



The Pioneer

Paper with passion since 1864

RNI No.APENG/2018/76468

*LATE CITY VOL. 7 ISSUE 136 | *Air Surcharge Extra if Applicable

PUBLISHED FROM: VIJAYAWADA DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL BHUBANESWAR RANCHI RAIPUR CHANDIGARH DEHRADUN HYDERABAD

Over Rs 22 cr incurred on PM's visit to US in June 2023'



'FILM FESTIVALS ARE FOR EVERYONE—COME, WATCH, BE INSPIRED'



Vaishnavi Chaitanya responds to SKN's remarks about Telugu ACTRESSES



QUOTE OF THE DAY

The Pioneer

I have great respect for Modi. But I would like to ask the PM to explain why people from Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh are coming to South India for jobs. Why are people from other states not going to UP and Gujarat? Who brought about the development visible in Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad? Is it us or Modi? Some leaders focus on marketing. However, we work hard

— A. Revanth Reddy, Chief Minister, Telangana P4

DON'T MISS...

Celebrities named in betting Apps FIR

The Miyapur Police have registered a First Information Report (FIR) naming actors Rana Daggubati, Prakash Raj, Vijay Devarakonda, Lakshmi Manchu, Praneetha and Nidhi Agarwal in connection with the promotion of online betting applications. The FIR, filed under Sections of the IT Act and BNS, follows an investigation into celebrities and social media influencers endorsing gambling platforms. In all, the list of actors/actresses leads to six and social media influencers are 19, totalling 25. A few names of social media influencers...

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India ranks 118th in World Happiness

India ranked 118th in the World Happiness Report 2025 published Thursday, up from the 126th position in the previous year but below countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Ukraine and Palestine. The 13th edition of the annual report, released coinciding with the International Day of Happiness that falls on March 20 each year, focuses on the impact of caring and sharing on people's happiness, including how sharing a meal increases happiness. Finland is ranked as the happiest country in the...

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Investors' wealth surges Rs 17.43l cr

Market investors kitty swelled by Rs 17.43 lakh crore in four days of sharp rally in equities where the BSE benchmark Sensex jumped over 3 per cent. On Thursday, the 30-share benchmark Sensex jumped 899.01 points or 1.19 per cent to settle at 76,348.06, regaining the 76,000 level. During the day, it soared 1,007.2 points or 1.33 per cent to 76,456.25. In four days, the Sensex zoomed 2,519.15 points or 3.41 per cent. The market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms surged Rs 17,43,418.8 crore to Rs 4,08,61,851.73 cr...

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BCCI lifts saliva ban in IPL

The BCCI on Thursday lifted the ban on use of saliva on the ball in the upcoming Indian Premier League after a majority of captains agreed to its proposal, making it the first major cricket competition to do away with the restriction that was a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision was taken at the captains' meeting in Mumbai ahead of the league starting on Saturday. "The saliva ban has been lifted. Majority of captains were in favour of the move. Some had reservations about the..."

-SPORTS

CM firm on SC sub-grouping

Says resolution to include Budaga Jangam in SC list will be sent to Centre

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has reiterated his commitment to the sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes (SC) in the State, emphasising that the move will ensure equitable distribution of benefits without disadvantaging any community.

Addressing the Assembly on Thursday, he described the resolution of this decades-old issue as a milestone, recalling that discussions on the subject date back to his first tenure as Chief Minister in 1995. He also highlighted the Supreme Court's endorsement of sub-categorization and assured that it would foster social justice among SC sub-groups.

Naidu stated that the state-level implementation of SC sub-categorization had commenced based on the 2011 Census. Once the 2026 Census is completed, the categorisation process will be extended to the district level, ensuring that the rights and dignity of all SC communities are protected. He also announced that a resolution to include the Budaga Jangam community in the SC category would be sent to the Central government.

The issue of SC sub-categorization has been under discussion for nearly three decades, with the Chief Minister describing it as a rare opportunity to correct long-standing

- State-level implementation began based on the 2011 Census; district-level execution after the 2026 Census
- Naidu recalls past caste discrimination and credits NTR for pioneering social justice initiatives
- Justice Punnayya Commission issues 25 orders against untouchability
- Justice Rajeev Ranjan Mishra Commission classified 59 SC sub-groups into three categories for reservations
- TDP historically fought against caste discrimination and promoted Dalit leadership



● Naidu announces 'P4' initiative to uplift the bottom 20% using top 10% wealth

● Caste certification for Turpu Kapu community and other social justice efforts to continue

inequalities. Reflecting on past struggles, he noted that Dalits had faced systemic discrimination, including denial of access to drinking water and substandard living conditions. He praised former Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao for pioneering social justice initiatives such as establishing permanent housing for SCs and STs and creating social welfare schools.

Recalling previous efforts to address caste-based discrimination, Naidu highlighted the role of the Justice Punnayya Commission,

which led to the issuance of 25 government orders to combat untouchability.

He also acknowledged the contribution of Manda Krishna, a leader of the Madiga community, whose "Madiga Dandora" movement pushed for justice for marginalized groups. The Justice Ramachandra Rao Commission, established in 1996, further examined the socio-economic status of Dalits in the state. The state government had initially sub-categorized SC reservations into four groups in 1997, a system

approved by then-President K.R. Narayanan. This categorization created over 22,000 job opportunities for Madigas and other sub-groups. However, the Supreme Court ruled in 2004 that only Parliament had the authority to decide on sub-categorization.

In 2023, the apex court upheld the legality of SC sub-categorization, citing the findings of the Justice Usha Mehra Commission, which had confirmed its positive impact.

Continued on Page 2



22 Naxals killed in two encounters in Chhattisgarh

PNS ■ BIJAPUR

In a fresh offensive against Naxals, at least 22 members of the banned CPI (Maoists) were killed in two separate encounters in Chhattisgarh, officials said on Thursday. While 18 Naxals were killed in Bijapur district, four Maoists were gunned down in Kanker areas by a joint team of the BSF and DRG personnel of the state police.

Intermittent firing was still going on in Kanker as reports last came in, the officials said.

A police jawan was also killed in the encounter at Bijapur, they said.

The gunfight broke out at around 7 am in a forest along the border of Bijapur and Dantewada districts when a joint team of security personnel was out an anti-Naxalite operation in Gangaloor police station area (in Bijapur), he said. Bodies of 18 Naxalites along with firearms and explosives were recovered from the spot, the senior police official said.

A jawan of the state police's District Reserve Guard (DRG) unit was also killed in the gunfight, he said.

Shah: Moving forward with ruthless approach



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said the security forces have achieved another big success in its march to make the country Naxal-free by killing 22 members of the CPI (Maoists) in Chhattisgarh.

Shah also said the Narendra Modi government is moving forward with a ruthless approach against the Naxalites, and adopting a zero tolerance policy against those extremists who are not surrendering despite all the facilities being offered.

AMARAVATI WORKS

Row over AP govt's tender exemptions

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The State government's recent handling of tenders exceeding the 5% ceiling rule has sparked a major controversy, raising concerns over transparency and favouritism in the bidding process.

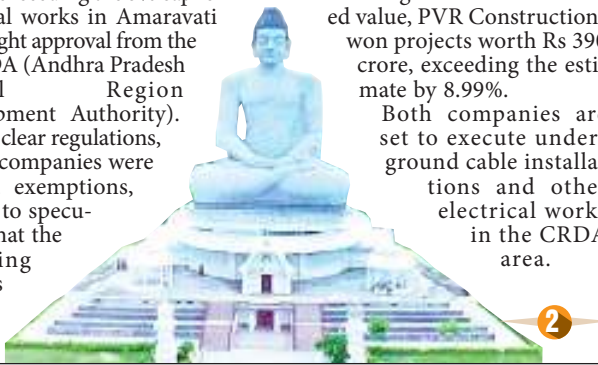
As per state regulations, any tender exceeding 5% of the estimated value must be cancelled to prevent irregularities. The rule, introduced under GO 133 on November 20, 2004, was designed to ensure fair competition and prevent inflated bids. However, recent developments suggest that these guidelines were bypassed for select contractors.

Exemptions raise eyebrows
The Municipal Administration Department has reportedly allowed tenders exceeding the 5% cap for electrical works in Amaravati and sought approval from the APCRDA (Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority). Despite clear regulations, certain companies were granted exemptions, leading to speculation that the tendering process was manipulated to benefit preferred contractors.

Critics argue that officials have inflated project estimates to work around the ceiling rule, ensuring that chosen firms could still secure contracts. This has intensified concerns that such exemptions could become more frequent, potentially undermining the integrity of public procurement.

High-value contracts
While World Bank-funded CRDA projects remain under strict financial scrutiny, BSR Amaravati projects have reportedly allowed exemptions. Two major contracts awarded under these exemptions have drawn particular attention. While one company secured a Rs 1,082.44 crore contract with a bid 8.98% higher than the estimated value, PVR Constructions won projects worth Rs 390 crore, exceeding the estimate by 8.99%.

Both companies are set to execute underground cable installations and other electrical works in the CRDA area.



Speaker slams YSRCP MLAs for skipping Assembly

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

State Legislative Assembly Speaker Chintakayala Ayannapathrudu has expressed strong displeasure over the conduct of YSRC MLAs, accusing them of failing to attend proceedings despite submitting questions for discussion.

The Speaker criticized members who signed the attendance register but did not stay for the sessions, depriving others of the opportunity to speak.

Continued on Page 2

TRANSFORMER PURCHASES

YSRCP govt favoured one firm for 90% of deals: Gottipati

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In a sharp criticism of the previous YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government, State Energy Minister Gottipati Ravi Kumar alleged that 90% of transformer purchases over the last five years were awarded to a single company. Speaking in the Legislative Assembly on Thursday, he responded to questions raised by MLAs B Balaramakrishna, Kalva Srinivasulu, and Somireddy Chandramohan Reddy.

The Minister assured that the government would ensure the availability of transformers ahead of the agricultural season, preventing any disruptions for farmers. He accused the YSRCP regime of failing to replace even a single electricity pole during



cultural season, preventing any disruptions for farmers. He accused the YSRCP regime of failing to replace even a single electricity pole during

its tenure and neglecting transformer repairs. However, he stated that the new alliance government had already begun replacing broken power poles and repairing damaged transformers.

Ravi Kumar said that the necessary transformers for the Rajahmundry constituency would be supplied before summer. He added that under the new government, the distribution of 10,000 transformers across APSPDCL would prioritize support for MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises).

Continued on Page 2

AP on high alert as heatwave intensifies

Chief Secy directs officials to take steps to safeguard public health

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The State government has sounded a heatwave alert, urging people to take precautions as temperatures continue to soar. Chief Secretary K Vijayanand, in a virtual meeting with officials on Thursday, emphasised the need for immediate meas-



ures to safeguard public health over the next three months. With temperatures currently

ranging between 40 and 42 degrees Celsius, Vijayanand directed the authorities, including disaster management teams, to launch awareness campaigns. He stressed the need to protect vulnerable groups, particularly daily wage labourers, by ensuring the availability of drinking water, buttermilk, shaded rest areas, and first aid facilities. Special arrangements must also be made at examination centres to ensure the safety of students.

Continued on Page 2

Assembly session ends

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The 3rd session of the 16th Legislative Assembly concluded after 15 days of discussions, totalling 85 hours and 52 minutes. Lawmakers engaged in debates on governance and legislative matters, answering 113 starred questions orally and placing 39 on record.

Nine bills were introduced and passed, with 127 speeches and five short discussions held. The session also included debates under Rule 344 and Rule 74, along with the adoption of two resolutions.



Israeli strikes Gaza again, kills 85 Palestinians

PNS ■ JERUSALEM

Israeli airstrikes overnight into Thursday struck several homes in the Gaza Strip and killed at least 85 Palestinians, according to local health officials.

Among those pulled alive from the rubble was a month-old baby girl, but her parents and brother were killed.

Hamas fired three rockets at Israel on Thursday without causing casualties. It was the first such attack since Israel resumed heavy bombardment of Gaza on Tuesday,

shattering the ceasefire that had halted the 17-month war.

The Israeli military also restarted its blockade of northern Gaza, including Gaza City, which it maintained for most of the war. It said people would only be allowed to leave and head south on Gaza's coastal road.

And in Israel, hundreds of people demonstrated outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem to protest his handling of the hostage crisis and his plan to fire the country's head of internal security.

Rs 6,200 cr dues of employees to be released today

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In a relief to government employees, Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has directed the Finance Department to release Rs 6,200 crore under CPS, GPF, and APGLI categories. The funds will be disbursed on Friday to clear pending dues.

Despite financial constraints, the coalition government remains committed to employee welfare. Earlier, on January 11, Rs 1,033 crore was released for various outstanding payments.

This latest move underscores the government's focus on supporting its workforce by ensuring timely payments and financial security.

AP LEGISLATIVE CULTURAL EVENING

Minister Durgesh shines with stellar performance

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh Legislative Cultural Evening turned into a spectacle of artistic brilliance as Minister for Tourism, Culture, and Cinematography Kandukuri Durgesh delivered a mesmerizing performance, portraying the character of 'Balachandra'. His impeccable expressions and stage presence captivated the audience, leaving an indelible impression.

Beyond his political role, Minister Durgesh's deep passion for the arts and cultural preservation was evident in his performance. His active involvements in promoting artistic expression underscores the government's commitment to safeguarding Andhra Pradesh's rich cultural legacy.



The evening served as a testament to the power of the performing arts in uniting people and preserving traditions. As the applause echoed through the venue, it was clear that Minister Durgesh's contribution to cultural promotion extends far beyond the stage.

Highlighting the role of entertainment in politics, he said cultural activities foster unity and communication. He praised Deputy Speaker Raghurama Krishna Raju's dialogues, comparing them to legendary actor N.T. Rama Rao's, and commended MLA Vishnukumar Raju's performance.

CM lauds talents of lawmakers

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu attended a cultural event in Vijayawada where MLAs and MLCs showcased their talents in sports and arts. The event, celebrating leadership and camaraderie, saw the CM personally honoring standout performances.

Continued on Page 2

UNION MINISTER'S CLARIFICATION

No direct financial support for new industries under ESDP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister of State for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Shobha Karandlaje has clarified that the Entrepreneurship and Skill Development Programme (ESDP) does not provide direct financial support for setting up new industries.

Responding to a query from MPs Kesineni Sivanath (Chinni) and Daggumalla Prasada Rao in the Lok Sabha, she stated in a written reply that the scheme focuses on skill development and entrepreneurship promotion rather than direct funding.

The MPs had sought details on the number of industrialists trained under ESDP over the past five years, the number of women entrepreneurs among them, and the new enterprises approved under the scheme.

According to the Minister, 17,883 aspiring industrialists received training under ESDP in Andhra Pradesh during this period, including 10,003 women. She emphasized that the scheme aims to support entrepreneurs, particularly from



marginalized communities, including SCs, STs, women, differently-abled individuals, and economically weaker sections.

Karandlaje reiterated that while ESDP encourages entrepreneurship, it does not offer financial aid for starting new ventures. Instead, it focuses on equipping individuals with skills to enhance their entrepreneurial capabilities.

MP Sivanath invited to TANA meet

VIJAYAWADA: Vijayawada MP Kesineni Sivanath (Chinni) has been invited to attend the 24th Telugu Association of North America (TANA) Conference, scheduled from July 3 to 5 in Detroit, USA. TANA representatives handed over the formal invitation to the MP during a meeting in Delhi on Thursday, where they also briefed him on the association's service activities. The invitation was extended by TANA Chairman Gangadhar Nadella, Conference Director Sunil Panthra, former President Jayaram Komati, BJP State Media Incharge Paturi Nagabhushan, and several prominent NRIs



Rs 12.82 crore released for pastors' honorariums: Min

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The state government has released Rs 12.82 crore for honorarium payments to Christian pastors across the state, Minister for Law and Minority Welfare NMD Farooq announced on Thursday. He stated that the funds would be distributed among 8,427 pastors, with each receiving Rs 5,000 per month.

Farooq noted that the government has been releasing funds for pastors' honorariums since May last year. He also highlighted that last month, the state disbursed Rs 45 crore for the six-month honorariums of imams and mouzams.

Reaffirming the government's commitment to minority welfare, the minister said it remains a top priority for the coalition government.

Govt cracks down on drugs

Minister Vasamsetti lauds film raising awareness of menace

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh government is intensifying its crackdown on drug abuse, with Home Minister Anitha spearheading efforts through the Elite Anti-Narcotics Group for Law Enforcement (EAGLE), said Labour Minister Vasamsetti Subhash. He accused the previous government of neglecting drug control measures and allowing children to fall victim to addiction.

On Thursday, Subhash launched the trailer of Dark Deals, a film produced by Sameera Films, in Vijayawada. Speaking at the event, chaired by producer Kazunori Maulali, he blamed the previous administration under YS Jagan Mohan Reddy for failing to tackle unemployment, which he said had driven many jobless youth toward drugs.

The Minister emphasized that under CM Chandrababu Naidu's leadership, the Home Department, led by Minister



Anitha, has been taking aggressive action against drug trafficking. He praised the formation of the EAGLE team within the police department, which is working to eradicate drugs from the state. He also commended Minister Anitha for her strong leadership in this fight.

Subhash lauded the team behind Dark Deals for shedding light on the dangers of drug abuse and hoped such films would inspire positive change among the youth. He urged filmmakers to continue

producing impactful projects that raise awareness and help prevent addiction.

The Minister assured that the government is committed to tackling unemployment through vocational training and job opportunities to steer young people away from destructive pursuits.

Producer Kazunori Maulali and director Kiran thanked the Minister for his support. Actresses Tejaswini, Asha, Uma, and actors Edakondalu and Sudhakar were also present at the event.



RGUKT students excel in GATE 2025 rankings

Ashok Amireddy of Nuzvid Campus secures 12th rank in Chemical Engineering

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Students from Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge Technologies (RGUKT-AP), hailing from the Nuzvid, Idupulapaya, Ongole, and Srikakulam campuses, commonly recognised as the Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), have excelled in the GATE 2025 examinations conducted by IIT Roorkee. Approximately 400 students demonstrated their academic prowess, with over 30 achieving ranks below 1,000, reflecting their dedication and the support provided by the university.

Notably, Ashok Amireddy from the Nuzvid campus in the erstwhile Krishna district (now it is in the Eluru district) achieved an impressive all-India 12th rank in Chemical Engineering, significantly enhancing RGUKT's reputation on a national scale. Across various disciplines, students secured remarkable ranks, underscoring the high standards of education and training offered at the university.

This outstanding success is largely attributed to the GATE-25 Support Programme initiated by the university, which played a crucial role in preparing students for the exam.

The programme, overseen by M. Ramakrishna, the Central Faculty Coordinator of the Higher Education and Competitive Exams Cell, included doubt-clearing sessions, an online practice test series, and video lectures on non-technical subjects relevant to the GATE syllabus.

SRM hosts intl meet on South Asian political perspective

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

SRM University-AP hosted a two-day international conference on 'Democracy's Undoing: South Asia and its Politics' on Thursday to explore the pressing issues and challenges faced by various democracies in South Asia. The conference organised under the aegis of the Department of Political Science, Easwari School of Liberal Arts, explored the concept of democracy and its relevance to the current political landscape in South Asia. Academicians, research scholars and social scientists from renowned institutions across the world were part of the two-day conference.

Prof Ashok Acharya from the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, delivered the first keynote session on the contextual explorations of liberalism. He examined liberal values and how they align with democracy in today's complex political climate. Tracing the relationship between liberalism and democracy, Prof Acharya stated, "The 20th century saw democracy take root as a



regime, while liberalism functioned as a guiding ideology with an emphasis on liberty, self-governance, and diversity." He elaborated on the significance of "dissensus" in a liberal democratic society.

The second keynote address welcomed Dr Kurt Annen, a Professor of Economics at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, who offered a global perspective on democracies. One of the central themes of the lecture was the challenge of establishing a clear causal relationship between democracy and economic growth. He also highlighted the importance of understanding

the mechanisms through which democracies may foster economic development.

Prof Vishnupad, Dean, Easwari School of Liberal Arts, in his welcome address, deliberated on various aspects of democracy and shared the vision behind Easwari School of Liberal Arts, now home to seven vibrant departments, each oriented towards the holistic growth of its students-intellectual, emotional, and ethical. Dr Idris Hassan Bhat, Assistant Professor of the Department of Political Science and the convener of the conference, addressed the resilience of democratic ideals in South Asian nations.

AP on high alert as heatwave...

Continued from Page 1

To enhance coordination, the Chief Secretary ordered the appointment of nodal officers at the district level. These officers will oversee district-specific heatwave action plans and ensure seamless communication between various departments. He also called for extensive public awareness campaigns through media platforms to educate people on precautionary measures.

The Disaster Management Organisation has been tasked with issuing early alerts for areas expected to experience extreme heat. Departments such as Health, Labour, Agriculture, Electricity, and Rural Development have been directed to implement necessary steps to minimize the impact of the heatwave.

Advising the public to avoid going out-

doors between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., Vijayanand warned that exposure to extreme heat could result in heatstroke and other serious health complications. He recommended staying hydrated by drinking ample water and consuming light foods, along with natural beverages like fruit juices, coconut water, and buttermilk instead of aerated drinks. The state has already recorded a maximum temperature of 42.7 degrees Celsius, and the India Meteorological Department has predicted that heatwave conditions will persist from March to May. Director of Disaster Management R Kurmanadh confirmed that daily temperature bulletins are being issued, with alerts being disseminated via social media and WhatsApp. As the heatwave intensifies, the government is ramping up efforts to mitigate its impact and ensure public safety.

Speaker slams YSRCP...

Continued from Page 1

"While signatures are recorded in the assembly registers, the respective members are conspicuously absent from the proceedings," he remarked. Questioning their commitment, he asked, "What does it mean to be elected by the people and then behave like a thief?"

He pointed out that some legislators were only appearing briefly to mark their presence before leaving, calling it a practice that does not add to their respect.

The Speaker named specific MLAs, including V Balangi Reddy, Thathiparthi Chandrasekhar, Regam Matsyalingam, Virupakshi, Dasari Sudha, Akepanti Amaranadha Reddy, and Vishveshwara Raju, who were noted for such behaviour. Urging them to uphold their responsibility, Ayannapatrudu stressed that elected representatives must honour their mandate by actively participating in legislative duties.

Row over AP...

Continued from Page 1

The selective enforcement of the 5% ceiling rule has led to confusion and criticism, with officials questioning the fairness of the process.

Political fallout

Municipal Administration Minister Narayana and CRDA Commissioner Kanna Babu have come under fire for allegedly recommending that tenders exceeding the 5% cap should not be cancelled. This has fuelled speculation that the process was deliberately manipulated, prompting concerns that similar exceptions may be extended to more tenders in the future. As discussions on the fairness and transparency of the tendering system continue, opposition leaders and industry experts are calling for greater scrutiny and accountability to ensure that public funds are utilized effectively and without bias.

Govt neglecting Minorities: YSRCP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Former Deputy Chief Minister Amzad Basha criticised the coalition government for neglecting minorities and discontinuing welfare measures for Haj pilgrims. Speaking to the media here on Thursday, he said the government failed to renew the embarkation facility at Gannavaram Airport, which was secured through the efforts of former Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy. Earlier, Haj pilgrims from Andhra Pradesh had to travel to Hyderabad due to the lack of an embarkation facility in the state.

CM lauds talents...

Continued from Page 1

He also appreciated Macherla MLA Brahmareddy and Anjaneyulu for their enactment of leader-worker interactions. Emphasizing fitness, Naidu quipped that an active Assembly could reduce health-care costs. "If all MLAs stay fit, we can cut the health budget and boost funds for entertainment and sports," he said. Reflecting on political discourse, he lamented increasing hostility, urging both ruling and opposition parties to focus on public welfare. He recalled past exchanges with former CM Marri Chenna Reddy, which, despite being intense, remained respectful.

CM firm on SC...

Continued from Page 1

Responding to ongoing demands for justice, Naidu underscored the establishment of the Justice Rajeev Ranjan Mishra Commission in November 2024. The commission's report, submitted in March 2025, classified 59 SC sub-groups into three categories: Group 1 (Most Backward) with 1% reservation for communities like Relli, Group 2 (Backward) with 6.5% reservation for Madiga sub-groups, and Group 3 (Relatively Less Backward) with 7.5% reservation for Mala sub-groups. This framework aims to ensure fair distribution of job opportunities among SC communities.

Naidu also highlighted the Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) long-standing commitment to fighting caste discrimination. Under NTR's leadership, the party introduced several measures to safeguard the rights of Dalits and tribals, including laws to protect tribal lands and the establishment of special grievance cells for SCs and STs. Additionally, TDP set up special courts to address atrocities against Dalits and provided free legal aid to victims. The party has played a significant role in promoting

Dalit leadership in politics, appointing GMC Balayogi as the first Dalit Speaker of the Lok Sabha. Naidu also recalled TDP's support in the election of K.R. Narayanan as President of India and APJ Abdul Kalam as President, backed by then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Expressing his commitment to economic upliftment, Naidu said that poverty eradication remains a top priority. He recounted his government's past initiatives, including the introduction of Public-Private Partnerships (P3) for economic growth, and announced a new initiative, "P4," aimed at supporting the bottom 20% of economically weaker sections by utilizing resources from the top 10%.

The Chief Minister also assured that the government would continue working on caste certification for the Turpu Kapu community and other marginalized groups to ensure social justice reaches all sections of society. He reaffirmed his commitment to eradicating caste-based discrimination and fostering an inclusive society with equal opportunities for all communities, regardless of their socio-economic background.

CM reviews preparations for P-4 launch

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday conducted a review meeting on the Zero Poverty and P-4 (Public-Private People's Partnership) programmes, set to be launched on March 30, coinciding with Ugadi.

The State government has formulated these initiatives as part of the Swarnandhra Vision-2047 and the 10-point programme, aiming to make citizens key partners in economic growth and direct beneficiaries of welfare measures.

Under the Zero Poverty-P-4 framework, financially sound families—particularly the top 10 per cent economically and those residing abroad—will support 20 per cent of families living below the poverty line.

10,000 police constable posts to be filled

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Home Minister Vangalapati Anitha announced that the government is working to fill over 10,000 constable vacancies in the State police department. Of the 16,862 sanctioned posts, recruitment for 6,100 constables has been completed, while proposals for the remaining 10,762 have been submitted to the DGP for approval.

Responding to MLA Konathala Ramakrishna's queries on police welfare, she assured that recruitment would begin once approvals are received. A committee will also be formed to address promotion-related issues, pending court clearance.

On police promotions, Anitha cited a legal dispute over the seniority list, which led to some DSPs being demoted to CIs. She acknowledged a financial burden of Rs 100 crore annually for new posts but assured that the government was committed to resolving the issue.

TODAY
ALMANAC
Month & Paksham: Krishna Paksha
Tithi: Saptami: Mar 21 02:45 AM to Mar 22 04:24 AM
Ashtami: Mar 22 04:24 AM to Mar 23 05:23 AM
Nakshatram: Jyeshtha: Mar 20 11:31 PM to Mar 22 01:45 AM
Moola: Mar 22 01:45 AM to Mar 23 03:23 AM
Rahukalam: 10:53 AM to 12:23 PM
Yamagandam: 3:23 PM to 4:53 PM
Varjyam: 01:41 AM to 03:23 AM
Gulika: 7:53 AM to 9:23 AM
Amritakalam: 04:08 PM to 05:53 PM
Abhijit Muhurtham: 11:59 AM to 12:47 PM

VIJAYAWADA WEATHER
Forecast: Sunny
Temp: 34°C
Humidity: 70%
Sunrise: 6:11 AM
Sunset: 6:18 PM
Updated: March 20, 2025 5:00 PM

GOVERNMENT OF ANDHRA PRADESH
RURAL WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION DEPARTMENT
E-PROCUREMENT TENDER NOTICE
NIT No 23-559NT/2024-25 Dt: 19-03-2025
Online tenders are being invited for executing 63 works to install FHTCs by upgrading the status of existing drinking water schemes in various villages under the limits of the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Circle, Guntur, under the Jal Jeevan Mission at a cost of Rs: 4158.56 lakh. Tender documents can be downloaded from e-site www.approcurement.gov.in from 25-03-2025. For details, contact 9100121425. Sd/- Superintending Engineer, RWS & S Circle, Guntur

GOVERNMENT OF ANDHRA PRADESH
Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Department
E-PROCUREMENT TENDER NOTICE
No 163-421/2024-25 Dt: 17-03-2025
Tenders are being invited from qualified contractors for execution of 260 works worth Rs 5537.90 lakh under J.M Grant in Srikakulam district. Availability of tender documents: From 11 am onwards on 24-03-2025 till 3.00 pm on 01-04-2025. For other details, contact e-market place www.approcurement.gov.in or call 9100121407. Sd/- Executive Engineer, RWS & S Department, Divisional office, Srikakulam

Prioritise members' proposals: Mayor

Discusses council meeting agenda and additional agenda with HoDs

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Vijayawada Municipal Corporation (VMC) Mayor Rayana Bhagyalakshmi held a review meeting with all Heads of Departments (HoDs) on Thursday to deliberate on the forthcoming council meeting. They discussed the agenda and additional agenda proposals. She emphasised the importance of collaboration between officials and corporators to advance initiatives focused on urban development and community welfare.

The VMC Budget Meeting for the fiscal year 2025-26 is set to take place on March 22, followed by the council meeting on March 25. In this context, the Mayor outlined the primary and additional agendas for the council meeting, urging officials to prioritise the proposals put forth by her corporators to ensure the city's continued progress.



Mayor Rayana Bhagyalakshmi meeting HoDs at her chamber on the VMC premises in Vijayawada on Thursday

Present at the meeting were VMC Chief Engineer R Srinath Reddy, Chief City Planner GVGSV Prasad, Chief Medical & Health Officer (CMHO) Dr Suresh Babu, Secretary Vasantha Lakshmi, Superintendents P

Satyanarayana and P Satya Kumari, Executive Engineers Venkateswara Reddy, Srinivas Reddy, and Samrajyam, Horticulture Deputy Director Rammohan, Examiner of Accounts Chakravarthi, Accounts Officer B

Satyanarayana Murthy, Joint Director Amrith, Estate Officer Dr Latha, Regional Fire Officer Venkateswara Rao, Veterinary Assistant Surgeon Dr B Somasekar Reddy, Biologist Surya Naik, among others.



Krishna district Joint Collector Geethanjali Sharma

Paddy procurement centres to be closed by March 31

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Krishna District Joint Collector Geethanjali Sharma has urged farmers to sell their paddy before March 31. She said that all Paddy Procurement Centres (PPCs) operating at Rythu Seva Kendras (RSKs) and Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS) will cease operations after March 31.

In a press release issued on Thursday, the Joint Collector stated that the district administration has procured 5,83,117 metric tonnes of paddy from 70,718 farmers, which costs Rs.1,333.43 crore. Given the completion of procurement, the district administration has decided to close all PPCs by the end of the month, she added.

Further, she advised farmers with remaining stock to complete their sales before the deadline to avoid inconvenience.

Officials asked to prepare detailed reports ahead of collectors' meet

CM has called the conference on March 25 and 26



Krishna District Collector DK Balaji addressing the district officers' meeting at the PGRS meeting hall on the collectorate premises in Machilipatnam on Thursday

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In preparation for the district collectors' conference to be convened by Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on March 25 and 26, Krishna Collector DK Balaji has instructed officials in relevant departments to prepare a detailed report addressing priority issues. He directed that all departments should submit their reports, including information on the district's progress and major problems, to him for presentation before the Chief Minister during the conference.

In connection with the

collectors' conference, Balaji and Joint Collector Geethanjali Sharma convened a meeting with all district-level officers at the Public Grievance Redressal System (PGRS) meeting hall at the collectorate in Machilipatnam on Thursday. They discussed the district's progress and major problems.

Speaking on the occasion, Collector Balaji asked the officials that they should submit reports of a plan of action for the upcoming three months regarding the Panchayat, Municipal, Water Resources,

DWAMA, Rural Water Supply, Agriculture, Fisheries, Housing construction, Education, Medical and Health and other departments. These reports will also be presented during the collectors' conference, he added.

Krishna District Revenue Officer (DRO) K Chandrasekhara Rao, KRRC Deputy Collector Sri Devi, ZP Deputy CEO Anand Kumar, RWS officer Nataraj, R & B SE Lokesh, DPO J Aruna, Horticulture Officer J Jyothi, Housing PD Venkatrao, APMIP PD Vijaya Lakshmi and others were present.

ROW OVER VIZAG STADIUM YSRCP protests alleged bid to remove YSR's name

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Former minister and YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) Visakhapatnam district president Gudivada Amarnath has condemned what he calls a politically motivated attempt to remove former Chief Minister Dr. YS Rajasekhara Reddy's name from the PM Palem International Cricket Stadium. The alleged move has sparked widespread protests from the party.

Leading a demonstration outside the stadium, Amarnath criticized Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, terming the move an act of "reckless folly" and a political vendetta aimed at erasing YSR's contributions. He said the stadium was named after YSR in 2009 by the Andhra Cricket Association (ACA) in recognition of his role in the state's development and demanded



the ACA clarify its stance on retaining the name at the main entrance.

Amarnath accused the ruling coalition of systematically removing YSR's legacy since June 2024, citing the removal of YSR's statues at Acharya Nagarjuna University (ANU) and Bapatla, the demolition of YSR Viewpoint in Sitakonda, and the renaming of welfare schemes such as Rythu

Bharosa and Arogyasri. He alleged that the stadium controversy was part of a larger effort to erase YSR's imprint on the state's history.

Despite the ongoing Indian Premier League (IPL) matches at the venue, YSRCP has vowed to intensify its protests. Party leaders claim authorities are using police action, including house arrests, to suppress dissent.

Collector reviews 'Mission Vatsalya' implementation

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

NTR District Collector Dr. G Lakshmi reviewed the implementation of the Mission Vatsalya Scheme at a meeting of the District Level Child Welfare & Protection Committee held at the Vijayawada Collectorate on Thursday.

Dr. Lakshmi emphasized the need to keep the village and ward-level committees active to ensure the scheme benefits vulnerable children.

He noted that these committees, chaired by the Sarpanch, Councilor, or Corporator, should meet every 15 days to oversee child protection initiatives.

He highlighted efforts to integrate child protection laws, promote family-based care, and provide institutional and financial support through various schemes. He also proposed organising division-level workshops to train committee members on child rights protection, the eradica-



tion of child marriage, educational empowerment, and legal frameworks.

The Collector stressed the importance of ensuring quality education for children in childcare institutions and called for collaboration between district childcare units, the Education Department, and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. He underscored the need for public awareness of the dangers of

child marriage, stating that it affects girls' education, health, and development.

Among those present were NTR District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) Secretary KV Ramakrishnaiah, DCP KGV Saritha, ZP CEO Y Kannana Naidu, ICDS PD D Sri Lakshmi, District Child Protection Officer M Rajeswara Rao, and Tribal Welfare Officer G Maheswara Rao.

RO plant & free medical camp inaugurated

Later, Dr. Lakshmi inaugurated the Shirishma Trust's RO Plant and Free Medical Camp near Raghavaiah Park on MG Road in memory of Chalasani Shirishma. The RO plant will provide drinking water and buttermilk to visitors in Vijayawada during the summer.

Speaking at the event, he urged public participation in

providing cold drinking water during the summer and mentioned that efforts were being made to set up cooling centers across the district with donor support.

The event was attended by APNGO Association General Secretary A. Vidya Sagar, Shirishma's father Chalasani Srinivasa Rao, Dr. Rama Seshaiah, Social Analyst T. Lakshmi Narayana, S. Chaitanya, N. Narayana, and APNGO leaders.

In a separate meeting, Collector Lakshmi reviewed the Nature Farming Kharif Action Plan and urged officials to encourage farmers to adopt natural farming methods. He directed officials to organize awareness rallies in all villages to promote sustainable agricultural practices.

The meeting was attended by District Agriculture Officer DMF Vijaya Kumari, DWAMA PD A. Ramu, Horticulture Officer P. Balaji Kumar, and APMIC Officer Subhani.

Celebrities named in betting Apps FIR

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Miyapur Police have registered a First Information Report (FIR) naming actors Rana Daggubati, Prakash Raj, Vijay Devarakonda, Lakshmi Manchu, Pranetha and Nidhi Agarwal in connection with the promotion of online betting applications.

The FIR, filed under Sections of the IT Act and BNS, follows an investigation into celebrities and social media influencers endorsing gambling platforms.

In aal, the list of actors/actresses leads to six and social media influencers are 19, totalling 25.

A few names of social media influencers mentioned among the 19 are Ananya Nagella, Sreemukhi, Nayani Pavani, Neha Pathan, Imran Khan, Harsha Sai, Bayya Sunny Yadav, Tastyteja and Rithu

Prakash Raj, Rana, Lakshmi Manchu, Vijay Devarakonda among 'endorsers'



Chowdhary. According to Miyapur Police, these actors were featured in adver-

tisements and pop-up promotions for betting apps like Junglee Rummy, A23, and Yolo247.

The crackdown comes amid rising concerns over the financial distress caused by online gambling, particularly among young and middle-class users.

Reacting to the FIR, actor Prakash Raj dismissed the allegations, stating that his association with such advertisements was nearly nine years old.

"I was part of a campaign nine years ago but after understanding the impact of such applications, I withdrew my support," he clarified.

Vijay Devarakonda's team clarified that he had signed a contract as a brand ambassador for A23, a legally recognized skill-based gaming platform, only in regions where it was permitted. They said that the Supreme Court distinguishes skill-based games like rummy from gambling. However, his association with A23 ended in 2023.

Vizag DIG outlines steps taken to tackle drugs menace

PNS ■ SRIKAKULAM

A large-scale crackdown on marijuana smuggling and trade is underway in Andhra Pradesh, with law enforcement agencies intensifying efforts to curb the illegal drug menace. Visakhapatnam Range Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police, Gopinath Jatti, on Thursday outlined a series of stringent measures taken over the past eight months to tackle the issue.

Speaking at a marijuana destruction and neutralization event in Srikakulam, he emphasized the police department's commitment to dismantling smuggling networks and urged



the youth to stay away from substance abuse. During the program, 7,378 kilograms of marijuana linked to 226 cases were destroyed under the supervision of the Drug Disposal Committee.

Senior police officials from Srikakulam, Vizianagaram, and Parvathipuram districts participated in the event, highlighting

the coordinated approach to countering drug-related crimes.

Over the past eight months, authorities have seized 31,768 kilograms of marijuana, 12.05 litres of hashish oil, and 372 vehicles involved in 524 cases. A total of 2,050 individuals have been arrested, including 575 interstate offenders.

YSRCP demands White Paper on Rs 7 L cr investment claims

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

YSRCP spokesperson Putta Sivashankar Reddy has challenged the coalition government to release a white paper detailing its claim of securing Rs. 7 lakh crore in investments for Andhra Pradesh. He demanded specifics on industries, locations, job creation, investment amounts, and production capacities, questioning whether the government could publicly display this information at village and ward secretariats, similar to how the YSRCP showcased welfare scheme beneficiaries.

Reddy criticized Minister Nara Lokesh for claiming credit for the Ashok Leyland unit near Vijayawada, which, he said, was operational before 2018 under



Chandrababu Naidu's tenure. He dismissed Lokesh's claim of creating 600 jobs in 2024 as "laughable" and urged him to prioritize fulfilling the coalition's free bus travel promise instead. He also questioned the sudden rise in the investment figure from Rs. 6.5 lakh crore in the Governor's February 25 address to Rs. 7 lakh crore in just 22 days, challenging the government to substantiate the additional Rs. 50,000 crore

with concrete details.

Accusing the coalition of driving industries out of Andhra Pradesh, Reddy alleged that companies like JSW shifted to Maharashtra due to government harassment. He dismissed the Davos investment summit as a "paid holiday" and contrasted it with YSRCP's industrial achievements under YS Jagan Reddy (2019-24), highlighting projects such as industrial corridors in Koppurthi and Orvakal, as well as Century Plywood and YSR EMC Park, despite challenges posed by COVID-19.

Reddy questioned the coalition government's transparency and progress, asserting that YSRCP had a more credible track record in industrial development.

NDC delegation visits AP for study on economic security

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

A high-level delegation from the National Defence College (NDC), New Delhi, visited the AP Disaster Management Authority in Tadepalli on Thursday, where they met with Revenue Special Chief Secretary RP Sisodiya. During the interaction, Sisodiya shared valuable insights with the team, drawing from his own experience, as he was previously a member of this esteemed programme during his career. The delegation also interacted with AP Disaster Management Authority Managing Director Ronanki Kurmanadh.

Sisodiya, who also serves as the Director General, Andhra Pradesh Human Resources Development Authority, stated that the delegation is in Andhra Pradesh as part of their study

Team comprises Indian Armed Forces officers, senior civil service officers, and military officers from 32 foreign nations



on economic security, scheduled from March 17-21. He mentioned that the team com-

prises Indian Armed Forces officers of Brigadier rank and equivalent, senior civil service

officers (Joint Secretaries/Directors), and military officers from 32 friendly

foreign nations. He further explained that as part of their curriculum on National Security and Strategic Studies, the course members undertake visits to various States to assess economic and social development initiatives, advancements in IT, tourism, industries and rural-urban development. Andhra Pradesh has been chosen as one of the States for this study.

Sisodiya added that the Air Marshal of the National Defence College has requested meetings with key State dignitaries, including the Governor, Chief Minister, and the Chief Secretary, along with heads of relevant departments.

State-wide crop workshops end

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Workshops covering ten major crops concluded under the leadership of Agriculture Department Director Dr S Dilli Rao on Thursday. The final session focused on advanced technological methods and best management practices for boosting yields in groundnut and sesame cultivation. Dr PV Satyanarayana, Director of Research, and Dr Dilli Rao participated in the discussions.

Following Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu's directives, the Agriculture Department organised these workshops ahead of the planting season. The sessions covered paddy, millet, sugarcane, groundnut, castor oil, maize, cotton, and small grains, considering consumer preferences, market trends, yield potential, and climate resilience.

Dr Dilli Rao highlighted the Chief Minister's emphasis on two key objectives—enhancing farmers' incomes and preserving soil health. He noted that the crop-specific workshops



Agriculture Director Dr Dilli Rao highlighted the Chief Minister's emphasis on two key objectives—enhancing farmers' incomes and preserving soil health. He noted that the crop-specific workshops facilitated in-depth discussions, problem-solving, and alternative approaches

facilitated in-depth discussions, problem-solving, and alternative approaches. He also stressed that these sessions created a platform for farmers and experts to exchange

insights on variety selection, market demands, management techniques, and technological advancements.

Dr PV Satyanarayana, Director of the Acharya NG

Ranga Agricultural University Research Wing, pointed out that such large-scale stakeholder meetings had not been held in the past 25 years. He commended Dr Dilli Rao for

spearheading the initiative, adding that field-level officials would greatly benefit from the shared experiences. The discussions led to constructive suggestions and valuable technology exchanges.

Successful farming models and management practices were compiled during the workshops. Dr Satyanarayana stated that this information would be structured and presented at the regional agricultural technology conferences in April.

He also confirmed that similar district-level workshops would be conducted before the Kharif season to equip farmers with market-driven agricultural knowledge.

Scientists from Regional Agricultural Research Stations in Kadiri, Yelamanchili, Anakapalle, Tirupati, and others attended the event, along with Lam Kiran Kumar Reddy, Kumari, Sirisha, Pratibha Sri, Devaki, Vishwanath, Jagannatha Rao, and Deputy Director Balu Naik from the Agriculture Commissioner's Office.



Officials directed to ensure purified water supply

PNS ■ RAJAHMUNDRY

East Godavari District Collector P. Prasanthi has directed officials to take immediate steps to provide purified drinking water in rural areas given the ongoing heat wave conditions.

The Collector conducted a surprise inspection at Peddagudem village in Gopalapuram mandal on Thursday.

She emphasized the need for a continuous supply of clean drinking water, citing climate change and rising temperatures.

Following the recent diarrhoea cases in Peddagudem, she instructed officials to ensure an uninterrupted supply of purified water. She also ordered water samples to be collected and sent for testing. By chlorinating water tanks,

she noted, clean drinking water could be provided consistently.

"It is crucial to keep storage tanks covered, conduct water sample tests, improve sanitation, and create awareness among villagers," she said.

She assured that diarrhoea cases were now under control and advised residents to boil and cool their drinking water before consumption.

She also urged villagers to avoid stepping out between 11 am and 4 pm due to the intense heat and to take necessary precautions when going out. She instructed mandal-level officials and special officers to conduct field inspections.

Medical Officer T. Rajiv, RWS Deputy EE GTV Ajay Babu, and other officials accompanied the Collector. Mega 'Job Mela' on March

22 Earlier in the day, Collector Prasanthi released posters for the 'Sankalpa-Mega Job Mela' at the Collectorate. She said the event presents a significant opportunity for unemployed youth in the district, as per state government guidelines.

She announced that 25 leading companies would participate, offering jobs for candidates aged 19 to 50 with qualifications ranging from SSC, ITI, Inter, Degree, Diploma, B.Tech, M.Tech, Pharmacy, MBA, and M.Com.

The Job Mela is scheduled for March 22 at the Government Degree College (Arts College) campus at 'Y' Junction. Interested candidates can apply at <https://naipunyam.ap.gov.in/> or contact 9988853335, 8712655686, 8790118349, or 8790117279 for more details.



Collector hands over Rs 1 lakh from CMRF to woman

PNS ■ BHIMAVARAM

West Godavari District Collector Chadalavada Nagarani handed over Rs 1 lakh in financial assistance from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund (CMRF) to a woman.

During the Swarnandhra-Swathi Andhra programme in Tanuku on March 15, Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu met Nandivada Yesamma of Duvva village in Tanuku mandal. She approached him after the event, tearfully explaining her plight.

Yesamma shared that her 17-year-old son is mentally challenged, unable to speak or

move and that she has been struggling to care for him since her husband passed away 14 years ago. She requested the Chief Minister to grant a pension for her son under the differently-abled quota.

Deeply moved by her struggles, the Chief Minister assured her of help and sanctioned Rs 1 lakh from the CMRF. However, as she had not submitted any formal representation, officials had no details or contact information for her.

District authorities, with the help of the police, launched a search using her photograph. After an extensive effort, they successfully located her.

Mala Mahanadu leader held, released

PNS ■ KAKINADA

Mala Mahanadu National President R S Rathnakar was arrested on Thursday while staging a hunger strike in front of the Collector's office, protesting against SC categorisation.

Defying the scorching heat, he sat on a mat as supporters raised slogans against the state government. Police intervened, ending the protest and shifting him to the Three Town police station.

Tension mounted as Mala Mahanadu workers gathered at the station, demanding his release. Normalcy was restored after Rathnakar was freed.



TTD Board member launches River store in Tirupati

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

BJP State Official Spokesperson and TTD Board Member G Bhanu Prakash Reddy inaugurated the River store in Tirupati. The store offers customers a firsthand experience of all River products, including the Indie electric scooter, accessories, and merchandise.

Spanning 829 sq ft, the store on Renigunta Road has been launched in collaboration with Shastha Automotive.

Speaking on the occasion, Bhanu Prakash Reddy highlighted the advantages of electric scooters, such as lower running costs, zero emis-

sions, reduced noise pollution, and ease of navigation in urban areas, making them a practical and eco-friendly transportation choice.

Designed to reflect River's signature aesthetics, the store features 'flow lines' and organic shapes inspired by rivers. The layout is crafted to showcase how Indie seamlessly fits into everyday life, aligning with River's vision of helping people move effortlessly from one place to another.

River made its entry into Andhra Pradesh with the launch of its Visakhapatnam store in December last year. The company currently operates 13 outlets across South India.

I will not function dictatorially like KCR, says CM Revanth

Why are people coming to South India for jobs from Gujarat and UP, questions PM Modi

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Chief Minister Revanth Reddy stated that he has great respect for Prime Minister Narendra Modi but Modi should explain why the people from Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh are coming to South India for jobs.

Targeting Prime Minister Modi CM said, "I have great respect for Modi. However, I would like to ask Modi to explain why people are coming from Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh to South India for jobs. Why are people from other states not going to UP and Gujarat? Is this the development brought about by Modi? Some people focus on marketing. But we work hard."

On the other hand, CM Revanth Reddy wondered why the opposition is saying that people are angry with him.

"Are people angry with me for launching social welfare schemes? Only the politicians in power have changed but officials are the same. Officials will go to jail if I order a probe. However, I will not function dictatorially like KCR," the CM said.

Chief Minister Revanth Reddy was speaking while taking part in 'Koluvula Panduga'

where he launched the 'Build Now' portal in Hyderabad on Thursday.

The Chief Minister handed over compassionate appointment letters to candidates selected for posts in the Panchayat Raj and Municipal Administration departments.

Addressing the gathering, the CM said that people who got the first opportunity, whether small or big, will be remembered for a lifetime. This occasion is also significant in the lives of the candidates who got jobs. Compassionate appointments are your right. These are the jobs that you inherited from your family members, he said.

The BRS government's refusal to carry out recruitments on compassionate grounds for 10 years is visible. We are completing these appointments to ensure that such negligence does not exist when the Congress is in power, he said.

"Unemployed youth fought for Telangana state. Even after the state was formed, the hopes of those who died for Telangana have not been fulfilled. Soon after coming to power, the 'people's government' filled 57,924 posts in government service.

Man sentenced to life for killing 3-yr-old son

PNS ■ ONGOLE

The Principal District and Sessions Court sentenced a 29-year-old man to life imprisonment for murdering his three-year-old son and imposed a fine of Rs. 10,000.

According to police, Sheik Khadar Vali was convicted of killing his son, Sheik Sahul, on November 30, 2018, at Yellaiah Nagar. Vali, allegedly addicted to alcohol, frequently quarrelled with his wife, suspecting her fidelity. On the day of the incident, he took his son on a motorcycle to Budawada village, slit his throat, and buried the body.

When his wife inquired about their son's whereabouts, Vali feigned ignorance. She then filed a missing complaint at Chimakurthy police station, leading to a case being registered under IPC Sections 363 and 302.

Following an investigation led by then Chimakurthy SI GV Chowdary and Ongole Rural CI O Durga Prasad, police recovered the child's body two days later and arrested Vali on December 8, 2018.

After a thorough prosecution, the court found Vali guilty and sentenced him to life imprisonment. SP AR Damodar appreciated the police team for their efforts in securing the conviction.

Pawan assures support to artists

PNS ■ GUNTUR

Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Panchayat Raj Pawan Kalyan unveiled the wall poster of 'Amaravati Chitraloka Veedhi' at his camp office on Thursday, accompanied by Andhra Pradesh Cultural and Creativity Commission Chairperson Tejaswi Podapati.

Assuring full support for artists, Pawan Kalyan emphasised the government's commitment to their welfare. Tejaswi Podapati highlighted the Cultural Commission's efforts under Tourism and Culture Minister Kandula Durgesh to uplift



long-neglected artists.

The event, set for April 4 in Rajahmundry, aims to unite artists nationwide, receiving overwhelming support from the artistic community.

Woman killed, 4 hurt as car runs over workers

PNS ■ NELLORE

A 55-year-old agricultural worker was killed and four others injured when a speeding car ran over them at Vardhana m Palem village in Venkatagiri rural mandal on Thursday.

According to Venkatagiri SI Subba Rao, a group of agricultural workers was filling gunny bags with paddy when a car travelling from Guduru to Venkatagiri veered off course and ploughed through them. The impact killed Ratnamma

(55) on the spot, while the vehicle came to a halt after ramming into a lorry. The injured workers were rushed to the Government General Hospital (GGH) in



Venkatagiri, where the condition of three remains critical. Police have registered a case and shifted the body to the hospital for post-mortem.

Work together to curb drug menace: Collector

PNS ■ ELURU

District Collector K Vetri Selvi directed officials of all government departments to work in coordination to curb the drug menace in the district.

Accompanied by SP KPS Kishore and District Legal Services Authority Secretary K Ratna Prasad, the Collector released stickers and pamphlets to raise awareness about the harmful effects of drugs.

She emphasized the need for extensive awareness programs against drug consumption and sale, including ganja. She instructed officials to establish anti-narcotic task forces, known as Eagle Clubs, in all educational institutions by the next academic year. A teacher should be appointed as coordinator, while enthusiastic students should be made club members, she suggested.

"Awareness programs must be conducted in every educational institution. The toll-free number 1972 should be



widely publicized for drug prevention, complaints, and assistance. RDOs and Tahsildars should provide updates on programs being conducted at division and mandal levels to curb drug use," the Collector said.

SP KPS Kishore stressed the need to form WhatsApp groups for all Eagle Clubs in educational institutions. He urged the public to report individuals selling cigarettes near schools or consuming alcohol in public places.

"If anyone is found disturb-

ing public safety or if liquor shops are operating within 100 meters of a school, they should immediately inform the police," he said.

The meeting also reviewed the management of de-addiction initiatives, including Nishamukti Bharat Abhiyan and de-addiction centres.

Legal Services Authority Secretary K Ratna Prasad, Excise Deputy Commissioner B Srilatha, DFO Subham, DRO V Visweswar Rao, ZP CEO Bhimeswara Rao, and other officials attended the meeting.

Simhachalam gears up for grand 'Chandanotsavam'

Extensive preparations underway to ensure smooth conduct of annual festival

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Visakhapatnam is preparing for the highly anticipated annual Chandanotsavam of Sri Varaha Lakshminarasimha Swamy at Simhachalam, set to take place on April 30th. District Collector MN Harendhira Prasad led a comprehensive review of the arrangements, emphasizing the need for a seamless and well-organized event. "Our priority is to ensure the smooth conduct of the traditional rituals while effectively managing the anticipated influx of devotees," stated the Collector, highlighting the dual focus on religious sanctity and crowd control.

A key measure announced was the restriction of Antaralaya (inner sanctum) darshan between 3:30 am and 4:30 am on April 30th. "During

this hour, access will be exclusively granted to hereditary trustees, donors presenting silk robes from the Supreme Court and High Court," Prasad explained. The decision concerning VIP and other visitor access to the inner sanctum will be determined following consultations with endowment authorities.

To further manage the flow of devotees, general darshan will be suspended from 6:00 pm on April 29th. "We urge officials to provide advance notice to devotees regarding this suspension," the Collector stressed. A structured ticket sale system will be implemented at designated counters within the city. Tickets will be available in denominations of ₹1,500, ₹1,000, and ₹300, incorporating security features such as holograms and watermarks.



"Only those holding ₹1,500 tickets will be permitted entry through the Neeladri Gopuram entrance," Prasad clarified.

To address potential overcrowding, the Collector announced that Antaralaya darshan will be strictly limited to a one-hour duration. Vehicle access to the hilltop will also be curtailed, with two designated

parking zones established. "Police officials will conduct thorough inspections of additional parking areas along these routes," he added.

Enhanced transportation services will be provided, including bus services for pilgrims, and increased distribution of drinking water and buttermilk, as well as expand-

ed medical camp facilities. "We are also focusing on improving sanitation and installing clear signboards to facilitate navigation," Prasad stated, emphasizing that private vehicles will be prohibited from the hilltop.

Commissioner of Police (CP) Shankha Brata Bagchi outlined the security measures in place. "We are focusing on robust traffic control, efficient parking management, and enhanced CCTV surveillance to ensure the safety of all devotees," he said, detailing the police's commitment to maintaining order.

The review meeting, held at the Collectorate on Wednesday, was attended by a wide range of senior officials from the Endowments, Police, GVMC, and Medical departments, along with representatives from Simhachalam.

ACROSS THE STATES



Temple demolition in Delhi's Mayur Vihar deferred

Delhi High Court-ordered demolition drive against three temples in Mayur Vihar was postponed in the face of a protest led by the local MLA on Thursday. A team of DDA accompanied by police reached the east Delhi locality around 4 am Thursday to raze Kali Mandir, Amarnath Mandir, and Badrinath Mandir – supposedly built in a green belt in the area's Phase 2. "As per the High Court's order, the DDA team, along with police, reached Mayur Vihar Phase 2 in the Patparganj Assembly. But we were already there, trying to ensure the temple remained safe," Patparganj MLA Ravinder Singh Negi said on X. A DDA spokesperson confirmed that the demolition was postponed. "We had to postpone the drive due to the outrage it sparked. However, our legal team is reviewing the matter," the spokesperson said. Negi said that he and others had been present at the site since 3 am and made every effort to protect the temples. He claimed that the drive was postponed after a discussion with Delhi Chief Minister Rekha



Kerala to provide houses, skill training for STs: Min

Kerala Minister for Welfare of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes O R Keli announced on Thursday that 10,000 new houses will be allotted to Scheduled Tribes (ST) under the Secure Accommodation and Facility Enhancement (SAFE) scheme, aimed at completing unfinished houses. During the discussion on the demand for grants in the Assembly, the minister also stated that land would be provided to 3,340 more individuals. "All Scheduled Tribe families in Kannur, Malappuram, Thrissur, and Kollam districts will be ensured land, making Kerala the first state where no tribal families remain landless," he said. Additionally, 6,000 study rooms will be provided for tribal students, and a regional study will be conducted in collaboration with Sree Narayana Guru Open University to assess the impact of Gandhian and Narayana Guru's philosophies on social change.



J-K: BJP leader shoots himself dead

BJP leader and former Independent MLA from Jammu and Kashmir's Gurez Faqeer Mohammad Khan on Thursday allegedly committed suicide by shooting himself, party officials said. Khan (62) shot himself using his security personnel's SLR rifle inside his official accommodation in the Tulsibagh government quarters here, they said. BJP spokesperson Altaf Thakur, while confirming the incident, said the former MLA has died due to suicide. It was not immediately known as to why Khan took the extreme step. Khan, who was elected to the Jammu and Kashmir assembly in 1996 as an Independent candidate, had joined BJP in 2020 and unsuccessfully contested the assembly polls on the party ticket last year. Police, in a statement, said it has taken cognizance of the incident and launched legal proceedings. "An incident of firearm discharge was reported today in the Tulsibagh area of Srinagar, resulting in the death of former legislator Faqeer Mohammad Khan, son of Jumma Khan, a resident of Gurez. Police have taken cognizance of the matter, and legal proceedings under section 194 of the BNSS have been initiated at Police Station Sherghari," Srinagar Police said in a statement.



Row over DMK MPs wearing T-shirts with slogans

RS fails to transact business

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Rajya Sabha failed to transact any significant business on Thursday and was adjourned for the day after witnessing three adjournments over a row on some DMK members wearing T-shirts with slogans written on them.

This is the first day during the second part of the Budget Session when the House was adjourned without transacting any business except for the laying of papers.

Soon after the House met in the morning, Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar allowed the laying of papers and some reports of the parliamentary standing committees, after which he adjourned the House for about an hour.

He said he wanted to meet leaders of political parties over what he witnessed in the House. Without sharing details of what he witnessed, Dhankhar adjourned the proceedings till noon.

"I will be calling a meeting of floor leaders in my chambers at 11.30 am today. I would share with the members what I have seen in the House a while ago," he said soon after listed papers were laid on the floor of the House.

While the chairman did not cite any reason for the adjournment, the issue of DMK members wearing T-shirts with slogans written on them was objected to by the chairman.

While the chairman did not cite any reason for the adjournment, the issue of DMK members wearing T-shirts with slogans written on them was objected to by the chairman.

Some of the DMK MPs attended the House proceedings wearing T-shirts with the slogan "Delimitation - Tamil Nadu will fight, Tamil Nadu will win", which was objected to by the Chair.

Some MPs also donned stoles that played upon Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's remarks on DMK MPs' protest in Lok Sabha against the three-language formula of National Education Policy (NEP), and had the word "uncivilised" written on it, with the first two alphabets 'U' and 'N' having been crossed.

As the deadlock over the issue continued, when the House reassembled at noon, Deputy Chairman Harivansh announced that the proceedings had been adjourned for another 15 minutes.

India ranks 118th in World Happiness Report

PNS ■ LONDON

India ranked 118th in the World Happiness Report 2025 published Thursday, up from the 126th position in the previous year but below countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Ukraine and Palestine.

The 13th edition of the annual report, released coinciding with the International Day of Happiness that falls on March 20 each year, focuses on the impact of caring and sharing on people's happiness, including how sharing a meal increases happiness.

Finland is ranked as the happiest country in the world for the eighth consecutive year and other Nordic countries – Denmark, Iceland and Sweden – continued to remain in the top four, in that



order.

The United Kingdom is at the 23rd position, the US is 24th and China stands at 68th position in the list of 147 countries this year. The State of Palestine is ranked 108th (103 in 2024) while Ukraine is at 111 rank (105 in 2024).

The annual report, published

by the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford in partnership with Gallup, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network ranks the countries according to the self-assessed life evaluations by those polled averaged over the years 2022–2024. Country rankings for the three benevolent acts

covered by the Gallup World Poll – donating, volunteering, and helping strangers – vary depending on cultural and institutional differences, the authors of the report said.

Researchers say that beyond health and wealth, some factors that influence happiness sound deceptively simple: sharing meals with others, having somebody to count on for social support, and household size.

While India ranked 118th overall, in terms of the 'Country rankings for six measures of benevolence', it was listed much higher at 57 for (how people) donated; at 10 for how people volunteered; 74 for helping a stranger; and in case of wallet returned by a neighbour (115), stranger (86) and police (93).

SC TO ACID ATTACK SURVIVORS

Approach state legal services authority for compensation

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday said acid attack survivors could approach their respective state legal services authority in case there was a delay in receiving compensation.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar took note of the submissions of the counsel of Mumbai-based NGO Acid Survivors Sahas Foundation that such survivors were finding it tough to receive compensation from authorities in Maharashtra.

"Just get in touch with the state legal services authorities (SLSAs)," the CJI said.



tion to acid attack survivors will be brought to its notice.

Observing the Centre and 11 states hadn't filed their replies to the petition, the court granted them four weeks and posted the hearing in the May 5 week.

The hearing related to a 2023 PIL of the NGO seeking the strict implementation of the court's directions issued in the famous Laxmi v. Union of India in 2014.

The order, among other things, said acid attack survivors should receive free treatment in both public and private hospitals and compensated with a minimum of Rs 3 lakh by the state government concerned as aftercare and rehabilitation cost.

588 antiquities repatriated to India from US so far: Govt

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As many as 588 antiquities have been repatriated to India from the US so far, out of which 297 were received in 2024, the government informed Parliament on Thursday.

Union Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said this in a written response to a query in Rajya Sabha.

He was asked the number of "looted or stolen artifacts" expected to be repatriated under US-India Cultural Property Agreement to prevent illicit trade of antiquities.



"Cultural Property Agreement (CPA) has been signed with the United States of America (USA) to prevent smuggling of Indian antiquities.

Agreement, being preventive in nature, has no timelines or target numbers. So far, 588 antiquities have been repatriated from USA, out of which 297 were received in 2024," he stated.

The Union minister was also asked whether the government plans to collaborate with international organisations or other nations to strengthen India's efforts in recovering stolen antiquities.

"India collaborates with different international organisations, including UNESCO and INTERPOL, as per requirement."

Bihar craving for change: Kharge

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Newly-appointed Bihar Congress president Rajesh Kumar met party President Mallikarjun Kharge and former party chief Rahul Gandhi here on Wednesday and discussed the preparations for the state Assembly polls later this year.

In a significant move ahead of the Bihar polls due later this year, the Congress named Kumar, a Dalit leader, as the new president of its state unit on Tuesday.



India, Brazil key to global climate action: COP30 prez

Says Global North fails to show way

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Global South, especially countries like India and Brazil, which have strong institutions and scientific expertise but also large vulnerable populations, is in a unique position to lead the fight against climate change, with developed countries failing to show the way, the president of this year's UN climate conference said on Thursday.

COP30 President André Correa do Lago, currently in India for bilateral meetings, told journalists at a press conference that Brazil aims to go beyond the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement to ensure the implementation of commitments made at UN climate conferences, as many financial and governance institutions operate outside the UN system.

Correa do Lago, a former Brazilian ambassador to India, highlighted a shift in global climate leadership from the Global North to the Global South, saying that the US has "reluctance regarding this subject", while "the Europeans now have priorities regarding defence" and "other countries [are] presenting other priorities."

"The Global South has an important role to play in this stage... The South has participated in this multilateral process of rules in a very constructive way. We followed the agreements, debated a lot, but remained constructive. We accepted the Paris Agreement, etc. But the part of the (Global) North, which involved financial support and accelerating emission reductions, has not happened as planned."

"So, there is a new space for the Global South because a country like India or Brazil has, at the same time, advanced science, very strong institutions, and also parts of the population that are very poor.

Over Rs 22 cr incurred on PM's visit to US in June 2023

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Over Rs 22 crore was incurred on the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US in June 2023, according to data shared by the government. Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita shared the data in his written response to a query in Rajya Sabha on Thursday.

Leader of Opposition in the Upper House Mallikarjun Kharge asked the government the total expenditure incurred by Indian embassies on arrangements for the prime minister's foreign visits in the past three years.

He also asked for visit-wise details of expenses under major heads such as hotel arrangements, community receptions, transport arrangements and other miscellaneous expenditures among others.

The data on country-wise expenditure on foreign visits by the prime minister, including the expenditure on official, accompanying, security and media delegations, in 2022, 2023 and 2024 was shared in a tabulated form in his response.

According to the data, an expenditure of Rs 22,89,68,509 was incurred on the visit of the prime minister to the US in June 2023, while the expenditure incurred was Rs 15,33,76,348 on the September 2024 visit to the same country.

The tabulated data pertained to over 38 visits, from May 2022 visit to Germany to Kuwait visit in December 2024. According to the data related to the PM's Japan visit in May 2023, the expenditure incurred was Rs 17,19,33,356 while the same was Rs 80,01,483 on the Nepal visit in May 2022. The min-

ister in his response also shared some corresponding data for years prior to 2014.

"For reference purpose, expenditure on Prime Minister's foreign visits earlier were INR 10,74,27,363 (USA, 2011), INR 9,95,76,890 (Russia, 2013), INR 8,33,49,463 (France, 2011) and INR 6,02,23,484 (Germany, 2013). These figures show actual expenditure without adjusting for inflation or currency fluctuations," he said.



National interest key in decisions on intl oil purchases: Centre

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India's decision on international oil purchases is based on diverse factors, with the country's national interests at the top, the Centre informed Parliament on Thursday.

The Ministry of External Affairs was asked in Rajya Sabha whether "it is a fact that the USA had asked India to stop unloading Russian oil tankers and has set a deadline for it."

MEA Minister of State Kirti Vardhan Singh in his response said that the ministry was informed by the US about its

January 14 sanctions imposed on more than 400 Russian energy sector-related entities.

He said the sanction, pronounced by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control, or OFAC, extended to oil majors and their subsidiaries, LNG terminals, insurance companies, oil traders/brokers, oil vessels and providers of oilfield services.

A 60-day "winding down period" was also announced after which the US was supposed to designate all those that continue to deal with sanctioned parties in Russia's energy sector, he said.

Voter list updating to be strengthened: EC

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Amid a debate on the purity of electoral rolls, the Election Commission said on Thursday that the regular updating process of the voter list will be strengthened in close coordination with the birth and death registration authorities.

Technical consultations between the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) and experts of the EC will begin soon on voter list-Aadhaar linkage, it said, adding that though an elector can only vote in the assigned polling booth and nowhere

else, the poll body has resolved to remove duplicates country-wide and end a decades-long issue within three months.

"Regular updation of the voter list shall be strengthened in close coordination with the birth and death registration authorities," the EC said in a statement.

In the EC's interactions with political parties, it was clarified that any inclusion or deletion in the draft elector list is governed by the process of appeals under relevant legal provisions for filing claims and objections available to all political parties in the Representation of People



act, 1950. In the absence of such appeals, the list is prepared by the electoral registration officer (ERO) prevails.

The EC recalled that merely 89 first appeals and just a single second appeal were filed after the

completion of the Special Summary Revision exercise in January.

The poll authority also said it has charted out "bold steps" towards strengthening election processes.

It said nearly 5,000 poll officials, including state chief electoral officers, district electoral officers and electoral registration officers, will hold regular meetings with political parties for resolution of issues at the grassroots levels by March 31.

The poll panel said digital training has also been planned for continuous capacity augmentation of nearly one crore

election officials. Within a month of Gyanesh Kumar assuming the charge as the chief election commissioner, the EC has put the entire election machinery, right up to the booth level and officer level, on a "path firmly on course for promoting participation of all electors and ensuring a pleasant experience for them at the polling stations", it said.

Political parties being key stakeholders are also being involved at the grassroots level. Steps will be taken to ensure that no polling station has more than 1,200 voters and that the stations are within a two-km dis-

tance from the electors' residences.

Basic facilities will be ensured even at the remotest rural polling stations, the EC said, adding that to tackle urban apathy and encourage more participation, clusters of high-rise buildings and colonies will have polling stations within their premises.

The offer of the commission to train political parties' representatives and their appointed booth-level agents on the due processes in accordance with electoral laws, including claims and objections to the voter list, has been welcomed by political parties, it said.

Editor's TAKE

Welcome back to Earth, Sunita

The safe return of Sunita Williams to Earth has brought immense relief to her admirers

The prayers of millions of admirers and fans were finally answered when NASA astronaut Sunita Williams, along with her colleague Butch Wilmore, returned to Earth after an unplanned nine-month mission aboard the International Space Station (ISS). Originally slated for a brief eight-day stay, their mission was extended due to technical issues with Boeing's Starliner spacecraft, underscoring both challenges within NASA's commercial partnerships and the resilience of its astronauts. Launched on June 5, 2024, aboard Boeing's Starliner for its inaugural crewed flight, Williams and Wilmore were expected to return after approximately a week. But that was not to be, as a technical glitch left Sunita stranded on the space station for nine long months, testing her resilience and the acumen of NASA scientists.

However, during the mission, Starliner encountered propulsion problems and helium leaks, rendering it unsafe for the astronauts' return. Consequently, NASA opted to keep the crew aboard the ISS while addressing these issues. Boeing's Starliner has faced multiple setbacks since its development, including delays and technical malfunctions. The propulsion system anomalies and helium leaks experienced during this mission highlighted significant concerns about the spacecraft's reliability. These issues not only delayed the astronauts' return but also raised questions about NASA's strategy of partnering with private contractors for crewed spaceflight missions.

The astronauts finally returned aboard SpaceX's Crew Dragon capsule, which landed off the coast of Florida. Throughout the extended mission, Sunita Williams demonstrated exceptional adaptability and commitment. She continued to contribute to various scientific experiments and participated in spacewalks, maintaining her professionalism despite the prolonged stay which can be tough psychologically as well as physically. Her ability to navigate the uncertainties of space travel exemplifies the resilience and mental fortitude required of astronauts. Back home in India, there was great relief, as images of the Space Shuttle Columbia explosion—in which Kalpana Chawla lost her life—flashed on people's minds.

Sunita Williams, the Indian-American astronaut, has become an emblem of perseverance, determination, and excellence for millions of young girls across India and beyond. With her extraordinary achievements in space exploration, she has shattered stereotypes, proving that no dream is too ambitious if one has the will to pursue it. Born in 1965 in Ohio, US, to an Indian father and a Slovenian mother, Sunita Williams' journey to space is a testament to hard work and resilience.

A graduate of the US Naval Academy, she served as a naval officer and test pilot before being selected as a NASA astronaut in 1998. Her achievements include holding records for the longest spacewalk time by a female astronaut and commanding the International Space Station (ISS), making her one of the most influential figures in space exploration. Sunita Williams' success story is a beacon of hope for countless Indian girls who aspire to excel in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Her journey sends a powerful message—that with courage and dedication, any barrier can be overcome. Coming from an Indian heritage, she represents the vast potential that lies within young minds across the country, encouraging them to dream beyond societal expectations.

Though the story has a happy ending, it also serves as a wake-up call for NASA to recalibrate its processes, ensuring that such glitches do not happen again—potentially costing human lives and shattering the dreams of millions.

Respect women's right to choose

As the world experiences an increasing number of climate-related calamities, it is high time to move towards the goal of a 'human rights-based economy' to mitigate vagaries of weather

Some recent photographs of Elon Musk, now, heading President Trump's newly created DOGE, in several of the US government Official meetings, including the one with the Indian Prime Minister, showed him with his children and family. A section of the media considered this overtone, apart from showing his familial love, also 'as the promotion for his pro-natalist position', a view shared by many conservative voters who elected Trump to power. Musk also made it clear that 'demographic decline, is a much bigger risk to civilisation than global warming.'

While on the campaign trail, the Vice-President nominee, JD Vance's comment 'childless cat ladies' referring to the Democratic presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, and Musk's calling her out as an "extinctionist", for citing 'climate anxiety' as a reason for not having kids, amply indicated about the upsurge of an intense wave of pro-natalism in the US, once Trump comes to power. In Trump 2.0, pro-choice activists apprehend that the Mexico City Policy, or the Global Gag Rule, which banned the US global health funding to non-US organisations, providing abortion care, reinstated during his first tenure, is going to be expanded to all US foreign assistance. Many also expect a nationwide abortion ban this time in the aftermath of the overturning of the 1973 Roe vs Wade decision during his earlier tenure. Trump's Project 2025, with its anti-choice agenda, casts a shadow on women's reproductive rights, while, the 'great replacement theory' of white supremacists finds a new life inside the Republican Party.

Many consider Trump's pro-life stand to be more about controlling women's bodies, rather than a genuine concern for the earliest stages of human life. As the global average number of births per woman hovers around 2.3, a little above the 'replacement level', and population ageing becoming a significant trend, policymakers and economists across the world expressed concern about 'diminishing labour force, upending consumer culture, increased inflation, and the prospect of overstressed government programs for ageing populations.'

Around three in ten nations are now pursuing pro-natalistic policies, restricting abortion and clamping down on family planning programs. A 2021 report, titled 'Welcome to Gilead', in a reference to a dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood, which examined the policies that promote childbearing in Iran, China, Turkey, Russia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, and the US, reported that 'there is a rise in toxic mix of



nationalism, xenophobia, and racism to serve nationalistic, economic and patriarchal interests, instrumentalising women's bodies, though, pronatalism, is not, in and of itself, coercive (Researcher, Monica Scigliano). Many feminists dubbed such pressures for high birth rates from family, religion, politics and economy as the products of millennia of patriarchal disempowerment of women, considering their bodies as vessels for advancing a growth agenda.' On the other hand, climate protagonists debunk the theory of 'perpetual growth', which treats 'babies as cogs in a growth machine', and overlooks their rights to be born into social and ecological conditions that support their well-being (Nandita Bajaj, Antioch University).

Almost half of the world's 2.2 Billion children live in one of the 33 countries classified as 'extremely high-risk' facing a deadly combination of exposure to multiple climate and environmental shocks. However, despite growing evidence, policymakers, journalists, and academics tend to de-link demographic factors from environmental sustainability concerns. As the world is besieged with rhetorics of pro-growth narratives and the racist 'great

replacement theory', author Laura Carroll, an exponent of reproductive rights and ethics, in her book, the 'Baby Matrix' urged people to make 'the most informed decisions about parenthood, as a society can no longer afford to leave pronatalism unquestioned.' Many climate economists also discard the bogey of 'Ponzi demography', based on the 'more is better' philosophy for sustained economic growth. Several development economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, found the current yardsticks of the GGDP-based economic growth on only material consumption, and not quality-of-life factors, as 'inadequate' in measuring human well-being.

Many espoused for a new economic model which can work on declining populations, and also on the ageing demographics.

Researchers revealed that 'fears about ageing population are often guided by the false idea that older people are homoge-

neously ill, dependent, and unproductive'. The recent economic analyses also disclosed that the costs connected with an ageing society are 'manageable, while the economic, social, and environmental benefits of smaller populations are substantial'. Moreover, a shrinking labour force is less likely to threaten economic growth as new technologies can take over more tasks. In the book, Decline and Prosper, the demographic expert, Vegard Skirbekk, argued that 'low fertility is on the whole a good thing, and the outcome is good for people, particularly women, and beneficial for the planet'.

In 2021-22, the UN recognised the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a fundamental human right, which has been enshrined into law by 161 countries, barring the UK, US and Russia.

As the world experiences an increasing number of climate-related calamities, it is high time to move towards the goal of a 'human rights-based economy', which proposes to give women the option of 'free choice' about childbirth and work for economic prosperity without compromising ecological concerns.

(The author is former Director General, Doordarshan and All India Radio. Views expressed are personal)



ARCHANA DATTA

Wome- e-trepre-eurs pla-t the seeds of health

SECOND Opinion

The children are getting fidgety. The suspenseful music blaring from the speakers near a small makeshift stage on the playground of their primary school in Samsa Tarahar village, Bahraich district, Uttar Pradesh, adds to the excitement as they eagerly await the arrival of Salman, the magician. As parents, the village pradhan, and other residents—men and women, young and old—settle down behind the rows of children, a sudden silence falls. All eyes are riveted on a snazzy dressed man wearing a long, flashy red and gold cape with a matching turban, making a dramatic entrance from behind a curtain. Do you know there is another magician like me who lives in your village? How many of you know her and want to meet her? Salman asks. As the audience responds enthusiastically, he waves the wand in his hand, mumbling some magical words. Just as the music reaches a crescendo, a woman, simply dressed in a cotton sari, stands up from the audience and makes her way to the front of the stage. Pointing to her, he announces, "This is Shashi Devi, the didi who makes your illnesses vanish with her magical vegetable plants from her nursery."

Her saplings are chemical-free and full of nutrients. The health of those who have set up poshan vatakas (nutrition gardens) in their homes with her saplings has vastly improved—



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

just like Shashi Didi's family. For those who haven't yet experienced this magic, all you need to do is get vegetable saplings of your choice from her and reap the health benefits. While the magician's deft weaving of magic tricks with health and nutrition messages has successfully raised awareness and curiosity about Shashi, she is not the only one creating magic. Ever since 24 women from marginalised communities, like Shashi, in 24 villages across four blocks were trained to become vegetable nursery entrepreneurs under the Aga Khan Foundation's Poshan Prerna and Aspirational District Programme, they have been sowing multiple seeds of health and empowerment—both within and beyond their villages—thanks to their nurseries. Initiated to address the health and economic challenges faced by rural families in Bahraich, the programme, implemented with support from IndusInd Bank, has not only created new income opportunities for these women but also improved their health.

In fact, these nursery entrepreneurs are proving to be life-savers for other women as well. When frontline health workers and the AKF team monitoring pregnant women found that Prema Devi, a resident of Balaha village in her third trimester, was anaemic and needed nutritional support, they immediately reached out to the AKF team, as there was no nursery entrepreneur in her village. A direct link was established with the nearest entrepreneur, and high-impact saplings of cauliflower, brinjal, cabbage, chili, tomato, long gourd, bitter melon, spinach, and coriander—rich in essen-

tial nutrients like iron, calcium, and vitamins—were provided to establish a nutrition garden in her backyard. Regular monitoring of her nutritional intake by a proactive panchayat, ASHA workers, ANM, AWW, and the AKF team yielded significant results, including weight gain and an increase in haemoglobin levels. Our data indicates a 17.1 per cent reduction in anaemia prevalence among pregnant women in areas where linkages were established between panchayats actively supervising health and nutrition indicators and vegetable nursery entrepreneurs. Increased consumption of iron-rich foods, combined with IFA supplementation, has also contributed to this positive trend, states Ashok Singh, District Programme Officer, Health. Learning about the nutritional value of saplings and receiving AKF training on organic methods for pest and disease management to ensure chemical-free growth has significantly boosted the entrepreneurs' incomes as well. Each entrepreneur was provided with 130 trays containing 15,000 saplings free of cost. According to Raghendra Singh, the district coordinator for skill development, each woman earned approximately ₹20,000 over a six-month cycle spanning two seasons, increasing their annual family income by nine per cent—a remarkable achievement for a district ranked as the second most backward in India. Their achievements are not only making them economically independent but also empowering them to take charge of their own health—conjuring magic one sapling at a time.

(The author is a journalist writing on development and gender. Views are expressed are personal)

Leaderspeak

Glorifying invaders means strengthening the very roots of treason. New India will never accept those who insult our great ancestors and praise those who attacked our civilisation, violated our women, and struck at our faith. At a time when the world recognises India's cultural legacy, every citizen has an obligation to maintain respect for our distinguished leaders, rather than praise those who attempted to eliminate our identity.

YOGI ADITYANATH, CHIEF MINISTER OF UTTAR PRADESH



Letters to the Editor

Are farmers' demands justified?

Madam — Refer to news report, 'Farmers MSP talks with centre in deadlock, Punjab police detain key leaders' (March 20). Farmers in Punjab receive free electricity, heavily subsidised seeds, and fertilisers from the government. They do not pay income tax but receive significant financial support from their relatives abroad. Additionally, they easily obtain loans from banks on lenient terms, allowing them to buy expensive tractors fitted with music systems.

Many farmers have leased their lands to contractors or given them on rent for farming, while they hire poor labourers from UP, Bihar and Jharkhand at low wages. With minimal personal involvement in farming, they have ample free time for politicking.

Due to their free time, many farmers actively engage in politics, frequent protests and movements. Earlier, they staged a nearly year-long sit-in at the Delhi border, severely inconveniencing the general public.

Now, for over a year, they have been blocking roads at the Khanauri and Shambhu borders in Punjab, creating hurdles for commuters, traders, and industrialists.

These roadblocks have caused significant economic losses and daily hardships for travelers and business owners alike. While Punjab farmers have the right to fight for their demands, it is unfair to violate the rights of other citizens.

VINAY KUMAR MALHOTRA | AMBALA CANTT

The decline of education system in MP

Madam — The data presented in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly paints a grim picture of the state's education system. The government has left no stone unturned in increasing education expenditure—rising from ₹25,953 Crore in 2021-22 to an estimated ₹36,581 Crore by 2025-26. Yet, the number of students in government schools has seen a drastic decline. Over the past decade, student enrollment has dropped from 7.896 Million to just 5.817 Million. The most alarming fact is that in the 2024-25 academic session, not a single student enrolled in the first grade in 5,501 schools. Meanwhile, private school enrollments have surged, clearly indicating that parents are losing faith in government schools.

The government has attempted to attract students by offering free books, uniforms, mid-day meals, and laptops, but these measures have failed. Experts believe that the 'Child Tracking System' has revealed the true figures, but the core issue remains the lack of quality education, inadequate infrastructure, and the growing preference for private schools. This is a wake-up call for the government. Increasing the budget alone is not enough, appointing more teachers, improving school infrastructure, and enhancing education quality are crucial. Winning back parents' trust is now the biggest challenge. If effective steps are not taken soon, the future of government schools could be in deep crisis.

RK JAIN | BARWANI

The cost of divisive politics

Madam —The quicksand of communalism presents a balanced and logical points to ponder over. Organisations without constructive ideas and ideologies seek to take divisive factors like regional, communal or caste or colour as a fertile ground to flourish for themselves. After incurring heavy loss of men and materials those trapped in the tussle realise their mistakes and return to a peaceful reconciled life. But the damage they cause is immense and the pains are borne for long time. Identify seekers find communal and caste platforms as potential ones for their instant response. Such leaders or organisations seeking identity in communal or caste grounds can be easily identified by the absence of any constructive agenda like removal of poverty, equality, equidistribution of wealth and peaceful co-existence.

But the history makes it clear that any advancements and achievements such elements make will be only ephemeral. Those who find fault with the Muslim rulers for their over-active communal activities against Hindus should remember that more such activities can be counted upon as Sivaites against Vaishnavaites, Vadakalai Vaishnavaites against Thenkalai Vaishnavaites and so on. Those who take oath to preserve the Constitution with spirit and essence openly promote communal hatred and the concerned authorities sit muted as number ones.

AG RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

HEALTH HAZARDS OF PESTICIDE RESIDUES IN INDIAN FOOD SUPPLY

Pesticide residues in food are small amounts of pesticides that remain on or within foods after they have been used on crops. These residues can potentially pose health risks, depending on the specific pesticide and its concentration. India is one of the top consumers of pesticides globally, using them extensively in agriculture to protect crops from pests and diseases. However, the detection of pesticide residues in food has emerged as a significant health issue. Research shows that most foods in India contain these residues, some of which have levels higher than safe limits.

This situation raises serious health concerns and highlights the need for better food safety regulations and greater public awareness.

The recent appeal by the Union Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare for a comprehensive national strategy for monitoring pesticide residues in food is important to enhance public health and food safety in India.

Contamination of food with pesticides poses a serious health risk, which is further worsened by modern farming practices and reckless use of chemicals. Although several regulatory measures are in place, there are gaps in monitoring, enforcement and public education, which require stronger government action at both the central and state levels.

Reports from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and various independent studies show that pesticide residues have been found in more than 50 per cent of food samples tested in India. Some foods, such as vegetables, fruits, cereals, pulses and spices, have been found to contain pesticides in excess of the maximum residue limits (MRLs) set by regulatory bodies.

Pesticides are used on crops to control insects, fungi and weeds and can be transported through water, soil and air, affecting nearby crops.

SATYAWAN SAURABH | BHIWANI

Please send your letter to the letterstopioneer@gmail.com. In not more than 400 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Indian Railways: Powering India's growth

With strategic investments, technological advancements and a visionary public policy approach, Indian Railways is redefining connectivity, efficiency, and sustainability

FIRST Column

The Indian Railways, often regarded as the crouching tiger of India's growth story, is one of the world's most remarkable yet under-discussed examples of how strategic investments in infrastructure and connectivity-focused public policy can yield exponential dividends for national development. The progress made by Indian Railways (IR) over the past decade (2014-2024) could well be considered its golden period of growth and transformation, making it one of the fastest-growing railway networks globally.

What sets India's railway story apart, making it a lesson for countries and regions with similar growth ambitions? The key lies in a public policy approach best summarised as: planning for the railways has been done with Bharat and for Bharat.

This approach recognises that the railway system must remain both world-class and affordable, fulfilling its essential role as the common person's mode of transport while simultaneously supporting India's industry, commerce, and the ambition of a \$5 Trillion economy. Every day, 22.4 Million people rely on Indian Railways as an integral part of their economic lives, and the system must grow in tandem with their aspirations.

This transformation required revolutionising business operations. Historically, Indian Railways faced criticism for slow modernisation and infrastructure constraints. However, many fail to recognise the crucial shift in priorities. While the total network length has gradually increased to 68,000 km since 1950, a more significant achievement is the expansion of track kilometers, which has grown to an impressive 132,000 km today, enhancing capacity and efficiency.

A decade-on-decade comparison highlights the scale of progress. Between 2014 and 2024, Indian Railways laid 31,000 km of new tracks compared to just 14,900 km in the preceding decade (2004-2014). Similarly, cumulative freight loading surged from 8,473 million tons to 12,660 million tons, revenue generation soared from ₹8.64 Lakh Crore to ₹18.56 Lakh Crore, and electrification expanded from 5,188 km to over 44,000 km, significantly reducing carbon footprints. The development of world-class Dedicated Freight Corridors (2,741 km, compared to none in the previous decade) has further bolstered efficiency. Locomotive production nearly doubled from 4,695 to 9,168 units, while coach manufacturing rose from 32,000 to 54,000 units. Across all productivity and performance indices, Indian Railways has set new benchmarks.

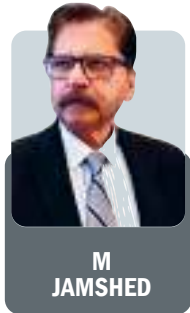
A major reform was the merger of the Railway Budget with the General Budget—a decision still lamented by some who hold onto outdated per-



spectives. Historically, inadequate financing led to a thin spread of resources across a vast backlog of pending projects. However, focused investments have changed the landscape, with Gross Budgetary Support (GBS) soaring to ₹8.25 Lakh Crore over the last decade, compared to just ₹1.56 Lakh Crore in the preceding 10 years.

One of the most significant upcoming milestones is the completion of the railway link to Srinagar, featuring some of the world's tallest bridges and longest tunnels, seamlessly connecting the valley to the national network. Additionally, Indian Railways is on track to become the first major railway system to achieve 100 per cent electrification, ensuring seamless connectivity while reducing dependence on fossil fuels and drastically cutting carbon emissions.

The proliferation of the KAVACH anti-collision system across the network is the most extensive implementation in any mixed-traffic railway system globally. Meanwhile, Indian trains are surpassing "world-class" standards, blending advanced global technologies with domestic priorities to create safer, faster, cleaner, and more comfortable travel experiences—all while maintaining affordability to keep rail services



M JAMSHED

POST-2014, THE GOVERNMENT HAS ADOPTED A PROGRESSIVE AND AMBITIOUS APPROACH TOWARD INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT. A MODERN INDIA DEMANDS A NATIONAL TRANSPORTER FREE FROM OUTDATED CONSTRAINTS, FOSTERING INNOVATION AND GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS

accessible to all.

A unique aspect of Indian Railways' business model is its ability to subsidise passenger travel using freight revenues while remaining profitable. In contrast, major railway systems in developed countries are either privatised with the freedom to set high tariffs or reliant on government subsidies to cover losses. Despite stiff competition from other transportation modes and its dependence on derived demand, Indian Railways continues to meet ambitious revenue targets, delivering record-breaking performance year after year.

This transformation may come as a surprise to those who remember an era when anything labeled "export quality" was reserved for affluent nations, while Indians settled for substandard goods and services. Generations of citizens were conditioned to lower their expectations, even for crucial services like Indian Railways. However, post-2014, the government has adopted a progressive and ambitious approach toward infrastructure development. A modern India demands a national transporter free from outdated constraints, fostering innovation and global competitiveness. This progress has been achieved while maintaining high levels of localisation for essential railway components and scaling up domestic manufacturing to unprecedented levels. While Vande Bharat trains have captured public attention, Indian Railways' transformation extends

far beyond these high-speed marvels.

India is now set to roll out the world's most powerful hydrogen trains in the coming months, a feat comparable to Operation Smiling Buddha, which established India as a nuclear superpower. At 1,200 horsepower, these locomotives far surpass those being developed by "advanced" nations still struggling with half as much power. To ensure safety, Germany's TÜV SÜD has conducted third-party audits of India's hydrogen trains.

With the establishment of the world's longest hyperloop test facility, India is emerging as a global leader in futuristic transportation. Following the completion of a 422-meter test track in December 2024, India is now developing a nearly 50-km test track to assess hyperloop's commercial viability. Agreements with SwissPod (backed by Elon Musk) and France's SYSTRA underscore India's commitment to leading hyperloop innovation. Even China has recognised the strength of the 'Make in India' initiative. CRRC India is actively localising metro coach manufacturing for the Bangalore Metro, achieving over 75 per cent domestic content, with plans to reach 90 per cent. Furthermore, the facility is set to handle export orders for West Asia and Africa.

While bullet train rolling stock supply agreements with Japan are being finalised, India has already embarked on domestic high-speed train manufacturing. Beyond rolling stock, Plasser India, a subsidiary of Austria's Plasser and Theurer, is revolutionising railway maintenance with locally produced track machines, enhancing self-reliance while supporting global exports.

Indian Railways is also spearheading ambitious connectivity projects. The BBIN initiative aims to enhance rail connectivity across South Asia, while the 'Act East Policy' envisions linking India with ASEAN. The 'IMEC initiative' is set to establish a Rail-Sea-Rail corridor connecting India with Europe. Meanwhile, Indian Railways' public sector undertakings (PSUs) are exporting rolling stock, undertaking track infrastructure projects, and providing consultancy services across Asia and Africa. With its new trains, modernised stations, faster speeds, dedicated freight corridors, and high-speed networks, Indian Railways has solidified its place as a world-class transportation system. This success story serves as a model for other nations yet to fully leverage the transformative potential of railways in national growth.

The motto 'Viksit Rail, Viksit Bharat' (Developed Railways, Developed India) is not just a vision for 2047, it is an ongoing journey for Bharat and with Bharat, with new records, milestones, and achievements being set every day.

(The writer is a distinguished fellow at CRF and former member, Traffic Railway Board. Views expressed are personal)

Foreign interference in India's farmer protests: A threat to national sovereignty

Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's recent call to ban Sikhs for Justice underscores a growing consensus within the Indian establishment that foreign-backed elements are actively working to destabilise the country's internal social fabric. His statement is not a reaction to isolated incidents but a recognition of a broader, orchestrated effort to exploit India's challenges for geopolitical leverage. At the heart of this manipulation lies the Open Society Foundations (OSF), led by George Soros, which has been systematically influencing India's internal affairs through financial backing, ideological infiltration, and political maneuvering.

The farmer unrest in India over recent years is not merely a reaction to domestic policy, it is closely linked to Soros's global network, which exploits social fault lines to exert influence and undermine sovereign decision-making.

Indian agriculture has undergone a transformation with direct government support and market interventions, yet the farmer protests are increasingly entangled in international financing and hidden political agendas. What started as grassroots struggles for farmers' rights have been infiltrated by foreign forces with interests far beyond agriculture.

Historically, Indian farmers have fought for better prices, market access, and protection from exploitative policies. Their movements have centered on resisting corporate encroachment and demanding fair subsidies. However, recent years have seen a shift where external funding has played a role in redirecting these movements. OSF has strategically injected capital into India's rural protests, not to empower farmers but to destabilise internal governance and promote an agenda aligning with Western geopolitical interests.

The 2020-21 farmers' protests exemplify how Soros's network infiltrates domestic movements. What started as a call for fair pricing quickly evolved into a sophisticated and well-funded political movement, backed by global media campaigns and international endorsements. This escalation was not organic—it was engineered. OSF-linked entities have funneled funds into Indian non-profits and activist groups under the pretext of supporting democracy and human rights, but the real intent was to use these protests as a tool against the Indian state.

Financial backing from international sources raises concerns about whether genuine farmer grievances are being amplified or manipulated. Soros's OSF, known for its involvement in "regime change" operations across Eastern Europe and Latin America, has been accused of funding civil unrest in developing nations. Similar patterns have emerged in India. The well-organised nature of the farmer protests, from logistics to media coordination, suggests significant financial and

strategic backing. The question remains: Why are these protests so well-funded, and what is the ultimate objective?

The consequences of such interference are multifaceted. While real farmer issues persist, external involvement risks overshadowing them with hidden political motives.

The movement, originally meant to empower farmers, risks becoming a tool for destabilisation. What began as a struggle for fair Minimum Support Prices (MSP) has transformed into a political agitation aimed at discrediting the Indian government and fracturing social cohesion.

The farmer protests received significant support from Canadian politicians, particularly in areas with a large Punjabi diaspora. Public endorsements, fundraising campaigns, and rallies abroad highlighted how a local agricultural movement turned into an international diplomatic issue.

Canada's Liberal Party, influenced by OSF-backed think tanks and lobbying groups, played a key role in amplifying the protests. Radical elements with foreign funding further intensified tensions, raising doubts about the protests' true motives.

The Sovereign Guarantee Fund (SGF) is another financial mechanism under scrutiny. Designed to provide security for agricultural projects, it has drawn concerns that foreign governments and financial institutions may be using it to influence farmer movements and shape internal policies. Soros's network has been linked to sovereign funds in various developing countries, often tying them to policy shifts favoring Western financial interests over local farmers. This creates economic dependencies that align with Western strategic goals rather than the welfare of Indian farmers.

Soros's network has been linked to sovereign funds in various developing countries, often tying them to policy shifts favoring Western financial interests over local farmers. This creates economic dependencies that align with Western strategic goals rather than the welfare of Indian farmers. For Indian farmers, this situation presents both opportunities and risks. While they demand fair prices and financial aid, there is a danger of being drawn into international power struggles.

The growing influence of foreign-backed transnational corporations (TNCs) is particularly alarming. These firms, often supported by sovereign guarantee agreements, introduce patented farming solutions that increase dependency, eroding farmers' autonomy.

What is presented as modernisation frequently results in escalating costs for farmers, reduc-

ing their control over their own practices.

The fingerprints of OSF are evident across these movements—international media coverage, coordinated social media campaigns, and well-timed statements from Western governments align with Soros's strategy of influencing emerging markets.

The influx of foreign-backed corporations undermines domestic agricultural enterprises, shifting control from Indian farmers to multinational conglomerates. Small farmers, in particular, bear the brunt of rising input costs and decreasing market power.

This is not about democracy or civil rights—it is about strategic geopolitical manipulation. The objective is clear: to weaken India's internal social cohesion, influence policymaking, and create economic dependencies that serve Western interests.

The increasing presence of foreign-backed elements in India's farmer movements is no accident, it is a calculated strategy to erode India's sovereignty and dictate internal policies.

At the core of these complexities is a fundamental truth—Indian farmers require genuine policy support, direct financial aid, and reforms that prioritize their interests over corporate or geopolitical agendas.

Their protests should not be battlegrounds for international diplomacy but platforms for real agricultural change. India's agricultural sector must remain sovereign, with policies driven by national interests rather than foreign capital.

As Rajnath Singh's statement suggests, the time for vigilance is now. The Indian government must safeguard its agricultural sector from external influences and hidden financial agendas. Protecting Indian farmers is not just about agriculture—it is about preserving national sovereignty, dignity, and economic independence. The future of Indian farming must not be dictated by foreign interests but shaped by the resilience and determination of India's farmers.

Their fight is not just for today—it is for the generations that will inherit their land, knowledge, and legacy. Ensuring a self-reliant agricultural sector is essential to achieving the vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047.

India's farmers deserve genuine support, not foreign interference. The influence of external forces threatens national sovereignty, turning rightful protests into geopolitical tools.

As Rajnath Singh warns, vigilance is crucial. India must protect its agricultural sector from hidden agendas, ensuring that policies prioritise farmers' welfare over external manipulation, securing a self-reliant future.

(The writer is secretary general, Confederation of NGOs of Rural India and Member, PM-MSP Committee, Government of India. Views expressed are personal)

Raisina dialogue 2025 convenes amid global uncertainty

The not-so-subtle changes in international diplomacy are quickly becoming the leitmotif within the first 50 days of President Trump's inauguration. While there have been some major embarrassments in the Oval Office—such as an ugly spat between President Zelensky of Ukraine and US Vice President JD Vance, as well as Vance's controversial statements in Europe regarding European politics—the expulsion and deportation of several international students and academics for their ideological leanings, travel bans on multiple countries, and a semi-trade war have all contributed to destabilising the global order.

Amidst this backdrop, the Ministry of External Affairs hosted its prestigious annual foreign policy event, the Raisina Dialogue, this week.

The tone was set by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary, and the event's organisers, ORF, who underscored the constant evolution and reshaping of the global order. In his welcome note, EAM Jaishankar wrote: "In a world where relationships are no longer mutually exclusive and every nation seeks to benefit from the best of the international order can offer, there is a constant flow of geopolitical convergences, alignments, turbulence, and transitions.

It is these shifts, with their continuities and discontinuities, that the Raisina Dialogue 2025 will deliberate upon. We are also living through an era of globalisation fatigue, where older partnerships are being remade and new ones forged.

The world is experiencing a wave of intense economic competition, where interdependence and de-risking struggle to find a balance. There are no lasting landing points, underscoring the continuing nature of competition. Since 2020, instability and conflicts around the globe have continued or escalated, whether in Ukraine, the Middle East, South Asia, or Africa. Divergent approaches toward climate action have created deep fissures.

Meanwhile, emerging technologies, particularly AI, have become a driving force in contemporary geopolitics, triggering a new tech race with the potential to shape the destinies of people and nations. The need to strive for peace, progress, prosperity, and security has never been greater."

The reshaping of the old world order was further emphasised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he sat down for a first-of-its-kind podcast with US computer scientist Lex Fridman. During the interview, he stated:

"We must also understand that the world has become one small village today. No country can thrive in isolation. Today, we all depend on one another. No one can make it far alone. That is why

you must learn to synchronise with everyone, and everyone else must learn to synchronise with you. That's the only way to propel this initiative forward.

Organisations like the United Nations came into being after the First World War, but they failed to evolve with the times, and this inability to adapt has sparked a global debate on their relevance."

PM Modi dedicated an entire segment of the conversation to his relationship with President Trump, sending a bold message to global leaders about their close affiliation. He said:

"When he was shot during the recent campaign, I saw the same resilient and determined President Trump—the one who walked hand in hand with me in that stadium.

Even after being shot, he remained unwaveringly dedicated to America. His life was for his nation. His reflection showed his 'America First' spirit, just as I believe in 'India First.' That's why we connect so well.

These are the things that truly resonate. And I believe that, across the world, politicians are covered so much by the media that people mostly perceive each other through its lens. People rarely get the chance to truly meet or personally know one another, and perhaps third-party intervention is the real cause of tensions."

Regarding his negotiating skills in comparison to President Trump, PM Modi added:

"It's his graciousness and humility—it is very kind of him to openly appreciate me on various occasions and in different contexts. But when it comes to negotiation, I always put my country's interests first.

That's why, in every forum, I speak up for India's interests—not to harm anyone, but in a positive manner. And because of that, no one takes offense. People know that if Modi is present, he will strongly advocate for these things. After all, the people of India have given me this responsibility. For me, my nation is my high command, and I will always honor their will."

It was no surprise that a top official from the Trump administration, the US Intelligence Chief, was in New Delhi this week.

She highlighted the personal bond between the two leaders and also spoke about the rise of the Islamic Caliphate while stressing the need to address the continued atrocities against religious minorities in Bangladesh.

New Delhi is pleased this week, but it will proceed with cautious optimism.

(The writer is a political analyst. Views expressed are personal)

IN BRIEF



Malabar Gold to open 12 new showrooms

Jewellery retailer Malabar Gold on Thursday said it will add 12 new showrooms across the country in the current fiscal at an investment of Rs 600 crore. Malabar Gold & Diamonds operates 11 state-of-the-art factories across India and 5 international units. The new showrooms will be opened in Panvel in Mumbai, Sinhad Road in Pune, Brahmapur and Soubhagya Nagar in Odisha, Dhanbad in Jharkhand, Hospet, Nagarbhavi and Chitradurga in Karnataka, Nandyal, Amalapuram, Machilipatanam in Andhra Pradesh and Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. This will take the total showroom count to 391 showrooms across 13 countries and 19 states in India and create employment opportunities this financial year, the company said in a statement, adding that currently, it employs over 25,000 professionals from 26 countries. Malabar Gold is also planning to open 60 new showrooms in India and overseas in 2025-26, of which 5 stores will be launched in April in the Middle East, UK, and Canada.



Gold falls Rs 300 to Rs 91,650 per 10 gram

Gold prices declined by Rs 300 to Rs 91,650 per 10 grams on Thursday, bringing an end to the three-day rally in the national capital, amid fall in precious metal rates globally, according to the All India Sarafa Association. On Wednesday, the precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity closed Rs 700 higher at its lifetime high of Rs 91,950 per 10 grams. Gold of 99.5 per cent purity, which ended the previous session at Rs 91,500 per 10 grams, slipped by Rs 300 to Rs 91,200 per 10 grams on Thursday. Silver prices also tanked by Rs 1,500 to Rs 1,02,000 per kg from Wednesday's closing level of Rs 1,03,500 per kg, also its historic high. In the preceding three sessions, gold added Rs 2,500 per 10 gram to hit its all-time high level, while silver surged by Rs 2,300 per kg to reach its fresh peak during the period. In the global markets on Thursday, spot gold fell by USD 14.44 or 0.47 per cent to USD 3,033.35 per ounce. In the morning trade, it rose to hit a lifetime high of USD 3,057.36 per ounce. Similarly, Comex gold futures for April delivery slipped 0.11 per cent to USD 3,038 per ounce. During the session, it touched a fresh peak of USD 3,065.09 per ounce.



Rupee rises 1 paisa to close at 86.36 against US dollar

The rupee stayed firm and appreciated 1 paisa to close at 86.36 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday supported by positive domestic equities. Forex traders said the Indian rupee has staged a counterattack against external pressures, gaining support from strong foreign inflows into debt markets. However, risks remain due to unabated foreign institutional investor sell-off, and uncertainty surrounding Trump's tariff stance could pose challenges to the rupee's upward momentum. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.39 then touched an intraday high of 86.20 and a low of 86.41 against the greenback. The unit ended the session at 86.36 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 1 paisa from its previous closing level. On Wednesday, the rupee appreciated 19 paise to close at 86.37 against the US dollar. This is the fifth straight session of gain for the rupee, during which it has added 87 paise.

'Taiwan ready to assist India reduce trade deficit with China'

Assures Taiwanese Deputy NSA Hsu Szu-Chien

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Taiwan can help India reduce its import of electronic components from China and the best way to bolster the economic engagement including in the semiconductor sector would be to seal a free trade pact, Taiwanese deputy national security adviser Hsu Szu-Chien said on Thursday.

Hsu said a trade deal will pave the way for greater investment in India by Taiwanese companies in the high-technology sectors as it will help in bringing down the "high tariffs". The Taiwanese deputy national security adviser was in the national capital to participate in the Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship conference on geopolitics, and hold talks with senior Indian officials.

Hsu said there can be a match-making between technology of Taiwan and India's

demographic dividends to produce high-end technology components in India that will help New Delhi cut its imports from China.

"I think there's great potential for the relations to expand, especially on economic cooperation," Hsu said.

He said India can bring down its "huge trade deficit with China by going for joint production of various electronics components instead of keep importing them from China.

"Most of these are ICT (information and communication technology) products, which from our perspective, India has great potential to produce. And Taiwan can be of help, not only semiconductor, but all other ICT products," he said.

"India itself is a huge market and you have a demographic dividend of a very young age of population, which can be put into the workforce."



India's 'AI for All' mantra backed by concrete action: Min

Asserts Commerce and IT MoS Jitin Prasada

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India's 'AI for All' mantra is backed by concrete action with the country leading in AI skill penetration and talent concentration, Union Minister Jitin Prasada said on Thursday as he urged industry leaders to prioritise research and development (R&D) to capitalise on India's position as a global skill capital.

Prasada, Union Minister of State for Ministry of Commerce & Industry and Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, was delivering a keynote address at the Nasscom Global Confluence 2025 here.

"Our mantra 'AI for All' is backed by concrete action. India is number one in the world in AI skill penetration - the AI skill index even outstrips the US and Germany.

"It's just not about numbers, it's about impact. As nations across the globe embrace digitalisation to modernise traditional sectors and fuel economic growth, India stands ready to be a strategic technology partner," the minister asserted.

Stressing that India is open for business and ready to lead,



Prasada urged industry leaders to make research a top priority in their future strategies.

"India is the skill capital of the world and we are ready to share, venture across the world, and contribute to various sectors given the enormous edge that we have on the skill front.

"We are also ensuring that even the future skills programmes reach every nook and corner to the last mile on the ground -- to our villages, where our workforce should be ready to tackle and engage with the changes in the transformation that's happening across the globe in the tech front," he said.

The country's strength reflects its capacity for innovation and resilience in the dynamic global landscape, Prasada said, adding that the Indian IT industry is a testament to that vision and resilience.

"In the fiscal year 2024, this industry recorded a remarkable revenue of USD 254 billion, a figure that underscores its role as a global powerhouse.

"With a presence in over 80 countries and a track record of delivering cutting-edge solutions to fortune 500 companies, Indian IT firms have

become synonymous with innovation, reliability, and excellence.

Our strength lies in our highly skilled workforce, our deep expertise in emerging technologies, and our ability to partner with the world in its digital transformation journey," he noted.

Referring to his dual responsibilities in governance -- Commerce and IT, the minister noted that both sectors are currently the flavours of the season, and emphasised that India is on a strong footing to capitalise on their growth.

FOUR DAYS OF MARKET RALLY

Investors' wealth surges Rs 17.43 lakh crore

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Market investors kitty swelled by Rs 17.43 lakh crore in four days of sharp rally in equities where the BSE benchmark Sensex jumped over 3 per cent.

On Thursday, the 30-share benchmark Sensex jumped 899.01 points or 1.19 per cent to settle at 76,348.06, regaining the 76,000 level. During the day, it soared 1,007.2 points or 1.33 per cent to 76,456.25.

In four days, the Sensex zoomed 2,519.15 points or 3.41 per cent.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms surged Rs 17,43,418.8 crore to Rs 4,08,61,851.73 crore (USD 4.73 trillion) in four days.

"Benchmark indices got a Fed booster shot on Thursday extending gains for fourth straight session, after the US Fed kept the forecast for two rate cuts in 2025 intact despite inflation risks from Trump's trade war. Broader mid and smallcaps also posted gains for the day. All major sectors also logged gains in broad-based rally with Nifty IT recovering from steep losses in recent weeks," Satish Chandra



Aluri, Analyst, Lemonn Markets Desk, said.

The US Fed is undoubtedly the driving force behind today's market rally as markets took comfort from the strong overnight gains in US indices, after Fed kept the projection for two rate cuts in 2025 unchanged, he added.

From the Sensex pack, Bharti Airtel, Titan, Tata Consultancy Services, Hindustan Unilever, Infosys, Nestle, Reliance Industries, Mahindra & Mahindra, HDFC Bank and Tata Motors were the biggest gainers.

However, IndusInd Bank, Bajaj Finance and UltraTech

Cement were the laggards.

The BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.73 per cent and mid-cap index went up by 0.61 per cent. All BSE sectoral indices ended higher where telecommunication jumped 1.94 per cent, oil & gas (1.56 per cent), energy (1.42 per cent), auto (1.39 per cent) and BSE Focused IT (1.23 per cent).

"The rally was driven by gains in the US market after the Federal Reserve maintained its forecast of two rate cuts this year despite the ongoing tariff concerns," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

Rs 124.98 cr demand notice to New India Assurance

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Public sector general insurer New India Assurance on Thursday said it has received a Rs 124.98 crore demand notice from the Income Tax Department.

The company received an order on March 19, 2025, from the National Faceless Assessment Centre, Income Tax Department, levying a penalty of Rs 1,24,98,58,050 for disallowance of payment made to auto dealers for the assessment year 2016-17, New India Assurance Company said in a regulatory filing.

The amount would be shown as a contingent liability in the financial statements of the company, it said.

Based on the merits of the matter, the company would pursue an appeal before the National Faceless Appeal Centre (NFAC) or other legal options against the order, it said.

Bengal's revenue receipt for FY'26 pegged at over Rs 2.66 lakh crore

PNS ■ KOLKATA

West Bengal's revenue receipt for the 2025-2026 fiscal is projected to be Rs 2.66 lakh crore, as per the recently tabled budget, a state minister said on Thursday.

In the 2024-25 financial year, the revenue receipt was a little over Rs 2.36 lakh crore, Minister of State for Finance (Independent Charge) Chandrima Bhattacharya said in the assembly.

Bhattacharya, during a discussion on two appropriation bills for the fiscal ending March 31, said it is estimated that there will be an increase of Rs 29,809 crore in revenue receipt for 2025-2026.

She maintained that the scope of taxation by the state has narrowed since most of the indirect taxes have come under the GST ambit.

The projected market loan of the state in 2025-26 has been pegged at Rs 81,972 crore, the minister told the House.

The West Bengal government is "well within its limits" in terms of obtaining market loan, she said.

Bhattacharya said the state's market loan in 2024-25 was Rs 79,727 crore.

Noting that capital expenditure has a significant influence in creation of long-term assets, employment and betterment of living standards, she said expenditure on this account for 2025-26 has been pegged at

Rs 39,337 crore, which was Rs 34,915 crore in the current fiscal. The assembly passed the two appropriation bills, authorising payment and appropriation of certain further sums from the consolidated fund for the current fiscal.

The House also passed the West Bengal Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (Amendment) Bill, 2025.

All the bills were passed by voice vote.

DPIIT inks pact with Yes Bank to support startups

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) on Thursday said it has signed a pact with Yes Bank to facilitate funding access, mentorship, and infrastructure support for early-stage startups.

This agreement aims to foster innovation and provide crucial support to product startups, innovators, and entrepreneurs across the country, it said.

"The partnership will leverage DPIIT's Startup India initiative and Yes Bank's financial expertise to facilitate market linkages, funding access, men-



torship, and infrastructure support for early-stage ventures," it said.

Startups will benefit from Yes Bank's HeadStartup programme, which offers tailored banking and financial solutions, including working capital, credit access, and cash flow management.

offer emerging startups the right resources and opportunities to scale and thrive.

The DPIIT has also inked a similar agreement with Kyndryl Solutions for supporting startups in the manufacturing and IT sectors by leveraging Kyndryl's expertise in digital transformation and Generative AI solutions.

It said Kyndryl will institutionalise dedicated programmes to support digital product startups, AI-driven innovators, and entrepreneurs.

"Startups will receive mentorship on product development, market readiness, cybersecurity resilience, and enterprise deployment," it added.

PFRDA notifies assured pension scheme for govt staff

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Pension Fund Regulatory & Development Authority (PFRDA) on Thursday notified operationalisation of the Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) which promises an assured pension of 50 per cent of the average basic pay drawn over the last 12 months prior to superannuation.

This follows the UPS notification dated January 24, 2025 by the government for central government employees covered under the National Pension System

(NPS).

The regulations shall come into effect from April 1, 2025, PFRDA said in a statement.

These regulations enable the enrolment of central government employees including an existing central government employee in service as on April 1, 2025, who is covered under NPS and new recruit in the central government services, who joins service on or after April, 2025.

The enrolment and claim forms for all these categories of central government employees will be available online from April 1, 2025 on



the website of Protean CRA - <https://npscra.nsdl.co.in>. The employees also have

the option to submit the forms physically, it said. UPS or assured payout

would not be available in case of removal or dismissal from service or resignation of the employee, as per the notification.

The notification added that the rate of full assured payout will be 50 per cent of 12 monthly average basic pay, immediately prior to superannuation subject to a minimum qualifying service of 25 years against a market returns linked payout under the NPS.

The notification will give the option to 23 lakh government employees to choose between UPS and NPS, which came into effect on

January 1, 2004.

The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 24, 2024, approved the UPS.

Under the old pension scheme (OPS), effective before January 2004, employees got 50 per cent of their last drawn basic pay as pension.

Unlike the old pension scheme, UPS is contributory in nature, wherein employees will be required to contribute 10 per cent of their basic salary and dearness allowance while the employer's contribution (the central government) will be 18.5 per cent.

EPFO's net member addition rises to 17.89 lakh

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Retirement fund body EPFO has added 17.89 lakh net members in January this year, reflecting a year-on-year growth of 11.67 per cent, according to payroll data released on Thursday.

An increase of 11.48 per cent has been registered in net payroll addition in the month under review compared to December 2024, a labour ministry statement said.

According to the statement, the Employees' Provident Fund Organization (EPFO) has released provisional payroll data for January 2025, revealing a net addition of 17.89 lakh members.

Further, the year-on-year analysis reveals a growth of 11.67 per cent in net payroll additions compared to January 2024, signifying increased employment opportunities and heightened awareness of employee benefits, bolstered by EPFO's effective outreach initiatives, it added.

The EPFO enrolled around 8.23 lakh new subscribers in January 2025. The new subscribers addition shows a growth of 1.87 per cent year-on-year.

It also stated that a noticeable aspect of the data is the dominance of the 18-25 age group, as 4.70 lakh new subscribers were added in the category, constituting a significant 57.07 per cent of the total new subscribers added in January 2025.

New subscribers in the 18-25 age group added in the month show a growth of 3.07 per cent year-on-year.

Further, the net payroll addition for the age group 18-25 for



January 2025 is approximately 7.27 lakh, reflecting an increase of 6.19 per cent compared to December 2024 and an 8.15 per cent growth year-on-year.

This is in consonance with the earlier trend, which indicates that most individuals joining the organised workforce are youth, primarily first-time job seekers, the statement said.

The payroll data highlights that approximately 15.03 lakh members exited and subsequently rejoined EPFO, reflecting a 23.55 per cent growth year-on-year.

DHANASHREE VERMA BRINGS HER 'MOST EMOTIONALLY CHARGED PERFORMANCE' AMID DIVORCE PROCEEDINGS

Dhanashree Verma, known for her work as a dancer and social media influencer, has stepped into a deeply emotional role with her latest music video, *Dekha Ji Dekha Maine*. Released on March 20 by T-Series, the song features Dhanashree alongside actor Ishwak Singh, portraying the struggles of a turbulent relationship. The release of the song comes at a time when Dhanashree is in the midst of her ongoing divorce from cricketer Yuzvendra Chahal, adding a layer of real-life emotion to the project. Set against the picturesque outskirts of Jaipur, the video captures the raw intensity of love, anger, and emotional turmoil, blurring the line between affection and pain.

emotionally charged performances I've been a part of. Every actor aspires to take on roles that push their limits and this character required a deep emotional intensity. The entire team has put in tremendous effort, and I hope the audience connects with it." Directed by Dhruval Patel and Jigar Mulani, the video features the evocative vocals of Jyoti Nooran, paired with Bunny's intense musical composition. The result is a hauntingly beautiful track that resonates with anyone who has experienced the highs and lows of a complicated relationship.

Reflecting on her experience, Dhanashree shared, "This was one of the most



Khushi Kapoor moves beyond rom-coms, eyes darker roles

After making her debut in the musical comedy *The Archies* and starring in rom-coms *Loveyapa* and *Nadaaniyan*, Khushi Kapoor is ready to step into a new territory. The young actress revealed her desire to explore a darker, more intense genre following her run of light-hearted films.

In a latest interview, Khushi expressed her fascination with the thriller-horror genre. "I've always been curious to see what the process of a thriller-horror movie would look like—maybe not completely horror but something a bit darker than the movies I've done so far," she said. The actress believes that taking on a more intense role would be a refreshing challenge for her.

While discussing her future aspirations, Khushi also shared her appreciation for emotionally charged and dramatic roles. She expressed interest in projects that allow her to tap into deeper, more complex emotions. "I would want to do a film that has a bigger focus on dramatic and emotional themes," she added.

Reflecting on her roles in *The Archies*, *Loveyapa* and *Nadaaniyan*, Khushi said that she approached each character differently, adapting her process to fit their personalities. She also revealed that while she tried to connect with all her characters, playing Bani in *Loveyapa* was the most challenging, as she felt the character was the furthest from her real-life personality.

POPCORN PICKS



Mark your calendars! *Sikandar* is slated for a worldwide theatrical release on March 30, 2025. The date holds special significance as it coincides with major festivals like Eid, Gudi Padwa (celebrated in Maharashtra) and Ugadi (the New Year festival in South India). The film's release during these celebrations is expected to draw massive crowds, adding to the festive atmosphere. Salman Khan took to Instagram to share the exciting news, unveiling a powerful poster of *Sikandar*. In his post, he wrote, "See you in theatres worldwide on 30th March! #Sikandar #SaiidNadiadwala's #Sikandar Directed by @a.r.murugadoss." Fans immediately flooded the comments section with enthusiasm, eagerly awaiting what promises to be a thrilling cinematic experience.

Standalone



Actor Kartik Aaryan expressed his pride and gratitude after being honoured with the Maharashtra of the Year 2025 award in the Actor category for his portrayal of Murlikant Petkar in *Chandu Champion*. Taking to Instagram, Kartik shared a picture from the event, where he was seen standing on stage alongside Maharashtra's Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and Governor CP Radhakrishnan. Describing the recognition as a "proud moment," the actor celebrated the achievement, which marks yet another milestone in his career.

Karan Johar drops hints about *Kesari Chapter 2*, ADDRESSES CRITICS IN NEW POST

Akshay Kumar, Ananya Panday, and R. Madhavan are set to bring history to life in *Kesari Chapter 2: The Untold Story of Jallianwala Bagh*. With the film's release set for April 18, 2025, anticipation has been building among fans eager to see the first look of this historical drama. Now, producer Karan Johar has dropped a major hint about the project, sharing a heartfelt message about its journey and an intriguing response to online trolls. On March 20, 2025, Karan Johar took to Instagram to share his thoughts on his career as a producer, reflecting on the evolution of Dharma Productions. "When I began producing films in

2003 with *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, the idea was to empower filmmakers and storytellers... to pay it forward," he wrote. He acknowledged that while some projects succeeded and others did not, the core mission remained the same—to tell stories they truly believed in. "Our aim has always been to entertain the audience, garner acclaim, or just have fun," he added.

Karan also took the opportunity to address critics who often accuse him of favoring star kids over newcomers. In a pointed remark, he wrote, "I am so proud to say that our next offering is the 24th debutant filmmaker we have introduced to Hindi

cinema! (Trivia for trolls: 90% of them are 'outsiders')." The filmmaker then revealed that the team has been working on this project for four years, overcoming numerous challenges, including delays due to the pandemic. He expressed admiration for the debutant director, Karan Tyagi, for his perseverance and dedication to bringing this story to the screen.

While Karan Johar admitted that commercial success is always unpredictable, he expressed immense pride in *Kesari Chapter 2*. "What I can say with all my heart is that this film is one of Dharma's proudest films! I say this as a

filmmaker and as an audience member... I pray for the team that the audience is coloured in the colour of their passion," he wrote.

In a subtle nod to the film, Johar used a saffron-hued background for his note and captioned the post with orange heart emojis, further fueling speculation about *Kesari Chapter 2*.

With an all-star cast and a gripping historical narrative, *Kesari Chapter 2: The Untold Story of Jallianwala Bagh* is shaping up to be a must-watch. As the release date approaches, fans eagerly await a glimpse of the film that promises to bring one of India's most tragic and defining moments to the big screen.

FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



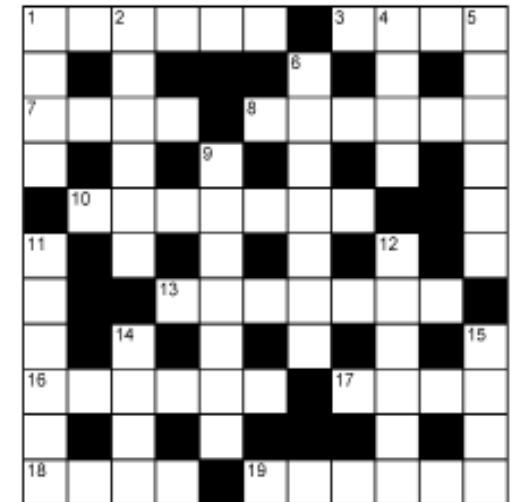
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- A written communication
- Bathe
- Touch lips with someone
- Concealed
- A sale where people make bids for things
- Rocks in space that burn up when close to the Earth
- An animal with a shell
- Mix up with a spoon
- Very impolite
- A university award
- Repaired
- Refuse to follow an order
- Pointy part of a church roof
- A restaurant employee
- Author
- Poke with a finger
- Factual

DOWN

- Enjoy
- Very thin, soft paper
- Broad



SUDOKU

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Yesterday's solution

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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.

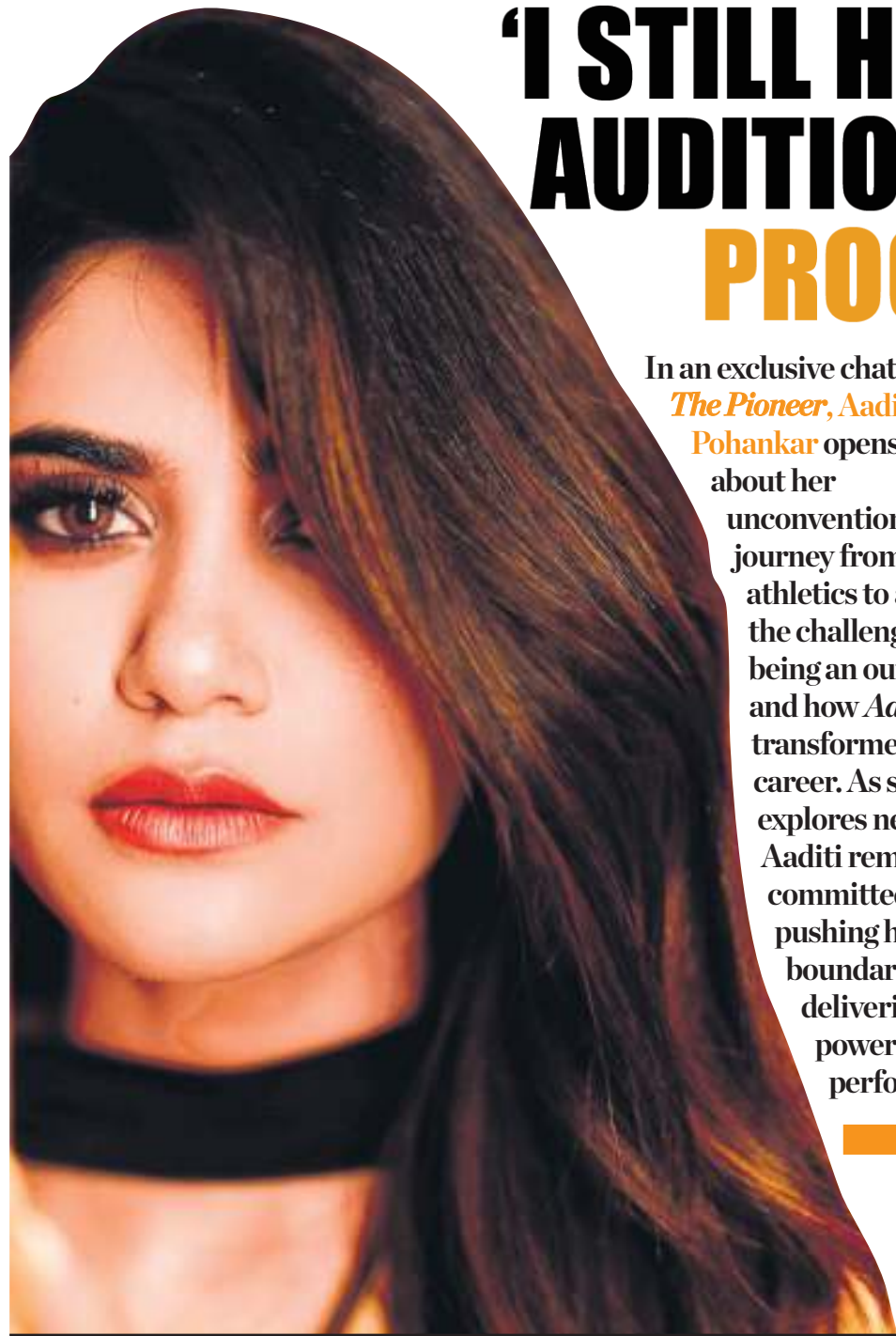
DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

The Pioneer Vijayawada

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Friday
March 21, 2025

'I STILL HAVE TO PROVE MYSELF THROUGH AUDITIONS, BUT IT'S A FAIR GAME IF THE PROCESS APPLIES TO EVERYONE'



In an exclusive chat with *The Pioneer*, Aaditi Pohankar opens up about her unconventional journey from athletics to acting, the challenges of being an outsider, and how *Aashram* transformed her career. As she explores new roles, Aaditi remains committed to pushing her boundaries and delivering powerful performances

TEJAL SINHA
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From an unexpected entry into acting to becoming a household name with *Aashram*, Aaditi Pohankar's journey has been one of perseverance and passion. Aaditi Pohankar's rise in the entertainment industry has been anything but conventional. From her early days to becoming a widely recognised face through *Aashram*, her journey has been marked by perseverance, learning, and transformation. In this candid conversation, Aaditi opens up about her career, the struggles of being an outsider, her approach to acting and how *Aashram* changed her life. Before stepping into acting, Aaditi was deeply invested in athletics. "Honestly, *Lai Bhaari* happened to me when I was just 17 or 18. At that point, I didn't even know if I wanted to be an actor. I was a runner, and my focus was on sports." However, an incident from her childhood left a lasting impression. "My mother was a teacher and she once told me she wanted to see me on a hoarding. She meant a school hoarding with student achievements, but I mistook it for a film hoarding," she shares with a smile. "After she passed away, that wish stayed with me, and I unknowingly walked into this profession." Her entry into the film industry wasn't immediate. She took time to train, attending workshops and performing in theatre to hone her craft. "I had no godfather in the industry. My only strength was my ability to learn, so I committed myself to the process—understanding my characters deeply and bringing them to life authentically." The *She* fame is candid about the difficulties she faced as an industry outsider. However, she doesn't label them as struggles but rather as part of the process. "Yes, I wasn't handed roles on a platter. There were multiple auditions, meetings and rejections. Even now, after two hit shows with three seasons each, I still have to prove myself through auditions. But I believe that if this process applies to everyone, then it's a fair game."



She also notes the changing landscape of the industry. "Earlier, actors had distinct personalities and now, that individuality is making a comeback. I think real, raw performances are being appreciated again." One of her most defining roles has been Pammi in *Aashram*. The transformation of Pammi—from a naive devotee to a determined woman seeking justice—was an intense experience for her. "The most difficult scenes for me were when Pammi realises she is being abused. There's a scene where she first understands that something is terribly wrong, and another where she realises Baba Nirala is the one violating her. These moments broke me into pieces." To prepare for the role, Pohankar took a unique approach. "I don't over-rehearse. I prepare by understanding the character's emotional depth, but once I'm on set, I react spontaneously to the environment and my co-actors. That's where the real magic happens." Playing Pammi was physically and emotionally exhausting. "There were scenes where I had to be extremely vulnerable, and it took a toll on me. I remember feeling completely drained after certain sequences. It was like living through Pammi's trauma, and that wasn't easy." The *Star* actress shares an interesting anecdote about

working with Bobby Deol. "We didn't have any prior rehearsals and I first met him on set. I was rehearsing my expressions intensely, and he thought I was genuinely giving him angry looks. Later, he told me, 'I thought you were upset with me! We laughed about it, but that initial distance actually helped build the tension needed for our characters.'" She also speaks highly of Prakash Jha's directorial approach. "His discipline and honesty to the script are inspiring. Even when we faced disruptions on set, he never let it affect the shoot. That kind of dedication and courage is something I truly admire." She acknowledges that *Aashram* was a turning point in her career. "When the series was released, my phone didn't stop ringing. Suddenly, people who had never spoken to me before were reaching out." She recalls an incident when she was recognised by a fan in a remote area. "I was traveling, and this woman came up to me and said, 'Pammi! *Aapko dekh ke bahut himmat milti hai!*' That moment made me realise the power of storytelling and how much the character had resonated with people." She believes that the rise of OTT platforms has transformed the entertainment industry, creating more opportunities for actors based on talent rather than connections. "OTT has leveled the playing field. The audience wants to see strong performances, and that has opened doors for so many of us who might not have had these chances otherwise." She also acknowledges that social media has played a role in changing the way actors engage with their audience. "Social media is a double-edged sword. It gives you direct access to your audience, but it also means there's constant scrutiny. I try to keep a balance—engaging when necessary but not letting it dictate my life." Despite her growing recognition, Aaditi is in no rush to sign multiple projects. "I'm taking things slow and choosing roles that truly challenge me. I've been lucky to work with some incredible directors, and I want to continue growing as an actor," she says. While she remains tight-lipped about her upcoming projects, she assures that she is exploring diverse roles. "I want to surprise myself and my audience. Whether it's an intense drama, an action-packed role, or even a lighthearted film, I want to push my boundaries."

'Film festivals are for everyone—come, watch, be inspired'

PNS/HYDERABAD

Vikramaditya Motwane, one of India's most celebrated filmmakers, has been deeply passionate about cinema—not just as a director but also as a cinephile. As he participates in the Red Lorry Film Festival, starting today, he reflects on the magic of film festivals, the evolution of his cinematic journey, and his latest project, *Black Warrant*. For Motwane, film festivals are more than just industry events; they are life-changing experiences. He fondly recalls how attending his first film festival—MAMI in Mumbai—opened his eyes to the boundless possibilities of cinema.

"My life, in a sense, was changed by a film festival. The first time I went to MAMI, I saw incredible movies that completely shifted my perspective. *Dr. Strangelove*, *Close-Up*, *A Brighter Summer Day*—these films blew my mind. They didn't just inspire me to write and create but also made me realise the impact a film can have when experienced on the big screen," heshares.

Encouraging audiences to embrace the festival spirit, he emphasises that film festivals are not just for industry insiders but for anyone willing to step into a world of unique and transformative storytelling. "It's a wonderful opportunity to open up your mind and expand your taste in cinema. If you've never been to a film festival, come, watch something new—you won't be disappointed."

Motwane praises the Red Lorry Film Festival as "an amazing initiative" and highlights its eclectic selection of films. "There are so many interesting categories this year. Apart from the obvious competition sections, which showcase both established filmmakers and debutants—there are also country-specific selections like those from Spain and France, as well as films made by women."

However, the section he is most excited about is Legacy Films, which brings classic masterpieces back to the big screen. "This category has

some absolutely stunning movies. *Deewar*, *Yaadon Ki Baaraat*, *Teesri Manzil*—all of these are cinematic gems. It's almost like a retrospective now, which makes it so special."

The Berlin filmmaker's latest project, *Black Warrant*, dives into the complex and morally ambiguous world of crime and justice. Based on real-life accounts, the series offers a gripping, unfiltered look at the underbelly of prison life and the criminals who inhabit it.

"We did a lot of research on Charles [Sobhraj]—as much as we could find," he says, referencing the notorious conman who inspired aspects of the story. "Sunil Gupta, who personally interacted with Charles, provided a first-person account of events, which gave us invaluable insights. Much of what we depict in the series comes from his voice, his memories, and his book."

One of the most significant creative decisions was casting Siddhant Gupta as Charles. "That was an inspired choice by Mukesh Chhabra. Siddhant brought something remarkable to the role—his research, his performance, everything was fabulous. Full credit to him for bringing the character to life."

Motwane describes *Black Warrant* as a mix of gritty realism and gripping storytelling. "There are moments where the true masala nature of the story comes to the forefront," he explains. "For instance, the opening of

Episode 4, where a World Cup final is playing while drugs are being smuggled—that's a perfect example of how we balanced intense drama with high-stakes storytelling."

Certain scenes stood out for him, both in terms of their impact and their execution. "Episode 7, where you see Sarju being beaten for information—that was a very strong moment. You also see the effect it has on Sunil, which adds depth to his character. Another scene that really stays with me is the hanging of Ranga and Billa in Episode 2. It's unsettling, but at the same time, you can't look away. It's deep, it's disturbing, and it pulls you into the emotional core of the series."

While adapting the book, the initial instinct was to condense 35 years of events into a single season. However, writer Satyanshu Singh proposed a different approach—focusing on just four years in Season 1.

"This allowed us to really dive deep into Sunil's story—his life in prison, his relationships, his traumas, and his inner world beyond just his interactions with criminals. Prison defines your life, but it doesn't mean life stops there. There's so much happening inside, and that's what we wanted to explore."

For Motwane, cinema is more than just entertainment—it is an experience, a conversation and sometimes, even a catalyst for change. Whether it's through *Black Warrant* or his advocacy for film festivals, he believes in the power of storytelling to challenge, inspire, and transform. "If you've never been to a film festival, go. Watch something new, something different. Open your mind—you never know, it might just change your life."



Ahead of the Red Lorry Film Festival, renowned filmmaker **Vikramaditya Motwane** gets in a chat with *The Pioneer* sharing his feelings on film festivals and speaks about his latest venture, *Black Warrant*

MAKING A NEW ERA IN INDIA'S INSURANCE

Bajaj Finserv's acquisition of Allianz's stake in Bajaj Allianz marks a defining moment in India's insurance industry. Bajaj Allianz, which began as a joint venture with Allianz in 2001, has grown into one of India's finest insurance companies over the past two decades. "With the Indian financial services and insurance sector presenting immense opportunities, both partners aspired to shape their own future. Since a company cannot have two captains steering the same ship, we made an amicable decision to acquire Allianz's 26% stake for Rs 24,000 crore. This is the largest cheque written in the history of the Indian insurance sector and one of the biggest transactions in the NBFC space," shares Sanjiv Bajaj, Bajaj Finserv Chairman & Managing Director. Sanjiv emphasised that the move aligns with Bajaj Finserv's vision of building world-class companies from India, for India. "Today, we have built a financial services business with a valuation exceeding Rs 10 lakh crore, starting from a market capitalization of just Rs 2,000 crore in 2007. If someone had invested Rs 1 crore back then, it would have grown 400 times today. This phenomenal growth is a testament to India's potential, the resilience of our team, and the power of long-term vision." Looking ahead, Bajaj highlighted the immense opportunities in India's financial services industry over the next decade.

"With rising incomes, increasing insurance penetration, and rapid digital adoption, the sector is set to expand significantly. India is poised to become one of the world's largest insurance markets, driven by a growing middle class, an aspirational young population, and a regulatory framework that fosters innovation and growth. Bajaj Finserv is committed to playing a pivotal role in this transformation—offering best-in-class products, leveraging cutting-edge technology, and driving financial inclusion at scale." Bajaj credited a strong work ethic as a key driver of long-term success. "At Bajaj, we believe in discipline, hard work, and relentless execution. Success is not about clocking in and out—it requires dedication, ownership and the willingness to go beyond the conventional 40-hour work week. Our leadership and teams put in the time and effort necessary to build something truly remarkable." Looking to the future, Bajaj stressed the importance of innovation, customer-centric solutions, and leveraging technology to stay ahead in an evolving financial landscape. "Success is never the result of just one individual. It takes a strong team, a clear vision and relentless execution. For aspiring entrepreneurs, my advice is to chase unique ideas, stay passionate and build teams that share the same vision. Challenges are inevitable, but perseverance and the right mindset create lasting businesses."

Is face oil right for you?

Face oils are an increasingly popular trend that has swept over the skincare industry. Because of their capacity to nourish and revitalise the face, they are now a common addition to skincare regimens. However, what are the benefits and when is the ideal moment to incorporate them into your skincare routine? Let's explore

WHAT IS FACE OIL?

Face oils are powerful mixtures of plant-based oils that provide your skin with protection, hydration, and nourishment. Face oils concentrate on retaining moisture and supplying vital nutrients, in contrast to water-based moisturizers. Here's how they make a difference:

Hydration & moisturisation: By creating a barrier that protects the skin's surface, face oils help to hold onto moisture. They are therefore particularly helpful for people with dry or dehydrated skin.

Nourishment: Premium face oils contain a variety of nutrients that improve skin suppleness and promote a natural, luminous glow, as well as important vitamins A, C and E.

Protection: The abundance of antioxidants found in many facial oils helps shield the skin from damage caused by free radicals, which can be brought on by pollution, UV rays and daily stress.

Balance oil production: Contrary to popular assumption, face oils can help those with oily or acne-prone skin by regulating sebum production.

Reducing inflammation: Oils with anti-inflammatory qualities, such as rosehip and chamomile, are well-known for their ability to reduce skin redness, irritation and sensitivity.



THE RIGHT AGE TO START USING FACE OIL

There isn't a fixed age to start using face oils, it's more about listening to your skin and its unique needs. However, here are some general guidelines:

• In your 20s:

This is a good time to start using face oils. Use mild oils, such as grapeseed or jojoba, to stay hydrated and avoid premature aging.

• In Your 30s:

At this stage, skin starts to lose elasticity. It is better to incorporate anti-aging oils like rosehip or argan to address fine lines and dullness.

• In Your 40s and beyond:

Matured skin which needs extra care, Opt for richer oils like marula or avocado to deeply nourish and restore elasticity.

SIGNS IT'S TIME TO ADD FACE OIL TO YOUR ROUTINE

- Your skin feels tight or dry despite using moisturisers.
- You notice dullness or lack of radiance.
- You want to prevent or address early signs of aging.
- Your skin needs extra protection during harsh weather conditions.

Face oils are a versatile and powerful addition to your skincare routine, offering hydration, nourishment and protection. Whether you're in your 20s looking to maintain healthy skin or in your 40s seeking deep hydration, there's a face oil for everyone. Choose the right one for your skin type and concerns and enjoy the benefits of glowing, nourished skin!

(The author, **Ritika Jayaswal**, is the founder and CEO, at **Nourish Mantra**.)

BCCI lifts saliva ban in IPL

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The BCCI on Thursday lifted the ban on use of saliva on the ball in the upcoming Indian Premier League after a majority of captains agreed to its proposal, making it the first major cricket competition to do away with the restriction that was a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The decision was taken at the captains' meeting in Mumbai ahead of the league starting on Saturday.

"The saliva ban has been lifted. Majority of captains were in favour of the move. Some had reservations about the re-introduction, some sat on the fence but majority of them supported the move," a top BCCI official said.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) had banned the age-old practice of applying saliva to shine the ball as a precautionary measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which health practitioners advocated strict hygiene protocols and physical distancing.

In 2022, the world body made the ban permanent. The IPL too included the ICC ban in its playing conditions in the aftermath of the pandemic but its guidelines are outside the purview of the sport's governing body.

With the development on Thursday, the IPL became the first major cricketing event to re-introduce saliva's use after the pandemic. The captains meeting, which was scheduled to begin at 12.30 pm in Mumbai, did not start on time due to a delay in arrival of a few team officials at the BCCI



office. Now that the ban is revoked in the IPL, the ICC too might review its stance on the subject.

On the sidelines of the ICC Champions Trophy, senior India pacer Mohammed Shami had spoken about the need to use saliva on the ball in what has become a predominantly batters' game.

The likes of Vernon Philander and Tim Southee had backed Shami's call.

"We keep appealing that we should be allowed to use saliva so that we can bring reverse swing back into the game and it becomes interesting," Shami had said during the 50-over event in Dubai, where India emerged victorious.

Also on the agenda of captains' meeting was the contentious Impact Player rule which the BCCI had already extended till at least 2027.

The likes of Rohit Sharma and more

recently Hardik Pandya have expressed their reservations on the playing strategy.

"While a few have raised objections on the Impact Player rule, it has benefitted uncapped batters and bowlers who otherwise won't get to play," the official said.

DRS extended to height and off-side wides The BCCI also approved the use of DRS for height wides and wides outside the off-stump.

"Hawk eye and ball tracking will be used to decide on the height wides and wides outside the off-stump," the official added.

It was also decided that one ball would be changed in the second innings of an evening game after the 11th over due to dew.

"This is not a rule change, it's just an understanding for this year between teams and umpires. The changed ball will have wear and tear," an official said.

2028 games to be catalyst for rebuild: LA Olympics head Casey Wasserman

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Costa Navarino

After deadly fires devastated much of Los Angeles, organisers of the 2028 Olympics told the IOC on Thursday how the city will rebuild with help from the Games. Count on Kendrick Lamar, too, to be part of "the greatest show on earth" in three years.

"The rebirth, the rebuild, maybe reimagining LA 2.0 and the Olympics as a catalyst for all those things we think is really part of our ethos," organising committee chairman Casey Wasserman said.

"You can't have a natural disaster at that scale in a city as big and as important as Los Angeles and not have it be part of your core philosophy going forward," he said in an interview before giving sports leaders an update at the International Olympic Committee's annual meeting.

Lamar would be a globally popular part of the opening ceremony on July 14, 2028, after his stunning halftime show at the Super Bowl last month.

"Fortunately in my day job I represent Kendrick Lamar," said Wasserman, who heads an international talent and promotions agency. "He is truly an LA icon so I think it would be a pretty fair bet that Kendrick will be involved in the Olympics in Los Angeles in some way."

The wildfires in January have reset the daily life and global perception of the city. "Everyone loves a comeback story,"

Wasserman told IOC members on Thursday. Olympic venues and operational plans escaped serious damage.

"From purely an Olympics perspective we got very lucky. That's not the most important thing," Wasserman told the AP on Wednesday. "What's important is helping people get back into their homes, get back settled, get back with their lives."

You can't have a natural disaster at that scale in a city as big and as important as LA and not have it be part of your core philosophy going forward

— CASEY WASSERMAN, CHAIRMAN

Olympic athlete visas another expected challenge for LA organisers is ensuring athletes, officials and fans from every Olympic team feel welcome and safe going to the United States in what shapes to be a turbulent future for the world.

"Irrespective of politics today, America will be open and accepting to all 209 countries for the Olympics," Wasserman said. "LA is the most diverse city in the history of humanity and we will welcome the people from around the world and give them all a great time."

Updating IOC and sports leaders on Thursday, Wasserman said his team made "significant strides" with President Donald Trump's administration, which has security obligations for the Olympics and subsequent Paralympics.

"I have met with President Trump and his team both prior to his inauguration and again last month," the LA Olympics leader said. "We have a regular cadence across all federal agencies with leadership from the president to make sure that these Games deliver for all our constituents."

The US Visa programme and current restrictions for more than 40 countries who should compete in LA was the subject of a sharp question from IOC member Ingmar de Vos, the equestrian official who leads the collective group of Summer Games sports bodies. De Vos cited a "red list" ban on travel to the US from 11 countries. "I don't anticipate any, any problems from any countries to come and participate," Wasserman replied, noting the US State Department has a "fully staffed desk" to help prepare.

"In my many conversations with President Trump and Secretary (Marco) Rubio they understand the scale and complexity required to deliver these Games, the access required for not just athletes but for delegations, and the incredibly short time frame on which to do those."

Wasserman insisted "with all due respect to FIFA," visa issues for the Olympics are more complicated than for the World Cup in men's soccer which the U.S. is co-hosting next year with Canada and Mexico.

His audience included IOC member Gianni Infantino, the FIFA president who has closely aligned himself with Trump.

Ex-F1 team owner Eddie Jordan passes away at 76

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Shanghai

Ex-Formula 1 team owner and media personality Eddie Jordan has died, according to a statement by his family. He was 76.

Often known simply as "EJ," he ran his own Jordan team in the 1990s and 2000s in F1. His humor, strong opinions and often extravagant dress sense made Jordan a popular pundit on TV after selling the team in 2005.

Jordan was undergoing treatment for what he had called "quite aggressive" cancer of the bladder and prostate which spread to his spine and pelvis.

The family statement, published by rugby club London Irish, where Jordan was a patron, said he "passed away peacefully with family by his side in Cape Town" early Thursday. "EJ brought an abundance of charisma, energy and Irish charm everywhere he went. We all have a huge hole

missing without his presence. He will be missed by so many people, but he leaves us with tonnes of great memories to keep us smiling through our sorrow."

F1 president and chief executive Stefano Domenicali, who was a senior Ferrari employee when Jordan owned his team, said Jordan was "a protagonist of an era of F1 and he will be deeply missed."

"With his inexhaustible energy he always knew how to make people smile, remaining genuine and brilliant at all times."

Irish businessman Jordan operated his own racing team in lower-level series before moving up to F1 in 1991, giving future seven-time champion Michael Schumacher his first race that year.

Jordan gave Schumacher his break in F1 because his regular driver Bertrand Gachot was sentenced to prison for assaulting a London taxi driver. The then-22-year-old Schumacher was with the team for only a

single race before Benetton signed him in controversial circumstances.

"I am deeply saddened by the loss of Eddie Jordan. Eddie was a great individual, who for decades always brought a smile to the entire F1 paddock," said Flavio Briatore, who then ran Benetton and became a close friend of Jordan, and is now executive adviser at Alpine.

"I have fond memories of the time spent on and off the track with Eddie, and his presence across the entire F1 world will be greatly missed."

Other Jordan drivers over the years included Damon Hill, who won the 1996 championship with Williams and gave Jordan its first win in torrential rain in 1998, future Ferrari driver Rubens Barrichello, and Heinz-Harald Frentzen, who was third in the championship for Jordan in 1999.

Jordan Grand Prix won four races before Jordan sold the team in 2005.

Following more sales and name changes since then, the team competes as Aston Martin.

"Eddie Jordan was one of the all-time motorsport greats. He was a one-off, a wonderful human being, and a charismatic leader who founded this team and took it to F1 in 1991," Aston Martin team principal Andy Cowell said in a statement.

"His vision laid the foundations for us and he leaves a lasting legacy for the entire motorsport community."

Jordan also acted as the manager for car design great Adrian Newey when he left Red Bull for Aston Martin last year.

When he revealed his cancer diagnosis last year, Jordan used it as an opportunity to urge listeners of his podcast to follow up on a health concern.

"This is a little message to everybody listening to this, don't waste or put it off," he said. "Go and get tested, because in life you have got chances."



Chahal, Dhanashree granted divorce

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

A family court here on Thursday allowed the joint plea filed by cricketer Yuzvendra Chahal and his estranged wife seeking divorce by mutual consent.

The estranged couple appeared before the family court in Bandra.

Chahal's advocate Nitin Gupta said the family court has granted decree on the joint petition filed by Chahal and Verma for divorce by mutual consent.

The court noted that the parties have complied with the consent terms.

"The family court has accepted the joint petition filed by Chahal and Verma seeking divorce by mutual consent," Gupta said. Chahal and Verma got married in December 2020. As per their petition, they separated in June 2022.

On February 5, they filed a joint petition before the family court seeking divorce by mutual consent.

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday requested the family court to decide the divorce plea by Thursday, considering the fact that Chahal would not be available later as he is participating in the upcoming Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket tournament.

The IPL T20 cricket tournament is scheduled to start from March 22. Chahal is part of the Punjab Kings team. The HC on Wednesday also waived the six-month cooling period stipulated

for every couple after filing of the divorce plea under the Hindu Marriage Act.

The cricketer and Verma had filed a joint petition before the HC, seeking that the cooling-off period be waived in their case as they have applied for divorce by mutual consent.

The petition, filed through advocate Nitin Gupta, had also prayed for a direction to the family court to decide the divorce petition expeditiously.

The couple challenged the family court order of February 20 refusing to waive the cooling-off period.

Under the Hindu Marriage Act, a couple has to undergo six-month cooling-off period before divorce is granted. The objective is to provide time for exploring the possibility of reconciliation.

The family court had refused to waive the cooling-off period on the ground that there was only partial compliance with the consent terms which required Chahal to pay ₹4.75 Crore to Dhanashree.

He had paid ₹2.37 Crore, the family court noted. It also cited a report of a marriage counsellor which said there was only partial compliance with the mediation efforts.

But the high court on Wednesday held that there was compliance with the consent terms, as they provided for the payment of the second installment of permanent alimony only after the decree of divorce was obtained.

Riyan Parag to lead RR in first three IPL games

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Rising star Riyan Parag will lead Rajasthan Royals (RR) in their first three IPL games as regular captain Sanju Samson has been told to avoid wicket-keeping duties by the BCCI due to a finger surgery, which means that he will only be available as a batter in these games.

Samson's finger was fractured after a Jofra Archer delivery hit him during the T20 International against England in Mumbai, following which he had to undergo a minor surgery last month.

While he has been cleared to bat, it is understood that medical and sports science teams at the BCCI's Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru have told to give his fingers some more rest before he starts keeping wickets. Therefore, the 23-year-old Parag will have the distinction of being one of the youngest captains in IPL.

Bonus points system to be pondered over for World Test Championship 2025-27 cycle

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The International Cricket Council (ICC) is likely to ponder over a new bonus points system during its board meeting in April which could give more weightage to victories against higher-ranked teams during the next World Test Championship cycle.

The 2025-27 WTC cycle will begin with India's five-match away Test series against England in June.

As per the prevailing rules, the team winning by the smallest margin or by an innings gets 12 points, six points for a tie and four points for a draw.

But this could see a change as the global governing body, as per a report in Telegraph, is considering awarding bonus points for innings victories or for a win above a certain big margin such as 100 runs.

"In fact, issues such as giving bonus points for innings wins etc has been in

continuous discussion from the beginning of the WTC, as many teams felt that due weight is not getting for wins against big teams," a source close to the development said.

"So, such topics have been a part of discussions, and this could again come up

As per the prevailing rules, the team winning by the smallest margin or by an innings gets 12 points, six points for a tie and four points for a draw

for deliberations," he said.

But this could now change as the ICC might bring in bonus points for landslide wins, and extra points could be given to victories over frontline teams such as India, Australia and England, as per their rankings.

"Yeah, it's a good move if it really happens. The teams will be more motivated to go for results, as we could see some

exciting games," a former India player told PTI on condition of anonymity.

The ICC is also mulling giving extra points for wins away from home. "Yeah, it will be a motivating factor for you, you know, those 'smaller' teams, Look, when New Zealand beat India last year, it was a historic win for them as not many teams came here and beat us. But they did not get any extra points for it."

"While winning away from home in itself can act as a motivating factor, now the teams will have that carrot in front of them extra points, if it really happens," he added.

Other than this, the ICC board meeting might also consider the two-tier Test system, which is vocally supported by Cricket Australia.

"It needs a lot of discussion before putting into practice as some teams might feel deprived of regular chances to play against strong teams like India or Australia" the player added.

England coach Thomas Tuchel takes tips from NBA as its World Cup quest begins

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Manchester

There was outcry in the English media: In its bid to end its decades-long wait for a trophy, England's national team turned to a German.

The Daily Mail published a back page headline declaring it a "dark day for England" when it emerged Thomas Tuchel, a serial-winning coach with Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Bayern Munich, would lead the national team into the 2026 World Cup. "I'm sorry, I have a German passport," he said when unveiled by the English Football Association last October.

Tuchel has an easy charm and sharp sense of humor. He will likely need both in the role.

Mission impossible?

For England's men, their one and only major trophy was the 1966 World Cup. Tuchel's predecessor, Gareth Southgate, came closest to ending that drought by leading England to the final of back-to-back European Championships and the semifinals of the 2018 World Cup.

Southgate was credited with making fans fall back in love with the national team, yet at last year's Euros he had to contend with fierce criticism from the terraces, with some venting their fury by throwing plastic beer cups in his direction when he went to applaud them after one match.

That was despite England advancing to the knockout stage as group winner. It went on to reach the Euros final, where it lost 2-1 to Spain, with the winning goal coming in the 86th minute.

No other England manager reached the final of two major tournaments, yet Southgate was still considered by some to be a failure. No wonder he's opted against giving advice to Tuchel.

"I've already decided, I think the best way I can help the next England manager is to stay out of the way," Southgate said.

"I've had my time, I loved it, I'm not missing too much of it at the moment, but I think it's important I stay out of the way and allow Thomas to do his job."

In a hurry

Tuchel is a man in a rush. He is contracted until the World Cup and charged with the responsibility of leading a talented squad to glory.

He is not hiding from that fact.

"He said the goal is to put another star on the jersey," said defender Dan Burn, referring to the one star above England's badge that represents its World Cup win in 1966.

In his first meeting with his players this week ahead of World Cup qualifiers against Albania on Friday and Latvia on Monday, Tuchel informed them they only had 24 training days ahead of the tourna-



ment in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Put in those terms, it is a paltry amount of time to get his vision across in comparison to the daily routine of working with players at club level.

Serial winner

Just as well then that Tuchel has experience making a near immediate impact.

In late January 2021, he took over a Chelsea team that was ninth in the Premier League. By May, he'd turned that

team into Champions League winners.

He also won back-to-back French league titles at PSG and the German title at Bayern. "He was very sure. It was almost like he knew... He believed in his own ideas (and) when you have someone who believes in what they want, you believe it as well," England midfielder Morgan Gibbs-White said of Tuchel's team address this week.

NBA style

Southgate was credited with creating a club-like atmosphere within the national team working hard to ensure there were no divisions carried over from club rivalries and improving the relationship with the media, which had been fractious in the past. Tuchel, too, wants to create a "brotherhood."

"He spoke about in the NBA that the best teams historically are normally the teams who are high-fiving, picking each other up and have a lot of those interactions," Burn said.

Veteran midfielder Jordan Henderson has been recalled for his "leadership" qualities after losing his place following a move to Saudi Arabia in 2023.

Playing for Ajax in the Netherlands now, he was reportedly the first player to arrive at England's Burton training headquarters. "Football in general, but maybe even more international football,

is about team spirit, it is about building a team that loves to play with each other that transports the spirit to the fans, to the nation, to the country and it is about building a brotherhood," Tuchel said.

Nationality debate

Criticism of Tuchel's appointment came despite him being England's third foreign manager after the late Sven-Goran Eriksson, a Swede, and Italian Fabio Capello.

Tuchel has done well to ease any tensions with his jovial manner when interacting with the media — many of whom he worked with during his time at Chelsea.

Asked by a German journalist to answer a question in his native language, he declined.

"I would like to do it just in English out of respect of where we are," he said.

He was asked by another journalist what the response was when he called Henderson and said: "Hi, this is Thomas Tuchel..."

(He said) Hi, I'm Jordan... "he replied to laughs from the assembled media. "I did not call him from an unknown number."

That sense of humor is likely to endear him to fans but, ultimately, it is results on the field that will count if he is to finally end England's trophy drought. That drought will reach 60 years by the time next year's World Cup rolls around.

VAISHNAVI CHAITANYA RESPONDS TO SKN'S REMARKS ABOUT TELUGU ACTRESSES

HE DIDN'T NAME ANY-ONE. IF YOU CHECK HIS COMMENTS, YOU'LL SEE THAT HE DIDN'T MENTION ANYONE'S NAME. MORE THAN THAT, HE RELEASED ANOTHER VIDEO TO CLARIFY HIS REMARKS. HE DIDN'T POINT ME OUT IN EITHER HIS REMARKS OR THE VIDEO

— Vaishnavi Chaitanya



SURESH KAVIRAYANI
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Siddhu Jonnalagadda and Vaishnavi Chaitanya are playing the leads in their upcoming film *Jack - Konchem Krack*. A song from the film, titled *Kiss Song*, was released on Thursday at an event in Hyderabad. Bommarillu Bhaskar is the director, and BVSN Prasad is the producer. The film is set to release on April 10. "Every person has a goal in life, but the way we approach our work and the reasons behind what we do are equally important. Some people do things differently, and when we see such a person, we call them a 'crack,' which is why we chose this title," said Siddhu about his role. When asked about being remembered as *DJ Tilly* and how people might perceive this new film, Siddhu responded, "Every film is different and the audience wants entertainment, which I am providing. Generally, we, the filmmakers, think too much about a film because we watch it a hundred times, but the audience watches it only once. So, it all depends on how we provide good entertainment." Siddhu, who is also a writer, contributed to the story. "I liked the way Bhaskar narrated my character, and I definitely shared my inputs for the improvisation as a writer," he said. He added that the story was entirely written by Bhaskar, and he didn't contribute to it in that sense. When asked further, Siddhu commented, "For this film, Vaishnavi Chaitanya, who is also known for her role in *Baby*, is the backbone. She plays a dual role and one of her characters speaks with a Telangana accent. When she spoke the dialect, I wanted to reciprocate with the same accent, but I told myself that I play a different character, so I speak in neutral Telugu." Bommarillu Bhaskar, who has been out of the limelight after delivering some flops, was questioned about why Siddhu chose to work with him. "It's not about hit or flop, but I look at their signature and unique style. If you look at Bhaskar's films like *Bommarillu*, *Parugu*, *Orange*, or any of his other films, he has a



unique voice and always comes up with fresh concepts, which is why I agreed to do this film," said Siddhu. He added that he adapted Bhaskar's style for this film. Producer SKN was a few days ago in the news for his remarks about Telugu actresses, which were reported to be indirectly directed at Vaishnavi Chaitanya. SKN had produced the film *Baby*, in which Vaishnavi was the female lead. The film was a massive hit and Vaishnavi received critical acclaim for her performance. When Vaishnavi was asked about SKN's comments, she clarified, "He didn't name anyone. If you check his comments, you'll see that he didn't mention anyone's name. More than that, he released another video to clarify his remarks. He didn't point me out in either his remarks or the video." She further added, "I'm very grateful to SKN and the director for giving me a chance in the film *Baby*." When asked about a project that was supposed to be made with the same producers and Anand Deverakonda as the lead actor, Vaishnavi said, "Unfortunately, the project didn't move forward. However, I'm looking forward to working with them again in the future. I had a great experience working with them."



Ram foregoes remuneration for upcoming project

Ram Pothineni is currently working on a film with director P Mahesh Babu, who is known for *Miss Shetty Mr Polishetty*. The unit recently returned after a long and hectic schedule in Rajahmundry. Bhagyashri Borse plays the female lead, while Rao Ramesh, Rahul Ramakrishna and others are playing important roles. The film is being produced by the prominent production house Mythri Movie Makers.

Ram Pothineni has experienced consecutive flops with his films. After *iSmart Shankar*, which was released in 2019, Ram hasn't seen a hit, despite doing several films, including *Skanda* with Boyapati Sreenu and *Double iSmart*

with Puri Jagannadh. His career is currently in a rough patch and at this time, Mythri Movie Makers is producing this untitled film with P Mahesh Babu as the director.

According to a source, Ram is not taking any remuneration for this film, as he wanted to complete the shoot first. "Once the film is completed, Ram requested the rights to a particular area, which the producers agreed to," said the source.

On the other hand, he is reportedly working hard for this film and the source revealed that it is a period drama. "The story revolves around a cinema hall that the protagonist wants to build for his favorite hero," the source added.

VIJAY DEVERAKONDA'S TEAM CLARIFIES HIS STAND ON BETTING APP CONTROVERSY

Vijay Deverakonda has found himself in the spotlight after Telangana police filed a case against him for promoting a betting application on social media. In response, his team has now issued a clarification, asserting that the actor only endorsed legally recognised betting platforms. His team emphasised that Deverakonda had entered into an official contract as a brand ambassador strictly for skill-based games. They pointed out that the Supreme Court of India has legally recognised games like online rummy as games of skill rather than gambling. "The endorsement was limited to regions and territories where online skill-based games are legally permitted," his team explained. They further clarified that the actor's legal team and agencies conduct thorough reviews before entering any agreements. Deverakonda's endorsement was for the skill-based gaming platform A23, which was legally vetted before he associated with it. Moreover, his team revealed that his contract with the brand ended in 2023 and he is no longer affiliated with it.



Ram Gopal Varma's *Saaree* explores the dangers of digital intimacy

Controversial filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma is back with a psychological thriller titled *Saaree*. Featuring Sathya Yadu and Aradhya Devi in the lead roles, the film is directed by Giri Krishna Kamal, with the story provided by RGV himself. Produced by businessman Ravishankar Varma, the film is set for release on April 4, with its trailer launching on Thursday in Hyderabad. Speaking about the film's theme, RGV explained, "When we communicate in person, we connect better. But through social media apps like WhatsApp, where we don't see the other person directly, we tend to develop emotional intimacy much faster. We end up sharing personal matters, which can lead to various psychological consequences." He added that *Saaree*



explores these issues in depth. "This is a serious subject, and the film delves into the consequences of digital intimacy. I wrote the story myself and Giri Krishna Kamal has done a great job directing it." Regarding the casting, RGV shared that he discovered Aradhya through a reel of hers wearing a saree and was impressed by her

performance. He also praised Sathya for his acting skills, stating that the film features some intense performances. Although he refrained from calling the film a message-driven project, RGV expressed hope that it would make young women more cautious about their interactions online. When asked about political and legal issues surrounding theaters in Andhra Pradesh, he remarked, "Politics and films are separate. I don't foresee any trouble in getting *Saaree* released in Andhra Pradesh."

Addressing the controversy over actors promoting betting apps, he stated, "Authorities should educate actors about which endorsements are legally permissible. Taking sudden actions against them is not the right approach."



Dil Raju ropes in *Marco* director Haneef Adeni for a Pan-India action drama

Malayalam film *Marco* has been a massive success, with director Haneef Adeni receiving widespread acclaim for his gripping storytelling and intense action sequences. Now, the director has been roped in by Dil Raju Productions, the banner founded by Dil Raju's daughter Hanshitha Reddy and nephew Harshith Reddy, for an ambitious Pan-India film. The pro-

duction house, known for its critically acclaimed and commercially successful film *Balagam*, is set to back this high-budget multi-starrer.

Haneef Adeni, who delivered the action-packed *Marco*, is now gearing up to bring his signature high-impact storytelling to Telugu cinema. While details about the film remain under wraps, it is expected to be a large-scale production that

will captivate audiences across India.

The collaboration brings together three unique forces in filmmaking, promising an exciting project that is set to make waves in the industry. Sunita Tati of Guru Films is also associated with the project, adding to the anticipation. Further details, including the cast and title, will be announced soon.

Chatha Pacha: Ring of Rowdies delivers a spectacle like never before

Reel World Entertainment is making a bold entry into Malayalam cinema with *Chatha Pacha: Ring of Rowdies*, a WWE-inspired action spectacle that promises to push the boundaries of the industry.

At the helm of this ambitious project is Adhvaith Nayar, the nephew of legendary actor Mohanlal, who makes his directorial debut with this high-octane entertainer. Having trained under cinematic stalwarts like Jeethu Joseph, Rajeev Ravi and Mohanlal himself, Adhvaith brings a fresh, fearless vision to the screen. Blending electrifying wrestling sequences, sharp humour and a compelling under-

dog narrative, *Chatha Pacha: Ring of Rowdies* is set to deliver a cinematic experience unlike anything seen before in Malayalam cinema.

At its core, *Chatha Pacha: Ring of Rowdies* is a tale of misfits, ex-convicts, and outcasts who attempt to rebuild their lives by forming an underground wrestling club in Fort Kochi. What starts as a small, makeshift fight club soon evolves into a spectacle, drawing huge crowds and turning the fighters into local icons. Inspired by their childhood WWE heroes, they create larger-than-life personas, develop intense rivalries, and put on electrifying matches. But as old ene-



mies resurface, personal grudges intensify and authorities begin to close in, the battle extends beyond the ring, turning into a fight for survival. With adrenaline-

pumping action, hilarious moments, and an emotional core, the film is a tribute to the spirit of sports entertainment and the power of brotherhood.

Backed by Reel World Entertainment, the film is a collaboration between Transworld Group, led by Ramesh & Ritesh Ramakrishnan, and Lensman Group, spearheaded by Shihan Shoukath. The production is strengthened by the expertise of industry veterans George Sebastian and Sunil Singh, known for their work with Mammooty Kampany, ensuring a large-scale cinematic experience.

One of the biggest highlights of *Chatha Pacha: Ring of Rowdies* is the musical collaboration with the legendary trio Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy, marking their first-ever Malayalam film.

With their track record of delivering iconic soundtracks, their presence adds an entirely new dimension to the movie's musical landscape. The film's lyrics will be penned by Vinayak Sasikumar, whose work has made a significant impact in the industry.

The film boasts a stellar cast featuring Arjun Ashokan, known for his performances in *Romancham* and *Brahmayugam*, Roshan Mathew, who has gained recognition in both Malayalam and Bollywood with films like *Moothon*, *Darlings* and *Choked* and Ishan Shoukath, fresh off his debut in the Rs 125-crore blockbuster *Marco*.