha, acknowledging the sanctity of the shrine and affirming the blessings awaiting all who visit. Reflecting on his participation in the centenary celebrations, he expressed



delight at witnessing the overwhelming turnout of devotees offering prayers.

A total of 180 priests participated in the final day's rituals, conducting the holy mass amidst a significant presence of foreign devotees.

Meanwhile, in anticipation of the sizable influx of devotees, the city police implemented elaborate traffic management measures, including the imposition of traffic restrictions to facilitate seamless access to the temple. Despite

these efforts, traffic along routes leading to Gunadala moved sluggishly. Specific areas such as the BRTS road food junction, Padavalarevu centre, BSNL centre, and other routes to the temple experienced restrictions.

However, reports emerged of certain auto-rickshaw operators taking advantage of the situation by overcharging passengers heading to the Gunadala temple. To address this, authorities permitted autos and RTC.

'Jabardast' plundering in Nagari: Sharmila

PNS ■ TIRUPATHI

Launching a scathing attack against Minister for Tourism RK Roja in her constituency in Nagari, APCC President YS Sharmila alleged that 'Jabardast' plundering of resources is taking place in her constituency.

Addressing a public meeting in Nagari on Sunday, she came down heavily on Roja alleging that not only Roja but also her husband and brothers have become 'de facto ministers' in the constituency.

"Altogether, they are plundering sand, soil and gravel. They are usurping government lands. The realtors should pay money to Roja to get layouts approved. Corruption is rampant here," Sharmila lambasted.

Sharmila recalled that RK Roja made absurd comments against YS Rajasekhara Reddy when he was alive. The Congress party has great respect for YSR and that is why she joined the Congress, Sharmila claimed.



Rajgopal Reddy calls upon people to boycott BRS public meeting

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Congress MLA from Munugode Komatireddy Rajgopal Reddy on gave a call to the people to boycott the BRS party's public meeting to be held on February 13 in Nalgonda. He appealed to the people cutting across political affiliations to spur the BRS party's call to people to attend the public meeting.

Rajgopal Reddy alleged that the former Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao signed an agreement to hand over the projects in Krishna basin to the Centre and is now intentional-



ly making allegations against the Congress government. He wondered there was greater amount of betrayal than this. While speaking to the media

Rajagopal Reddy alleged that the former Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao signed an agreement to hand over the projects in Krishna basin to the Centre and is now intentionally making allegations against the Congress government

at Chanduru on Sunday, Rajgopal Reddy alleged that KCR, who turned south Telangana as desert, is now organising a public meeting to provoke the sentiment among the people. He questioned KCR, who failed to complete the Nalgonda projects even

though he was in power for 10 years, to tell whether he was ashamed of organising a public meeting.

The MLA slammed KCR saying that the people did not get justice in getting R&R Package to the land oustees. He said that there is no clarity till now on the water to be brought to Dindi Lift Irrigation Project from Palamuru-Rangareddy project from which way.

Rajgopal Reddy recalled that the former Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao assured that he would complete the SLBC project by sitting in a chair at the project.

Rockathon sets forth call to save rocks and adventure

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Hyderabad Rockathon 2024 organised by the Society to Save Rocks and the Great Hyderabad Adventure Club (GHAC) took place at the Forestrek Park, Narsingi on Sunday. It was supported by the Telangana State Forest Department Corporation (TSFDC) and Telangana Tourism.

The Rappelling event was flagged off by Dr G Chandrasekhar Reddy, Secretary to Chief Minister, and Vice-Chairman & Managing Director TSFDC, and the rockwalk by Farida Tampal, State Director, WEF - India, flagged off the rockwalk. Close to 250



participants enjoyed the adventure-filled day in the picturesque site which has boulders, trees, a lake and interesting walking paths.

This 10th edition of Rockathon had fitness challenges for those who


opted for Rappelling, Ziplining, Rock Walks, Rock Shotput and Slack lining. The creative events requiring more attention and focus were the Rock balancing, Art and the Rock Quiz. The Snake Awareness drew the crowds and had the audience in awe while educating them about the reptiles in the outdoors.

The Society to Save Rocks has been creating awareness about the unique features of the Deccan Rocks for 28 years. It is the only NGO in India working for the conservation of the Deccan rocks which have been dated by geologists to be amongst the second oldest in the world, approximately 2,500 million years old.

INDIA CORNER


5 killed, 15 injured in two road accidents in Odisha

At least five people were killed and 15 others injured in two separate road accidents in Odisha on Sunday. In the first incident, four people were killed and nine injured when a pick-up van carrying them collided head-on with a truck on NH-49 near Lakhanpur in Jharsuguda district around 10.30 am, a police officer said. The coal-laden truck overturned after hitting the pick-up van. The injured passengers were taken to Lakhanpur Community Health Centre. Later, the seriously injured were shifted to the district headquarters hospital, Jharsuguda, the officer said. Police sent the bodies for autopsy and initiated an investigation. The second accident took place near Aradi Chhak in Bhadrak district in the early hours of Sunday, another police officer said. One person died while six others were critically injured, he said. The accident happened when a vehicle carrying passengers from Puri to Balasore collided head-on with a truck.



Landslide early warning system likely to set up in Odisha

The Odisha government is planning to set up a user-friendly landslide early warning system (EWS) in Gajapati district as a proactive measure, officials said on Sunday. A team of seven experts from Coimbatore-based Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham's World Centre of Excellence on Landslide recently visited landslide-prone Gajapati district to conduct a comprehensive study on the causes of landslides and potential mitigation measures, including setting up a user-friendly landslide EWS. During their two-day field visit, the expert team surveyed the most vulnerable areas for landslides, including Baraghara and Madha in Rayagada block of the district. The district administration has identified 139 sites highly susceptible to landslides across six blocks in the southern Odisha district. The experts conducted assessments on various factors such as topography, landscape pattern, soil textures, vegetation, slope percentage, rainfall trends, rock types, agriculture patterns, and the location of water bodies.



17-year-old stabbed in Delhi, 5 juveniles apprehended

Five juveniles have been apprehended in connection with the stabbing of a 17-year-old boy in central Delhi's Patel Nagar area, an official said on Sunday. The incident took place when the boy was returning home after tuition on Friday night. The call about it was received at the police control room at 9:45 pm, police said. The official said that a team was dispatched to the spot and the boy was rushed to a hospital for treatment for stab injuries. "He told police that when he was returning home, seven to eight boys thrashed him and stabbed him. Our teams apprehended five minors later," the official said. The official said that during questioning, the accused told police that they had an argument with the boy a few days ago. "We have recovered the knife used for the crime. An FIR under sections 307 (attempt to murder) and 34 (common intention) of the Indian Penal Code has been registered. Further investigation into the matter is underway," said the officer.



BJP will get 370-plus seats in LS polls: PM

PNS ■ JHABUA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said he is confident the BJP will cross the 370 seats-mark in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, and even the opposition leaders in Parliament are saying the ruling coalition will get more than 400 seats. Addressing a public meeting of tribal community members in Madhya Pradesh's Jhabua district, PM Modi ((donning a tribal waistcoat)) said the Congress was anti-tribal and thought of villages, farmers and the poor only during elections. He also said he had got overwhelming love from the people as he visited temples associated with Lord Ram in the south of the country. Aware of their imminent

‘Slams Cong for ’loot and divide’



He also said he had got overwhelming love from the people as he visited temples associated with Lord Ram in the south of the country

defeat, the Congress and its allies are resorting to last-ditch tactics, the PM said, adding that 'loot and divide is the motto of the Congress. The Congress and other opposition leaders abuse him because he is working for the

betterment of tribals and the poor, Modi said. "The Congress when it is in power indulges in loot, while out of power engineers divisions (in society) based on language, region and caste. Loot aur phoot Congress ke oxygen

chain (Corruption and politics of division are Congress' oxygen), he said. But the people know the truth about the Congress and will never let it succeed in its motives, the PM said. The Congress has drowned in its own sins and the more it will make efforts to come up the further it will slide down, the PM asserted. It got decimated in the 2023 (Assembly polls) and will be wiped out in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, he said. "The people showed the mirror to the Congress in the Assembly polls. The mood of the nation is similar in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls," Modi asserted. PM Modi asked voters to ensure polling of an additional 370 votes in each booth.

PM to distribute over 1 lakh appointment letters to recruits in govt

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will distribute more than 1 lakh appointment letters to newly inducted recruits in central government departments on Monday via video conferencing. On this occasion, the prime minister will also lay the foundation stone of Phase-I of the Integrated Complex "Karmayogi Bhavan" here. This complex will promote collaboration and synergy among various pillars of Mission Karmayogi. Prime Minister Modi will distribute more than 1 lakh appointment letters to newly inducted recruits on February 12 at 10:30 am via video conferencing, a statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said. The Rozgar Mela will be held at 47 locations across the country and recruitments .

Govt, Oppn likely to lock horns over Centre-State row

Karnataka Budget session begins today

PNS ■ BENGALURU

The Karnataka legislature's Budget Session, which will begin on Monday, is expected to be fraught, with the Centre's alleged discrimination against the state and the accusations of corruption and poor governance faced by the Siddaramaiah-led government likely to take centre-stage. The Congress government is expected to showcase its agenda ahead of the Lok Sabha polls later this year through the Governor's address and presentation of the State Budget, while the opposition BJP and JD(S), which are set to fight the polls jointly, look to show the government in poor light by highlighting the allegations against the administration. The 10-day session, which will commence with Governor Thawarchand Gehlot's address to the joint session of both



houses of the state legislature, will see Chief Minister Siddaramaiah presenting his record 15th Budget on February 16. The session, which will conclude on February 23, is also expected to be stormy as the united opposition of the BJP and JD(S) are likely to corner the government on a host of issues, which the ruling Congress has vowed to strongly counter them. The BJP and JD(S) are expected to attack the Siddaramaiah administration,

alleging poor management of the drought situation, lack of development, deteriorating law and order situation, mismanagement of state's finances, and corruption, among other issues. Karnataka State Contractors' Association President D Kempanna's recent allegation that the former BJP administration's practice of taking 40 per cent 'commission' on government contracts continues even under the Congress dispensation because of corrupt officials.

A few switching sides won't impact INDIA bloc

Mamata Banerjee still part of alliance: Pilot



He also said the BJP talking about 370 seats for itself and 400-plus for the NDA was more of "bravado and rhetoric" than a practical assessment on the ground

PNS ■ NEW DELHI(RAIGARH)

Amid some INDIA bloc constituents switching sides to the NDA, Congress leader Sachin Pilot on Sunday said the opposition alliance is 'strong' and the BJP is attempting a "frantic rejig" of the political landscape as it is worried over the collective strength of the coalition. In an interview with PTI, Pilot also said West Bengal Chief Minister and TMC chief Mamata Banerjee is very much part of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), and expressed confidence that a way forward will be found in seat-sharing talks with her party. He also said the BJP talking about 370 seats for itself and

400-plus for the NDA was more of "bravado and rhetoric" than a practical assessment on the ground. As the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra travels through Chhattisgarh, the AICC general secretary in-charge of the state dismissed suggestions that the yatra was adversely affecting the poll preparations of the party and asserted that talks for seat-sharing with allies were going on simultaneously. "As we speak, we are finalising seat-sharing agreements with most of our allies in different states. So it is not a question of either/or. The yatra is going on but other things are being handled by the AICC leadership and the state in-charges.

Lunch with PM: Cong backs UDF leader Premachandran

PNS ■ KANNURU(KERALA)

A day after he was criticised by the ruling CPI(M) for having lunch with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, UDF MP N K Premachandran on Sunday received support from the Congress leadership in Kerala who made it clear that there was nothing wrong in accepting the invitation extended by the prime minister. Whole-heartedly backing the Kollam MP, KPCC chief K Sudhakaran and Leader of Opposition in the assembly V D Satheesan said the Marxist party was deliberately creating controversies as they had nothing else to say. Premachandran is a leader of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), an ally of the Congress-led UDF Opposition in the southern state. While jointly addressing a press conference here, the leaders said Premachandran is one of the best parliamentarians in the country and a popular MP. What was the controversy about him having lunch with the prime minister at the Parliament's canteen, Satheesan asked. "Even when Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan is politically opposed, the Opposition leader and



(UDF) MLAs attend the meeting called by him. Similarly, Premachandran also received an invitation from the Prime Minister's Office," he said. While answering a question, the LoP also said the Congress party didn't criticise Vijayan when receiving Modi and saw him off during his recent visit to the state. Like the BJP, CPI(M) was also playing the trick of creating communal polarisation in the society to get votes, Satheesan further charged. Sudhakaran also criticised the ruling party for creating a row over the incident and asked whether CM Vijayan hadn't gone to meet Modi. "There is nothing wrong with Premachandran accepting the prime minister's invitation," he added. In Thiruvananthapuram, senior Congress Leader and

MP K Muralaeeharan also extended support to the Kollam MP and said if he received a similar invitation from the PMO, he would also have accepted it. Premachandran's lunch with the prime minister triggered a political row in Kerala on Saturday, with the ruling CPI(M) taking a dig at him pointing out his "closeness" with Modi. The Kollam MP was among the parliamentarians, selected from different parties, with whom PM Modi had lunch at the Parliament canteen on Friday. While Premachandran justified his accepting the invitation from the PMO saying it was a friendly meeting beyond politics, senior CPI(M) leader and Finance Minister K N Balagopal made fun of him.



'BJP scared of AAP, wants to defame, crush us'

PNS ■ TARN TARAN(PUNJAB)

The BJP is only scared of the AAP and wants to defame and crush it, Delhi Chief Minister and AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal alleged on Sunday. Addressing an event here to mark the recent acquisition of a power plant by the Punjab government from a private company, he also accused the Centre of withholding Rs 8,000 crore funds of AAP-ruled Punjab. "Today the BJP is scared of only one party and that is the AAP (Aam Aadmi Party). The AAP is not letting it sleep," Kejriwal said. He said in a span of 10 years, the AAP has formed governments in Delhi and Punjab, and has MLAs in Gujarat and Goa. "Wherever we fight elections, we secure many votes.

Pawar targets BJP, says its leaders don't face ED action

PNS ■ PUNE

Veteran politician Sharad Pawar on Sunday claimed that no BJP leader has faced action from the Enforcement Directorate since the party has been in power. On the Election Commission recently recognising the faction led by his nephew Ajit Pawar as the 'real' NCP and allotting the party's poll symbol 'Clock' to his group, Sharad Pawar said such a situation has never been witnessed in the country and the people will not support such a decision. Ajit Pawar walked away with a majority NCP MLAs in the Maharashtra assembly in July last year and joined the Eknath Shinde-led state government. The EC has allotted 'Nationalist Congress Party-Sharadchandra Pawar' as the party name for the group led by Sharad Pawar. Addressing an event here, Sharad Pawar claimed that misuse of power is evident when anyone opposes the ruling BJP. "The ED has conducted investigations across the country, with 6,000 cases registered from 2005 to 2023. But, substantial findings were obtained in 25 cases, and 85 per cent of



the cases involved political leaders from the opposition," he claimed. "Since the BJP has been in power (from 2014), no leader from the party has faced action from the ED. Moreover, investigations against BJP leaders were halted after the party came to power," he further claimed at the Aarogya Doot Abhiyan organised by his party here. Later, when reporters at a press conference asked him about the EC's decision on the NCP name and symbol, the Rajya Sabha member said he had contested his first election on the symbol of a pair of bullocks. "Thoughts and ideology are more important than any symbol, he said. "The EC's decision is surprising. Our political party was given to other people.

El Nino weakens, raises hopes of 'bountiful monsoon'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

After delivering a warm 2023, El Nino conditions are set to dissipate by June this year raising hopes of "bountiful monsoon" rains this season, meteorologists have predicted. At least two global climate agencies announced last week that El Nino, the warming of the equatorial Pacific Ocean that impacts weather across the world, has started to weaken and there is a probability of La Nina conditions setting in by August. Weather scientists in India, tracking the developments closely, have said that La Nina conditions setting in by June-August could mean monsoon rains would be better this year than the last year. However, they also struck a word of caution citing the 'spring predictability barrier', considered a forecasting headache as weather models



have a harder time making accurate forecasts. Madhavan Rajeevan, former secretary in the Ministry of Earth Sciences, said there is a good probability of La Nina developing by June-July. "Even if El Nino transitions into ENSO-neutral conditions, the monsoon this year should be better than the last year," he said. The southwest monsoon

delivers about 70 per cent of India's annual rainfall, critical for the agriculture sector that accounts for about 14 per cent of the GDP and employs more than half of its 1.4 billion population. The United States' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said last week that there is a 79 per cent chance that El Nino will transition to ENSO-neutral by

April-June and a 55 per cent chance of La Nina developing in June-August. The European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) confirmed that El Nino has started weakening. La Nina is the cyclic counterpart to El Nino. "Currently, we cannot say anything with certainty. Some models indicate La Nina, while some predict ENSO-neutral conditions. However, all models suggest an end to El Nino," D Sivananda Pai, a senior scientist at the India Meteorological Department, said. NOAA, the American national forecaster, said there was a historical tendency for La Nina to follow strong El Nino events. "The forecast team is in agreement with the latest model guidance, with some uncertainty around the timing of transitions to ENSO-neutral and, following that, La Nina,"

the US agency said. "But even if El Nino transitions into ENSO-neutral conditions, the monsoon this year should be better than last year," the senior meteorologist said. India received "below-average" cumulative rainfall of 7820 mm compared to the long-period average of 868.6 mm in the 2023 monsoon season, which was attributed to a strengthening El Nino. Assuming El Nino continues through the first half of 2024, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) earlier predicted that 2024 would be warmer than 2023, Pai said. "If La Nina develops, 2024 would not be warmer than 2023," he said. Roxy Mathew Koll, a climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, said latest forecasts indicate a quick transition to La Nina by June, which could result in an on-time and bountiful monsoon.

'Is laying thorns, nails on farmers' path 'amritkaal' or 'anyaykaal?'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra Sunday attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi over reports of barricading and laying of nails on roads at certain points near the Delhi border ahead of the farmers' proposed 'Delhi Chalo' march. Sharing a video of nails laid on roads and multiple barricades put up to stop farmers from marching into the national capital on X, the Congress general secretary asked why the tillers were being treated in this manner. Prohibitory orders under CrPC section 144, which bars large gatherings, were imposed in the northeast district of the national capital on Sunday in view of the farmers' march on February 13, an official said



here. A large number of farmers from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab are expected to march towards the national capital on Tuesday as part of the march organised by around 200 farm unions. "Is laying thorns-nails in the path of farmers' amritkaal or 'anyaykaal'? This insensitive and anti-farmer attitude had cost the lives of 750 farmers. Working against farmers and not even allowing them to

raise their voice what kind of government does this," Gandhi said in a post in Hindi. "The promise made to the farmers was not fulfilled neither was the MSP law made nor was the income of farmers doubled if farmers do not come to the government of their own country, where else will they go," she added. "Mr Prime Minister! Why such behaviour with the country's farmers? Why don't you fulfil the promises made to farmers," the Congress leader said. According to an order issued by Deputy Commissioner of Police (northeast) Joy Tirkey, farmers were likely to sit at Delhi borders till their demands were met. "Keeping in view the kind of behaviour and adamant approach farmers showed during protests in the past.

An exhilarating term

Parliament adjourns for the last time before LS polls are held and the next Govt assumes office

As both Houses of Parliament have been adjourned sine die one last time before the general elections, it is time to reflect on the Government's achievements, challenges and legacy of the past five years. This period has been marked by significant policy reforms, legislative milestones and moments of both triumph and controversy. The concluding session of Parliament holds special significance as it serves as a crucial juncture for the Government to showcase its accomplishments and for the Opposition to hold the former accountable for its actions. Over the past five years, the Government has introduced a plethora of reforms across sectors, ranging from economy and governance to social welfare and national security. Initiatives such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) and ambitious welfare schemes like Ayushman Bharat and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana have left a deep impact on the nation's socio-economic milieu. However, alongside these successes,



the Government has faced its fair share of challenges and criticism. Issues such as economic slowdowns, agrarian distress, unemployment and social unrest have tested the administration's resolve and elicited strong reactions from both critics and supporters. Debates on contentious issues like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), farm laws and handling of COVID-19 pandemic have dominated parliamentary discourse. Besides, the Government's inability to take timely action to quell Manipur violence would also be a blot on its tenure. As the 17th Lok Sabha is bid farewell, the parliamentarians must assess the overall progress made and identify areas that require further attention. This

introspection is essential not only for the ruling party but for the entire political spectrum to understand the pulse of the nation and address people's aspirations effectively. Beyond legislative achievements, the last five years have witnessed significant shifts in the political landscape with coalition dynamics, rise of regional parties and evolving voter preferences shaping the electoral narrative. The general elections present an opportunity for citizens to voice their verdict on the Government's performance and chart the course for the nation. Moreover, the conclusion of the session marks the beginning of a new chapter in India's democratic journey, where the electorate will exercise its right to choose the next set of leaders to steer the country forward. It is time for political parties to engage in constructive dialogue, present their vision and earn the electorate's trust. In this transitional phase, lawmakers must uphold the principles of democracy, foster inclusivity and prioritise mass welfare. The Government's legacy will be defined not only by its legislative accomplishments but also by its commitment to upholding democratic values, promoting social justice and growth for all. As the nation embarks on the next phase of governance, let us reflect on the lessons learnt and communicate effectively to our would-be lawmaker representatives.

PICTALK



Children fly kites in a field in the backdrop of the Taj Mahal, in Agra

PTI

Synergise regional and national science academies

It is essential for regional science academies to actively promote science through regional media and provide regular updates

Science education in the country is at a crossroads, because of the declining trend among the new generation to pursue a career in Science. Across the country, many brilliant students move towards professional courses that fetch them a good placement soon after their studies. No one will wait 5 or 10 years to get a good placement. Even our policymakers neglect basic science education, forgetting the fact that it's the backbone for building a strong Viksit Bharat. The trend of student exodus to foreign countries is increasing. The public's initial encounter with scientific advancements often occurs through newspapers, television programs, and various other media outlets. The reduction in space or airtime allocated to Science can be viewed as a direct challenge to the field. Many media organisations prioritise commercial considerations when making decisions about content allocation. They may contribute to a lack of public awareness and understanding of scientific concepts, potentially hindering progress in scientific literacy and societal



engagement with Science. This lack of awareness leads to parental pressure on students to move away from science courses. It is where our regional science academies in the country can play a lead role in building a robust scientific force for the future. We have three national science academies in India - the Indian National Science Academy, the Indian Academy of Sciences, and the National Academy of Sciences, India. Even though our National Science Academies are doing their service to promote Science, it doesn't reach every nook and corner of the country. Here, regional science academies come into the picture. Regional science academies can play a crucial role in fostering scientific advancement, education, and collaboration within specific geographic

regions. These academies are well-positioned to address and prioritize issues that are specific to a particular region. They can focus on problems related to geography, climate, biodiversity, and other factors that may vary from one region to another. By bringing together scientists and researchers from a specific region, science academies help build a strong and collaborative scientific community. This facilitates the exchange of ideas, expertise, and resources, fostering a culture of innovation and cooperation. It is essential for regional science academies to actively promote Science through regional language media channels, maintain regular interactions with journalists, and offer science updates, accessible format. Apart from science popularisation activities, many regional academies conduct studies on various topics that could affect the enhancement of Science in society, for example, student exodus to foreign countries, public perception of science and scientific research, etc. Regional academies can offer insights into

the unique challenges faced by their communities and contribute to developing informed policies that address regional needs. Regional science academies can promote diversity and inclusion in Science by supporting underrepresented groups within the region. This contributes to a more inclusive and equitable scientific community. Regional science academies' contributions to nation-building and developing scientific temper are well documented in history. In our journey towards a Viksit Bharat, we should take various regional science academies and the National Science Academies' by affiliating them to the National body. When both academies work with a common goal, it can foster significant advancements in Indian Science. By aligning their efforts and resources, these academies can synergise their strengths, expertise, and networks to tackle scientific challenges more effectively. (The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Messi confronts China in his own way

China's psychological warfare extends from visa manipulations to Messi's 'snub,' providing a taste of their own strategy in return

Last year, three Indian Wushu players i.e., Nyeman Wangsu, Onilu Tega and Mepung Lamgu, were given stapled visas to travel to China, for the World University Games. All three were proud Indian Arunachalis, and the entire Indian squad pulled out of the competition in protest of the Chinese sleight. It was reminiscent of the 2016 incident when the Manager of the Indian Badminton team, Bamang Tago, was denied a visa to travel to China - he too was an Arunachali! Much earlier in 2011, a 45-team Indian Karate team travelling to China were issued standard visas, except five members who were given stapled visas, again all Arunachalis. Chinese are past masters in psychological warfare and no domain or opportunity is too irrelevant for them to resist partaking a 'ping'. It is culturally part and parcel of their patented 'three warfare' approach where they relentlessly invoke psychological, legal, and public opinion warfare. The recurring bone of contention is the Indian State Arunachal Pradesh which expansionist China falsely claims as so-called 'South Tibet', and therefore shadow boxing on the same. It's the same pressure tactic that it applies with Taiwan and forces its athletes to compete under an unfamiliar name called 'Chinese Taipei', in Olympics and other events. Taiwanese athletes also compete under an alien flag (1981 agreement with the International Olympics Committee led a newly designed white flag with a flower outline around a sun and the Olympic rings in the middle) with an unheard flag-raising song. The Chinese are constantly looking to score a symbolic and psychological 'hit'. Therefore, with such fixation with political posturing and insinuations in everything that it does and imagines, it also leads to hallucinations or perceived indignities whenever it is on the receiving end, deliberately or inadvertently. The latest issue of a 'non-starter' by the global football superstar, Lionel Messi, whilst in Hong Kong owing to an ostensible 'swollen and painful injury' got



doubly compounded by the football icon subsequently playing in Japan, within three days thereafter. The angst against Messi started early with fans booing the 'no-show' on field (which extended to even avoiding interacting with fans or receiving the trophy). The Chinese were not amused and were seen openly questioning the intent of the player and called out what they thought was a 'deliberate and calculated snub'. All hell broke loose when just after a couple of days Messi took to the ground in Japan. As it is, China has major beef with Japan. An indignant Global Times echoed Chinese frustrations in its editorial, "The match in Hong Kong became the only one in Messi's six pre-season friendly matches on this trip where he was absent. The situation... has magnified these doubts and suspicions on the integrity of Inter Miami and Messi himself." The Chinese finally got a flavour of a dish that they so routinely serve, even if Messi who is an Argentine (which little or no sovereign stakes for or against China) is not known to make political points, unlike some other stars. This incident harks back to 2019 when the then Arsenal football club legend Mesut Ozil openly condemned China's treatment of the coun-



PERHAPS THE ONLY TIME THAT MESSI DID COME UNDER POLITICAL SUSPICION WAS WITH HIS PURPORTED MOVE TO SAUDI ARABIA EARLIER, A MOVE RIFE WITH SUSPICIONS OF SAUDIS 'SPORTSWASHING' THEIR MURKY CREDENTIALS BY LURING SPORTSMEN WITH MONEY

try's Uighur minority - the thin-skinned Chinese reacted furiously, and Arsenal club had humiliatingly buckled under pressure, offering meek clarification, "The content published is Ozil's personal opinion. As a football club, Arsenal has always adhered to the principle of not involving itself in politics". The Chinese had flexed muscle and extracted their revenge. For the Chinese, football is particularly important given its global popularity and Xi Jinping's penchant in the same reflecting with its declared aspiration to be a 'soccer powerhouse' with the stated intent of winning the Football World Cup in 2050! Perhaps the only time that Messi did come under political suspicion (indirectly again) was with his purported move to Saudi Arabia earlier, a move rife with suspicions of Saudis 'sportswashing' their murky credentials, by luring sportsmen with money. But Messi didn't move, finally. Despite a long career he has remained steadfastly apolitical and steered clear of political controversies. With a permanent house in Barcelona, Messi took no position on the contentious Catalan-independence issue, given its resonance in Barcelona region. However, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner has somehow never played against England at internation-

al level, with whom the Argentinian emotions date back to the 1982 Falkland War and Diego Maradona's infamous 'Hand of God' moment in 1986. In fact, Messi now plays for Inter Miami owned by the English star David Beckham, who had his own 'moment' against rival Argentines when he kicked their captain Diego Simeone in the crucial FIFA World Cup match of 1998. So, it is extremely unlikely that Messi would be making a political point this late in his career, and especially given the lucrative contracts he has with Chinese conglomerates. If anything, Messi has been in the news for milking his stardom by signing brand endorsements without bothering too much about the brand product or service itself. Incidentally, he had signed up with the now-in-news Byju's as their global ambassador, only to be put on hold when the company started going belly-up. Nonetheless, the Chinese are feeling insulted and aggrieved, Messi's likely innocence and apology notwithstanding. But it is a providential taste of China's own medicine. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POWER SECTOR WOES

Sir — The government in Andhra Pradesh seems to be under complacency with the pittance of Navarathnas Scheme provided to the poor section. Though the beneficiaries are thankful for the small benefit they are equally upset over the increase in the burden imposed by an increase in the power bill. The functioning of three companies in the power sector seems to be let loose to function the way they want. Inadequate planning by distribution companies results in purchasing power from private players, who dictate unfavorable Power Purchase Agreements. This compels the distribution companies to burden consumers with charges like FPPCA I, FPPCA II, True Up Charge. Government offices' delayed power bill payments, subsidies, and unauthorized payouts of ₹1,400 crores to a private company further strain consumers, leading to unjustified extra charges of ₹500 and an unfair share of system-induced losses. To add to the woes Smart meters are going to be provided to each consumer. Each consumer has to bear the cost of it, which is likely to be around ₹13,000/-. It is to be paid in monthly instalments for a few years. The smart meter lacks consumer benefits, focusing on prepaid and dynamic tariffs that favour private entities. Prepaid setups benefit companies, while dynamic pricing confuses consumers, hindering consumption planning. Reforms prioritize profits over people's well-being, urging the government to prioritize citizens over private interests for a better quality of life. AG Rajmohan | Anantapur

INFLATION RISING

Sir — The Reserve Bank of India is trying to control the inflation rate. According to the RBI report, the inflation rate between April and December in the current financial year has been 5.5 per cent. The inflation rate is estimated to be 5.4 per cent during the entire current financial year. The inflation rate is likely to come down in the next financial year, and it may remain at 4.5 per cent.

Well-deserved Bharat Ratna



The Bharat Ratna, the Country's highest civilian honour has been given to three distinguished personalities of the country P V Narasimha Rao, Charan Singh and Swaminathan who have made monumental contributions to the nation in different sectors. P V Narasimha Rao the 9th prime minister of India, was a statesman and distinguished scholar of our times. He held the reins of the country during a politically tumultuous time in the wake of the assassination of for-

mer Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi when the nation was facing an extremely grave economic crisis and was on the brink of bankruptcy, indeed there were several challenges galore for him, the shattered Economy and several internal security problems, but with his visionary leadership he steered the country through successfully. Narasimha Rao's unmatched legacy secures his pivotal place in Indian history. Chaudhary Charan Singh dedicated his life to farmers' rights, earning the title 'champion of farmers.' A principled socialist, he advocated higher taxes for the wealthy and opposed luxury consumption. MS Swaminathan, a distinguished agricultural scientist, played a crucial role in India's transformation from a food-importing to a self-sufficient, food-exporting nation, earning him the moniker 'father of the green revolution' during challenging times marked by droughts.

Ramesh G Jethwani | Bangalore

However, the efforts of the Reserve Bank of India and the claims of the government are in their place, but the bitter reality is that the food plate of the common man of the country is still expensive. This inflation is likely to increase further. In other words, the growth rate of our economy has been more than 7.5 per cent. But for the common man, economic development means that he gets relief from inflation and adequate employment opportunities. If inflation is not under control and youth are not getting employment, then the figures of economic progress have no relevance to the life of the common man.

Jahangir Shaikh | Mumbai

GRAHAM STAINES' DEATH ANNIVERSARY

Sir — A few days ago, on January 22, residents of Manoharpur, a remote village in Keonjhar district of Odisha observed the 25th death anniversary of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons. Graham Staines had been working with leprosy patients in Odisha since his coming to India in 1965 till his death in 1999. "For 35 years, Saibo, clad in casuals with

his trademark hat, pedaled his rickety bicycle, a familiar sight in Baripada. Known for doing God's work, he cared for leprosy patients in a dedicated home on the outskirts. Tragically, Graham Staines and his two sons, Timothy (6) and Philip (10), were burned alive while sleeping in their jeep in a Manoharpur forest." When Dara Singh and his followers had set fire to the vehicle, they woke up and tried to come out. But those fanatics used their long stout sticks to shove them back into the fire, till they died close to midnight of January 22, 1999. His wife Gladys Staines told television reporters, "I forgive those who have killed my husband and my two sons." After his husband's death, she continued to serve leprosy patients and managed to turn his husband's home for the wealthy into a hospital. Every year, January 22 will come and remind us about the warning signs of religious fanaticism on the road to our evolutionary progress.

Sujit De | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

A JOURNEY THROUGH LOSS AND HEALING

The Buddhist approach offers a grounded and rational way to cope with grief



RAVI VALLURI

The doctor was an early riser. Upon waking he hit the gym. He remained fit and in proper shape by maintaining this regimen. The medico was a noted pediatrician, his wife an eminent cardiologist. Unfortunately, their only daughter suffered from a compromised heart condition. The trio had attended a party the previous evening. It was time to drop the daughter to school and the father knocked at the door. But the cherubic girl did not respond. Life was snuffed out; tragedy had struck the family and a pall of gloom descended.

A few weeks back an old aunt had kicked the bucket. It was a double whammy for the family, and they were inconsolable. Several centuries ago, in the time of the Buddha, a woman lost her only child to the cruel hands of fate. In an anguished state she implored the Enlightened One to resuscitate the dead child. Buddha, the compassionate, agreed to perform the miracle. He asked the lady to collect mustard seeds from all the houses of the village which had never seen death or grief. The woman knocked at the doors of all the houses in the village but returned empty handed. Handling grief is a challenging task and only skillful minds can undertake this responsibility.

The doctor couple who could not save their precious child were subsumed into a cesspool of anger, guilt, sadness, pangs of loneliness, numbness, and a yearning for their beloved one. To overcome their grief and desolation, the husband, a moderate drinker, became a quotidian one and his spouse began administering herself sedatives.

Several eminent psychologists like Parker, Arewill and Worden have zeroed in on the point that those suffering from grief, need to move on from the feeling of numbness, pining, depression, a feeling of shock and despair



to the process of recovery. It is important for the grieving to accept the reality of the loss, experience the pain of the departed one, adjust to the environment of living without the deceased person.

Medical science has made rapid advancements such that proper diagnosis, therapy, and counselling along with proper medication can trigger the change agent in the wrecked mind. Alternatively, there are techniques like hypnosis and even providing ECT (in the worst-case scenario) to address the problem.

The Theravada Buddhist traditions have dealt with the subject of handling grief in a dynamic manner. The human mind by the process of strong internal resolution can overcome this vicissitude in life by mindfulness. The process is called Satipatthana.

The emotionally wrought can find solace and succour by becoming aware of the reality about the impermanence of events, happenings, and people. The mind should become strong to accept the reality and look ahead. There are breathing techniques like Vipassana and Sudarshan Kriya which have proven ability to transfigure the mind from a depressed state to a positive one. Both the techniques have been validated by medical science as alternative therapies and have the power to alter the thought process, bringing it to the present moment.

Several grieving souls adopt holistic measures like the breathing techniques mentioned, meditation, pranayama, yoga, chanting of mantras, being in communion with nature or seva to overcome their grief and restore normalcy in their lives. It is the recalcitrant human mind which acts as a deterrent and needs to be tamed. "Grief is in two parts. The first is loss. The second is remaking of life," writes Anne Roiphe.

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

Celebrating women in science: Recognising their achievements

Despite their significant contributions, women in science still face systemic barriers, including gender bias, unequal representation and limited access to opportunities

Yesterday, we celebrated the International Day of Women in Science, a day dedicated to recognising and honouring the achievements of women in the field of science. This annual event serves as a reminder of the invaluable contributions women have made to scientific progress and innovation throughout history. It is an opportunity to highlight their accomplishments, shed light on the challenges they face, and inspire future generations of women to pursue careers in science.

Recently, while presenting the interim Budget 2024, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman highlighted that female enrollment in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) courses



VEERENDRA MISHRA

has reached 43 per cent, which is one of the world's highest figures. She said, "Female enrollment in higher education has gone up by 28 percent in ten years. In STEM courses, girls and women constitute 43 percent of enrollment—one of the highest in the world. All these measures reflect the increasing participation of women in the workforce." She also mentioned the empowerment of women through entre-

preneurship, ease of living, and dignity, mentioning, "Thirty crore Mudra Yojana loans have been given to women entrepreneurs."

From historic figures like Savitribai Jyotiba Phule, who was the first female teacher of India and founded the first girls' school, to Lady Abala Bose, who was the first Indian woman to study medicine at Madras University, to Kamala Sohonie, the first Indian woman to receive a PhD in a scientific discipline, to Ayyalasomayajula Lalitha, India's first woman engineer, to Shakuntala Devi, who was popularly known as the "Human Computer," women continue to leave an indelible mark on the scientific landscape. Today, women scientists are assuming leadership posi-

tions in groundbreaking projects like Chandrayaan-3 and the Aditya-L1 solar mission, showcasing their continued influence and expertise in pushing the boundaries of scientific exploration.

The Government has taken significant strides to bolster STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education, recognising its pivotal role in driving innovation, economic prosperity, and societal advancement. Initiatives like the Vigyan Jyoti Scheme, spearheaded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, are breaking gender barriers by empowering young girls in STEM fields through exposure and mentorship programs. Additionally, programmes like INSPIRE foster innovation

among students through scholarships and research opportunities, while Atal Tinkering Labs nurture creativity and problem-solving skills among school students.

The Rashtriya Avishkar Abhiyan promotes a culture of innovation in schools, bridging the gap between theory and real-world applications. Moreover, the government provides research fellowships and grants, digital learning resources through the National Digital Library, and skill enhancement programmes via Skill India, all aimed at nurturing a skilled workforce and fostering growth in STEM-related industries. These concerted efforts underscore the government's commitment to nurturing a robust ecosystem for scientific inquiry and tech-

nological advancement in the country.

Women in STEM in India have been steadily challenging stereotypes and contributing significantly to various disciplines. Pioneers like Dr. Tessy Thomas, known as the "Missile Woman of India," have shattered glass ceilings in fields traditionally dominated by men. Indian women researchers are excelling in areas like space technology, biotechnology, and mathematics, making remarkable advancements.

Additionally, the government's Vigyan Jyoti scheme aims to encourage young girls to pursue STEM education and careers, fostering inclusivity. Women have made groundbreaking strides in diverse scientific domains, ranging from astronomy and biology to

engineering and computer science. Their discoveries, innovations, and leadership have enriched our understanding of the world and advanced technological progress.

Women have played a pivotal role in shaping the scientific landscape, yet their contributions have often been overlooked or undervalued. By celebrating the International Day of Women in Science, we aim to rectify this imbalance and bring attention to the remarkable achievements of women scientists. It is crucial to showcase diverse role models in science to inspire young girls and women to pursue their passions and break down the barriers that still exist in the field. While progress has been made, women in science still face numerous challenges.

Gender bias, a lack of representation, and unequal opportunities persist in many scientific fields. It is essential to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for women in science. By providing equal opportunities, mentorship, and support, we can empower women to thrive and contribute their unique perspectives to scientific advancements. Despite their significant contributions, women in science still face systemic barriers. By encouraging and showcasing the achievements of women in science, we hope to ignite a passion for discovery and innovation in young girls.

(The writer is an IPS officer and the director RACE Lab, Samvedna India, views are personal)



The impact and evolution of IBC 2016



MANOJ KUMAR ANAND

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code IBC of 2016 streamlines insolvency resolution processes and bolstering investor confidence



The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) of 2016 stands as a transformative milestone in recent Indian legislative history. Enacted with the aim of streamlining and expediting the resolution process for distressed businesses, the IBC has had far-reaching implications for India's economic landscape and global standing. In this comprehensive exploration, we delve into the genesis of the IBC, its impact on India's Ease of Doing Business Index, the role of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI), and the recent amendments that have further refined and strengthened the framework.

The IBC of 2016 was a response to the urgent need for a comprehensive insolvency regime in India. Prior to its enactment, the country grappled with a fragmented and inefficient system that often led to protracted legal battles and value destruction for all stakeholders involved. Recognizing the critical importance of a robust insolvency framework in fostering economic growth and investor confidence, the Indian government embarked on a journey to overhaul the existing system.

The passage of the IBC in 2016 marked a paradigm shift in India's approach to insolvency resolution. By introducing a unified legal framework that streamlined the resolution process and prioritized creditor rights, the IBC sought to expedite the resolution of distressed assets and maximize value for all stakeholders. Key provisions of the IBC include the establishment of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI), as well as the creation of Insolvency Professionals (IPs) and Insolvency Professional Entities (IPEs) to facilitate the resolution process.

One of the most significant outcomes of the IBC has been its impact on India's Ease of Doing Business Index. Since the



THE SUCCESS OF THE IBC CAN ALSO BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE EFFORTS OF THE INSOLVENCY AND BANKRUPTCY BOARD OF INDIA (IBBI), THE REGULATORY AUTHORITY TASKED WITH OVERSEEING ITS IMPLEMENTATION

enactment of the IBC, India's ranking in the World Bank Ease of Doing Business Index has steadily improved, climbing by another 14 places to 63 in 2019. This improvement can be attributed in large part to the IBC's success in resolving insolvency cases more efficiently and effectively, thereby enhancing the overall business environment in the country.

In particular, India's ranking in resolving insolvency saw a remarkable jump of 56 places to 52 in 2019, marking the highest-ever leap recorded by any country in the history of the World Bank. This significant improvement reflects the positive impact of the IBC in expediting the resolution process, reducing the time and cost involved in resolving insolvency cases, and maximising the value recovered by creditors.

The success of the IBC can also be attributed to the efforts of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI), the regulatory authority tasked with overseeing the implementation of the IBC. Since its inception, the IBBI has played a crucial role in shaping and refining the insolvency framework, issuing regulations, guidelines, and circulars to ensure smooth and effective implementation of the IBC.

In its journey of seven years, the IBBI has introduced six amendments to the IBC, each aimed at further enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the insolvency resolution process. These amendments have addressed various challenges and loopholes in the framework, making it more robust and resilient to emerging

complexities in the insolvency landscape.

One of the key areas of focus for the IBBI has been the regulation of Insolvency Professionals (IPs) and Insolvency Professional Entities (IPEs), who play a critical role in the insolvency resolution process. The IBBI has introduced several amendments to the regulations governing IPs and IPEs, aimed at enhancing their role and capabilities in resolving insolvency cases.

For example, the IBBI has introduced amendments to allow IPs to resign from their roles under certain circumstances, thereby addressing concerns about the prolonged tenure of IPs without remuneration. Additionally, amendments have been made to allow IPEs to engage their partners or directors in insolvency assignments, expanding their capacity and expertise in the resolution process.

Furthermore, the IBBI has introduced amendments to streamline the appointment process for IPs by introducing a panel of eligible candidates for appointment by the adjudicating authority. This has helped to expedite the appointment process and ensure a more transparent and efficient resolution process.

In addition to amendments relating to IPs and IPEs, the IBBI has also introduced amendments to other regulations governing the insolvency process. For example, amendments have been made to clarify the role of monitoring committees in the resolution process and to streamline the billing process for insolvency professionals. Overall, the amendments introduced by the

IBBI have helped to address various challenges and complexities in the insolvency resolution process, making it more efficient, transparent, and effective. These amendments have further strengthened the IBC and solidified India's position as a leader in insolvency reform.

Looking ahead, the IBBI remains committed to continuously improving and refining the insolvency framework to ensure that it remains responsive to the evolving needs and challenges of the insolvency landscape. By fostering an environment that is conducive to efficient and effective insolvency resolution, the IBBI aims to support India's economic growth and development goals and enhance investor confidence in the country's business environment.

In conclusion, the IBC of 2016 stands as a testament to India's commitment to fostering a business-friendly environment and enhancing the ease of doing business in the country. Through its robust framework and proactive regulatory efforts, the IBC has contributed significantly to improving India's ranking in the Ease of Doing Business Index and enhancing investor confidence in the country's business environment. With the continued support and efforts of regulatory authorities like the IBBI, India is well-positioned to further strengthen its insolvency framework and drive economic growth and development in the years to come.

(The writer is a chartered accountant and a visiting faculty to ICAI, ICSI; Views are personal)

MONEY MATTERS

StartupTN launches Smart Card to boost entrepreneurs

StartupTN has launched Smart Card and other new initiatives to meet the needs of aspiring entrepreneurs in the early stage of building their startup. StartupTN is backed by the Tamil Nadu government and aims to nurture a vibrant startup ecosystem in the state to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship-driven employment and economic growth. The Smart Card initiative offers a comprehensive selection of products and services at subsidised rates to entrepreneurs. Some of the services offered pertain to legal and compliance, marketing and business consulting, finance and insurance, and software and information technology, among others. Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises T M Anbarasan launched the Smart Cards at an event here recently, and gave away 10 Smart Cards to startups on the occasion. In a statement on Sunday, StartupTN said it has collaborated with various partners to provide a diverse range of products and services to equip budding entrepreneurs with essential resources and support at a reduced cost.



Mcap of 4 most valued firms jumps Rs 2.18L cr; LIC, SBI lead

Four of the top-10 most valued firms together added Rs 2.18 lakh crore in market valuation last week, with Life Insurance Corporation and State Bank of India emerging as the biggest gainers. From the top-10 pack, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and SBI were the gainers. They collectively added Rs 2,18,598.29 crore in market capitalisation. On the other hand, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Infosys, Bharti Airtel, Hindustan Unilever and ITC faced erosion from their valuation to the tune of Rs 1,06,631.39 crore. Last week, the BSE benchmark declined by 490.14 points or 0.67 per cent. Market valuation of LIC jumped Rs 86,146.47 crore to Rs 6,83,637.38 crore. The share price of LIC on Monday jumped nearly 6 per cent to hit the Rs 1,000 mark for the first time. SBI added Rs 65,908.26 crore, taking its valuation to Rs 6,46,365.02 crore.



Akums Drugs files draft IPO papers with Sebi

Akums Drugs and Pharmaceuticals Ltd has filed draft papers with capital markets regulator Sebi to raise funds through an initial public offering (IPO). The initial share-sale is a combination of fresh issue of equity shares worth Rs 680 crore and an offer-for-sale (OFS) of 1.86 crore shares by promoters and an existing investor, according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP) filed on Saturday. Those selling shares in the OFS are Sanjeev Jain, Sandeep Jain and Ruby QC Investment Holdings Pte Ltd. The company is looking to raise Rs 136 crore through a pre-IPO placement. If such placement is undertaken, then fresh issue size will be reduced. Proceeds from the fresh issue will be used to repay debt, fund working capital requirements of the company, pursue inorganic growth initiatives through acquisition and for general corporate purposes.



Close to Rs 750 cr stuck in Qatar projects: Voltas

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Tata Group firm Voltas is facing a major headwind in Qatar as around Rs 750 crore has been stuck due to delays in the realisation of overdue receivables and execution timelines, said its MD and CEO Pradeep Bakshi.

In some projects, bank guarantees were "unethically" encashed by some contractors, which was an "uncalled" action to make quick money, derailing the international project business of Tata Group firm in the December quarter, he added.

"Unprecedented things are happening in that area, especially in Qatar, wherein, unfortunately, our dues are not being paid to us timely, and inordinate delays are happening. We have completed the project and handed it over, and despite that, payments are not made," Bakshi told PTI.

Voltas has already approached the Indian government for help on the issue and also approached the Embassy in Qatar.

Govt examining FDI flow from China in Paytm firm

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The government is examining foreign direct investment from China in Paytm Payments Services Ltd (PPSL), the payment aggregator subsidiary of One97 Communications Ltd, sources said.

In November 2020, PPSL had applied for licence with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to operate as a payment aggregator under the guidelines on Regulation of Payment Aggregators and Payment Gateways. However, in November 2022, RBI rejected PPSL's application and asked the company to resubmit it, so as to comply with Press Note 3 under FDI rules.

One97 Communications Ltd (OCL) has investment from Chinese firm Ant Group Co.

Subsequently, the company filed the required application on December 14, 2022 with Government of India for past downward investment from OCL into the company in order to comply with Press



Note 3 prescribed under FDI guidelines.

An inter-ministerial committee is examining investments from China in PPSL and decision would be taken on the FDI issue after due consideration and comprehensive examination, sources said.

Under Press Note 3, the government had made its prior approval mandatory for foreign investments in any sector from countries that share land bor-

der with India to curb opportunistic takeovers of domestic firms following the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries which share land borders with India are China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Afghanistan.

When contacted, a Paytm spokesperson said PPSL applied for an online Payment Aggregator (PA) application for online merchants and the regulator subsequently asked

PPSL to seek necessary approvals for past downward investment and resubmit the application.

"This is part of the regular process where everybody applying for a payment aggregator licence has to get FDI approval," the spokesperson said. The spokesperson said PPSL followed the relevant guidelines and submitted all relevant documents to the regulator within the stipulated time. During the pending process, PPSL was allowed to continue with its online payment aggregation business for existing partners without onboarding any new merchants.

"Since then the ownership structure has changed. The Paytm founder remains the largest stakeholder in the company. Ant Financial reduced its stake in OCL to less than 10 per cent in July 2023. Subsequently, it does not qualify for beneficial company ownership. OCL founding promoter now holds a 24.3 per cent stake.

PM Modi, Sri Lankan President & Mauritius PM to watch UPI services launch

PNS ■ COLOMBO

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth will witness on Monday, via video conferencing, the launch of Unified Payment Interface (UPI) services in Sri Lanka and Mauritius, it was announced here on Sunday.

The launch will enable the availability of UPI settlement services for Indian nationals travelling to Sri Lanka and Mauritius as well as for Mauritian nationals travelling to India, the Indian High Commission said in a statement.

"India has emerged as a leader in Fintech innovation and Digital Public Infrastructure. Prime Minister has placed a strong emphasis on sharing our development experiences and innovation with partner countries. Given India's robust cultural and people-to-people linkages with Sri Lanka and Mauritius, the launch will benefit a wide cross-section of people through a faster and seamless digital transaction experience and enhance digital connectivity between the countries," the statement said.

Commissioning of India-assisted refinery in Mongolia by 2026

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Mongolia's ambassador to India Dambajav Ganbold has said the India-funded green-field oil refinery project in South Gobi is on track and will be operational by 2026.

However, he acknowledged some delays from the Indian side in delivering products for the refinery plant.

"Of course, there are some delays from the Indian side in delivering the products, but overall, the project is progressing well," he told PTI. "It is crucial for our relations, and we eagerly look forward to its completion."

With a USD 1.2 billion line of credit announced by India during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Mongolia in 2015, the refinery's construction has been delayed by 1.5 years due to COVID-19.

"The work on the refinery project is going well. Because of COVID, it has been delayed by one and a half years. We



believe that it will be operational by 2026," Ganbold said.

The refinery aims to reduce Mongolia's reliance on Russian oil imports. Upon completion, it will have a capacity of 30,000 barrels per day or 1.5 million tonnes annually, helping the country meet its demand for gasoline, diesel, aviation fuel, and liquefied petroleum gas.

Mongolia anticipates a visit by the Indian Prime Minister in 2025, coinciding with the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

"We expect our President to visit India in the second half of this year, and we will celebrate 70 years of diplomatic relations in 2025.

Inflation, industrial production data, global trends to drive market trends this week

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Stock markets would take cues from the upcoming macro-economic data announcements and global trends besides keeping a watch on the trading activity of foreign investors, analysts said.

The last batch of the ongoing earnings calendar would trigger stock-specific action, traders said.

"This week, we have to deal with macroeconomic data on both the domestic and global front. Our IIP and retail inflation numbers will be released on February 12, while WPI will be released on February 14. The



US CPI numbers will be released on February 13, while their retail sales numbers will be announced on February 15.

"Amid these numbers, the movement in US bond yields and the dollar index will be watched. Apart from this, movement of crude oil and flows from institutional investors will be other important factors. The

last batch of Q3 earnings can lead to stock-specific movements," said Santosh Meena, Head of Research, Swastika Investment Ltd.

NHPC, SAIL, BHEL, Hindustan Copper, Mahindra & Mahindra, among others would announce their quarterly earnings this week.

"This week, market will react to the global and domestic economic data, FII (Foreign Institutional Investors), DII (Domestic Institutional Investors) investment pattern, crude oil inventories, ongoing quarterly earnings, movement of the rupee against the dollar, trend in the global stock market.

Adani Ports secures top position for climate actions

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ) on Sunday said it has secured top position for its climate actions and environmental performance in assessments done by four global rating agencies.

The assessments were done by CDP, S&P, Sustainalytics and Moody's. While the company secured leadership band' in CDP Climate Assessment 2023, it ranked first on the environmental dimension among 324 companies in the transport and transport infrastructure sector by S&P Global CSA 2023, a statement said.

FPIs infuse over Rs 15,000 cr in debt mkt

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) continued their bullish stance on the country's debt markets with a net infusion of over Rs 15,000 crore so far this month, on the back of inclusion of Indian government bonds in the JP Morgan Index along with relatively stable economy.

This followed a net investment of Rs 19,836 crore in January, making it the highest monthly inflow in more than six years. This was the highest inflow since June 2017, when they infused Rs 25,685 crore.

On the other hand, foreign investors pulled out more



than Rs 3,000 crore from equities during the period under review. Before this, they withdrew a massive Rs 25,743 crore in January, data with the depositories showed.

"The main trigger for this divergent trend in equity and debt is the high valuation in the Indian equity market and the rising bond yields in the US," V K Vijayakumar, Chief

Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director - Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, attributed the outflow from equities to the uncertainty surrounding the interest rate environment, both domestically as well as globally.

According to the data, FPIs made a net investment of Rs 15,093 crore in the debt markets in this month (till February 9).

With this, the total investment by FPIs reached over Rs 34,930 crore in 2024.

They have been injecting money in the debt markets for the past few months.

FPIs infused Rs 18,302 crore in the debt market in December, Rs 14,860 crore in November, and Rs 6,381 crore in October.

"The Indian debt markets witnessed a reversal in FPI flow trend last year after the announcement of inclusion of Indian government bonds in the JP Morgan Index. This was one of the major drivers for the robust flows from FPIs, along with relatively stable economy," Srivastava said.

JP Morgan Chase & Co. in September last year announced that it will add Indian government bonds to its benchmark emerging market index from June 2024.

Direct tax collection reaches 80% of revised FY24 target at Rs 15.60L cr

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Net direct tax collection so far in current fiscal grew 20 per cent year-on-year to Rs 15.60 lakh crore, which is 80 per cent of revised budget estimates for full fiscal year.

"The provisional figures of direct tax collections continue to register steady growth. Direct tax collections up to 10th February, 2024 show that gross collections are at Rs 18.38 lakh crore, which is

17.30 per cent higher than the gross collections for the corresponding period of last year," Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) said in a statement.

Direct tax collection, net of refunds, till February 10 of FY24 stands at Rs 15.60 lakh crore, which is 20.25 per cent higher than the net collections in the corresponding period last year. This collection is 80.23 per cent of the total revised estimates of direct taxes for 2023-24.

LIC expects income tax refund of Rs 25,464 cr in Q4

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Life Insurance Corporation of India has received an income tax refund order of Rs 25,464 crore, and it is likely to be realised during the current quarter, its chairman Siddhartha Mohanty said.

Last month, the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal (ITAT), Income Tax Department, issued intimation for a refund of Rs 25,464.46 crore. The refund is related to interim bonuses to policyholders in the past seven assessment years.



"We are pursuing the matter, and we are hopeful of getting a refund from the Income Tax Department during this quarter itself," Mohanty said during the post-result interview.

During the quarter, he said, the Life Insurance Corporation

of India (LIC) would be launching more new products, including child protection. In the third quarter, LIC launched Jeevan Utsav, Index Plus and some more products, helping it to increase the value of new business (VNB) margin levels to 16.6 per cent.

The refund is likely to boost the bottom line of the corporation in the fourth quarter.

The state-owned insurer last week reported a 49 per cent jump in net profit to Rs 9,444 crore for the third quarter ended December 2023 against

Rs 6,334 crore in the year-ago period.

Its net premium income improved to Rs 1,17,017 crore in the third quarter of the current fiscal from Rs 1,11,788 crore in the same period a year ago.

LIC's total income also rose to Rs 2,12,447 crore in the latest December quarter compared to Rs 1,96,891 crore in the year-ago period.

The LIC board has approved an interim dividend of Rs 4 per equity share of face value of Rs 10 each for FY24.



Large-cap mutual funds garner Rs 1,287 crore

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Investors flocked to large-cap oriented mutual funds with influx of Rs 1,287 crore in January, making it the highest fund infusion in 19 months, as a significant run-up in small and mid caps prompted them to book profit.

This is a huge turnaround following a net outflow of Rs 281 crore in December. Also, the quantum was 80 per cent higher than inflows of Rs 716 crore in January last year.

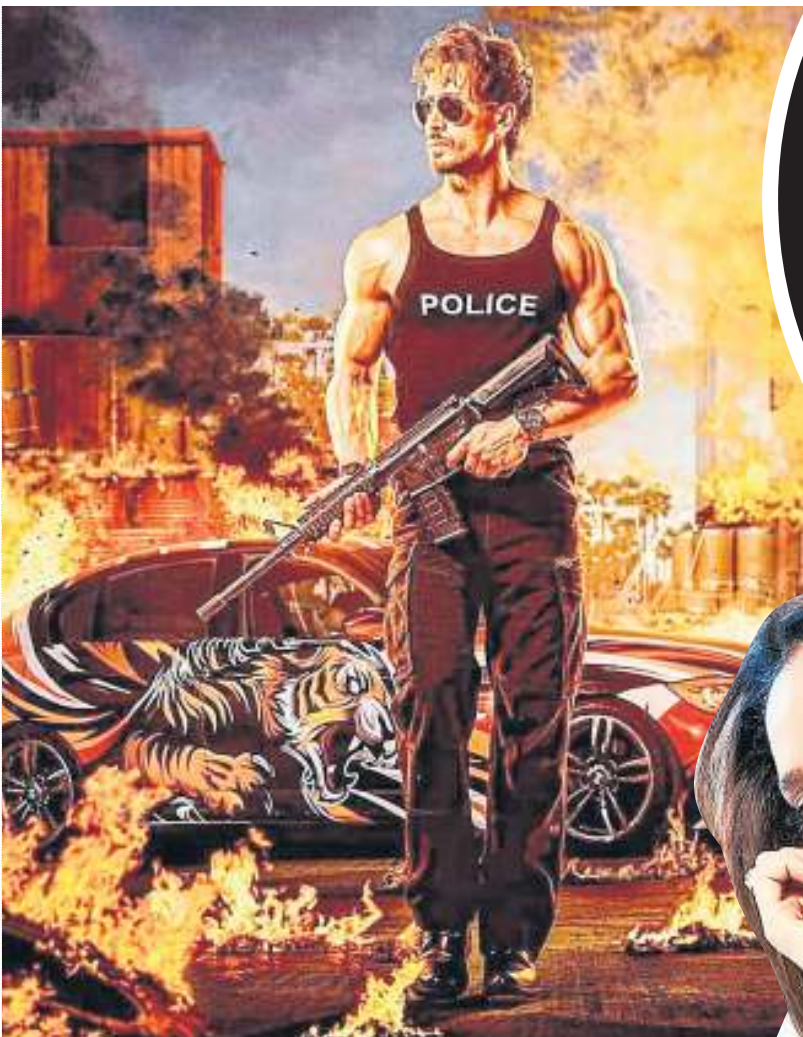
The latest inflow helped push the asset base of large-cap equity category by 26 per cent to Rs 3 lakh crore at January-end from Rs 2.38 lakh crore a year ago.

According to latest data by Association of Mutual Funds in India (Amfi), equity mutual funds focused on large-cap received inflow to the tune of

Rs 1,287 crore in January. This was the highest level since July 2022, when the category saw an inflow of Rs 2,052 crore.

Given the significant run-up in small and mid caps, investors are booking some profits and rebalancing into large-caps, Kaushtubh Belapurkar, Director - Manager Research at Morningstar Investment Research India, said.

Akhil Chaturvedi, Chief Business Officer, Motilal Oswal AMC, said, "Large-caps demonstrated positive contributions in January, reversing the net outflows experienced in December 2023. This shift in trend is in line with valuation differentials among large v/s mid and small caps, suggesting that large caps or flexi caps oriented schemes may attract higher flows in the future."



Major portions of Tiger are being canned for Singham Again

Tiger Shroff returned to hustle immediately after wrapping up the filming of *Bade Miyan Chote Miyan* in Jordan in order to start filming *Singham Again*. As a result, Shroff now appears on film alongside Ajay Devgn in Rohit Shetty's cop universe. Shetty intends to take over a substantial time of Shroff by the end of February 2024.

"Matching dates is always a struggle in multi-stars," a source reportedly told. The actors Tiger and Ajay have been filming in Mumbai's Film City for the past week. The source went on, "At the moment, a lot of Tiger's scenes are being canned. There's a race to reach the deadline because Ajay would be preoccupied with *Shaitaan* movie promotions after this week. By the end of this month, the producers hope to have shot the majority of Tiger's sequences."

Reuniting after *Sooryavanshi* and *Simmba*, respectively, Akshay Kumar and Ranveer Singh are starring alongside Ajay Devgn in *Singham Again*. Kareena Kapoor Khan too makes a comeback to the police realm! In this movie, Deepika Padukone will also make her debut as a police officer. Tiger Shroff and Arjun Kapoor are among the new entry. August 15, 2024 is when the movie is scheduled to open in theaters.

AFTER BIGG BOSS 17, ANKITA LOKHANDE WANTS PEOPLE TO 'STOP JUDGING' HER RELATIONSHIP WITH HER SPOUSE

Due to Ankita Lokhande and Vicky Jain's time in the *Bigg Boss 17* house, they were the talk of the town. Throughout the reality show, they got into a number of fights and disputes, and they even made a few references to getting a divorce. Ankita recently discussed the public perception of their relationship following the conclusion of the show last month in a new interview. She urged viewers to refrain from "judging" them for their arguments even today.

Ankita Lokhande stated in a recent interview, "Once I came out, there was media, and their questions. A pressure was present. Others are evaluating your partnership. We are aware of the nature of our relationship. We are quite familiar with our bond. I stated certain things there at the *Bigg Boss 17* house, and Vicky said certain things as well. I am not criticizing any relationship, so I don't want anyone to judge us based on that."

Ankita went on to say that they argue just like any other relationship. "I don't compete with anyone. Despite my imperfections, I am a good fit for my relationship and for myself. Though we do not witness it, couples argue in their homes. We had never had any issues, so we had no idea that we would argue so much. It was the *Bigg Boss* home where our battles began and finished. People are asking, "How are they together?" these days. People are making disparaging remarks about divorce. Guys, please stop judging us. Allow us to live our lives and live yours."



The Grammy Awards reunion between Tracy Chapman and her bassist was moving

At the 66th Annual Grammy Awards, Tracy Chapman and her band made their triumphant comeback to the stage after a 16-year hiatus, setting off the reunion of the decade. *Fast Car*, which was first released in 1988, was performed by singer-songwriter Tracy and Luke Combs in a rare reunion that took place after a long time. Larry Klein, the bassist, revealed that he was quite emotional to see Chapman again.

"I hadn't worked with her since we recorded *Our Bright Future* in 2008," bassist Larry Klein said, adding, "We had tears in our eyes when we got to the first rehearsal."

Larry Klein, also had a great time performing on the Grammy stage, especially after witnessing Combs, treat Chapman with such respect. According to Klein, "*Fast Car* inspired Combs to pursue music," and "life is a journey that can gradually numb us." "A book should be an axe for the frozen sea within us," remarked Franz Kafka. "*Fast Car* is one of those songs that serves as a constant reminder of our humanity, therefore it was very meaningful to play it at the Grammy Awards." Combs revealed to PEOPLE in December that he began singing *Fast Car* because it brought back happy memories of his father, Chester Combs!

There has been rumors that popular FX sitcom *Dave*'s creator and star, Dave Burd, is taking an indefinite break from the show. Fans of the sitcom are still curious about what will happen to the well-liked comedy show. The popular program follows the struggles of a made-up Burd, better known as Little Dicky. Rumour has claimed that Bird is taking an indefinite hiatus from the show to focus on personal and other interests, however the exact reasons for this decision are still unknown.

A representative from FX Networks issued a statement regarding the hiatus, stating, "We fully respect Dave's decision to take a break from the show and support him in his future endeavors." This official confirmation indicates the network's stance on Burd's decision and calls for cooperation and understanding between the parties.

IS FX COMEDY STAR DAVE BURD TAKING AN INDEFINITE BREAK?



FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



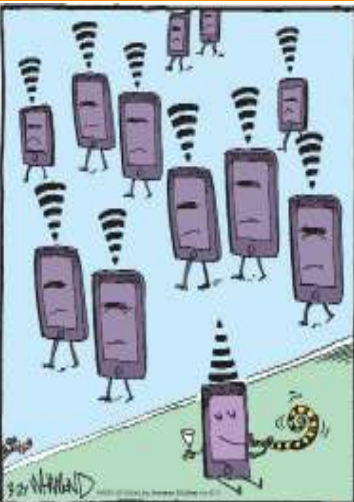
NANCY



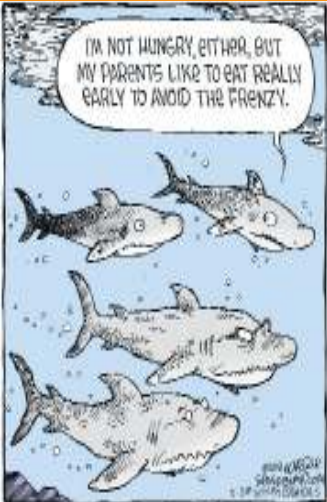
GINGER MEGGS



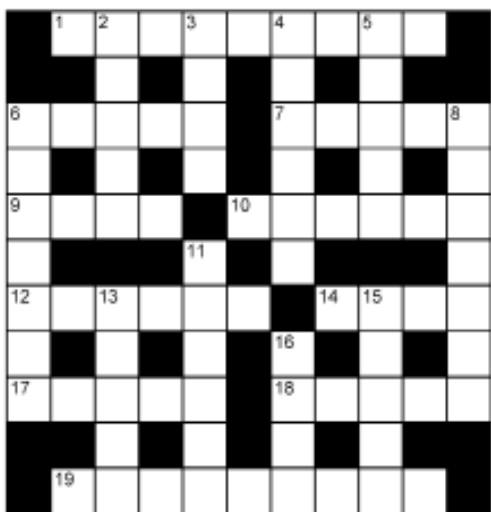
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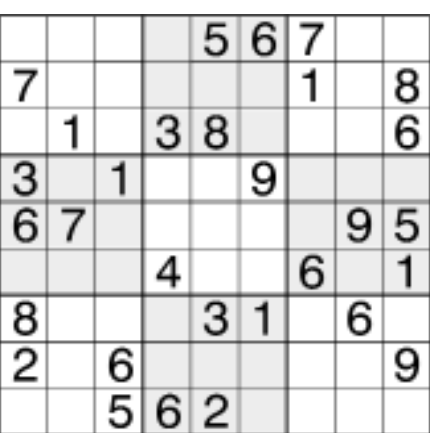
SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



SUDOKU



Yesterday's solution

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

- Hair on the upper lip
- Fortunate
- Boggy land
- A rower pulls these
- Cold region around the North Pole
- Quantity
- Wicked
- Used a car
- Helped
- A holder for mail

DOWN

- A large spotted wild cat
- Preserved in vinegar
- Six-legged creature
- A gas layer high above the Earth
- TV recorder
- Two matching items



Actor Varun Sood, who is currently the talk of the town for his much-deserved OTT debut with *Karmma Calling*, gets candid with *The Pioneer*, sharing his feelings on his journey being a slow process, his fanboy moment, staying away from social media, and more.



TEJAL SINHA

Varun Sood: The 'thirst trap' will be constant, so will be my private life

Undeniably, Varun Sood is the heartthrob of the industry, and one cannot stop adoring him. Lately, the actor has been the talk of town with his performance in the Raveena Tandon-starrer *Karmma Calling*, unleashing his charm as Ahaan Kothari. From initially playing a cameo in *Jug Jugg Jeeyo* to a remarkable main cast in *Karmma Calling*, he enthuses, "I'm just extremely grateful for every opportunity I have got. I'm glad that it's been a slow process because it gave me time to learn and also be humble about every step that I climbed."

Basically, for the series, it was the opportunity that drew him to the project. For an outsider, he says, "We need people to believe in us, and I knew this was a really big show, and the audience will also be massive. The audience is what makes an artist, and I took this as an opportunity for the audience to accept me as an actor."

The biggest star of the show is Raveena Tandon. As one of her co-stars, his biggest fanboy moment was when he saw her picture with the rest of the cast during the look test. And then, "When I stepped outside the room, there she was. I was in awe. Someone who I have admired all my life is now standing in front of me, and I will be sharing screen space with her. It still gives me jitters! Her aura is magical and powerful."

All the characters in this show are so layered and complex. But talking of his character, Ahaan, he says, he had individual readings with everyone to develop characters. So what was the brief for Ahaan Kothari? It was the poor billionaire boy who wanted to make something special of his own. She is a pretty humble and loving person, but she has grown up among the Kotharis. The *MTV Roadies* fame had to find a right balance that didn't take away Ahaan

from the fact that he also belongs to that world.

Apart from the intensive workshops, Varun had his own method of getting into the skin of a character. "I try to look different physically for every character I get. For Ahaan, I hired a trainer for the first time ever. I was on this crazy fancy diet!" All this was not to feel like Varun but to build on Ahaan.

What you put out will come back to you in the most unexpected ways, they say about *karma*. In fact, the makers too have rightfully personified *karma* and made it appear believable. But does Varun personally believe in it? "Oh yes, I do believe in the concept of *karma*," shares the handsome hunk, adding, "I have always wished well for others. No matter what has happened to me in my life, I don't wish bad things on others at all. Maybe unknowingly, I have hurt some people, but I also believe *karma* has done its job for that. I believe I'm a good human being, and I'm honestly grateful that *karma* works both ways, good and bad. Basically, it's all the good *karma* I've done, which gave me a beautiful family and such amazing friends. All in all, a beautiful life, indeed!"

Well, guess what? Every day was so special for the rising star that he had his amazing moments on the sets, just by loving to spend time on the set. So much that he kept looking forward to being back on the sets and now misses it much.

With much discussion happening around the challenges for young actors to maintain the balance between their work and social media personalities, the *MTV Splitsvilla* fame gleefully shares, "I think it's a choice we have to make. Social media is in our control, and we get to choose what to make of it. For the last 2 years, I have been away from social media because I only want people to see my work and very less of me on my social media. I'm inten-

tionally keeping my private life, my travels, and my family time to myself. Being yourself on social media is very important, and it's important to be honest, but everyone should find that healthy balance between what to post and what not to."

Not to forget, though Varun has made sure to keep his private life private, the 'thirst trap' has been incessant. And he couldn't agree much, as he asserts with a laugh, "The thirst traps will be a constant, and so will be my private life. I was in the public eye ever since I was 19, and because of the things happening around me, it was hard to keep things private. And it was probably affecting me in some way. So in the last 2 years, I thought of working on myself, travelled, and had a lot of fun without letting the world know about it. But only for myself."

From being that outsider making a mark in this industry to headlining a big-scale show, he feels it's all just getting started, and further comes a revelation: "I have two more releases in 2024." An ecstatic Varun further shares, "I'm just happy that I have people around me who believe in me and trust me with their vision. And I'm just hoping that in the future, as my work comes out, more and more people will start looking at me as a bankable

actor. So yes, every moment is fireworks in my body. But I just have to keep my head down and do good work. For me, what matters is the depth of the role, what that character is bringing to the table, and how he affects the story."

So is it that he is more focused on becoming a full-time actor or completely removing himself from the reality TV pool? Well yes! "I'm completely out of it. I don't mind hosting or judging a reality show. But that is the only association I would like to have with reality TV now." The promising actor, who also loves comedy, hopes something around the genre happens soon, as well as a superhero film, having been a fan since his childhood!



Tips for successful home plumbing

Plumbing needs tend to be your first priority when it comes to home maintenance. To maintain the integrity of their home, homeowners should be aware of a few plumbing-related topics. By using these suggestions, you can maintain your plumbing system functioning and prevent more serious issues.

1. AVOID POURING OIL OR GREASE DOWN THE DRAIN

Grease and oil residue can accumulate over time in your drains, leading to blockages. Grease and oil should be disposed of in a container, like an old coffee can, to prevent this.

2. PUT STRAINERS IN YOUR SINK

This will assist in accumulating contaminants and food particles that may clog your drain. To ensure that your strainers continue to function properly, make sure to clean them frequently.

3. UNDERSTAND WHAT NOT TO FLUSH

Disposable products such as paper towels, sanitary napkins, and diapers can block your plumbing system severely. Empty the toilet only of human waste and toilet paper. Pro tip: It might not be a good idea to use those "flushable" wipes as well.

4. REGULARLY CHECK YOUR PIPES

Every year, inspect your pipes for leaks or cracks, and get them fixed as soon as you find them. This will

lessen the likelihood that your house will sustain additional damage and save you money on future, more involved repairs.

5. KEEP YOUR SHOWER DRAIN CLEAN

We are aware that it's an unpleasant task that requires time, and who would like to perform it right after a refreshing shower? However, a build-up of hair can seriously clog your drain. After every usage, make it a habit to unclog the shower and bathtub drains by pouring a solution of cider vinegar and bicarbonate of soda down the drain every few months.

6. MAKE SURE YOUR SHOWER AND FAUCETS ARE CLEAN

Mineral buildup can be a problem for faucets and shower heads, but it's easily preventable. One useful preventive technique is to tie a little bag filled with vinegar around the shower head or tap and leave it there for the night. The build-up can simply be cleaned off in the morning.

7. USE OPTIMAL FITTINGS

Use water efficient Sanitary Ware and Sanitary fittings (kitchen taps, wash basin taps, showerheads, dual flush toilets) as per IS 17650 Part 1 and Part 2 to reduce water consumption at source by about 40-50% without compromising the user comfort.

(The author, Gurmit Singh Arora, is the National President of Indian Plumbing Association)



SHIKHA DUGGAL

In the Punjabi entertainment industry, Ihana Dhillon is an artist who has adeptly balanced several aspects of her life! *The Pioneer* was keen to learn that she has the aptitude and capacity to handle everything brilliantly, from acting to production. She will also be appearing in the upcoming film *Je Paisa Bolda Hunda* shortly. There's a great deal of enthusiasm and expectation surrounding it! It's noteworthy that a few of the songs have already received widespread praise from the public, which further heightened our excitement for this exclusive interview.

Ihana is passionate about this for a number of reasons. She shares, "It is a really straightforward family film. Compared to the other characters I have played thus far, my character and appearance are distinct. For the first time, I had a tanned appearance to fit the character. It tells the tale of a recently married couple's struggles in life. People can relate to this story, especially those who live in rural Punjab."

Ihana Dhillon chose to take a break from her career after suffering a major injury more than two years ago. The Punjabi actress adds that after recovering from her accident, she opted to take a break from her profession for health concerns, purposefully opting to work on a small number of projects in a year. She also now values quality over quantity in her career! She continues, "This script just so happened to come to me, and after only one narration, I locked it and made the decision to both produce and act in it. We spent several months refining the storyline and characters, and the result is fantastic. There weren't many difficulties encountered throughout the production because everyone knew exactly what we were shooting, and the other actors were really helpful and character-specific. By God's grace, everything went extremely well."

She is adamant that the audience will identify with the characters and plot. Since she is from rural Punjab herself, she could identify with this script when she first heard it. Her goal is to portray the struggles of everyday people and how they must battle the system to reclaim their property. Thus, she thinks Punjabis will enjoy this film. She has total faith in the finished outcome!

Talking about the recreation of a very famous track with a modern twist, she says, "The song *lakk tunuu tunuu* is a promotional track. Although it contra-

'FOR THE FIRST TIME, I HAD A TANNED APPEARANCE TO FIT THE CHARACTER'

Artist Ihana Dhillon, who will be appearing in the upcoming film *Je Paisa Bolda Hunda*, shares with *The Pioneer* her excitement for the project, the recreation of a popular track, among others.



dicts the movie's plot, it nevertheless reinforces it! The best part about this song, in my opinion, is how the music directors updated the track while leaving the vocals same. It remains in the honourable Surjit Bindrakhia ji's voice. The late Surjit Bindrakhia ji sang this iconic song, and it remains special. Manan Bhardwaj recreated the music of the recently released hugely popular song *Arjan Vailly*."

The actress also revealed that there are really not one but too many scenes that will draw in viewers. Since the film is about to be released and she doesn't want to ruin the surprise, she can't give away the entire narrative! However, she thinks each character is different, and each exchange is meaningful and different. She adds, "I am working with Hardeep Grewal for the first time. He came to mind as we were writing the script for the *Ginda* character since he is a great fit for the role! Hardeep had been of great assistance and support. He puts forth a lot of effort and is meticulous about how his persona is portrayed. Thus, it really helped the film. He is an extremely quiet and reserved person. I also didn't have a lot of time to interact personally because I was a producer on the sets too! However, we did talk and usually arranged our dialogues together on set. The audience would undoubtedly like that on-screen chemistry."

We realised in our talk with the famous actress of *Hate Story 4* how she usually considers the story's overarching narrative before focusing on the contributions her character makes. She doesn't care how big or tiny the role is; her character should matter to her! "I cherished every role I had played up until this point. However, I suppose Rani is someone I will always remember. Since I am from a village myself and have experienced the struggles Rani faces in the movie since I was a young child, I have always wanted to play a humble village girl. Thus, I truly see how I am connected to Rani. I always select music videos also that allow me to showcase my artistic abilities," she gracefully finishes the interview.

Nagal, Ramkumar draw French rivals in opening round of Bengaluru Open

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Indian ace Sumit Nagal is pitted against Geoffrey Blancaneaux, while wild card entrant Ramkumar Ramanathan will face Maxime Janvier in the men's singles main draw of the Bengaluru Open beginning here on Monday. World ranked 121 Nagal will aim to extend his dominance over French player Blancaneaux, whom he has beaten three times, including in the Australian Open Qualifiers. India No 2 Ramkumar has a 1-1 head-to-head record against Janvier of France and if he clears the first round hurdle, he is likely to run into top-seed Italian Luca Nardi, who has been drawn to meet a qualifier in his opening round. Australian Adam Walton has been seeded third and will open his campaign against



Indian wild card entrant Prajwal Dev. In the doubles main draw, Frenchman Dan Added and Korea's Yun Seong Chung have been given the top billing and will clash with the Australian pair Tristan Schoolkate and Adam Walton. Australia's Christopher Matthew Romios and Poland's Piotr Matuszewski are seeded second and will take on Taipei's Ray Ho and Australia's Calum Puttergill. There are nine Indians in the doubles main draw. N Sriram Balaji and Andre Begemann of Germany will clash with the German duo of Mark Wallner and Jakob Schnaitter. The ATP Challenger event is being organised by Karnataka State Lawn Tennis Association at KSLTA Stadium. Qualifying rounds began on Sunday, while the final is scheduled on February 18.



Man City keeps pressure on Liverpool

AP ■ LONDON

Watch out, Premier League. The competition's most lethal attacking combination is back in tandem. Erling Haaland and Kevin De Bruyne - both recently back from long injury absences - linked up for the clinching goal in Manchester City's 2-0 win over Everton on Saturday in what will be a worrying sight for the defending champions' rivals. Liverpool remained in first place after a 3-1 victory over Burnley but City is ominously placed on the leader's shoulder, two points behind with a game in hand, and with its superstar attackers back in the groove. Make it 12 times that De Bruyne has set up Haaland for a goal since they started playing together at the beginning of last season following the striker's move to England. No other Premier League partnership has delivered that many goals in this period.

"With him, I know I'm going to get it perfect. You know the ball is going to come," Haaland said of De Bruyne, English soccer's king of the assists. "I watch a lot of football and I already saw for many years where he plays the ball, and he hasn't changed anything for the last five years. For me, it was about coming in and finishing those actions." And there was something so familiar with the way De Bruyne collected the ball in center-field and deftly slid in Haaland, who bundled his marker off the ball and opened his body to steer home a finish in the 85th minute. It was Haaland's second of the game, after he broke Everton's stubborn resistance in the 71st by pouncing on a loose ball following a corner. "I like to win this type of game - suffering and knowing how difficult everything is - because we learn the lessons for what's coming," City manager Pep Guardiola said. City has won six games in a row in the league, and 10 straight in all competitions. Still, Liverpool is holding strong at the top, with Diogo Jota, Luis Diaz and Darwin Nunez - the starting front three while Mohamed Salah is out injured - all scoring at Anfield. Vincent Kompany, the Man City great in charge of Burnley, couldn't do his old club a favor. Liverpool bounced back

from only its second league loss this season, at Arsenal last weekend, though there might be concerns over the fitness of Trent Alexander-Arnold after the right back came off at halftime with a recurrence of a recent knee injury, when the score was 1-1. "Same area in the knee. Nothing really bad but he felt it again," Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said. SON'S TRIUMPHANT RETURN Son Heung-min marked his return for Tottenham after more than a month away at the Asian Cup by creating a dramatic winner against Brighton. Son, whose South Korea team was eliminated in the semifinals on Tuesday, started on the bench for his comeback game, came on at 1-1 and set up Brennan Johnson for a goal in the sixth minute of stoppage time that made it 2-1.

"It's fair to say that we are still a work in progress but we had a world-class player in Son who makes the most difficult ball look simple to set up Brennan," said Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou, whose team jumped above Aston Villa into fourth place. GUIMARAES DOUBLE Bruno Guimaraes continues to be the shining light in a difficult season for Newcastle. The Brazil midfielder scored in each half, including a superb curling shot for the winner, as Newcastle beat Nottingham Forest 3-2 to climb two places to seventh. Guimaraes' performances have been consistently excellent for Newcastle while, crucially, he has stayed healthy in a campaign that has seen manager Eddie Howe lose player after player to injury. Forest stayed two points and two places above the relegation zone but, like third-to-last Everton, was recently charged with breaching the league's financial regulations and could yet be facing a points deduction. IN-FORM TONEY Ivan Toney scored for the third time in four games since his return from a ban for breaching betting regulations as Brentford won 2-0 at Wolverhampton. Last-place Sheffield United won for just the third time this season, 3-1 at relegation rival Luton, and Fulham was the winner by the same score at Bournemouth.



Inter wins 4-2 at Roma to end De Rossi perfect record

AP ■ MILAN

A sublime second-half performance from league leader Inter Milan saw it win 4-2 at Roma in the teeming rain and end Daniele De Rossi's perfect record. Goals from Gianluca Mancini and Stephan El Shaarawy had given Roma the lead at halftime following Francesco Acerbi's opener for Inter. But the Nerazzurri turned things around immediately after the break with a strike from Marcus Thuram, who also forced an own-goal from new Roma defender Angelino. Alessandro Bastoni sealed the match late on as Inter moved seven points above second-place Juventus. The Bianconeri can cut the gap to four points with a win at home to relegation-threatened Udinese on Monday but will then have played a match more than Inter. Roma remained a point behind fourth-place Atalanta after De Rossi's first loss. The former Roma player had won all three of his matches as coach after replacing the fired Jose Mourinho. The Nerazzurri were without coach Simone Inzaghi on the bench in Rome after he picked up his fifth yellow card of the season in last weekend's win over Juventus. The suspended Inzaghi watched from the stands as his team took the lead in the 17th minute - with the help of a former Inter player. Former Nerazzurri forward Romelu Lukaku headed away an Inter corner but only as far as Acerbi, who headed it into the back of the net. However, Roma leveled in the 28th minute when a free kick was floated over the top and Mancini headed it into the bottom right corner from close range. And Roma turned the match around on the stroke of halftime as a counterattack sent El Shaarawy sprinting into the area and he unleashed a shot which hit the crossbar and the left post before also bouncing off the right post and going in.

Qatar win Asian Cup titles after beating Jordan 3-1

AP ■ LUSAIL (QATAR)

Akram Afif dropped to his knees. Pretty soon he was being thrown into the air by his joyous teammates after the forward's hat trick of penalties secured back-to-back Asian Cup titles for Qatar. Afif, the outstanding player of the tournament and leading scorer with eight goals, was nerveless when converting his spot kicks in a 3-1 win against Jordan at Lusail Stadium on Saturday. Just over a year ago it had been Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe who had lit up this spectacular venue in arguably the greatest World Cup final of all time. On this occasion it was Afif taking center stage and becoming the first player to score a hat trick in the Asian Cup final. He had been his country's standout performer from the start of the tournament and did not disappoint when it fell to him to produce the decisive moments against Jordan as Qatar became the first back-to-back winner since Japan in 2000 and 2004.

In front of more than 86,000 fans and with the pressure on, Afif never looked likely to miss from the spot and he sparked wild celebrations with each goal. (I scored) the penalties because of the confidence my teammates had in me. It is not about technique, it is about the feeling that people are behind me - my team," Afif said. He won and converted his first penalty in the 22nd minute. And after Yazan Al Naimat leveled the game in the 67th he struck again from the spot in the 73rd and sealed the win in the fifth minute of stoppage time. Afif had spoken earlier in the tournament of his wish to return to European soccer after spells in Spain and Belgium at the start of his career. His performances, which also earned him the award for the Asian Cup's most valuable player, will likely have caught the attention of clubs far and wide. While this was a personal triumph for him, it was redemption for Qatar, which had endured a miserable World Cup on home soil in



2022 when exiting the tournament after three straight defeats in the group stage. Even as host and defending champion, Qatar had been an unexpected finalist, let alone winner. Captain Hassan Al-Haydos noted on the eve of the final how critics had expected little of the team ahead of the tournament. How satisfying for him, then, to be draped in the same type of black Qatari ceremonial robe that Messi had worn to lift the World Cup. After the pain of that tournament, here was a

moment of national celebration as the Emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani handed Al-Haydos the trophy and shortly after there was an eruption of tickertape and fireworks. Earlier, Qatar's Spanish coach, Márquez López slumped in his seat, seemingly exhausted, as he waited out 17 minutes of stoppage time. The exertions of the past month appeared to have taken its toll. He had only been hired in December and Qatar had been beaten 2-1 by Jordan in a friendly in January.

Shankar wins season opening meet in Belgium

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

National record holder in high jump Tejaswin Shankar won the top prize in the International High Jump Gala Elmos 2024 athletics meet in Heist-op-den-Berg, Belgium with a leap of 2.23 metres. Shankar, competing for the first time since October last year, finished ahead of Greece's Antonios Merlos (2.20 metres) in the World Athletics Indoor Tour Challenger event on Saturday. The 25-year-old, who holds both the men's high jump and decathlon national records, however, could not better his personal best of 2.29m. Shankar is also focusing on decathlon and had won bronze and silver in the discipline in the Asian Championships and Asian Games last year.



Shankar has trained his eyes on a Paris Olympics berth but for that he will have to achieve a qualifying standard of 2.33 metres. The other Indian in fray, Jesse Sandesh finished joint-10th with a jump of 2.09 metres. Shankar will next be seen in action at the Hvezdy v Nehvizdech athletics meet in Nehvizdy, Czech Republic on February 20.

Jota, Diaz, Nunez score for Liverpool in 3-1 win over Burnley

AP ■ LIVERPOOL

Diogo Jota, Luis Diaz and Darwin Nunez - Liverpool's starting front three while Mohamed Salah is out injured - all scored for the Premier League leaders in a 3-1 win over Burnley. The Reds responded to Manchester City's extremely brief return to the league's summit, after its 2-0 victory against Everton hours earlier, with a triumph that tested their mettle even more than their stretched resources. While the three points reestablished Liverpool's two-point advantage, the less-than-convincing nature of victory against the league's next-to-last side was not quite befitting the occasion of the hosts' biggest league crowd of 59,896 after the full opening of the Anfield Road stand. For a time it appeared Liverpool, which was without goalkeeper Alisson Becker



and defender Joe Gomez because of illness as well as the injured Salah, was still suffering a hangover from the defeat at Arsenal last week. It took the familiar right boot of Trent Alexander-Arnold, setting a new mark of 58 for Premier League assists by a defender, and the equally reliable head of Jota to put

them ahead at a corner in the 31st. The sloppy concession of an equalizer, when Dara O'Shea headed in at a corner on the stroke of halftime, posed further problems as did the withdrawal of Alexander-Arnold - only recently returned from a knee injury - at the break. It was the England international's replacement, Harvey Elliott, who set up headed goals for Diaz in the 52nd and Nunez in the 78th to ease the pressure. However, had on-loan Chelsea forward David Fofana been as clinical as he was scoring twice last weekend, then not only would Liverpool be looking up at City but questions would have started to be asked about their ability to match their long-time rivals. Liverpool should have Salah and Dominic Szoboszlai back from injury in the next couple of weeks.

Paul, Giron advance to Dallas Open final

AP ■ DALLAS

Second-seeded Tommy Paul Sand unseeded Marcos Giron won in straight sets to set up an all-American final in the Dallas Open. Paul beat No. 3 seed Ben Shelton of the U.S., 6-2, 6-4, and Giron rolled over a seeded opponent again, beating No. 4 seed Adrian Mannarino of France, 6-1, 6-3, in the semifinals. The 30-year-old Giron, who beat top-seeded American Frances Tiafoe in the

quarterfinals, is seeking his first ATP Tour title Sunday in his second trip to a final. Paul's only title came in 2021 in Stockholm. Paul won the final four games of the first set before a break early in the second set held up against the 21-year-old Shelton in the hardcourt event on the SMU campus. Giron took a 4-0 lead in the first set a day after going up 5-0 in a straight-set win over Tiafoe, who was the highest-ranked player in the tournament at No. 14.



The first break of the second set came when Giron made a lunging save with a forehand, then ran down Mannarino's

volley for a backhand crosscourt passing shot and a 5-3 lead. Giron, who hasn't lost a service game in four matches in the tournament, had little trouble closing out the match on his serve. With three victories over seeded opponents, Giron has a chance to surpass his career-best ranking of 49th from 2022, when Giron lost his only previous final in San Diego. Giron reached the semifinals in Dallas two years ago, losing a three-setter to Jensen

Brooksby while having match points. The final two sets went to tiebreakers. "That stuck with me, and that's hard," Giron said. "I have experience. I know what it's like to lose. I know what it's like to win. Having a big win yesterday was awesome, and I'm really, really happy to be able to come back today." Paul reached two finals last year, losing in a grass-court event at Eastbourne and a hardcourt tournament in Acapulco. The 26-year-old Paul

converted three of eight break points against the hard-serving Giron while saving all three break points he faced. The 15th-ranked Paul, who stopped a six-match losing streak against top 20 opponents, had dropped his previous two matches against Shelton, who is No. 16. "Obviously, his serve is unbelievable," Paul said. "These courts kind of help me a little bit. You don't have to jump in quite as high. Kind of kept the ball in my strike zone.

FORTHCOMING, IS A TIMELY FILM LIKE MYRA

tollywood



Pan-Indian film *Myra* is originally directed by Smile Sreenu in Telugu. Smile Sreenu is a well-known name in Kannada where he works under the Padma Shri Tridandi Devanatha Ramanuja Jeyar Swamiji, who suggests that the times we live in require a film with such a strong message. According to Swamiji, "it seems that this film will be very useful for today's

times when our way of living is antagonistic towards sustainable living and environment," implying that contemporary living has harmed nature. "Please see this movie in a number of languages, not just Telugu and Kannada. I will support a movie this good," he declared. The film's director, stated, "I am appreciative of Swamiji's blessings. He proposed that the film be produced as a pan-Indian production. In addition, he made some recommendations on the subject of coexisting peacefully with nature. His remarks have increased our bravery. We will soon make more information public about our plans to film this Telugu movie featuring a famous heroine too."

KALKI 2898 AD GLIMPSE OUT NOW

Santhosh Narayanan shares the theme of *Kalki's 2898 AD* glimpse. Fans are excitedly anticipating the premiere of Prabhas and Deepika Padukone's next film *Kalki 2898 AD* in May 2024! The excitement around the film is quite evident. A tantalizing sneak peek of the film's unreleased theme song was recently given to spectators at singer Santhosh Narayanan's *Neeve Oli* performance in Chennai, adding to the frenzy. The captivated audience responded well to the two-minute clip which purportedly included Prabhas' entrance moment, greatly increasing the excitement around the film's premiere too. Santhosh Narayanan's mesmerizing score sets the tone for this future tale, and *Kalki 2898 AD* is sure to enthrall viewers with its inventive graphics, gripping story, and outstanding acting. The anticipation for the picture is growing as the days before its release draw closer, and it seems like a great movie experience for everyone. The film's star power is further enhanced with the inclusion of the outstanding Disha Patani in a prominent part alongside Prabhas and Deepika Padukone. Filmed concurrently in Telugu and Hindi, *Kalki 2898 AD* is anticipated to be a visual extravaganza, with breathtaking cinematography by Djordje Stojiljkovic and fluid editing by Kotagiri Venkateswara Rao! With a star-studded ensemble cast that includes the renowned Amitabh Bachchan and the famed Kamal Haasan in key roles too, *Kalki 2898 AD*, directed by Nag Ashwin, is adding to all its allure and popularity among moviegoers.

The director of *Dhamaka* is accused of being 'indecent' to actress Payal Radhakrishna

Director Trinadha Rao Nakkina, of *Cinema Choopistha Mava* and *Dhamaka* fame, spoke for sixteen minutes on a wide range of topics at a film event in Hyderabad recently. Allegedly, he made actress Payal Radhakrishna feel uncomfortable for a minute!

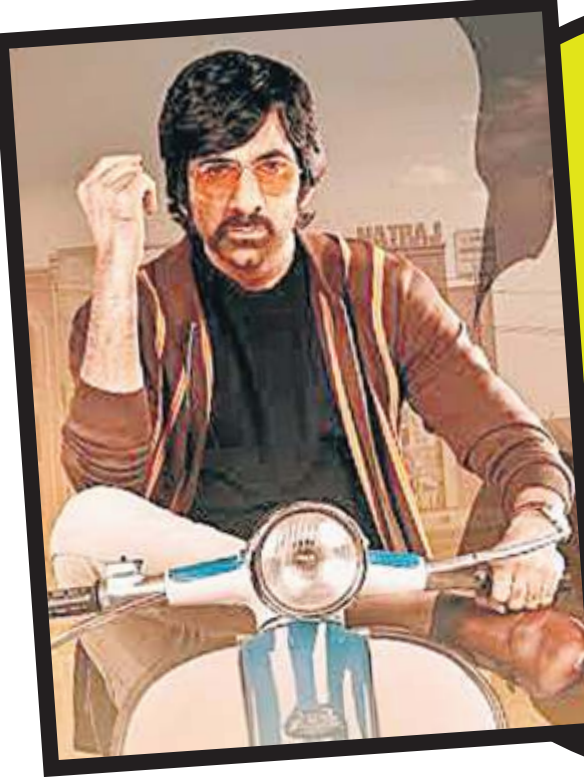


Nenu Local director got off to a regular start. "Payal is a girl from Telugu. She was raised in Bengaluru." Then he began to make her look embarrassed. "She's hugged everyone on the set but me. She has always had my whole affection. If she hugs me, what does she think she will lose?" stated Trinadha Rao. In an attempt to be funny, he continued, "She is not hugging me even though I, the producer of this film, have cleared all her payments with GST." Trinadha Rao's so called sense of humour increased when Payal approached the director and patted him. "Can you call this a hug? Is this what people in the world refer to as a hug? The ultimate must be a hug," he continued.



With Tollywood actor Mahesh Babu, renowned filmmaker SS Rajamouli is presently in pre-production for his next project. With the working title *SSMB 29*, the project has been making waves for a very interesting reason. For several days now, speculation on social media has been rife that Chelsea Elizabeth Islan, an actress from Indonesia, would play a significant role in *SSMB 29*. Since online users saw her recent Instagram activity, these unfounded rumours have gotten stronger. She has started to follow SS Rajamouli on social media. It's important to note that she follows Deepika Padukone and Disha Patani, the female leads of *Kalki 2898 AD*, rather than Mahesh Babu. Under Durga Arts, *SSMB 29*—a traveling adventure in the style of Indiana Jones—will be developed by KL Narayana. MM Keeravaani is the music director, and Vijayendra Prasad writes the screenplay.

SSMB 29: REPORTEDLY, INDONESIAN ACTRESS CHELSEA ELIZABETH ISLAN WILL BE LANDING A PIVOTAL ROLE IN THE MOVIE



Harish Shankar drops an update on *Mr Bachchan*

Eagle, which was recently released and was directed by Karthik Ghattamaneni, is currently bringing in a lot of money for Mass Maharaja Ravi Teja. In the middle of the festivities, *Mr. Bachchan* has been making news as his next project. The most recent schedule of *Mr. Bachchan*, directed by Harish Shankar, has just finished. The director announced the completion on social media and thanked DOP Ayananka Bose and Ravi Teja for their steadfast support. He increased excitement for the movie by sharing enticing on-set stills with the announcement! Bhagyashri Borse is making her Tollywood debut in this movie, and the prestigious People Media Factory is supporting the venture. Mickey J Meyer, who takes on the position of music director for this exciting endeavor, heightens the anticipation.

BUZZ: IS RAKUL PREET PLAYING SHURPANAKHA?

Right now, Nitesh Tiwari is working hard on the fascinating project called *Ramayana*. Pre-production for the movie is presently underway, and the directors are also focussed on deciding on the main actors. Rakul Preet Singh is rumored to be joining the cast as well! The official cast list for the movie has not yet been released. However, it is essentially known that Ranbir Kapoor will play Lord Sri Ram. Although Sai Pallavi has expressed her intention to join, she has not yet given her approval to portray Sita. There are talks for Rakul Preet Singh to play Shurpanakha. It is a pivotal figure in the *Ramayana*, and most of the previous *Ramayana* filmmakers portrayed her negatively. However, Nitesh wants to highlight her beauty and give her a new perspective on life. The cast and crew details will be formally revealed by the team at a press conference.