THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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LONDON, PARIS, KYIV TO WORK ON CEASEFIRE PLAN FOR UKRAINE WAR

The three countries will present the new ceasefire plan to the United States, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said on Sunday

STARMER STRESSES RESTORING PEACE TALKS

The European leaders are in London to discuss ending the war. The meeting has been overshadowed by the extraordinary scolding of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy by Donald Trump, who lambasted him on Friday. Starmer said he is currently focused on being a bridge to restore peace talks, rather than "ramp up the rhetoric"

'EUROPEAN FORCE TO BE SENT TO UKRAINE'

- Sunday's summit is likely to include talks on establishing a European military force to be sent to Ukraine to underpin a ceasefire. Starmer said it would involve "a coalition of the willing"
- Next steps: Arming Ukrainians, including a European element to guarantee security and providing a "US backstop" to check Putin

€200 bn

LIKELY TO BE RELEASED BY EU TO FUND UKRAINE'S EFFORTS

CHENNAI ▪ MADURAI ▪ VIJAYAWADA ▪ BENGALURU ▪ KOCHI ▪ HYDERABAD ▪ VISAKHAPATNAM ▪ COIMBATORE ▪ KOZHIKODE ▪ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM ▪ BELAGAVI ▪ BHUBANESWAR ▪ SHIVAMOGGA ▪ MANGALURU ▪ TIRUPATI ▪ TIRUCHY ▪ TIRUNELVELI ▪ SAMBALPUR ▪ HUBBALLI ▪ DHARMAPURI ▪ KOTTAYAM ▪ KANNUR ▪ VILLUPURAM ▪ KOLLAM ▪ TADEPALLIGUDEM ▪ NAGAPATTINAM ▪ THRISSUR ▪ KALABURAGI

No rift among Cong leaders in Kerala, says Rahul Gandhi

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

CONGRESS leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday sought to dispel the notion there is a rift among the party's leaders in Kerala following its MP Shashi Tharoor's recent remarks praising the achievements of CPM-led government in the state, saying they stand united.

His comment came in the wake of a meeting between the Congress' central leadership and the party's leaders from Kerala at Indira Bhawan on Friday to discuss the strategy and the way forward ahead of next year's assembly polls.

Followng Tharoor's remarks, the Congress brass had issued a warning that strong action will be taken against those making comments that go against the party's interests.

Posting a picture of the Kerala leaders' interaction with the media after the meeting on Facebook, Rahul wrote: "They stand as one, united by the light of purpose ahead." His post was accompanied by the hashtag "Team Kerala'.

The three-hour meeting at the Congress's Indira Bhawan headquarters here on Friday had discipline, unity and the strengthening of the state organisation as its running theme.

Sources said at the meeting, Gandhi asked leaders to be very careful and not to do or say anything that does not toe the party line.

THAROOR U-TURN ON KERALA STORY

Days after his praise of the growth of Kerala's startup ecosystem, Shashi Tharoor has taken a U-turn, saying the growth of startups should not remain "confined to paper" alone

ECI RESPONSE

Concern over similar EPIC nos allayed

MUKESH RANJAN @ New Delhi

THE Election Commission of India (ECI) has moved to calm concerns over duplicate voter ID numbers, clarifying that identical EPIC numbers don't indicate fake voters. The issue came to light after several social media posts flagged the issue and claimed that electors in different states were being assigned similar EPIC numbers. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had also raised similar concerns.

In its response, ECI said while some electors may share the same elector photo identity card (EPIC) number, their demographic details, assembly segment, and polling booth information differ, and that they can only cast their votes at their designated polling stations. The duplicate EPIC numbers were caused by a decentralized and manual mechanism used before the electoral roll database was shifted to the ERONET platform.

To address this, the ECI has said it will assign unique EPIC numbers to electors, ensuring that any cases of duplicate EPIC numbers are rectified.

Spl court orders FIR against Buch

Anti-Corruption Bureau told to book ex-Sebi chief, 5 others for alleged stock market fraud

SUDHIR SURYAWANSHI & BENN KOCHUVEEDAN @ Mumbai

A day after Madhabi Puri Buch demitted office as the chairperson of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), a special court here directed registration of an FIR against her and five others in connection with alleged stock market fraud and regulatory violations.

The order was passed by special judge Shashikant Eknathrao Bangar on Saturday on a petition filed by Thane-based journalist Sapan Shrivastava. Seeking a court-monitored investigation, the petitioner alleged large-scale financial fraud, corruption, and regulatory violations in the listing of a company.

The court said prime-facie it shows there have been violations and there are documents to support the same; therefore, the Anti Corruption Bureau should file an FIR against the accused, it ordered.

Apart from Buch, the officials against whom the court has ordered registration of the FIR are three whole-time members of Sebi--Ashwani Bhatia, Ananth Narayan G, and Kamlesh Chandra Varshney -- BSE chief executive Sundararaman Ramamurthy and former BSE chairman Pramod Agarwal.

Responding to the court order, Sebi said it will challenge the order. In a statement issued on Sunday, the markets regulator said it was not given a chance to represent itself and that none of the officials named in the petition was in their current positions when the alleged misdeeds happened.

Terming the complaint 'frivolous', Sebi alleged that the petitioner is known for filing such petitions in the past. "The applicant is known to be a frivolous and habitual litigant, with previous applications being dismissed by the Court, with imposition of costs in some cases," it said. Echoing similar views, the BSE said: "The application is frivolous and vexatious in nature," adding that the court has not issued any notice or granted any opportunity to place the facts on record.

Avalanche toll rises to 8, rescue act over

NARENDRA SETHI @Dehradun

THE bodies of the last four trapped labourers were pulled out from the site of the avalanche-hit Border Roads Organisation (BRO) camp in Chamoli on Sunday, taking the death toll to eight as authorities ended the nearly 60-hour rescue operation.

Army doctors said 46 workers who were rescued on Saturday have been brought to the military hospital in Jyotirmath. Two of them have been referred to AIIMS, Rishikesh. Three of the workers are in critical condition. The body of the last missing worker has also been retrieved, said Army PRO Lt Col Manish Shrivastava. The avalanche hit the BRO camp between Mana and Badrinath.

MLC POLL COUNTING TODAY

The counting of votes for one teachers' segment and two graduates' MLC seats will be taken up amid tight security on Monday

FOREIGN TRIPS

Ex-CID chief Sunil Kumar suspended

PHANINDRA PAPASANI
@ Vijayawada

IN a significant development, the State government has suspended former AP CID chief and Director General rank officer PV Sunil Kumar for allegedly making repeated foreign visits without prior permission during the previous YSRCP regime.

Chief Secretary K Vijayanand issued orders, suspending Sunil Kumar. He was directed not to leave the headquarters (Vijayawada) without obtaining prior permission from the government.

With this, the number of suspended IPS officers rose to five. Soon after the TDP-led NDA came to power in the State, former Intelligence chief PSR Anjaneyulu, former CID chief N Sanjay, former Vijayawada CP Kanthi Rana Tata and former Vizag Range DIG Vishal Gunni were suspended, citing irregularities and criminal misconduct, violating the All India Services (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1969. P4

Rushikonda Beach loses Blue Flag tag, restoration process on

USHA PERI @ Visakhapatnam

IN the wake of cancellation of Blue Flag certification for Rushikonda Beach in Visakhapatnam, the only Blue Flag-certified beach in the State, officials have clarified that the revocation is temporary, not permanent.

The Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) revoked the Blue Flag due to concerns regarding parking, security, and stray dog management.

Addressing the matter, Visakhapatnam Collector MN Harendhira Prasad told *TNIE*, "The Blue Flag India sent a notification regarding temporary revocation due to certain issues such as parking, security, and dog menace. We have taken corrective measures, and will complete the audit by Tuesday, March 4. Once we submit the compliance report, the certification will be restored within this week."

According to an official release, the process leading to the temporary suspension began with a control visit on June 29, 2024, by Blue Flag India representatives.

This visit resulted in observations and suggestions for improved facilities and services, which were subsequently addressed, leading to the beach's certification for 2024-25 in October 2024. However, the beach's popularity, particularly during festivals, led to significant challenges in traffic and visitor management.

"Rushikonda Beach consistently attracts high crowds, especially during weekends and festivals like Dasara, Diwali and Sankranti," the press release explained, noting the resulting in traffic congestion. P4

The Blue Flag India sent a notification regarding temporary revocation of tag due to certain issues. We took corrective steps

MN Harendhira Prasad, Collector

FEE main concerns

Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) revoked the Blue Flag due to concerns regarding parking, dog menace, security

UNBEATEN INDIA MARCH ON

MEN IN BLUE BEAT NEW ZEALAND BY 44 RUNS TO FINISH ON TOP OF GROUP A ON SUNDAY. A LOOK...

Varun Chakravarthy(L) celebrates a wicket on Sunday | AP

VARUN TAKES FIFER

In what was his first game of the tournament, Varun Chakravarthy took five wickets for 42 runs and in the process helped India defend the target of 250. On the slowish Dubai surface, the spinner from TN rattled thje New Zealand middle-order to ensure India remain unbeaten.

PROTEAS FACE BLACK CAPS TEST

With the loss against India, New Zealand finished second in Group A. They will be flying to Pakistan, along with South Africa who topped the Group B, where the two teams play the second semifinal in Lahore on Wednesday.

SEMIFINAL LINE-UP

INDIA VS AUSTRALIA, DUBAI, TUESDAY

SOUTH AFRICA VS NEW ZEALAND, LAHORE, WEDNESDAY

SIKSHA 'O' ANUSANDHAN

SAAT-2025

APPROVAL & RECOGNITION

Accredited by NAAC with Grade 'A++' | UGC Graded Autonomy(Category-I) | NBA Accredited | ICAR Accredited | NABL Accredited | NABH Accredited

AICTE Approved | NMC Approved | DCI Approved | PCI Approved | BCI Approved | INC Approved | VCI Approved

PROGRAMMES OFFERED

B.TECH PROGRAMMES
Civil Engineering
Electrical Engineering
Mechanical Engineering
Electrical and Electronics Engineering
Electronics and Communication Engineering
Computer Science and Engineering
Computer Science and Information Technology
Computer Science and Engineering (AI and ML)
Computer Science and Engineering (Cyber Security)
Computer Science and Engineering (Data Science)
Computer Science and Engineering (Internet of Things)

M.TECH PROGRAMMES
Structural Engineering
Electric Vehicle Technology
Machine Design and Robotics
Embedded System and VLSI Design
Computer Science and Engineering

MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES
BBA
MBA
Integrated MBA
MBA (Hospital Administration)
MBA (Artificial Intelligence and Data Science)

M.Sc. PROGRAMMES
Physics
Chemistry
Mathemetics
Biotechnology
Integrated (M.Sc. Biotechnology)

COMPUTER APPLICATIONS PROGRAMMES
Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA)
Master of Computer Applications (MCA)

PHARMACEUTICAL PROGRAMMES
B.Pharm.
M.Pharm.

LAW PROGRAMMES
BA LLB (H) - Integrated Law
BBA LLB (H) - Integrated Law
LLB (H) - 3 Years Law
LLM

HOTEL MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES
BHMCT (Bachelor of Hotel Management & Catering Technology)
MBA (Hospitality Management)

NURSING PROGRAMMES
B.Sc. (Nursing) (Basic)
B.Sc. (Nursing) (Post Basic)
M.Sc. (Nursing)

AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMMES
B.Sc. (H) Agriculture
M.Sc. Agriculture

VETERINARY SCIENCE AND ANIMAL HUSBANDRY PROGRAMME
Bachelor of Veterinary Science & Animal Husbandry (B.V.Sc. & A.H.)

nirf National Institutional Ranking Framework 2024
14th in University Category
26th in Engineering Category
21st in Medical Category
09th in Dental Category
09th in Law Category

QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS 2025
64 in QS Southern Asia University Ranking
278 in QS Asia University Ranking
1201- 1400 in QS World University Ranking
Instituion of Happiness
Recognized by QS I-Guage

THE WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS 2024
801-1000 in THE World University Ranking
401- 500 in Engineering Technology
601- 800 in Computer Science
801-1000 in Health Sciences

To apply for admission through SAAT 2025, Visit: www.soa.ac.in

ALMANAC TODAY

Monday : 03/03/2025 **Year:** Sri Krodhi **Aayanam:** Uttarayanam
Rutuvu: Sisira **Masam:** Phalguna **Paksham:** Shukla **Tithi:** Chaturthi 06.02 pm
Nakshatram: Revati 06.39 am **Durmuhurtham:** 12.52 pm - 01.39 pm
Varjyam: 12.51+ am - 02.18+ am **Rahukaalam:** 07.30 am - 09.00 am

WEATHER WATCH

MIN 20°C | MAX 39°C

FORECAST Mostly Sunny

Sunrise 06.27 am
Sunset 06.21 pm
Moonrise 08.46 pm
Moonset 09.40 am

'Ensuring safety of pilgrims is our priority'

Given the temple town's importance, we prioritise pilgrim-friendly policing for effective law and order, says SP

Asserting that ensuring the safety of pilgrims is the top priority, **Tirupati District Superintendent of Police V Harshavardhan Raju,** in an exclusive interview with **Nethaji Kumaramangalam**, highlighted the efforts of the police in maintaining law and order in the temple city. He elaborated on various measures taken to enhance security, the role of technology in crime prevention, and initiatives to involve the public in policing.

Excerpts:

How does the Tirupati police prioritise the safety of visiting pilgrims?

The first and foremost responsibility of the Tirupati police is to instill confidence among pilgrims, assuring them that we are here for their safety and security. Every day, thousands of devotees from across the world visit Tirupati for Srivari Darshan. Given the significance of the temple town, our responsibility in maintaining law and order is immense. To uphold the reputation of the world-renowned Hindu shrine, we are encouraging pilgrim-friendly policing.

What security measures are in place to ensure safety of pilgrims visiting Tirumala?

The police have focused on key areas such as bus stands, railway stations, and Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) accommodation complexes like Srinivasam and Vishnu Nivasam. We have deployed armed police personnel in uniform as part of visible policing, ensuring their availability for pilgrim aid round the clock. Additionally, two police patrolling vehicles have been stationed at important pilgrim hubs to provide immediate response services. Over the past six months, the Andhra Pradesh Police Department and Tirupati police have been working tirelessly to enhance security measures for the devotees visiting Tirumala.

What is your plan for using technology in crime prevention and law enforcement?

We have initiated the installation of advanced closed-circuit (CC) cameras to strengthen surveillance in Tirupati. In the last three months, we have added 3,000 new CCTV cameras to the existing network. Furthermore, we are prepared to deploy drone technology to enhance police security operations, particularly for effective crowd management during major events like Tirumala Brahmotsavams and other festivals.

V Harshavardhan Raju, Tirupati SP

In three months, 3,000 CCTV cameras were added to the network. Drones will be deployed to enhance security, ensuring effective crowd management during Tirumala Brahmotsavams and other major festivals

Are you introducing any innovative measures in Tirupati policing?

Yes, several innovative measures are being implemented in the district policing. These include the introduction of tourist police, mass police patrolling every 15 days, and an increase in visible policing. With approval from the State government, we will soon launch the tourist police initiative for the Tirupati-Tirumala tourist destinations. Additionally, every 15 days, our police teams, including Rakshak and Blue Colts, conduct large-scale walking patrols and midnight checks. It help to monitor habitual offenders and ensure area safety. We have also collaborated with local civic bodies to curb public nuisances, such as consumption of liquor in open places.

What steps have been taken to prevent nighttime crimes across the district?

Most crimes are committed by strangers. To address this, our personnel conduct daily nighttime checks in Tirupati city and rural areas using special devices to verify individuals' identities through fingerprint and iris scans. This allows us to quickly determine whether a person has a criminal history or is innocent. In Tirumala, surveillance over suspects has been intensified. Every night, our officers conduct midnight checks, bringing in 60 to 80 strangers for inquiry to ensure public safety.

How is the police involving the public in crime prevention and law enforcement?

Public safety and security require the active participation of citizens. Recognising this, the Tirupati police have engaged various community groups, including gold merchants, residential associations, the Chamber of Commerce, RTC drivers and conductors, as well as student organisations in universities and colleges. We believe that supporting the police is a shared responsibility to ensure effective maintenance of law and order.

MAUD Minister Narayana distributing pattas to beneficiaries in Nellore city | EXPRESS

126 displaced families get house site pattas in Nellore

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Nellore

THE State government will launch the 'Thalliki Vandanam' scheme in May, granting ₹15,000 to every eligible student, Municipal Administration Minister Dr P Narayana announced on Sunday.

The minister distributed house site pattas to 126 displaced families in Bhagat Singh Colony, fulfilling a promise made after their homes were demolished for a railway bridge project. Each beneficiary received two cents of land.

During a pension distribution event, Narayana visited a government school in the 54th division, noting the lack of a compound wall and play equipment. He laid the foundation for new facilities and assured that tenders would be issued soon.

Criticising YSRCP, he accused the previous government of issuing fake house site documents and burdening Andhra Pradesh with ₹10 lakh crore debt. He warned of a financial crisis but assured that under CM Chandrababu Naidu, the economy is stabilising.

The minister highlighted ongoing welfare schemes, including NTR Bharosa financial aid, social pensions, and free gas cylinders for women. Civic chief Surya Teja and other officials were present.

Srisailam gears up for Ugadi Mahotsavams

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Kurnool

FOLLOWING the Maha Shivaratri Brahmotsavams, Srisailam temple is now preparing for the five-day Ugadi Mahotsavams from March 27 to 31.

Temple Executive Officer M Srinivasa Rao held a review meeting on Saturday, directing officials to complete all arrangements by March 20. The festivities will begin with Yagasala Pravesam, Ganapati Pooja, and Siva Sankalpam. Facilities such as temporary tents, sheds, and water packets will be provided to accommodate visiting devotees.

Unlike Maha Shivaratri, which mainly draws devotees from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Ugadi Utsavams see a large Kannada pilgrim influx. Many Kannada devotees, traditionally known as Mainarulu and Ghanacharulu, will offer mangalsutras and silk clothes to Goddess Bhramarambha Devi on the first day of the festival.

PM Shri to boost infra at 42 schools in Nellore dist

D SURENDRA KUMAR @ Nellore

DEVELOPMENT works have commenced in 42 schools across Nellore district under the PM Shri (Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India) scheme, a Central government initiative aimed at modernising government schools with improved infrastructure and quality education.

Each selected school will receive ₹1 crore over five years to establish science laboratories, digital libraries, smart classrooms, and sports facilities. For the current academic year, the government has allocated ₹473.49 lakh, with funds distributed for laboratory facilities (₹13.24 lakh per school), modern equipment and chemicals (₹2 lakh), kitchen construction (₹1.27 lakh), playground development (₹4.25 lakh), and sports infrastructure (₹1.50 lakh).

While some schools have begun implementing the upgrades, others are awaiting additional funds. The initiative aims to enhance educational standards and foster scientific thinking among students.

An Education Department official stated that the PM Shri Scheme is being rolled out in phases, with the first two installments already received.

These funds are being used to upgrade government schools to match the standards of corporate institutions.

Over the next five years, further funds will be allocated to enhance infrastructure, improve sports facilities, and promote analytical and problem-solving skills among students.

The selection process for schools is based on six key parameters, including curriculum, pedagogy, infrastructure, leadership, inclusivity, and governance.

The District Education Department applied for the programme through the Union Education Ministry's portal in November 2023.

Among the selected schools is KNR Municipal High School, Nellore, known for its 95% pass rate in Class X.

Other institutions include Zilla Parishad High Schools in Jaladanki, Kaluvoya, Ananthasagaram-Revuru, Vidavaluru-Vavilla, and AP Model Schools in Kaligiri and Duttaluru.

The Centre urged the State government to support the scheme's effective execution.

EXPRESS READ

Rivier varsity delegation explores ties with MITS

Chittoor: A Rivier University delegation visited Madanapalle Institute of Technology & Science (MITS) to discuss an MoU, student exchange programmes, and research collaborations. MITS Principal Dr C Yuvaraj stressed the global academic exposure initiative. University faculty, officials, and students participated in discussions

Govt sanctions ₹5 lakh for student's family

Kurnool: The State government sanctioned ₹5 lakh for the family of G Shrilakha, a Class 8 student of Polakal ZP High School, who succumbed to injuries on Sunday after a tree collapsed on her. Collector P Ranjit Basha expressed condolences and directed the District Education Officer to enforce strict safety measures in schools

European firm studies banana export potential

Anantapur: Patrick, Founder and Executive Chairman of Faitrasa, a European company, visited Anantapur district to assess banana export opportunities. The Horticulture Department, under District Collector Dr Vinod Kumar V's directives, organised the tour to evaluate the region's banana production capacity and potential for international exports

105 development projs to be launched in Nellore Rural segment on March 9

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Nellore

A record 105 development projects will be launched in Nellore Rural on March 9, focusing on CC roads and drains under Nellore Municipal Corporation limits.

MLA Kotamreddy Sridhar Reddy termed it a historic initiative, marking a significant step in urban infrastructure development.

At a meeting with TDP leader Kotamreddy Giridhar Reddy and party workers, he announced that he would personally attend 51 foundation stone ceremonies, while alliance leaders would oversee 54 others.

The ₹191 crore initiative, led by Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, aims to complete the projects within 60 days. Reddy urged party workers to prioritise public service over political rivalries. Officials and contractors have been instructed to complete the works on a war-footing.

Party leaders, corporators, and division in-charges pledged their support for the development programme.

TUDA Towers residential flats e-auction from March 8

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Nellore

THE residential flats in TUDA Towers will be auctioned online from March 8 to 12, said TUDA Vice Chairperson N Mourya.

The ₹345-crore project near Annamayya Circle spans 8.28 lakh square feet across 3.60 acres, with a G+13 structure. Construction began in 2023, and six floors are complete. The project is expected to be finished by April 2026.

The basement is designated for parking, while commercial spaces (1.2 lakh sq. ft.) will be on the ground and first floors. The second to fifth floors will house offices (90,000 sq. ft.), and the second to 13th floors will feature 230 residential flats—2BHK (1,235 sq. ft.), 3BHK (1,900 sq. ft.), and 4BHK (3,740 sq. ft.).

Amenities include a swimming pool, gym, shuttle court, podium garden, and children's play area. Separate entry and exit points will be provided. A model flat is available for inspection. More details can be found on tudaap.in and tudatowers.in. Mourya stressed that project is being executed with strict adherence to regulations and quality standards and will be completed within the stipulated time frame.

Daily Starscope

PETER VIDAL

03rd March : The current curious Mars-Neptune alignment brings the planet of action and energy into a difficult relationship with the planet of inspiration and good ideals. The result is actually a tendency towards serious muddle, but there is a solution, and that is to take very great care in all important, practical matters.

ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr. 20)
The Sun is now poised on the very edge of a new dynamic position, and is thus about to align itself with the region of the zodiac closely tied to your creative skills, romantic prospects and ability to enjoy yourself. First, though, you have to work out exactly what it is that you really want!

TAURUS (Apr. 21 - May 21)
One single planet is responsible for all personal and professional achievements at the moment - Mars, the ancient God of War. Without advising you to do anything reckless, this is an excellent time to take on the world and win. You've got to be subtle about it, though!

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)
If I were you, I'd think long and hard before issuing any ultimatums! You see, Mars is not the most trustworthy of planets, and it's encouraging you to do things you may regret! For one thing, you may be about to go behind somebody's back. Take care.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23)
Social influences are decidedly lively as the week begins. You can expect some pretty dramatic encounters, especially if you mix with a new group of friends. Financial prospects look strong, although obvious signs of prosperity are two months away.

LEO (July 24 - Aug. 23)
When the Moon is so helpfully placed, it means that life is going your way. Yet, human nature being what it is, you may eventually find something to complain about. I doubt very much, though, whether you'll be able to put your finger on whatever it is that's bugging you.

VIRGO (Aug. 24 - Sept. 23)
Since Mercury, your ruling planet, is about to play a much greater role in your affairs, you can be sure that you are shortly to enter a nicely auspicious period. This should be enough to keep your spirits high throughout life's little ups and downs.

LIBRA (Sept. 24 - Oct. 23)
I know that some of you are having a hard time at work but, in truth, the prospects have seldom ever been brighter. If all goes according to plan, you can expect considerable public acclaim or professional success over the coming weeks. You'll also be putting extra effort into keeping a relationship on the rails.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24 - Nov. 22)
The Sun is now approaching a crucial region of your solar chart, a region associated with prestige and worldly success. Professional achievement and social status are therefore high on the agenda - but so, as it happens, is romantic happiness. It's all looking good!

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 23 - Dec. 22)
Some of your closest emotional ties may be put to the test, but perhaps not until the end of the week. Right now, I should imagine that money is the biggest thing on your mind. Get your accounts in order before it's too late! Money, as you know by now, doesn't grow on trees!

CAPRICORN (Dec. 23 - Jan. 20)
This should be a fairly smooth phase for most Capricorns, although those of you getting over relationship upsets will still be wound up in an emotional tangle. The key concept throughout is personal liberation, so you'll be resisting people who try to tie you down.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 21 - Feb. 19)
You have often been underestimated - too often! Little do other people realise just how much you have up your sleeve and how many irons you have in the fire. From now, and over the next few months, you will have an increasing number of opportunities to display your skills.

PISCES (Feb. 20 - Mar 20)
Lunar alignments suggest a busy day but also reveal that your attitude to work will be shaped by your emotions. You may therefore respond over-enthusiastically at one stage, but be rather miffed at another. Still, you always seem to bounce back!

Solutions to Saturday's puzzle ⬇

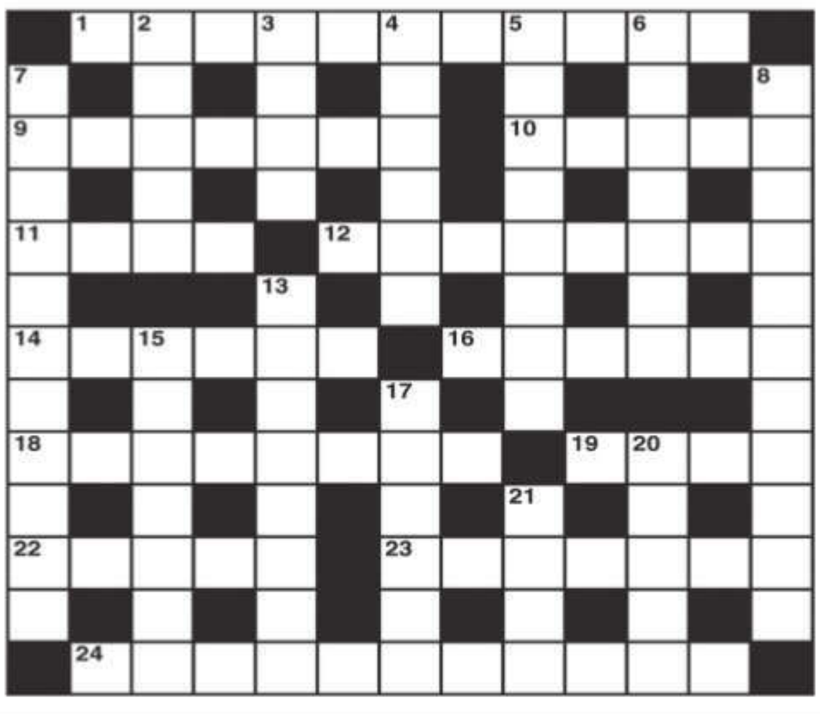
8					5	2	4	
5		4	3	2		1		
			1	9	4	8		
9		5			1	7	3	
	3	8	6			5		4
		1	5	3	7			
		3		1	2	9		7
	8	2	9					1

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

SU DO KU EASY

TEST YOUR NUMBER CRUNCHING SKILL WITH OUR UNIQUE PUZZLE

Fill in the grid with digits in such a manner that every row, every column and every 3X3 box accommodates the digits 1 to 9, without repeating any.



CROSS WORD

ACROSS

1 The lamb's tender (11)
9 Wept and ran from a Belgian port (7)
10 Account gets credit with a bit extra capital (5)
11 Pain in stomach excruciating (4)
12 Producing fruit makes small companies crazy (8)
14 Reply some Americans were hoping for (6)
16 Bail is brought round to the French subject (6)
18 Billets for four divisions (8)
19 Home from one's travels (4)
22 French lethargy (5)
23 Nothing to share but words (7)
24 Hardly dark thoughts (6,5)

DOWN

2 Rabbit cage, shed and church (5)
3 Birds can do it with their eyes shut (4)
4 Make use of unfinished polymer formation (6)
5 It's wicked enough to make acid boil (8)
6 Give way and die (7)
7 Stages in funerals (11)
8 Well-attended church service? (4,7)
13 Deciding to make no further moves? (8)
15 Tool for tightening up a bridge perhaps (7)
17 About the end of May tutor arranges test (3-3)
20 Girl from the States taking the morning off (5)
21 Musicians forbidden to speak (4)

SATURDAY'S SOLUTIONS

Across: 1 Airway, 4 Appraise, 9 Lights, 10 Haunting, 12 Cast, 13 Known, 14 Stag, 17 Trendsetters, 20 Green fingers, 23 Leaf, 24 Stare, 25 Dodo, 28 Redstart, 29 Miners, 30 Scrapped, 31 Abated.

Down: 1 Allocate, 2 Register, 3 Arts, 5 Play with fire, 6 Rank, 7 Idiots, 8 Engage, 11 Interest-free, 15 Adore, 16 Grant, 18 Redolent, 19 Espoused, 21 Glares, 22 Gander, 26 Stop, 27 Limb.

JUMBLE

UNSCRAMBLE THESE JUMBLES, ONE LETTER TO EACH SQUARE, TO FORM FOUR ORDINARY WORDS.

BY DAVID L. HOYT AND JEFF KNUREK

TOTOH

CHUNL

GWILEG

DVIRRE

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Now arrange the circled letters to form the surprise answer, as suggested by the above cartoon.

Answer here:

(Answers tomorrow)

Saturday's Jumbles: BLURB DIGIT ABRUPT UNWELL
Answer: After the masseuse was named "Employee of the Month" again, she — RUBBED IT IN

MAN KILLED A 50-year-old man, identified as Tirupati Varadhi, was murdered in Maddineni Vaddepalli village. He was attacked while sleeping near cement bags on Saturday night, suffering fatal head injuries. Police registered a case & launched an investigation

Poultry sector bounces back, chicken sale surges

Strict biosecurity measures help curb spread of bird flu in State

BANDHAVI ANNAM @ Guntur

POULTRY sales in the State have surged by 60% in just one week, thanks to a bold strategy by farmers to win back consumer confidence following a bird flu outbreak. Organising food festivals across major cities like Guntur, Rajamahendravaram, Kakinada, Vijayawada, and Tirupati, farmers served free chicken and egg dishes to debunk myths surrounding poultry consumption. The move helped ease public fears and revived demand, signalling a strong recovery for the industry.

The fear of bird flu, which once gripped the state, is now fading due to strict biosecurity measures and aggressive consumer outreach. The Animal Husbandry Department has confirmed that no new cases of Avian Influenza have been reported since February 25, marking a crucial turning point. Meanwhile, poultry farmers, who suffered massive losses, are steadily bouncing back.

The outbreak was first detected in six poultry farms across East Godavari, West Godavari, Krishna, and Eluru districts, leading to the culling of

We conduct four rounds of tests as a precaution. If a single sample tests positive, we immediately tighten biosecurity measures in the red zone at the affected-poultry farms

Animal Husbandry Director

over 1.90 lakh hens by February 15. Later, two more farms in Pithapuram reported infections. However, officials acted swiftly, ensuring the new cases were isolated and not linked to previous outbreaks. "The test results from Pithapuram arrived late, but they confirm there was no further spread after the culling," clarified Dr Damodhar Naidu, Director of from the State Animal Husbandry Department.

To prevent a resurgence, officials have intensified surveillance, testing samples from affected farms every 15 days. "We conduct four rounds of tests as a precaution. If a single sample tests positive, we immediately tighten biosecurity measures in the red zone," Dr Damodhar explained. Strict checks remain in place on poultry transportation within a 10 km radius of infected farms, while border checkpoints prevent the movement of potentially infected poultry in and out of the State.

Farmers seek govt support

"Poultry farmers faced an unprecedented crisis. Bird flu is a global issue, but misinformation, especially on social media, made it worse. Sales had plummeted to just 10% of normal levels," said Y Suresh, President of the AP Poultry Farmers Federation. Some farmers even gave away poultry for free in desperation. "We've never seen losses like this before—it will take at least three to four years to recover," he added.

Suresh urged the State government to step in with interest-free loans and flexible repayment options. "The industry needs assistance, and timely intervention can prevent further damage," he emphasised.

Ganja acreage brought down to 100 acres from 1k

PHANINDRA PAPASANI @ Vijayawada

IN a major crackdown on illegal drug cultivation, Andhra Pradesh police have successfully reduced ganja farming from over 11,000 acres to less than 100 acres across nine mandals of Alluri Seetharamaraju district. The initiative, aimed at eradicating the ganja menace, was carried out through sustained efforts involving multiple government departments, advanced surveillance, and farmer awareness programmes.

The large-scale reduction was not an overnight achievement but the result of coordinated efforts by the police, health and medical department, revenue, agriculture, and the Integrated Tribal Development Corporation (ITDC). Awareness campaigns highlighted the stringent provisions of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, prompting many farmers and tribal communities to voluntarily destroy their ganja crops, fearing legal repercussions.

Elite Anti-Narcotic Group for Law Enforcement (EAGLE) chief Ake Ravi Krishna emphasised the role of awareness programs in changing farmers' mindsets. "Through various initiatives, we encouraged them to adopt alternative cash crops that offer economic benefits. This played a crucial role in reducing ganja cultivation in agency areas," he told TNIE.

During the harvest season, officials conducted multiple meetings with tribal farmers, promoting 23 alternative crops and distributing seeds. Law enforcement used drones, satellite imaging, and cordon-and-search operations to locate and destroy illegal plantations. Authorities identified 360 families in Paderu agency as habitual ganja cultivators and educated them on the legal consequences. Regular meetings between police, revenue officials, and district administration ensured that government welfare schemes reached these families, offering them viable livelihood options. Ravi recalled a notable instance where farmers in Prathapadu and G Madugula voluntarily destroyed their illegal crops after police surveillance using drones. "The use of advanced technology has created a strong deterrent. Our goal is to curb ganja cultivation in AP," he said.

EXPRESS READ

Infant among 3 killed in road mishap in A'pur

Anantapur: Four people, including an eight-month-old infant, died in a road accident near Kammuru village in Kudair Mandal when a car collided with an auto carrying passengers, Kudair CI G. Raju said. The deceased, identified as Neelamma (50), Lokeshwari (45), Saraswati (40), and baby Vidya Shri, were travelling from Marthadu to Rayampalli when the accident occurred. The infant died on the spot, while the three women succumbed to injuries in the hospital.

Rare civet cat spotted at Tadepalli, rescued by cops

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Guntur

RESIDENTS of Muggu Road were startled on Sunday when a rare feline, identified as a civet cat, descended from the Tadepalli hills and entered a local home.

It sought refuge in the house of Gottimukkala Lazar, triggering alarm among neighbours. As the feline hid among household items, locals cautiously captured it and informed the Forest Department. Officials confirmed the species, typically found in African forests, and transferred it to a veterinary hospital for examination. After necessary health checks, the civet cat was safely released back into its natural habitat.

Poll promise: Govt issues 28.62 lakh caste certificates

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Vijayawada

THE State government has fulfilled another election promise by issuing permanent caste certificates to 28.62 lakh families.

The Revenue Department reviewed data from 34.37 lakh families, conducting field inquiries before Village Revenue Officers (VROs) delivered the certificates door-to-door, eliminating visits to MRO offices.

These certificates will help beneficiaries secure school admissions, job reservations, and government welfare schemes. However, around five lakh families were denied certificates due to eligibility issues.

Eligible individuals can apply through village/ward secretariats or AP Seva centres, with revenue officials conducting on-site verification and issuing certificates instantly.

NTR police rescue baby from child trafficking gang

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Vijayawada

NTR district police rescued another baby from a notorious child trafficking gang on Sunday and handed the child over to the Women and Child Welfare Department.

Earlier, five women—Bagalam Sarojini, Shaik Fareena, Shaik Saidabee, Kovvarapu Karuna, and Pedala Sirisha—were arrested in a joint operation by the Commissioner's Task Force and North Zone police. The gang sold babies for profit. Probe is underway.

Budgetary allocation for healthcare scanty: PAV

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Visakhapatnam

PRAJA Arogya Vedika (PAV) has criticised the State Budget for 2025-26, citing inadequate funding for the healthcare sector. The organisation expressed concern that the allocation of ₹19,264.63 crore to the Medical, Health, and Family Welfare Department falls significantly short of both World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines and the government's own commitments.

PAV pointed out that WHO recommends allocating 6% of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) to healthcare. With AP's GSDP estimated at ₹16,41,000 crore for 2023-24, the required health budget should be ₹98,460 crore. "This budget reflects a blatant disregard for public health," said PAV president Dr MVRS Ramanaiah. He said the government's promise to raise health spending to 2.5% of GSDP remains unfulfilled.

The organisation highlighted the State's persistent underfunding of healthcare, with past budgets allocating less than 1.5% of GSDP to the sector. It warned that the ₹79,195.37 crore shortfall would worsen existing issues, including inadequate hospital infrastructure and a severe shortage of medical personnel. "The government must act to address this crisis," said PAV General Secretary T Kameswar Rao.

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NOTICE TO EX-DIG In a significant development in K Raghu Rama Krishna Raju's CID custodial torture case, chief investigating officer and Prakasam SP AR Damodar sent notices to former CID-DIG Sunil Nayak to attend a police inquiry

AP NAREDCO welcomes govt's urban reforms

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Vijayawada

THE Andhra Pradesh chapter of the National Real Estate Development Council (NAREDCO) has welcomed the State government's recent reforms aimed at boosting urban development and streamlining revenue processes.

At a press meet on Sunday, State President Gadde Chakradhar praised key changes, including the reduction of minimum road width from 40 to 30 feet for layout regulation and the approval of Podium Parking, which lowers construction costs. Executive Vice President Kiran urged the removal of floor height limits on non-high-rise buildings and flexible setback rules for small plots. Several other members spoke on the occasion.

All set for MLC polls counting today

NDA confident of winning Graduate constituencies; stiff fight likely in teachers' segment

S VISWANATH @ Vijayawada

THE counting of votes for three MLC seats, two Graduates' constituencies (Krishna-Guntur and East Godavari-West Godavari) and one Teachers' constituency (Srikakulam, Vizianagaram, Visakhapatnam), set to commence on Monday.

This election serves as a crucial test for the ruling NDA coalition, which extended support to its preferred candidates in all three constituencies.

Despite projections of a tough fight, NDA sources are confident of securing victories in both Graduates' constituencies, while acknowledging stiff competition in the Teachers' constituency.

Counting for the Teachers' constituency will take place at Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, while the Krishna-Guntur Graduates' constituency will be counted at Andhra Christian College, Guntur. Votes for the East-West Godavari Graduates' constituency will be counted at Sir CRR Engineering College, Eluru.

With just over 20,000 voters, results for the Teachers' constituency are expected within a day. However, counting for the Graduates' constituencies, where nearly three lakh votes were cast, may take up to three days.

In the Krishna-Guntur Graduates' constituency, 35 candidates contested, but the primary battle is expected between NDA-backed TDP leader Alapati Rajendra Prasad and sitting MLC KS Lakshmana Rao from PDF. In the East-West Godavari Graduates' constituency, NDA-backed Perabathula Rajasekhar is likely to face off against PDF candidate DV Raghavulu.

Though the YSRCP boycotted the elections, sources suggest its sympathisers may have voted for PDF candidates in the Graduates' constituencies.

For the Teachers' constituency, 10 candidates are in the fray, with the contest expected between PRTU's Gade Srinivasulu Naidu, NDA-backed APTF candidate Pakalapati Raghu Varma, and UTF's Koredla Vijaya Gowri.

With a high-stakes battle unfolding, the results of MLC elections will indicate the political landscape ahead of future elections.

Eluru District Collector K Vetri Selvi inspecting counting arrangements | EXPRESS

Rushikonda witnesses highest footfall among all Blue Flag beaches

Continued from page 1

On February 13, a notification from the National Operator, Blue Flag India, conveyed the "Temporary Withdrawal of Blue Flag & Request for Appropriate Corrective Actions," with a 10-day deadline for implementation.

In response, the Collector convened a meeting on February 17, where the key departments were instructed to take immediate action. The Regional Director of Tourism was suggested to improve infrastructure and monitor contract employee performance, police were asked to ease traffic and enhance security, the GVMC was directed to address stray dog and sanitation issues, and the Tourism Department was tasked to make alternative parking arrangements.

> **Large scale construction activities have disrupted the coastal habitat. Two to three drainage outlets empty sewage and waste into the ocean, affecting cleanliness and marine life**
>
> Officials

Officials confirmed that almost all the assigned tasks have been completed, and a compliance report will be submitted following an audit team's visit from Pune on March 4.

They acknowledged the challenges posed by the beach's high visitor volume, stating, "Rushikonda Beach attracts higher footfall compared to other Blue Flag beaches in India, with up to 70,000 to 1,00,000 visitors on festive days." They noted that given the location constraints and Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) regulations, systemic changes require time. Ongoing efforts include creating additional parking area, increasing police presence, and CCTV surveillance, and addressing dog and waste management issues through the GVMC.

Blue Flag certification is awarded after fulfilling 33 environmental, safety, and cleanliness criteria, including proper sanitation, pollution control, and tourist amenities such as benches, showers, and waste disposal systems. The Denmark-based FEE first granted Rushikonda Beach the certification in 2020 for a 600-metre stretch.

However, concerns have been raised regarding the environmental management of Rushikonda Beach. Platypus Escapes, a local scuba diving centre, also involved in regular coastal clean-up initiatives, pointed out environmental and regulatory issues.

"Large scale construction activities have disrupted the coastal habitat. Additionally, 2-3 drainage outlets empty sewage and waste directly into the ocean, affecting cleanliness and marine life. Violations of environmental norms, lack of proper waste management, and failure to meet sustainable tourism standards have also contributed to the situation," they said.

Jana Sena Party corporator Peethala Murthy Yadav also criticised the regional tourism department for the temporary revocation of Blue Flag certification, attributing it to mismanagement.

Govt to revise local and non-local reservations

K KALYAN KRISHNA KUMAR
@ Vijayawada

THE State government has decided to revise its policy regarding the implementation of local and non-local reservations for admissions in institutions of higher education, following the Telangana government's recent order over seat allocation.

A committee has been constituted with the HRD secretary as its chairman, with officials from other departments including health as its members.

Under the current system, where allocation of seats was made as per the provisions of the Undivided Andhra Pradesh era, the State was divided into three regions: Andhra University (AU) colleges for Coastal Andhra, Sri Venkateswara University (SVU) for Rayalaseema, and Osmania University (OU) for Telangana. Each university allocated 85% of seats to local students, with the remaining 15% designated as unreserved for students across the three regions.

However, the Telangana government recently amended its approach, citing the need for modification of seats after a decade of the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh. It removed the 15% unreserved quota in colleges under OU's jurisdiction for AP students and reserved it for students across the country. Following its decision, the State government also decided to adopt a similar policy. Orders to this effect will be issued in a few days.

Speaking to *TNIE*, Andhra Pradesh State Council of Higher Education (APSCHE) Chairman Dr K Madhu Murthy said, "Discussions are still underway on the allocation of seats for students from other states. The upcoming report is also expected to clarify the definition of local and non-local status. The State government is also taking legal opinions."

According to sources, legal experts argue that higher education quotas are linked to constitutional provisions, particularly Article 371(D), which governs special provisions for educational and employment opportunities in AP and TG. Modifications to the quota system would require constitutional amendments or presidential approval.

Dr Murthy revealed that the team is studying a proposal to allocate the remaining 15% of seats to all states, including Telangana, to enhance the institutional reputation and fill vacancies. Another proposal suggests sharing the 15% quota between AU and SVU where students from different regions in the State can apply to their non-local colleges.

TGCHE Chairman Prof V Balakista Reddy calls on APSCHE Chairman Prof K Madhu Murthy in Mangalagiri on Sunday | EXPRESS

Naidu violated his oath of office: YSRCP leaders

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Vijayawada

YSRCP leader Sailajanath and Yerragondapalem MLA Tatiparthi Chandrasekhar on Sunday criticised Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, alleging his remarks violated the Constitution and his oath of office.

Shailajanath accused Naidu of degrading his office by denying welfare benefits to YSRCP workers and urged him to emulate former CM YS Jagan Mohan Reddy's governance. He condemned the TDP leaders for offensive social media posts targeting Jagan's family. Chandrasekhar called Naidu's statements vengeful and divisive, accusing TDP leader K Atchannaidu of favouring party donors. He alleged that Naidu and Home Minister Anitha diverted funds to Minister Nara Lokesh's constituency while filing false cases against YSRCP leaders.

YSRCP Kadapa district president P Ravindranath Reddy slammed Naidu for reportedly instructing officials to withhold approvals for YSRCP supporters, contradicting Jagan Mohan Reddy's welfare policies. He warned of public backlash against Naidu, calling him a "brand ambassador for deception." He cited unfulfilled Super Six promises, inadequate funding for schemes such as Annadata Sukhibhava, and the scrapped job calendar. Chandrasekhar slammed the neglect of the Veligonda project, challenged Minister Nimmala Ramanaidu on funding failures, and announced a padayatra to push for its progress. He urged Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan to assess West Prakasam's water crisis.

EXPRESS READ

TGCHE chief vows action on open varsity issues

Vijayawada: Telangana Higher Education Council Chairman Balakista Reddy assured swift action on pending salaries of Dr. BR Ambedkar Open University study centre staff in AP. Dr. Velaga Joshi, OSD of the university in AP, met Reddy and highlighted post-bifurcation issues, including halted admissions for 30,000 students. Reddy pledged to coordinate with both States' higher education councils to resolve concerns

Officer's multiple foreign visits sans permissions

Continued from page 1

According to the suspension orders, it has come to the notice of the government that the 1993 batch IPS officer Sunil Kumar had undertaken multiple foreign visits without obtaining prior permission. In certain cases, he deviated from the travel plan approved by the government, thereby violating the terms of permission granted.

In last February, Sunil Kumar was accorded permission to visit Georgia for two days by sanctioning casual leave, and additional permission to avail public holidays, making it a four-day tour. However, Sunil Kumar visited the United Arab Emirates on his own, in deviation from the approval.

"The unauthorised travel constitutes violation of Rule-3 (1), 3 (1A) (i), 3 (1A) (iv), and 3 (2B) (x) & (xi) of the All India Services (Conduct) Rules, 1968. The government has determined that there is sufficient prima facie evidence indicating that the officer has repeatedly demonstrated willful disregard for established practices. Disciplinary proceedings are contemplated for such repeated acts of grave misconduct," the order stated.

"In exercise of the powers conferred under Rule 3 (1) of the All India Services (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1969, the State government hereby placed Kumar under suspension with immediate effect, pending an inquiry. However, he shall be paid a subsistence allowance during the period of suspension as admissible under Rule 4 of the All India Services (Discipline & Appeal) Rules, 1969," the order read.

There are inquiries pending against Sunil for his alleged role in the irregularities that took place during his stint as Police Housing Corporation chairman, Fire Services DG and AP CID chief during the previous YSRCP regime.

CPM RALLIES ON PUBLIC ISSUES FROM MARCH 8

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Vijayawada

COMMUNIST Party of India (Marxist) State Secretary V Srinivas Rao announced public awareness marches from March 8 to 17 across Andhra Pradesh to address various public issues and advocate for women's rights in view of International Women's Day.

At the two-day State Committee meeting in Vijayawada on Sunday, the CPM scripted strategies, including petitioning and dharnas at government offices from March 22 to 28 to resolve identified issues. They decided to intensify protests from April if the issues were not resolved.

Speaking to mediapersons, Srinivas Rao revealed that the CPM leaders will tour the State to study public grievances. The marches, including padayatra and cycle rallies, are to demand the implementation of the free bus for women scheme, one of the Super Six promises by March 8, unemployment allowances and ₹1,500 financial support for women by Ugadi.

On the occasion, the CPM leader accused the State government of failing to fulfil promises, stating that a nine-month wait for budget relief yielded disappointment. He accused it of slashing funds for the implementation of Super Six promises, cutting 20% of P4 beneficiaries, and neglecting the elderly. Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu neither secured special status for Andhra Pradesh nor ₹20,000 pending central funds despite several Delhi visits. Projects like Veligonda and Polavaram received only ₹309 crore and ₹6,000 crore in the budget. CPM opposes the government's stand on the SECI deal," he emphasised.

PREHISTORIC INSCRIPTIONS

ASI team discovers 16th century Shaivite centre at Lankamala Wildlife Sanctuary

S NAGARAJA RAO @ Kadapa

LANKAMALA Wildlife Sanctuary in Siddavatam forest range, once renowned for its rich biodiversity, has now emerged as a key historical site with new archaeological discoveries.

A team of researchers led by Siddavatam forest range officer K Kalavathi and Dr K Munirathnam Reddy, Director (Epigraphy) at the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Mysore, has uncovered ancient inscriptions and prehistoric rock art. The findings, dating from the fourth to 16th century Common Era (CE), indicate that Lankamala was a major Shaivite pilgrimage centre visited by North Indian devotees.

During a routine inspection in December 2024, Kalavathi discovered rock inscriptions and carvings in the Siddavatam, Madduru, Konduru, and Rolabodu forest areas.

Following her report, Dr Munirathnam secured official permissions for a detailed study. A team of experts from Bengaluru and Chennai, including Yesubabu, Meka V Raghavendra Varma, and Kalavathi, conducted a three-day exploration from February 27 to March 1. Their research focused on Gopalaswami Konda, at an altitude of 3,200 feet, where they documented 12 label inscriptions written in Siddhamatrika, Shankha script, and Devanagari.

The inscriptions, believed to be from the sixth century CE, showcase Kushan-era craftsmanship and were carved using a unique thumb-engraving technique. The presence of North Indian names like Sri Vishishta Kankanadhadi, Yedharmaja, and Chandrahasa confirms that pilgrims travelled long distances to visit the temples of Lankamala. Researchers also traced an ancient pilgrimage route between two Shaivite temples, reinforcing the site's religious significance.

On the second day of exploration, the team identified 15 additional label inscriptions, including 14 in the rare Shankha script and one in Brahmi. This marks the first discovery of Shankha script inscriptions in the Rayalaseema region. A significant find was two inscriptions on the same rock from different periods, one in Brahmi from the fourth century and another in Shankha script from the sixth century, providing insights into the evolution of writing styles in South India.

The research team undertook a 12-kilometer trek through rugged terrain, scaling a 600-meter steep hill near the Akkadevatala Temple. Despite the absence of communication signals, they persevered and identified a total of 28 inscriptions, confirming human presence in the region from the fourth to 16th centuries CE. Dr. Munirathnam noted that this is the first time in 140 years that label inscriptions have been discovered inside a wildlife sanctuary. The inscriptions, written in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Brahmi, and Devanagari, were likely made by devotees to commemorate their visits.

On the third day, the team uncovered three rock shelters, one containing prehistoric rock paintings. The artwork, depicting animals, geometric patterns, and human figures, was created using Red Ochre, Kaolin, animal fat, and crushed bones, enabling the pigments to last for millennia. The site is believed to date back to the Megalithic (Iron Age) and Early Historic periods (2500 BCE - 2nd century CE). Given the significance of these discoveries, the ASI plans to publish a detailed research volume documenting the inscriptions and prehistoric paintings.

Ancient inscriptions and prehistoric rock art of 16th century discovered in Lankamala Wildlife Sanctuary | EXPRESS

POCSO CASE A 45-year-old man was booked under the POCSO Act for sexually harassing a 16-year-old girl at her house.he allegedly tried to sexually harass her. a case had been booked against the man

Revanth terms Kishan Reddy a villain

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Hyderabad

CHIEF Minister A Revanth Reddy said that while Prime Minister Narendra Modi was favourably disposed towards Telangana, Union Minister G Kishan Reddy was trying to stall the State's progress. "When I recently met Modi, he was sympathetic towards the problems of Telangana and expressed his readiness to solve them. But Kishan is playing the role of Saindhava and blocking the development of Telangana. While the prime minister is favourable towards the state, Kishan Reddy holds a grudge against it," the chief minister alleged.

Addressing a 'Praja Palana' public meeting at Wanaparthy, he accused Kishan of putting pressure on the Centre to not grant approval for the Metro phase II, funds for the Musi rejuvenation project, and national project status for the Palamuru Rangareddy Lift Irrigation scheme.

"The Central government has granted permission for the development of the airport at Mamnoor because of the efforts of the state government. But Kishan is claiming credit for it. He did not attend the review meeting convened by Union Power Minister Manohar Lal Khattar in Hyderabad. This shows that Kishan is not interested in the development of Telangana," the CM alleged.

He further wanted Kishan to explain why he was not bringing any funds or projects to the state, while Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman managed to bring Metro to Chennai and Union Minister Shobha Karandlaje secured funds for the Benguluru Metro. He alleged that the state BJP president was full of jealousy and bitterness.

He also held KCR responsible for 'illegal projects' like the Rayalaseema Lift Irrigation Scheme, taken up by the AP government and asked the BRS chief why he failed to complete Bheema, Kalwakurthy, and Nettampadu projects during his rule. Accusing the BRS of obstructing the Congress government's efforts to make 65 lakh women Self Help Group members crorepatis, he alleged that the previous government has weakened SHGs. The CM said that 150 crore women have utilised the free bus ride facility so far and noted that the government paid ₹4,500 crore towards the expenditure incurred by the TGSRTC to implement the scheme. He noted that the state government had deposited ₹7,625 crore in the bank accounts of farmers.

"There are no power cuts in the state even though electricity consumption has increased to 16,000 megawatts and supplying 24-hour free power to farmers besides providing free power up to 200 units for the domestic needs. We also supply gas cylinders to 50 lakh families at just ₹500 each," he said .

Modi was sympathetic towards the problems of Telangana and expressed his readiness to solve them. Kishan is playing the role of Saindhava and blocking the development of Telangana

A Revanth Reddy, TG CM

Fate of workers trapped in SLBC not known yet: CM

Revanth says it will take 2 to 3 days to get a clear picture of disaster

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Hyderabad

CHIEF Minister A Revanth Reddy on Sunday said that the fate of the eight workers trapped in the Srisailam Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel remained unknown.

He visited the SLBC project site and inspected the rescue operations being carried out by various agencies. He along with Irrigation Minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy and Tourism Minister Jupally Krishna Rao reviewed the situation with the rescue teams.

"Experts have not come to any conclusion regarding the trapped persons. We do not know whether they are still alive or dead. It will take two to three days to get a clear picture and the rescue operations are continuing," CM explained that the government was ready to extend every possible support to the families of the trapped workers.

He said that mechanical parts were found during the digging in the tunnel by the rat miners at the place which was mapped by the NGRI as the possible location of the trapped persons. The rescuers tentatively identified the whereabouts of the workers, but have not reached a firm conclusion, the CM added.

He explained: "Mud and water are filling the tunnel. Rescue operations will be sped up after repairing the conveyor belt." He said that he had instructed the officials to use robots, to carry out the rescue operations.

The tunnel collapse as an unexpected accident, he said: "All should rise above political differences and come together to face this difficult situation and show sympathy to the families of the victims." He said that 11 agencies with support from private organisations were participating in the rescue operations.

Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy visits the SLBC Tunnel collapse site along with ministers and other officials on Sunday | EXPRESS

Film fraternity members & Oppn criticise DKS over BIFFes outburst

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@Bengaluru

A day after his stern remarks at the inauguration of the 16th Bengaluru International Film Festival (BIFF), Deputy CM DK Shivakumar on Sunday came under fire from film fraternity members and opposition parties.

The DCM had expressed displeasure at the film fraternity's absence at the event and also not extending support to the Mekedatu Padayatra. He also warned that if the government does not grant permission for shooting, they cannot make films. In his speech, Shivakumar had said he knows exactly where to tighten their (film fraternity members) "nuts and bolts". Leader of Opposition R Ashoka said Shivakumar earlier insisted that MLAs bow before him if they want grants and now, he has threatened film artistes and other members openly.

Ashoka said the Mekedaatu Padayatra was a Congress event. "It is up to the film fraternity to support it or not. These remarks do not suit a person who is the deputy CM of the state," he said. He said DCM should not treat everyone as his subordinates. He has to come out of this mindset. Film fraternity members are not party workers. "Shivakumar has to learn to respect artistes," he said.

Union Minister HD Kumaraswamy said people gave 135 seats to the Congress not to repair nuts and bolts. "Looks like DCM's feet are not on the ground. The power is making him speak arrogantly."

Actor-turned-politician and BJP MP Jaggesh said Rajkumar had initiated an artistes' association to bring artists together.

He urged to direct officials concerned to hold elections for the association so that artistes can be brought together. "There are many problems in the film industry. I have brought them to your attention," he said.

5 boys held for sexual assault

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Krishnagiri

FIVE minor boys aged between 13 and 15 were arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting two sisters aged nine and 13 on the terrace of their home near Hosur on Saturday afternoon.

Based on a complaint from the victim girl's father, police launched a search and secured three of the minors late on Saturday night, and the other two on Sunday morning for sexually assaulting the girl. All five of them were booked under Section 7 (sexual assault) r/w 8 of the POCSO Act.

EXPRESS READ

What's wrong if I attend a religious event, questions DK Shivakumar

Udupi: In the backdrop of his participation in recent religious events creating a buzz in political circles, Deputy CM and KPCC president DK Shivakumar said there's no need to read anything into his visits to the Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj. He told reporters in Kaup, where he arrived for the 'prathishta' ceremony of Sri Hosa Marigudi temple on Sunday, that the religious visits are not a harbinger of a drastic political move and such speculations are unwarranted.

2-language policy: Decision will be in Kannada's interest, says Minister

Shivamogga: School Education and Literacy Minister Bangarappa said that the two-language policy is a technical issue, but the government will take all necessary measures to uphold Kannada in the State. He was responding to a question,to implement the two-language policy in the State on the lines of TN. He said that some students who come to Karnataka from other States and enrol for Class 8 cannot be forced to learn Kannada as they would have never studied the language before

AP's proactive role in energy conservation applauded

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Vijayawada

THE Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), under the Ministry of Power, is driving Mission LiFE in Andhra Pradesh, positioning the State as a key player in sustainability efforts.

The initiative aligns with the National Concept of the Pro Planet People Initiative (PPPI), developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change. BEE is urging State Designated Agencies (SDAs), especially in AP, to lead the Massive Mass Movement (3M) for global adoption of Mission LiFE.

BEE Secretary Milind Deore emphasised AP's proactive role alongside Telangana in advancing energy conservation in cities like Vijayawada, Vizag, and Tirupati. Speaking after the BEE-Indo German Energy Partnership Summit in Vijayawada, BEE Secretary Deore and Director Abhishek Sharma stressed the need for energy conservation cells in AP's government departments. Media Adviser A Chandra Sekhara Reddy also spoke at the event.

RURAL ELECTRIFICATION

It's freedom from darkness for Palar hadi tribals

K SHIVA KUMAR @ Mysuru

IT is celebration time at Palar hadi along the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu as the tribal settlement with 75 houses that lived in darkness with kerosene lamps and torch lights for decades has finally got electricity supply.

The hadi, one of forest brigand Veerappan's hideouts and situated on the banks of the Palar River, had not got power all these years as the forest department had objected to erecting poles or drawing power lines fearing it would threaten wildlife as the region has a high movement of elephants, sambar, deer and other animals.

The families had to buy kerosene in the black market at nearby Govindapadi and Kolathur village in Salem district or Gopinatham, the brigand's village.

A villager, Murgesh, skipped work to attend the event to commission power supply. He said they want the panchayat to erect streetlights to protect them from elephants which visit their hadi almost every day.

He said many tribal villages have congregated at the hadi to celebrate.

The area has 22 tribal villages that are in darkness and don't have basic facilities like power supply, roads and drinking water. The Chamundeshwari Electric Supply Company (CESCOM) took up the initiative in December last year to provide power supply at a cost of ₹41 crore.

CESCOM former managing director G Sheela said they managed to convince forest authorities to lay underground power cables to all the 75 villages. Borewells will also be energised so that the villagers can get tap water. She said the work is in progress and all other tribal villages falling inside the forest will also get power within two months.

CESCOM has spent ₹55 cr to give power supply to tribal hamlets in Mysuru, Chamarajanagar and Kodagu districts. District in-charge Minister K Venkatesh said he was moved when tribal leaders told him that they have had no power connection, roads, drinking water or transportation in 31 hadis even after 75 years of Independence.

"This made me reach out to CM to get his approval and take up the project to develop a 120 km road at Rs 12 cr to connect tribal hadis," he added.

Social Welfare Minister HC Mahadevappa got the feedback on the guarantee schemes anassured the tribals that dues of Gruha Lakshmi will be deposited before Ugadi.

Lord Mahadeshwara has been kind this Shivarathri as the village has electricity supply. Our villagers are hoping that the electric bulbs will be lit anytime and we can say goodbye to kerosene lanterns

A tribal

GOVERNMENT OF TELANGANA
HYDERABAD METROPOLITAN WATER SUPPLY & SEWERAGE BOARD
O/o Chief General Manager (Engg), Transmission Circle, Khairatabad, Hyderabad-500004, TG.
e-PROCUREMENT TENDER NOTIFICATION

'e'-Tender No. & Date	Name of Work	Ranging (approx.)	Bid document download start date
'e'-Tender Notice No: EP. No. 97/CGM(E)TC/T1/TD-II/MoM-Ph-IV/2024-25, dated: 01-03-2025.	MoM of Ph-IV 150 MLD WTP and Jackwells, for the Period of (1) ONE Year under Singoor Section, SD-II, Peddapur, TD-II, Patancheru.	Rs.199.68 lakhs	03-03-2025 @ 11.30 AM

The Tenderers are requested to upload the information on the Zip format preferably. Further details can be seen on www.eprocurement.gov.in.
Sd/- Chief General Manager (Engg), Transmission Circle, Khairatabad, Hyderabad-04, TG.

STATE BANK OF INDIA
Vedayapalem Branch, Nellore, Cell: 9908523561
NOTICE FOR BREAK OPEN OF LOCKERS DUE TO NON PAYMENT OF RENT

This is to inform that locker holders of our SBI Vedayapalem Branch relating to the following locker accounts have failed and neglected to pay the prescribed locker rent for a long time inspite of our various notices and demands madeto them. As per terms and conditions agreed to, by the locker holder, the bank will be at liberty to break open the said lockers in the event of non-payment of rent. Accordingly it is proposed to break open the said locker on 28.03.2025 by serving the formalities and the respective locker holders are advised to approach the branch before 28.03.2025 and settle the dues to avoid action. If the locker holders fails to clear the due, then the bank will go ahead with break open of lockers. The charges for break open would be borne by the renters and bank reverse (the right to take legal action for recovery of the same along with rent arrears / other charges etc.

Sl. No.	Locker No.	Name of the Locker Holders	Due amount (In Rs.)
1.	7/7	Katakam Venkata Jayasankar & Katakam venkata pranitha, G-4 Pride Residency, 5th Line, Ramji Nagar, Nellore-1	24544

Date: 03.03.2025
Place: Nellore
Sd/- Authorised Officer, State Bank of India,

SRI POTTI SRI RAMULU NELLORE DISTRICT COOPERATIVE CENTRAL BANK LTD., NELLORE
(GOVERNMENT PARTNERED BANK)
Licensed by Reserve Bank of India

This is to inform that locker holders of our Nellore District Cooperative Central Bank, Gudur and Naidupeta Branches related to the following locker accounts have failed to operate the Locker accounts and neglected to pay the prescribed Locker rent for a long time inspite of various notices and demands made to them. As per terms and conditions agreed to, by the locker holders, the Bank will be at liberty to break open the said lockers due to inoperation/non-payment of rent. Accordingly, the locker holders mentioned below or the nominees of locker holders are requested to approach their respective branch to settle the locker rent dues if any and operate their locker accounts before 17/03/2025 to avoid this action. In case, if the locker holders/nominees fail to approach the branch within the due date, the Bank will initiate the process of Break open of the said inoperative lockers on 21/03/2025. The charges for break open would be borne by the locker holders and Bank has the right to take legal action for recovery of the same along with rent arrears/other charges etc.,

S.No.	Name of the Branch	Name of the Locker Holder	Locker Number	Address
1	Gudur	V. Narayana Reddy, V. Aruna	20	Vidya Nagar, Near TTD Kalyana Mandapam, Kota
2	Gudur	Sk. Shiraj Ahmed	28	H.No. 11-161, Darga Street, Gudur
3	Gudur	Pallamala Radhakrishna Reddy	34	Narasinga Rao Pet, Gudur
4	Gudur	M. Murali Krishna Naidu	38	S/o. Srihari Naidu, H.No: 6/114, Karanal Street, Gudur
5	Gudur	S L N Prasad	44	S/o. Pattabhi Ramaiah, Saguturu, Ozili (M)
6	Gudur	Bommu Usha Rani	48	W/o. Siddaiah, H.No: 5/159-2, East street, Gudur
7	Gudur	Pelisetty Madhu sudhan Rao	49	121, Vivekananda Road, Gudur
8	Gudur	Aakula Gopi	55	S/o. Venkateswarlu, C/o. Shirdi Sai Enterprises, Hospital Road, Gudur
9	Gudur	G Sreenivasa Rao	56	H.No. 2/112, N R Peta, Gudur, Nellore Dt.
10	Naidupeta	Mogal Vimal & B. Krishna S/o Mangal	74	Opp. Police Station, Bank Street, Naidupeta Mandal
11	Naidupeta	Balaji Sivaraj Patel S/o Vikas Patel	58	Beside Welcome Bakery , Naidupeta.

Date : 02-03-2025
Place : NELLORE
Sd/- Authorised Officer
SPSR NDCC Bank Ltd., Nellore.

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VELLORE, TN - 632 002 Email: registrar@cmcvellore.ac.in
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Group B : Diploma in Nursing, AHS Diploma Courses, AHS PG Diploma, MSc Bioethics, Biostatistics, Medical Physics, Epidemiology, Clinical Nutrition & Nuclear Medicine Technology, MPH (Master of Public Health), MHA (Master of Hospital Administration), MPT (Master of Physiotherapy), MOT (Advanced OT in Neurology, Paediatrics, Mental Health), Fellowships in Antimicrobial Stewardship for Clinical Pharmacists, Hospital Quality Management (FHQM) & Hospital Chaplaincy courses.
CERTIFICATE COURSES (Medical / Dental)
POST-DOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP COURSES (Medical / Dental)
M.S. BIOENGINEERING COURSE
The last date for online application submission for Group A & B courses with payment is 28th March 2025, for Certificate & PDF courses with payment is 7th May 2025 & for MS Bioengineering course with payment is 4th June 2025.
For more details refer Admission Bulletins available at CMC, Vellore website http://admissions.cmcvellore.ac.in
Important Information: The admission process contained in the Bulletins shall be subject to any order that maybe passed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court / High Court / any other statutory enactments that maybe passed by the Central or State Government.
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COLLEGE OF NURSING
VELLORE, TN - 632 004 Email: registrarcon@cmcvellore.ac.in
M.Sc., Post Basic B.Sc., Post Basic Diploma and Fellowship in Nursing Programmes Admissions: 2025 - 2026
Application form can be accessed & submitted only online through the College website till 28th March 2025.
Please refer to Admission Bulletin (available at our website) for Course details, eligibility criteria etc.
REGISTRAR
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The General Public are CAUTIONED not to be lured by any person offering admission to any of the courses conducted by CMC Vellore. The college will not be responsible for any candidates or parents dealing with such person / persons. Civil and a criminal court proceeding will be taken up against any person who holds out promises and also uses the institutions intellectual properties.
PLEASE NOTE: WE DO NOT ADMIT STUDENTS THROUGH AGENTS OR AGENCIES.
CMC VELLORE ADMINISTRATION

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA "e" PROCUREMENT NOTICE
Bid Identification No 21 of 2024-25
O-1556
1. Name of the Work: - Construction of check dams and Rural Piped Water Supply scheme.
(Refer DTCN available in the website :- tendersorissa.gov.in)
2. Total No of work :- 11 Nos.
3. Estimated Cost :- Rs. 102.14 Lakh to 285.72 Lakh
4. Eligible Bidder :- 'B' & 'A' class Contractor
5. Period of Completion :- 08 (Eight) months to 10 (ten) Months
6. Other Details :-

Procurement Officer	Bid Identification No.	Availability of Tender online for bidding		Date and time for opening of Technical Bid
		From	To	
Executive Engineer, RWSS Division, Phulbani	21 of 2024-25	Dt. 06.03.2025 At. 10.00 Hrs	Dt. 20.03.2025 Up to. 17.00 Hrs	Dt. 21.03.2025 at 11.00 A.M

Further details can be seen from the website www.tendersorissa.gov.in
Corrigendum, if any, will be uploaded in website only.
Sd/- Executive Engineer, RWS&S Division, Phulbani
OIPR-25006/11/0006/2425

PUBLIC NOTICE
It is hereby inform to the public that my client's bank rept. by : Branch Manager, Union Bank of India, NGO Colony Branch, Kadapa has intended to sanction Home loan for below mentioned schedule property in favour of UPPU BHARATHI she lost original link Doc.No. 391/1979, Dt. 01.02.1979 and 5152/1986, Dt.16.07.1986. Somewhere and not trace out as per Police certificate, issued by C.I (Chinna Chowk) P.S., Kadapa. So if anyone having objection against the property and same may be intimated to Branch Manager, Union Bank of India, NGO Colony Branch, Kadapa within 7 days for compliance.
SCHEDULE: YSR Kadapa District, Kadapa Urban Sub District, Kadapa Municipal corporation area limits, at Chinna Chowk village fields, in Sy.no.676, an extent of Ac. 1-10 cents, in this an extent of Ac.0-02 cents & 84 Sq. links, and in Sy.No.719 an extent of 262 sq. links total in these two Surve numbers an extent of Ac.0-02 cents & 346 sq. links 123.33 Sq. links, within the following boundaries:-
Boundaries: East: Road. West: V, Krishnamurthy joint wall and house. North: K. Narayana Reddy vacant site. South: Public Road
G.VENKATESWARA REDDY, ADVOCATE, KADAPA. Cell: 9948092702

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EDITORIAL

"A man who wants to lead the orchestra must turn his back on the crowd" — Max Lucado

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

DELIMITATION REFERENCE TERMS MUST BE SOUND TO DO JUSTICE TO THE SOUTH

A political hot potato is in the making much before the Centre takes a final call on the long-pending delimitation process. The scheduled redrawing of parliament constituency boundaries based on population is now at the heart of a raging political controversy in Tamil Nadu and the rest of South India after the state's CM called for an all-party meeting on March 5, claiming the exercise hangs over the southern states like the sword of Damocles. M K Stalin believes these are the BJP's machinations to run the country with the support of the increased number of MPs coming from the Hindi heartland and royally ignore states governed by opposition parties. The political storm Stalin kicked up ahead of next year's state elections fits perfectly with his anti-Hindi and anti-BJP tirade.

Home Minister Amit Shah's assertion that southern states would not see reduced parliamentary representation has not cut any ice with them. There is no clarity yet on the term of reference. Will it be based on population or a pro-rata basis on existing Lok Sabha seats? There are no quick answers. Karnataka and Telangana have responded quickly to the call to unite against the Delhi move. Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah called Shah's claim "not trustworthy". His Telangana counterpart, A Revanth Reddy, accused the BJP of using delimitation as a pretext to secure 'permanent' power by increasing seats in 'BIMARU' states while diminishing South's political significance.

In general, delimitation is directly proportional to size. It means states with larger populations get more representatives in parliament. Currently grappling with a population explosion, northern states may end up in that category, while southern states with effective population control may see reduced representation. India's population may reach 142 crore by 2026, and the delimitation process based on the new census may increase the Lok Sabha seat count of Tamil Nadu by a few. The back-of-the-envelope calculation shows Karnataka may see a minor increase while Kerala, with the slowest population growth, may lose a seat. Fears are that states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar could see a substantial 50 percent jump in their Lok Sabha seats, making South India increasingly insignificant in parliament. That would mean a slap in the face of the states that effectively implemented population control in the nation's interest.

STOCK MARKET DIP CLEANS EXCESSES OF LAST 2 YEARS

THE Indian equity markets have been 'imploding', falling 15 percent from their September 2024 peaks, eroding nearly ₹1 lakh crore of investors' wealth. Over the past five months, the unprecedented and persistent fall has clouded investor sentiments with fear and gloom. In the recent past—February-April 2020—we have seen the indices taking bigger hits of over 30%, but this time, the negative sentiments are more broad-based and hence more structural. FIIs have been dumping Indian stocks for more lucrative destinations—the US, China, etc—due to stretched valuations of Indian equities and lower profitability of Indian corporates, a sombre economic prospect in the medium term and given the uncertainties around Trump's economic policies. India's fiscal policies have not helped the markets either. The decision to increase the short-term and long-term capital gains tax rates last year has also made the Indian equities market less lucrative for foreign portfolio investors. The reasons are many and fundamental in nature, so the bear grip is tighter this time.

While one cannot sit quietly seeing the value of their portfolio falling persistently, knee-jerk reactions by the investors or the government would be unwarranted. The government must resolve basic issues—making policies which boost the economy—instead of trying to tinker with the natural course of equity markets. If it can reverse its capital gains tax decisions of last year, it might inject some positivity into the market in the short term. Investors, on their part, can follow the basic lessons of investing and invest in quality stocks, now available at cheaper valuation, diversify portfolios across assets and geographies, stay away from small-cap stocks for now, and invest regularly instead of making large commitments at one go. The current bear run is not the end of the world for investors. Treat the current phase in the market as a clean-up of excesses built over the past two years during the market's one-way movement upwards. The theory of mean reversion—asset prices reverting to historical means or averages—is playing out in Indian equities markets, not for the first time. As and when clouds of global uncertainties disperse, and the conditions become more amenable for business and economic activities, equity investors will see the light at the end of the tunnel.

QUICK TAKE

REFORM DISCOURAGING ATTITUDES

THE Supreme Court recently ordered reinstating two women civil judges sacked for underperformance in Madhya Pradesh. Terming their dismissal grounds as punitive, the court noted many complaints weren't even related to judicial competence. Underlining the absence of women-centred perspectives, it observed: "…growing number of female judicial officers (isn't enough) if we (can't) secure for them a sensitive work environment and guidance." The lack of gender diversity in the judiciary is well-accepted. That's no reason for leniency, but creating amenable circumstances, including oft-missing gender-sensitive infrastructure facilities, is paramount. Without a discerning mindset, it isn't easy to encourage women's entry into and retention in the judiciary.

The people reeling under tremendous economic pressures crave urgent measures to reduce their woes, which may not be possible in the medium term

HURTING ECONOMY, RISING ASPIRATIONS, LOOK FOR ANSWERS

DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI

Award-winning journalist and lawyer; founder and director of the Colombo-based Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR)

MANDAR PARDIKAR

COLOMBO'S new administration will soon complete six months in office. Predictably, it has not been a bed of roses. The government has tried to introduce changes, particularly to the entrenched political culture, streamline systems and reduce excessive spending. Nevertheless, the challenges remain daunting.

The left-leaning government presented its first budget on February 17, striking a tricky balance that meets the International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements while seeking to push a home-spun approach to solving the island's long-standing economic woes. On February 19, Fitch Ratings recognised the island's budget reflected the authorities' commitment to raising fiscal revenues as a share of its GDP—an approach that, if proven successful, may alleviate a long-standing weakness in the credit profile. While acknowledging risks to the fiscal outlook with the slow pace of fiscal consolidation weighing on prospects for debt reduction over the medium term, Fitch also noted the budget offered greater clarity over the administration's medium-term fiscal and economic reform agenda and consistency.

The government aims to increase revenue to 15.1 percent in 2025, from 11.4 percent in 2023, exceeding Fitch's assumption that the 15 percent threshold would be achievable only by 2026. The budget incorporates a 36.5 percent increase in revenue from taxes on external trade and a 13.1 percent from income taxes. While these revenue-based targets demonstrate its commitment to the IMF programme and gradual economic recovery, challenges remain before the fragile economy.

In the lead-up to the budget presentation, the general mood was both sceptical and sombre rather than hopeful, a silent acknowledgement of the absence of space to wriggle within the controlled fiscal climate with the IMF conditions posing an additional stranglehold. The administration lacked the space to develop its economic formula or to deliver on one of its key pre-election pledges: to renegotiate the IMF-backed debt restructuring programme achieved during President Ranil Wickremesinghe's presidency to offer a level of relief to the poor and middle classes. The administration is unable to withdraw from the deal without causing significant economic consequences that could be more severe than those experienced in 2022.

In its wake, following the third review on February 28, the IMF approved $2.9 billion as part of the bailout to help the island's economic rebound. Nevertheless, the IMF-brokered deal remains anathema for most people, and a sense of disappointment prevails despite accepting the economic constraints as the collective reality.

As the euphoria of electing a new administration and a trusted presidency begins to wane with time, the government is entering a period of renewed scrutiny—which will intensify and find people's expression during the local authorities' elections in the coming months. Insiders claim the new dispensation is working with intent towards course correction, but the people reeling under tremendous economic pressures crave urgent measures to reduce their woes, which may not be possible in the medium term.

The people, meanwhile, are getting impatient as they struggle to make ends meet amid spiralling costs of living. Government insiders, however, call for patience, claiming the administration is formulating policies to strengthen programmes while trying to introduce a new political culture to increase public institutions' efficiency.

The government is cognisant of the political reality that catapulted them into office: economic and political bankruptcy. In the run-up to the crucial presidential and parliamentary elections, the National Peoples' Power (NPP) drummed up public support by effectively driving the point that the island's economic collapse was more about corruption and nepotism than systems. This also means the administration must now cater to public expectations around accountability, including acting against corrupt elements in previous administrations and going beyond a couple of indictments of Rajapaksa family members. Difficult as it may be, it is time for tangible changes to political structures.

However, the introduction of such changes may not be easy. For example, the promulgation of a new Constitution will require time. The public has continued to harbour hopes of having the executive presidency dismantled, but since 1996, despite vocal pledges to abolish it, each president has embraced the powerful executive presidency and has not desired to prune the excessive powers, let alone abolish it. It would also require dealing with the island's powerful Buddhist clergy and the military, wielding immense power over the Sri Lankan community.

To bring a political equation among ethnicities, the government will have to address war excesses, which may necessitate action against security personnel hailed in the South as war heroes. Another perspective would be to consider the political issues of the ethnic Tamils, who largely supported Dissanayake's NPP with the expectation of a new beginning, free from the influence of long-standing power politics that overlooked Tamil political goals. The severely constrained government may have continued with the IMF programme to ensure stability, but political reforms of inclusion and justice cannot be postponed if the administration Is serious about structural reforms.

This also brings up the NPP's equation with neighbouring India, a critical player in geopolitics. Dissanayake's party has historically remained critical of what was termed "Indian expansionism". The incumbency has resisted calls to investigate military exercises during the protracted war in the North of Sri Lanka. Dissanayake grabbed headlines last month by pushing the cancellation of a 450 MW wind power project by the powerful Adani Group due to tariff and environmental concerns.

Many Sri Lankans are apprehensive about Indian investments, seeing them often as extensions of India's geostrategic interests while undermining Sri Lanka's sovereignty. India and Sri Lanka cannot afford an estranged relationship while following their growth trajectories and strategic interests. This calls for both Delhi and Colombo to address the underlying trust deficit.

(Views are personal)
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(dilrukshihandunnetti@gmail.com)

THE MANY MYSTERIES OF THE NAGA SADHUS

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

I missed seeing the famous Naga Sadhus at the Mahakumbh, which was disappointing as I had so many questions I would have liked to ask. But I caught up with them indirectly and unexpectedly late last week and would like to share what I learnt since there's so much more to them than the seemingly bizarre aspects portrayed on social media.

It happened at a stunning photo exhibition on Naga Sadhus at the Travancore Palace in Delhi. The photographer is well-known photojournalist Bandeep Singh, whose deep interest in this enigmatic aspect of Indian culture led him to the Kumbh. He kept going to the Kumbh for over 20 years and spent 25 days closely with the Naga Sadhus of the Juna Akhada (*juna* means 'ancient'). This happened through a chance introduction by a Delhi spiritual activist who had grown close to them. "A window opened, and I was suddenly in," said Bandeep, of this rare opportunity.

Naga Sadhus are followers of one of the 10 akhadas or monastic orders founded by no less than Adi Shankara himself in the 8th century. They are celibate by choice, sleep on the ground and are proficient in yoga and martial exercises. They either shave their heads completely or grow long matted locks called 'jata', which are supposed to enhance their energies. Many of them wear only a loincloth or, after reaching a particular stage of spiritual detachment, discard even that as the last relic of earthly rules.

They smear themselves with ash as it keeps the body warm in cold weather and is a proven antiseptic for scratches, wounds and insect bites. Deeper, vibhuti, as Lord Shiva's attribute, is believed to promote both physical and mental purity. The sanyasis say, "Chade khaak, mann hove paak, alakh niranjan aape aap", meaning that when vibhuti is applied, your mind is purified, and you transcend the limits of human measurement. Niranjan, meaning spotless and blemish-free, is one of Shiva's many epithets. They carry trishuls and wear rudraksha malas to proclaim their adherence to Shiva. Bandeep's show is called Bhasmang, meaning 'ash-smeared', which holds these layers of meaning.

They eat sparingly, and there are even those who have subsisted for years on drinking nothing but tea and smoking chillums (opium pipes). But why do they smoke weed? They told Bandeep it's because it helps them concentrate and cuts off worldly distractions. They take good care to appear in public only at the Kumbhs, where they have a historical right of way, to show society that they are there for them. After that, they mysteriously disappear to isolated ashrams and forest hide-outs, travelling by night to avoid townsfolk.

BHASMANG BY BANDEEP SINGH

> The Naga Sadhus take good care to appear in public only at the Kumbhs, where they have a historical right of way, to show society they are there for them. After that, they mysteriously disappear to isolated ashrams and forest hide-outs, travelling by night to avoid townsfolk

The purpose of the Naga Sadhus is twofold. One is their spiritual growth. The other is to be in a state of constant readiness to defend temples and holy places of India from attackers. Historical incidents are chronicled about their battles in the mould of the Bhrigus, ancient warrior-priests. The orders have various surnames, such as Sarasvati, Bharati, and Giri. Bandeep tracked sanyasis of the Giri order.

The sanyasis he met were mostly men and boys from poor, rural families. Apparently, they renounce the world for one of three reasons. One, of course, is a sense of personal calling, not limited to the rural poor. It can strike urbanites too, except that city people seem more tightly bound in the coils of the 'maya jaal' or net of illusion. This personal calling could be a growing feeling or a sudden epiphany. So, they follow the strong pull of their hearts into sanyas.

The second and sad reason is a traumatic personal life. Tragedy, cruelty, the forlorn feeling of being abandoned, and the human heartbreak of 'Na main kisi ka, na koi mera', meaning 'I belong to nobody, and nobody belongs to me', leads some to take sanyas. In contrast to being orphaned and ill-treated, there is order, method, a regulated life and, above all, a strong sense of community and emotional security in the akhadas, once you are accepted. That sets your feet on the path of inner growth.

There is no looking back after that, for you leave your past behind and get trained to become a new person, anchored in God-awareness. It is especially healing when anchored in a compassionate and powerful concept like Shiva, whose allure has kept believers spellbound for millennia.

The third reason is something that Bandeep discovered and shared with me. In the rural North, men join the army or the police as respectable and secure professions. But there is a third category that gets even more respect—the genuine sanyasi. And so, some are drawn to sanyas, though the initial attraction transforms rapidly into an arduous personal journey of hardship, renunciation and soul growth.

Candidates are first put through hard labour and given the most tiring and unpleasant community tasks to test their commitment. If they pass and are accepted as initiates, they undergo 12 years of rigorous training and practice. Each initiate is given five gurus to oversee different aspects of his training. The fifth guru is the powerful 'mantra guru'. If one guru leaves the akhada or dies, the leader instantly appoints another. So, the initiate is never left unattended and may safely progress in his new life. Quite a system, is it not? Centuries-old, and still ticking.

(Views are personal)
(shebaba09@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Ukraine's Catch-22

Ref: *Peace falls to pieces as Trump and Zelenskyy spar* (Mar 2). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy exposed his impulsive impetuosity in the high-level meeting between the US and Ukraine, putting himself in a Catch-22 situation. He has to either agree to American terms for the exploration of rare minerals and work on developing the rundown economy of Ukraine, or get prepared to lose many more territories of his nation in the war against Russia.
Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Global concern

The recent standoff between Trump and Zelenskyy is a cause for concern. While Kyiv battles Russian aggression, a withdrawal of American support would be catastrophic. Will Europe step in to fill the gap, or will Ukraine's opposition collapse without strong US support?
Anshu Bharti, Begusarai

Successful Mahakumbh

Ref: *Surge of bharatiyata unity at Prayagraj* (Mar 2). The article highlights the success of the Mahakumbh, which witnessed a congregation of over 66 crore people across the world in 45 days without too many major disruptions, incidents, or accidents. It has reinforced faith, redemption and cultural unity.
R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

Cleaning Prayagraj

After the unprecedented global gathering of more than 66 crore pilgrims near Sangam ghats for the Maha Kumbh mela after 144 years, the next vital part is cleaning the tonnes of garbage generated and dismantling Mahakumbh Nagar. It's a major task to clean 10,000 acres to maintain the sanctity of the ghats and Sangam.
Jayaprakash Reddy, Nalgonda

Congress politics

Ref: *Brand Tharoor: Pride & prejudice* (Mar 2). It is strange that a senior Congress leader like Shashi Tharoor has to wait for three years to meet Rahul Gandhi. Shashi came into politics later in life and is an erudite scholar who is not afraid to speak his mind. Tharoor has a closer view of happenings in Kerala and rightly praised the government for its policies.
Parthasarathy Mandadi, Tirupati

Children's safety

The surge in Pocso cases in Tamil Nadu reflects improved reporting, a positive shift towards confronting abuse. However, the government must address criticisms such as delayed trials and inadequate support for survivors. Enhanced preventive measures are also crucial to ensure a safer environment for children.
Deepa Pandey, Bhubaneswar

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS
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Deputy Resident Editor (Andhra Pradesh) **BSN Malleswara Rao** * Published by **R K Jhunjhunwala** on behalf of Express Publications (Madurai) Private Limited, at 4th Floor, No. V, MM Complex, Opp. More super Market, AIR Bypass Road, Tirupati - 517 502. and printed by him at Sakshi Press, Survey No.2/4, Kotha palem Village, Renigunta Mandal, Tirupati Revenue Division, Chittoor District - 517 520 **Tirupati:** Vol. 11, No. 52. RNI Reg. No. APENG/2015/64463. Phone: 0877-2238202, Fax: 0877-2239005. *Responsible to decide the matter under the PRP Act. **Copyright:** Express Publications (Madurai) Private Limited. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited.

POSTS OF THE DAY

Himanta Biswa Sarma @himantabiswa
The biggest enemies of the Hindu society are not the people of any other religion but the Left and Liberals thriving within the Hindu society itself.

Abhishek Banerjee @abhishekaitc
What began as a vision has now become an unstoppable force – one that is reshaping Diamond Harbour's healthcare landscape, one patient at a time.

Shivraj Singh Chouhan @ChouhanShivraj
According to our Sanatan tradition, the marriage rituals of our son Kartikeya are going on. Today the ritual of Haldi was completed with happiness.

Centre, BJP states plan to anounce new women schemes on March 8

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR @ New Delhi

THE Centre and BJP governments in states are planning to announce several women-centric initiatives on March 8 in line with its policy aimed at women's empowerment.

BJP sources said that on the occasion of International Women's Day the party is planning to introduce initiatives that will financially empower women from poorer categories, both in Delhi and other party-ruled states.

"Since our party is taking initiatives centred on the economic, educational, and social empowerment of women, we are poised to introduce more women-centric schemes. A large section of women voters have supported us, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is genuinely committed to their empowerment through a slew of schemes," a senior party functionary said.

It is expected that some of these initiatives will include financial support for girls' education and assistance for women from marginalised sections for the promotion of vocational and skills-based empowerment, the functionary said.

"Additionally, the BJP Mahila Morcha has planned a series of outreach programmes and activities for Women's Day on March 8, focusing on the Prime Minister's eight flagship schemes designed to empower women economically, educationally, and socially," he said.

In Delhi, the registration process for the Mahila Samriddhi Yojna, which promises ₹2,500 per month to women from economically weaker sections, is expected to begin on March 8.

This scheme was included in the BJP's Delhi Assembly election manifesto, which pledged to provide financial assistance to women once the party came to power in the city.

Shah: Govt unsparing in punishing drug traffickers

Says 29 narcotics smugglers convicted by courts in 12 cases so far

MUKESH RANJAN @ New Delhi

NOTING that the government has been "unsparing in punishing drug traffickers," Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said that 29 drug traffickers had been convicted by courts in 12 different cases across India as a result of the "bottom to top" and "top to bottom" approach adopted in investigation by the agencies.

Taking to his X handle, Shah said that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, the government pledges to continue combating the drug menace with "ruthless and meticulous investigations" to build a "drug-free Bharat".

The Home further asserted that the successes are the testament to the "bottom to top" and "top to bottom" approach adopted by the agencies under the direction of the government.

Later, in a statement the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said, in pursuit of the government's zero-tolerance policy against drugs, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) has achieved this significant success. Some of the instances cited by the ministry include: the seizure of 23.859 kg charas at the Sabarmati Railway Station in Gujarat's Ahmedabad in 2019, where three people were arrested and sentenced to 14 years in jail.

Ruthless investigations

Shah said that under PM Narendra Modi's leadership, the government pledges to continue combating the drug menace with "ruthless and meticulous investigations" to build a "drug-free Bharat". He further asserted that the successes are the testament to the "bottom to top" and "top to bottom" approach adopted by the agencies.

In July 2022, the NCB in MP's Mandsaur intercepted two vehicles in Shahdol and seized 123.080 kg of ganja. Four people were arrested and sentenced to 12 years RI with a fine of ₹ 2 lakh each.

In July 2022, the NCB in MP's Mandsaur intercepted two vehicles in Shahdol and seized 123.080 kg of ganja. Four people were arrested and sentenced to 12 years RI with Rs 2 lakh each as fine. In the Chandigarh Zone last year, a parcel containing two hockey sticks packed with 438 grams of opium was intercepted at DHL Express, Ludhiana, which led to arrest of two accused. They were sentenced to three years of imprisonment by a Punjab court.

A man was held at Chandigarh Railway Station in 2021 for possession of 390 grams of charas. He was sentenced to six months in jail.

In June, 2021, a Zimbabwean woman was arrested at Cochin International Airport with 2.910 kg of heroin and was sentenced to 11 years in jail.

In January 2018, the NCB seized 450 grams of charas, arrested one person in Dehradun, who was later sentenced to one year in jail. In 2021, the NCB seized 1.950 kg of charas from the possession of two accused. A court in January 2025 sentenced the accused to 10 years in jail. In February 2021, the NCB seized 681.8 kg of ganja in the Ranga Reddy district of Telangana and arrested eight accused. They are undergoing 10 years in prison.

INSIDER TRACK

Cabinet reshuffle whispers

Whispers are growing louder in political circles about a possible reshuffle to the Union Cabinet around June or July, when the NDA government will complete first year in its third term. "Since no one from the party organisation has been inducted yet, we're hopeful for a reshuffle in June or July, bringing in some fresh faces while letting the veterans either rest or take on new organisational roles," said a BJP functionary. Ministries like Petroleum, Law and Justice, Tribal Affairs, and Minority Affairs, along with a few MoS roles, are expected to see a shuffle in favour of new blood. "Some ministers are now so senior that they might be shifted to gubernatorial posts or organisational duties," added another functionary. Meanwhile, one minister eyeing the national president's post might be shown the door by mid-year. The cherry on top? A cabinet spot could be reserved for a minority face, making the reshuffle even more intriguing!

Leadership blues & survey doom

For the Congress in Kerala, it's not just the leadership struggle at the Centre that has the party leadership concerned. The party's hopes of returning to power in Kerala seems to be in jeopardy even before the race has officially begun. According to sources, internal surveys conducted by the party's war room general, Sunil Kanugolu, paints a bleak picture for the Congress. The surveys suggest that the party may be staring at a third consecutive defeat in the Assembly elections due for 2026. This would be another blow to the party, which has been striving to regain its lost ground after its losses in the 2016 and 2021 assembly polls. Despite recent efforts by its top brass to curb anti-party remarks and internal strife in Kerala, Kanugolu's surveys indicate that the damage has already been done. The discord within the party has seemingly taken a toll on its prospects, making the path to victory in 2026 more challenging. Sources said that Kanugolu has now set his sights on the 2031 elections.

Youtuber Bhardwaj? AAP not happy

The latest venture of former Delhi minister Saurabh Bhardwaj into the world of YouTube has struck a discordant note within his party. Bhardwaj's channel called 'Berozgar Netaji', which hasn't exactly won approval from AAP leadership, especially party chief Arvind Kejriwal. In the elections, the BJP made a comeback after 27 years of political exile in Delhi, winning 48 seats. After Bhardwaj's defeat in Greater Kailash, he decided to announce his new digital career. In his first post after the election results, he said, "For leaders like us, life took a 180-degree turn...As an MLA, we get a salary. But how long can we sustain from savings? So this will also be a source of livelihood." Good intention, perhaps. But Kejriwal is displeased with Bhardwaj's new gig, feeling that while it's normal for political leaders to lose elections, Bhardwaj's online antics have made the party a subject of ridicule more than anything else.

PMO and language advantage

Shaktikanta Das, former RBI Governor and retired IAS officer from the Tamil Nadu cadre, has recently joined the PMO as Principal Secretary-II, leaving many in bureaucratic circles surprised. This is especially true since PK Mishra, a Gujarat cadre officer, continues as PS-I. Some believe Das's appointment might be part of a succession plan, reminiscent of when Nripendra Mishra served as PS to the PM and PK Mishra was added as Additional PS. Back then, Mishra played a vital role as the go-to person for appointments and personnel affairs, smoothly transitioning into his role as PS to the PM. However, others feel that this is not a passing-of-the-baton situation. Rather, Das's role as PS-2 seems to be part of an upgrade, with him taking on a similar macro-level role as Nripendra Mishra once did in the PMO. But here's where it gets interesting —Das brings a valuable language advantage to the table. While Mishra's fluency in Odia and Gujarati works well for communication with the PM and HM, Das, fluent in both Odia and Tamil, is expected to have a smoother rapport with Cabinet Secretary TV Somanathan, also an expert in these languages.

Exercises carried out to raise Special Forces for operations

MAYANK SINGH @ New Delhi

THE month of February was hectic for the Indian Special Forces (SF) as troops carried out training exercises in multiple theatres, desert and mountains, at the joint tri-services and bilateral levels.

Also, the SF troops are conducting airborne operations at the international levels. These add to the government's plan to raise the Armed Forces Special Operations Division.

"An integrated Tri-Service Special Forces exercise named Exercise Desert Hunt 2025 was conducted by the Indian Air Force at Air Force Station Jodhpur from 24 to 28 February 2025," the IAF said. The exercise involved elite Para (Special Forces) from the Indian Army, the Marine Commandos from the Indian Navy, along with the Garud (Special Forces) from the Indian Air Force, participating together in a simulated combat environment.

This high-intensity drill was aimed at enhancing interoperability, coordination and synergy among the three Special Forces units to ensure swift and effective response towards emerging security challenges. The exercise included airborne insertion, precision strikes, hostage rescue, counter-terrorism operations, combat free falls and urban warfare scenarios wherein the combat readiness of the forces was tested under realistic conditions.

In February, the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force also conducted a significant joint exercise, involving their elite special forces, to enhance operational readiness and inter-service coordination.

As TNIE reported, "Elite troops of the Indian Army recently participated in a comprehensive training exercise christened Exercise Winged Raider." The exercise focused on special airborne operations, demonstrating a high level of preparedness and synergy between the two forces. According to the Army, the exercise "involved rehearsing various airborne insertion techniques from both fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft, enhancing the skills of participating personnel. The exercise also witnessed a first in the Eastern Theatre in terms of training on airborne operations from the Chinook Helicopter." The training provided a valuable opportunity for troops to refine their expertise in airborne operations, which are essential for rapid deployment and mission success.

The Army emphasized that "the exercise underscored the critical role of airborne forces in modern military strategy, enabling swift and decisive action in diverse operational environments."

Why should there be a confrontational stand over language: Dhankhar

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR @ New Delhi

AMID the ongoing language row, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Sunday emphasised the need to nurture every language. "Should there be a confrontational stance on language in Bharat? We have to nurture every language."

During a virtual interaction with students of IIT Hyderabad, Dhankhar stated that India is a land of rich languages—Sanskrit, Bangla, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and many others. Even in Parliament, simultaneous translation occurs in 22 languages.

He also referred to the recent conferral of classical language status on some languages as a proud moment. As languages have a global reach, every language should be nurtured. They are a gold mine of literature, and these literary works are filled with knowledge and wisdom—Vedas, Puranas, the epics Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Gita, he added.

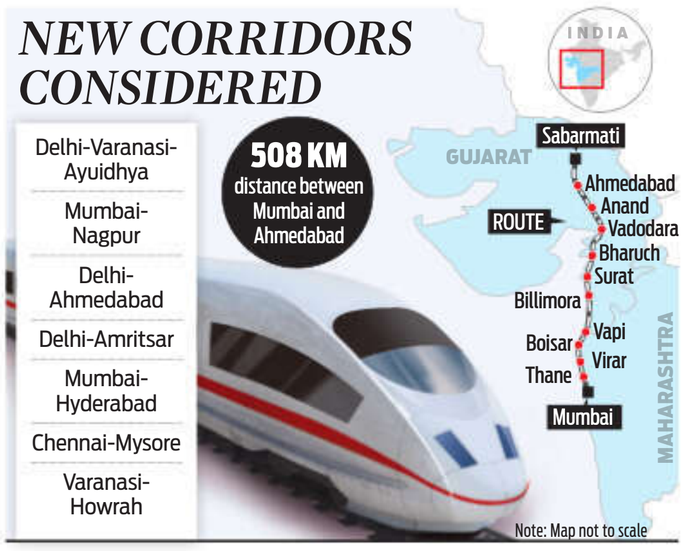
The Vice-President also ideated for the formation of a confederation of alumni associations from institutes of excellence. Underlining the importance of alumni associations, he said, "Look at global universities and their endowment funds, billions of US dollars. I had the opportunity to see the figures. The top list is approaching 50 billion dollars. Why don't we have this? We have alumni. Let our alumni contribute to the corpus. The amount doesn't matter; it's the spirit of contribution that will foster a connection with the institute."

He shared an idea with IIT Hyderabad's students: "I have proposed an idea. We have institutes of excellence—such as IITs, and others. Their alumni associations should form a confederation, which will become a top global benchmark think tank for policymakers."

Urging the corporate sector to invest in research and innovation, the Vice-President said, "Firstly, our corporates. I am not critical, just a critique. They must invest in research—invest in research for development and innovation."

Economic zone to come up on bullet train route

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR @ New Delhi



LIKE in Japan, the route for India's first bullet train, currently under construction, has been designed to create a large and unified economic zone across the states it passes through.

The economic zones, which will be established once the bullet train services between Mumbai and Ahmedabad begin, are expected to yield economic benefits through industrialisation. "The biggest advantage of the bullet train is that it brings together 5-6 cities to form a single economic zone," Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw recently said. "The bullet train project is not only a means of transportation, but it is a project for the growth of the entire region," he added.

India's first high-speed rail corridor, designed to accommodate bullet trains, is anticipated to give an economic boost to more than 12 cities along its route, and their smaller neighbouring towns through enhanced business and industrial activities.

Drawing a comparison to Japan's first bullet train project, which created a significant hub between Osaka and Tokyo, Vaishnaw said, "As a result of Japan's first bullet train, introduced between Osaka and Tokyo, all the six cities located along the route between these stations emerged as major hubs. Similarly, areas like Surat, Nadia, Bilimora, Vapi, Thane, Ahmedabad, and others along the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train route will witness rapid growth."

Providing an update on the progress of the project, the minister said 360 km of work is now at the viaduct level. "The work at the Anand bullet train station is progressing well, and it is being modernised to accommodate trains running at speeds of up to 350 km/h," he added.

A senior railway official explained that the bullet train project is conservatively expected to multiply business activities across the regions between these two states by more than five times, with reduced travel times prioritising business movements.

It is also expected that the first bullet train project will lead to the creation of economic estates around major stations along the route, attracting substantial private sector investment in infrastructure.

"The high-speed rail development will stimulate construction, engineering, and manufacturing sectors, resulting in job creation and improved transportation networks. With travel time reduced from 7-8 hours to just 2-3- hours, day trips or business travel will become more viable," said the senior railway official.

"The most significant economic impact will be felt through job creation, with an estimated 1 to 2 lakh jobs generated in construction for both skilled and unskilled labour, in addition to specialised technical roles," the official added.

India's policymaking must account for uncertainty, says PK Mishra

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR
@ New Delhi

PK Mishra, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, on Sunday said policymaking must account for uncertainty, focusing on a comprehensive framework and an outcome-driven, constructive mindset.

"In a world characterised by growing uncertainty, it is imperative that our policies and practices operate within a comprehensive framework," he said. He also highlighted the need for a multi-dimensional and dynamic approach, aiming not only for resilience but for the creation of an anti-fragile system.

Addressing a wide range of issues at the Standard Manthan summit, Mishra said that the government had successfully navigated crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia conflict, and the West Asia crisis, with a focus on 'Atmanirbhar' (self-reliance). He credited this success to the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who prioritized readiness in addressing challenges by implementing reforms to tackle emergent issues.

On the Indian economy front, Mishra pointed out the several challenges faced, including geopolitical tensions, global supply chain disruptions, and the energy transition.

He praised the government's initiatives, such as the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, and highlighted India's consumption base and demographic advantage.

Mishra described PM's recent visit to the US "positive" for enhancing trade relations. He further noted that the evolution of bilateral, regional, and multilateral relationships in the changing global trade environment is reshaping the economic landscape.

Mishra expressed optimism that India's vast consumption base, demographic advantages, robust digital public infrastructure, and technological capabilities would allow the country to withstand external pressures and negotiate from a position of strength.

Talking about India's agriculture sector, he highlighted that the sector continues to employ approximately 46% of the country's workforce, despite its share in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declining from nearly 50% in the 1970s to 18% today. He also addressed reforms in India's civil services, outlining several initiatives aimed at making governance more accessible, efficient, and citizen-friendly.

KUMBH REUNITE

More than 50,000 people who were separated from their families amid the massive crowd of devotees at the 45-day Maha Kumbh were successfully reunited with their loved ones, the UP government said on Sunday.

3 KILLED IN TRUCK-AMBULANCE COLLISION IN BENGAL

INDIA	Max	Min		Max	Min
Ahmedabad	32	21	Mumbai	35	25
Bhopal	30	17	Panaji	36	26
Jaipur	27	17	Patna	31	19
Amritsar	22	10	Lucknow	29	14
Chennai	31	26	Port Blair	32	26
Kolkata	34	24	Imphal	24	14
Srinagar	10	02	Chandigarh	24	11

BSP chief acts against kin for second time due to closeness with his expelled father-in-law

Won't name successor: Mayawati removes nephew from key post

NAMITA BAJPAI @ Lucknow

DAYS after expelling Ashok Siddharth, a close relative and the father-in-law of her "heir apparent," Akash Anand, Bahujan Samaj Party chief **Mayawati** implemented another shakeup by dismissing her nephew, Akash Anand, from his position as national coordinator. "I will not announce my successor until my last breath and will continue to handle party affairs myself, she stated.

The BSP chief, under whose leadership the party graph has been dwindling relentlessly since 2012, replaced Akash with her brother and Akash's father, Anand Kumar. Another senior party leader, Rajya Sabha MP Ramji Gautam, was also appointed as the party's national coordinator. The former CM chief attributed the action against Akash Anand to his closeness with his expelled father-in-law Ashok Siddharth.

Releasing a statement after replacing Akash with his father, Mayawati said: "You are aware that Siddharth's daughter is married to him (Akash). We will have to watch how much influence Siddharth will exert on his daughter as well as Akash. In such a situation, Akash has been removed from all party responsibilities. Siddharth is completely responsible for this and has damaged the party while ruining Akash's career."

According to BSP insiders, Akash was informed of the decision to remove him from the post of national coordinator at a party meeting in Delhi on February 17. The decision was formally announced on Sunday at a meeting of senior leaders in Lucknow, where Akash was not present.

This is the second time that Mayawati has removed Akash Anand after she announced him as the "successor" of her political legacy. Last time, he was suddenly removed from the party's national coordinator post on May 7, in the middle of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

BSP's graph dwindling since 2012

Mayawati, under whose leadership the party graph has been dwindling relentlessly since 2012, replaced Akash with her brother and Akash's father, Anand Kumar. Another senior party leader, Rajya Sabha MP Ramji Gautam, was also appointed as the party's national coordinator. She attributed the action against Akash Anand to his closeness with his expelled father-in-law Ashok Siddharth.

Mayawati then removed Akash, saying he needed more political maturity to represent the party on public platforms. During the 2014 general elections, Akash was booked for 'promoting enmity' through his election rallies, especially the one held in Sitapur. Akash was first appointed BSP national coordinator in 2019.

Interestingly, Mayawati introduced her second nephew and Akash's younger brother, Ishant Anand, by bringing him forward on the party platform during her birthday celebrations on January 15.

After the Lok Sabah elections, in which BSP failed even to open its account in Uttar Pradesh, Akash was reinstated by Mayawati on June 23. On February 12, Mayawati expelled Ashok Sidhharth from the party and removed him from the post of central-state coordinator for 'anti-party activities'.

Besides Siddharth, Mayawati had also expelled Nitin Singh, a close aide of Siddharth, who accused them of factionalism.

According to BSP insiders, while Anand Kumar will set up the party's camp office in Delhi, Ramji Gautam will travel across the country to connect with the party's supporters.

Cong will not work as 'B' team of RJD in polls, says Bihar in-charge

RAMASHANKAR @ Patna

At a time when BJP and JD(U) are consolidating their alliance ahead of Bihar assembly elections, all is not well between Congress and RJD. If the statement of newly appointed Congress in-charge of Bihar Krishna Allavaru's is any indication, seat-sharing among opposition alliance partners will not be an easy task.

Krishna Allavaru, who reached Patna on Sunday for the second time within a fortnight, said that Congress will not work as 'B' team of people in Bihar. Instead, it will work as 'A' team of people, which is a clear signal for its alliance partner, RJD that it would seek a respectable number of seats from it in the upcoming election.

In 2020, Congress had contested 70 seats. However, grand old party could secure its win on 19 seats only. Allavaru, however, clarified that the party would primarily focus on strengthening its support base at booth level before the elections to derive good results.

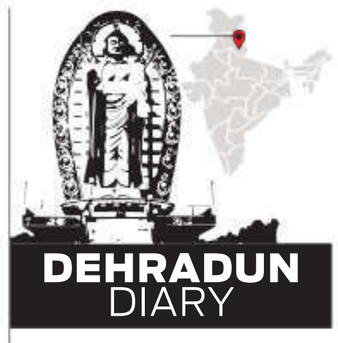
In response to a media query, Bihar in-charge said that talks among grand alliance partners for seat-sharing have not started. But one thing is sure that the party would not work as people's 'B' team this time.

Speaking on possibility of Congress contesting Bihar assembly polls independently, similar on the lines of Delhi, Allavaru said that the party is in the process of formulating electoral strategy for the state assembly elections. Bihar –in-charge made it clear that only those party workers would be given positions in organisation who would work hard on the ground. Similarly, only hard workers will get tickets in the assembly elections. "The process for the purpose has already started," he told the media.

Sources said that Congress, in fact, wanted to strengthen its support base at village and booth levels and not to rely on RJD.

Corroborating RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav's statement that double engine government has failed to deliver and has virtually become 'kharata' (outdated), Allavaru said that there is no doubt that the ruling dispensation has not come to the expectations of people.

When asked about Bihar chief minister's son Nishant Kumar's entry into politics, Bihar Congress in-charge said that it was upto to Nitish or Nishant to decide.



DEHRADUN DIARY

NARENDRA SETHI
Our correspondent in Uttarakhand
narendrasethi@newindianexpress.com

Police launch drug crackdown, 591 arrested

In the largest operation against drug trafficking since the formation of Uttarakhand, police have arrested 591 people over the past two months as part of the "Drug-Free Uttarakhand" campaign. Authorities have seized narcotics valued at ₹24.25 crore from these offenders. DGP Deepam Seth reported that 427 cases have been registered in this special operation, leading to the recovery of 936.56 kilograms of illegal drugs.
Additionally, 26 criminals have been detained under the Gangster Act, and assets worth approximately ₹1.74 crore belonging to 15 accused individuals have been confiscated for being illegally acquired.

Industrialists upset over 29% power rate hike

The proposed 29% increase in electricity rates by the state's three power corporations—UPCL (12%), PTCUL (12%), and UJVNL (5%)—has sparked discontent among local industrialists. During a public hearing held by the Uttarakhand Electricity Regulatory Commission, industry representatives made it clear that businesses may relocate unless electricity prices are reduced. Pankaj Gupta, president of the Industries Association of Uttarakhand, voiced his concerns: "Every year, electricity rates are being increased. This is alarming and affecting our operations."

Fire service athletes clinch 8 medals

The state's fire service athletes secured a total of 8 medals, including 3 golds, at the Third All India Fire Service Games and Fire Service Meet held at Tyagaraj Stadium in New Delhi from February 28 to March 2. Fireman Mahendra Singh Rawat excelled by winning gold in both Arm Wrestling (35) and Javelin Throw (35). Female fireman Dimple Rawat also made headlines by clinching gold in the 5000-meter race. Additionally, Pinky Rawat earned silver in the 1500-meter race, while Madan Singh Farswan took silver in the Long Jump. Mahendra Singh Rawat added another silver in the Open category for the Javelin Throw.

Minister says daughter harassed in Maha fair, Fadnavis vows action

SUDHIR SURYAWANSHI @ Mumbai

UNION minister for state and BJP MP Raksha Khadse on Sunday lodged a police complaint regarding the harassment of her daughter and some of her friends by a group of boys, despite being accompanied by police, at an event in Maharashtra's Jalgaon district. CM Devendra Fadnavis, however, said the accused belong to a political party, and some of them have been arrested.

Khadse lodged the complaint at Muktainagar police station in connection with the incident that occurred at Sant Muktai Yatra in Kothali village in Muktainagar on Friday night. A Jalgaon police officer said, "A case under the POCSO Act has been registered over the incident and one person arrested. Search is on for the other accused."

Talking to reporters, Khade said, "My daughter and her friends were followed and pushed, and their photos and videos were taken. When my staff objected, the boys resorted to unruly behavior. The boys had misbehaved with her. It is unfortunate. If such things happen to an MP or Union minister's daughter, imagine what common people have to go through."

Maharashtra Congress president Harshvardhan Sapkal said, "Women are not safe in Maharashtra. Each day we are witnessing horrible incidents of women harassment. Two days ago, a 26-year-old woman was raped inside the bus. Home minister Devendra Fadnavis has failed to maintain law and order."

He said, "The fact that a minister's daughter was molested even in the presence of security guards is a sign that the law and order has gone haywire. Fadnavis should resign from the post of home minister and give the state a full-time competent home minister for the safety of mothers and sisters in the state."

Speaking to reporters in Raigad, CM Fadnavis said, "Those who harassed Khadse's daughter are from a political party. The local police have arrested some of them and registered a case in this regard."

One held, 5 FIRs registered over Jadavpur case

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Kolkata

FIVE FIRs have been registered, and one person has been arrested so far in connection with the violent clashes at Jadavpur University on Saturday, where Education Minister Bratya Basu was heckled, his car vandalised, and several professors were attacked.

Violence had broken out when students, primarily from ultra-Left organisations, demanded that Basu announce student union election dates on the spot. Tensions escalated when the minister said he could only do so after consulting senior officials. Protesters ransacked the venue, assaulted professors, and later set fire to a university employee's office.

A student who fell in front of the minister's car and sustained serious injuries is undergoing treatment at KPC Hospital. Former JU professor and ex-VC Om Prakash Mishra was also attacked and manhandled by students. Several university professors, including WBCUPA members Monojit Mandal and Samir Chatterjee, also suffered injuries. Meanwhile, Left student leaders accused TMC-affiliated professors of instigating the violence.

J&K Assembly session after over 7 years may be stormy

FAYAZ WANI @ Srinagar

THE maiden Assembly session of Jammu and Kashmir after over seven years is expected to be stormy as issues like Article 370, ban on liquor and reservation disparity are likely to take centre stage and BJP's warning that its legislators won't allow any 'anti-national' bill to be tabled in the House.

The Budget Session will start on Monday with Lt Governor Manoj Sinha's address. The legislators have been instructed to maintain decorum and attentively listen to LG's address, which will start at 10 am.

CM Omar Abdullah, who is also finance minister of J&K, will present the budget. The last budget was presented by then PDP finance minister Dr Haseen Drabu in the Assembly in February 2018.

The J&K Legislative Assembly comprises 90 elected members. The number can go up to 95 as the L-G has powers to nominate five members to the house including two women, two from Kashmiri Pandit community including a woman, and one representing displaced persons from PoK. However, Lt Governor has not nominated the five members so far. The issue has gone into backburner as NC enjoys a comfortable majority in the House.

Since one BJP member passed away and CM vacated Budgam seat, of the 88-member J&K Assembly, NC has 41 members with five independents, six Congress and two members one belonging to (CPIM) and AAP supporting the Omar government. BJP has 28 members.

The NC, Congress and BJP held legislature party meetings in Jammu today to chalk out strategy for the Assembly session. Omar also chaired a joint legislature party meeting of coalition partners in Jammu.

The focus of the Assembly will be the private members bill submitted by the legislators.

Peoples Conference chairman and MLA Handwara Sajjad Lone has submitted a bill to condemn the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A by centre on August 5, 2019 and demand its restoration. Three legislators including two from opposition and one from ruling NC have moved bills to seek complete ban on sale and consumption of liquor in J&K.

NC MLA Dr Bashir Ahmed Veeri has submitted a bill seeking rationalisation in reservation in J&K. The bill has sought 60 per cent reservation for Open Merit and 40 per cent for categories. The reservation policy introduced by the L-G administration before Assembly polls last year reduced the Open Merit category to mere 30% and increased the quota for reserved categories to 70%.

'No sankh sound at Badrinath due to avalanche fear'

NARENDRA SETHI @ Dehradun

WHILE it is said that Lord Vishnu has a special affinity for the conch shell (shankh), an intriguing rule governs its use in Badrinath Dham. "The sound of the shankh is strictly prohibited in the temple," said a local priest, highlighting the temple's adherence to both religious customs and scientific reasoning.

Local lore suggests that the vibrations produced by the conch could potentially trigger avalanches in the surrounding mountainous region. "This belief is deeply rooted in our traditions and is taken seriously by both devotees and locals," the priest said. As visitors flock to Badrinath, they are reminded that even the smallest actions can have significant implications in such a sensitive environment.

Environmentalist and Chipko movement leader Chandi Prasad Bhatt has highlighted that a significant portion of Badripuri, excluding the main temple of Badrinath, is at high risk of avalanches.

"If we look at past avalanche incidents, Badripuri has suffered damage from avalanches almost every decade. In 2014, a major avalanche caused severe damage in the Narayan Mountain area of Badrinath," said Bhatt, who has played a pivotal role in protecting the Himalayan environment for over five decades. Bhatt, 92, has received accolades, including Padma Vibhushan, Padma Shri, Gandhi Peace Prize, and the Magsaysay Award.

"Avalanches have not only caused loss of life and property in Badripuri but also in Mana and surrounding villages," he told this newspaper.

Social activist Om Prakash Bhatt said, "In Badrinath Dham, we have Nilkanth Mountain, Nar-Narayan, Kanchan Ganga, Satopanth, Mana, and Kuber Mountain. Additionally, there are many other peaks that remain snow-covered. In the past, there used to be heavy snowfall from Badrinath to the Mana region. Due to the fear of avalanches from these snow-capped peaks, the conch shell was not blown in Badrinath temple."

Bhuvan Chandra Uniyal, the religious authority of Badrinath, said, "In Badrinath, the conch shell is used for the Abhishek ritual, and it is also employed to sanctify the offerings made to the deity." However, he said, "It is prohibited to blow the conch shell here. This restriction may very well be in place to prevent the occurrence of avalanches."

A senior scientist told this newspaper, "The entire valley from Badrinath to Mana is sensitive. Previously, human movement in this area was minimal. The scientific reason behind the prohibition of blowing the conch shell in Badrinath was to prevent vibrations in the snow-covered peaks. However, human activities in the area have significantly increased. There is rampant construction taking place here, which is leading to incidents of avalanches."

'Conch shell used only for Abhishek ritual'

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Climate change: Punjab sees decline in migratory birds for past six years

HARPREET BAJWA @ New Delhi

THE number of migratory birds that fly in from Siberia, Russia, Kazakhstan and Northern Europe to escape the cold winters and reach six protected wetlands in Punjab, including Harike Wildlife Sanctuary north India's largest wetland, is almost the same as last year. However, their numbers have constantly been decreasing for the past six years.

Earlier, the winter season lasted longer, and the birds from these countries stayed here for five to six months, now they hardly stay for about two months. As per the census carried out this year by the Punjab Forest and Wild Life department at Harike north India's largest wetland, this year 55,059 birds of 89 species were spotted against last year's 50,529 of 81 species. But in 2023, their number stood at 65,624 and they belonged to 84 species. In 2018 and 2019, as many as 94,771 birds of 94 species and 1,23,128 birds of 83 species arrived at the wetland site, respectively.

In Kanjli Wetland Conservation Reserve, 20 species and 443 birds were recorded this year as compared to 23 species and 669 birds last year.

In Keshopur –Miani Community Reserve, 78 species with 13,676 birds have been recorded this year as compared to 10,857 birds of 66 species last year. While at Ropar Conservation Reserve the bird count was 1,486 of 44 species this year and last year 1,755 birds and 20 species spotted, and at Nangal Wildlife Sanctuary this year the bird count was 2,411 and 36 species and last year it was 2,400 and 32 species.

Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden, Punjab, Dharminder Sharma said, "The change in climatic conditions across the globe might be the reason for migratory birds from those parts of the world choosing other destinations besides reshuffling of species."

Gitanjali Kanwar, Senior Coordinator, Aquatic Biodiversity, World Wildlife Fund-India, said, "The winter season has been very brief as compared to previous years. Earlier, the winters would start around October and continued till March."

SIX
killed as unidentified gunmen open fire on their vehicle in Pakistan's Punja

GLOBAL WEATHER
LR: Light Rain HR: Heavy Rain LS: Light Snow TDS: Thundershower LC: Light Cloud SNY: Sunny

Beijing	7	-5	SNY	Los Angeles	20	10	SNY
Colombo	32	25	SNY	Melbourne	19	15	LC
Dhaka	31	21	SNY	Moscow	-6	-9	LS
Dubai	26	20	LR	New York	-2	-9	SNY
Houston	17	6	LR	Singapore	30	25	LR
Istanbul	7	4	LR	Toronto	-7	-17	LS
London	7	2	SNY	Washington	11	7	LC

Once-in-a-generation moment for Europe's security: UK

European allies underscore their commitment to protecting Ukraine at key London summit

LONDON

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer on Sunday warned that European security faced a once-in-a-generation moment, as he hosted crisis talks in London on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, just days after a Kyiv-Washington clash.

Eighteen allies were gathered on the key question of security guarantees for Ukraine, all the more pressing after US President Donald Trump berated his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky in an unprecedented White House blow-up.

Sitting next to Zelensky in front of the flags of Ukraine and European nations, summit host Starmer said it was "a once-in-a-generation moment for the security of Europe and we all need to step up".

"I hope you know that we are all with you and the people of Ukraine for as long as it takes. Everyone around this table," he told the Ukrainian leader.

Zelensky was embraced by some of the 18 other top leaders, including Starmer, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and NATO chief Mark Rutte, while protesters rallied outside the UK leader's home in support of Ukraine.

It was a stark contrast to Zelensky's unusually heated Friday meeting with Trump in Washington, where he was berated by the American leader and accused of not being "ready" for peace with Russia.

Their argument, played out in front of the world's news cameras, raised fears that Trump wants to force Kyiv into a peace deal giving Russian President Vladimir Putin what he wants while leaving Ukraine broken and insecure.

Speaking ahead of the summit in London, Starmer said "nobody wants to see" scenes like Zelensky and Trump's Oval Office clash.

"We have to find a way that we can all work together. Because, in the end, we've had three years of bloody conflict. Now we need to get to that lasting peace," Starmer told the BBC.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni echoed the sentiment, saying as she met Starmer in his Downing Street home that it was "very, very important that we avoid the risk that the West divides".

Ukraine's allies have been underscoring their steadfast commitment to counter growing concerns that Trump is about to sell Kyiv short in negotiations with Russia.

Starmer warmly welcomed Zelensky to the British capital on Saturday, the day after the Ukrainian leader was kicked out of the White House, extending a loan to strengthen Ukraine's depleted defences.

Protestors wave Ukrainian national flags and hold placards during a gathering in support of Ukraine outside Downing Street | AFP

NATO chief tells Zelenskyy to restore relations with Trump

Secretary-General Mark Rutte has said he told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that he had to "find a way to restore his relationship with the American president" after the two leaders engaged in an extraordinary meltdown at the White House on Friday. Rutte told the BBC on Saturday that he told Zelenskyy that "he really had to respect what (US) President (Donald) Trump has done so far for Ukraine". He was referring to the first Trump administration's decision in 2019 to supply Ukraine with Javelin antitank missiles that Ukraine used to deadly effect against Russian tanks

Donald Trump

English designated as US' official language

WASHINGTON

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has signed an executive order designating English as the official language of the US.

The order allows government agencies and organizations that receive federal funding to choose whether to continue to offer documents and services in language other than English.

It rescinds a mandate from former President Bill Clinton that required the government and organizations that received federal funding to provide language assistance to non-English speakers.

"Establishing English as the official language will not only streamline communication but also reinforce shared national values, and create a more cohesive and efficient society," according to the order signed by Trump on Saturday.

"In welcoming new Americans, a policy of encouraging the learning and adoption of our national language will make the United States a shared home and empower new citizens to achieve the American dream," the order also states. "Speaking English not only opens doors economically, but it helps newcomers engage in their communities, participate in national traditions, and give back to our society."

More than 30 states have already passed laws designating English as their official language, according to US English, a group that advocates for making English the official language in the United States.

For decades, lawmakers in Congress have introduced legislation to designate English as the official language of the US, but those efforts have not succeeded.

Within hours of Trump's inauguration last month, the new administration took down the Spanish language version of the official White House website. *AP*

Top US officials suggest Zelenskyy step down

WASHINGTON

TOP Washington officials suggested Sunday that Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy might have to step down if a peace deal is to be reached, underscoring President Donald Trump's stunning shift in approach to the war with Russia.

"We need a leader that can deal with us, eventually deal with the Russians, and end this war," National Security Advisor Mike Waltz told CNN.

"And if it becomes apparent that President Zelenskyy's either personal motivations or political motivations are divergent from ending the fighting in this country, then I think we have a real issue."

His remarks and those of other key Republicans follow Trump's dramatic turn against Zelenskyy during a televised Oval Office meeting on Friday.

The unprecedently public spat resulted in Zelenskyy leaving the White House without the anticipated signing of a preliminary pact on sharing Ukrainian mineral rights.

While European leaders have rallied around Ukraine, Republican officials appeared Sunday on news programs questioning whether any deal could be reached with Russia so long as Zelenskyy remains.

"Either he needs to come to his senses and come back to the table in gratitude, or someone else needs to lead the country to do that," said Republican Mike Johnson, speaker of the House of Representatives.

"I mean, it's up to the Ukrainians to figure that out, but... we need President Zelensky to do what is necessary."

Senior Democrats have angrily pushed back since the debacle Friday, saying Trump has come dangerously close to an all-out embrace of Russia.

"The White House has become an arm of the Kremlin," said Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat who has emerged as one of Trump's most outspoken critics."It appears America is trying to align itself with dictators," he said on CNN. Secretary of State Marco Rubio insisted, however, that the White House was clear-eyed about Putin's Russia. *AFP*

ASIA MATTERS

SINGAPORE

FATHER-SON FEUD ROCKS REALTY FIRM

A high-stakes father-and-son feud has plunged Singapore property giant City Developments Ltd (CDL) into turmoil, with the private boardroom dispute of one of the city-state's wealthiest families erupting into public view this week. The battle of words between CDL's executive chairman Kwek Leng Beng and his son Sherman Kwek has exposed deep rifts within the Forbes-ranked fourth-richest family in Singapore. Laced with allegations of corporate missteps, governance breaches and personal entanglements, the fight threatens to escalate into a bruising court battle

THAILAND

SUBSIDY SCHEME TO SPUR THAI TOURISM

The government is planning to introduce a co-payment package for tourism in May to promote domestic travel, the *Bangkok Post* reported. Under the scheme, a traveller needs to pay only half of their travel costs. The government will takes care of the rest. It is only for Thai citizens and is applicable only for domestic travel with some conditions applied

INDONESIA

SCAMSTERS USE PRESIDENT'S DEEPFAKE

Wearing a traditional Indonesian black hat and shirt, President Prabowo Subianto speaks to the camera in an Instagram video, asking his people how he can help them after his election last year. "Who hasn't received aid from me? What are your needs right now?" Prabowo appears to ask viewers in the clip posted in November. Those ensnared by the message were asked to contact a WhatsApp number and hand over between 250,000 and one million rupiah ($15-$60) as an "administrative fee" to get aid that never materialised

Day after first phase of truce ends, Israel suspends aid delivery to Gaza

JERUSALEM

ISRAEL stopped the entry of all goods and supplies into the Gaza Strip on Sunday and warned of 'additional consequences' if Hamas doesn't accept a new proposal to extend a fragile ceasefire.

Hamas accused Israel of trying to derail the existing ceasefire agreement and said its decision to cut off aid was "cheap extortion, a war crime and a blatant attack" on the truce, which took hold in January after more than a year of negotiations. Both sides stopped short of saying the ceasefire had ended.

The first phase of the ceasefire, which included a surge in humanitarian assistance, expired on Saturday. The two sides have yet to negotiate the second phase, in which Hamas was to release dozens of remaining hostages in return for an Israeli pullout and a lasting ceasefire.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that under the existing agreements Israel could resume fighting after the first phase if it believed negotiations were ineffective. He said the ceasefire would only continue if Hamas kept releasing hostages, telling his Cabinet that 'there will be no free lunches'. He said Israel was 'full coordinated' with President Donald Trump's administration.

There was no immediate comment from the United States on the proposal announced by Israel or its decision to cut off aid.

Hundreds of aid trucks have entered Gaza daily since the ceasefire began on January 19, and it was unclear what the immediate impact of the aid cutoff would be.

Israel said the new proposal, which it said came from US Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff, called for extending the ceasefire through Ramadan ' the Muslim holy month that began over the weekend ' and the Jewish Passover holiday, which ends on April 20.

Under that proposal, Hamas would release half the hostages on the first day and the rest when an agreement is reached on a permanent ceasefire, Netanyahu said. *AP*

Trucks carrying humanitarian aid wait on the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing on Sunday after Israel suspended the entry of supplies into Gaza | AFP

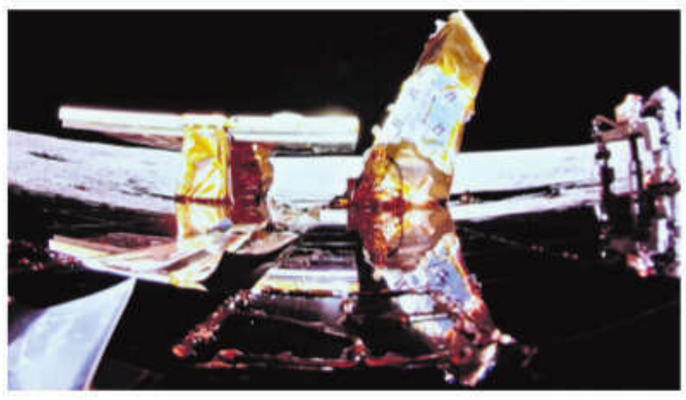
WAR WATCH
ISRAEL-GAZA: DAY 513

TOLL SO FAR
50,432

4 killed in Israeli strikes: Gaza ministry

The ministry of health in Hamas-run Gaza said four people were killed and six others wounded in Israeli attacks Sunday after the first phase of a fragile truce in the territory drew to a close. "Since this morning, four dead and six wounded" have been brought to "hospitals in the Gaza Strip following Israeli attacks", the ministry said in a statement

Private US firm aces lunar landing on first mission


Private lunar lander Blue Ghost after touching down on the moon with a special delivery for NASA on Sunday | AFP

WASHINGTON

A US company successfully landed its spacecraft on the Moon on Sunday, marking only the second private mission to achieve the milestone -- and the first to do so upright.

Firefly Aerospace's Blue Ghost Mission 1 touched down at 3:34 am US Eastern Time (0834 GMT) near Mons Latreille, a volcanic formation in Mare Crisium on the Moon's northeastern near side.

The mission control team in Austin, Texas, erupted in cheers as CEO Jason Kim confirmed that the spacecraft was "stable and upright."

That stood in stark contrast to the first private lunar landing last February, which toppled over upon arrival, dulling the achievement of being the first US Moon touchdown since the crewed Apollo 17 mission of 1972. "We're on the Moon!" exclaimed Nicky Fox, associate administrator for NASA's Science Mission Directorate.

"We did do two hazard avoidance maneuvers on the way down -- that tells us that our software did work exactly as it needed to," she told reporters.

EXPRESS READ

Iran sacks minister over economic woes

Tehran: Iran's parliament sacked the country's finance minister on Sunday after impeaching him over soaring inflation and a plunging currency, state television reported. Economy and Finance Minister Abdolnaser Hemmati lost a vote of confidence, with 182 of 273 parliamentarians present backing his removal.

Imran seeks global help for democracy in Pak

Islamabad: Imran Khan has appealed to the international community, particularly the United States, to reaffirm its commitment to democracy, human rights, and regional stability. He expressed deep concern over the alleged erosion of democracy in the country, in an article published in Time Magazine

Federal judge rules Trump can't fire head of watchdog

WASHINGTON

A federal judge ruled Saturday that limits on President Donald Trump's power to fire the head of an independent watchdog agency are constitutional, teeing up a likely Supreme Court showdown.

The case revolves around the White House's February 7 dismissal of Hampton Dellinger, chief of the Office of Special Counsel.

His small agency investigates whistleblower complaints and protects federal workers' rights, among various other roles, and could possibly be a significant player in pushing back against Trump and Elon Musk's efforts to fire swaths of federal employees.

District Judge Amy Berman Jackson had previously ordered Dellinger temporarily reinstated while she considered the case, but on Saturday issued a ruling that his dismissal had been "unlawful."

She said there were specific legal reasons for which the agency head could be fired by the president, but "the curt email from the White House informing the Special Counsel that he was terminated contained no reasons whatsoever."

She further rejected the White House's argument that the unique restrictions blocking the president from firing the special counsel were unconstitutional. *AFP*

Yawning wealth gap widening inequalities in China: Report

China's wealthiest individuals continue to grow richer, widening economic inequalities in the country despite the ruling Communist Party's efforts to control private businesses and implement policies aimed at boosting people's incomes, according to a report published by the Hurun Research Institute.

5.12 million
families in China with over six million yuan ($824,000) in assets had a combined wealth of about 150 trillion yuan ($7 trillion) in 2024

CONSUMPTION SLOWS

Much of the economic strain is being felt by those in the middle and lower-middle classes.

As a result, the overall consumption essential to halt the economic slowdown grew by just 3.5% last year, a rate that was slower than the 5 per cent rise in GDP, suggesting that the income and wealth gaps were holding back spending.

1,30,000
families accounted for 58% of national wealth in 2024, which is up from 56% a year earlier

41,314 yuan
China's per capita disposable income last year, up 5.3% from 2023, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported

XI'S CALL TO UNLEASH TALENTS

Chinese President Xi Jinping on Feb 17 held a rare meeting with the country's top corporate leaders and urged them to unleash their talents to shore up sagging business confidence

₹34,574 CR have been pulled out by foreign investors from the Indian equity markets in Feb.

Why are equity mkts in firm bear grip?

Experts say even if there is a pull back in markets, investors should be cautious as there is no guarantee for recovery

BENN KOCHUVEEDAN @Mumbai

THE benchmark indices are down as much as 16% from the peak they had scaled on September 26, 2024, when the Sensex closed at 85,836.12 and the Nifty scaled to 26,216.05, from 73,198 and 22,125, respectively, while midcaps are bleeding by 30%.

Last Friday alone the market tanked almost 2% each after the US president Donald Trump repeated 25% tariffs on Mexico and Canada and an additional 10% over the previously announced 10% duties on Chinese goods landing on the US shores from March 4, along with a threat to slap 25% on EU goods soon. This is the longest losing streak running into five full months ending February 28, making it the worst period in the past 30 years, and the second worst bear-hug in history when the rout lasted eight months between September 1995 and April 1996, tanking by over 31%. The previous five months fall was during July-November in 1996, eroding the market value by 26%. But the current bloodbath is much higher in terms of losses, which is a staggering ₹107 lakh crore in market cap and a whopping ₹ 50 lakh crore erosion in investor wealth! .

What's plaguing the mkts?

There are myriads of issues that are running down the market and investor sentiment.

While the first trigger was foreign funds, allured by the highly beaten-down Chinese stocks, began to pull out to park their monies in Chinese stocks after Beijing announced a big stimulus but never implemented fully. Though since then many brokerages said China was still not a good investing story given the deep-rooted structural issues plaguing the world's second largest market and economy, foreigners continued to sell after Trump stormed back to the White House, leading to a rally in the US stocks and the greenbacks.

Another reason is the massive slump in the domestic growth story, and a bleeding rupee which had sniffed at ₹88 early February losing almost 4.5% since October only added to the pains, along with the falling earnings of India Inc.

Growth slump

While the economy was talked up to a good start in the beginning with the RBI forecasting over 7.2% uptick in FY25, it just lost the momentum in the first quarter itself with GDP slowing to a 6.6% (revised estimate from 6.4%) which was correctly attributed to the missing government capex due to the hustings.

But the biggest negative was the slump in Q2 when it slumped to a seven-quarter low of 5.4% and the Q3 printing in at 6.2% turned out to be a non-event for the markets.

Be cautious

The US tariff tantrums have only added to the already mounting pressure on the market due to domestic issues, like falling growth, slumping consumer demand, among others according to a note by Asit C Mehta Intermediates.

The issue is more to do with a crisis of confidence and not data driven per se and this is the main reason for the current panic trends, says another analyst, adding given these, even if there is a pull back this week, investors should be cautious as there is no guarantee that the recovery will be strong enough. At the same there are market-men who say it's time investors get back to the highly beaten down blue-chips provided they have a 12-24 months patience. Yet the overriding word is caution.

IN CONVERSATION

SWAPNIL JAIN
Co-founder & CTO, Ather Energy

'Right product helping us expand beyond south mkt'

IPO-READY electric two-wheeler manufacturer Ather Energy, which recently expanded its R&D and testing capabilities in Bengaluru, has found success in the northern market with its newly launched e-scooter Rizta. **Swapnil Jain, Co-founder & CTO, Ather Energy** in an interaction with TNIE's **Uma Kannan**, says the company was focusing on the Southern market for a long time and now with the right product they are expanding into other places, especially the North. The Hero MotoCorp-backed company has two manufacturing plants in Tamil Nadu and another one is coming up in Maharashtra. Jain also spoke about why the growing competition is good for them, its market share and R&D capabilities. Edited excerpts:

In CY2024, the overall EV two-wheeler sales grew by 33%, but Ather's sales grew only 20% y-o-y and your market share was 11%. But in January 2025, sales improved and you sold 13,040 units. What kind of growth are you expecting going forward?
There have been multiple factors to it. If you again look at the market share data for this month (February), you will be convinced that we are not growing slower. In between, we had a slowdown and that was because of a transition. People were anticipating a new product and we introduced the Rizta. Following the new launch, we came back on track and have been doing good. It's a journey for us. We have been focusing on the South for a long time, and now we are expanding into other places because we now have the right product for the North.

What difference are you seeing between the South and the North markets?
The customer preference in the South is very different compared to the North. Ather 450 is something that works really well in the South, but doesn't work well for North India, as people there prefer a bulkier product. With respect to serving, the North customer is very different from serving a South customer. The Rizta has received a very good response there. We have grown significantly, especially in Gujarat because the State loved us as a brand but we didn't have the right product. As soon as we launched the new product, our market share there went up from 5% to almost 22-23%.

With more OEMs, you get comfortable as a user and you start using tech. Incumbents are also bringing products into the market. Competition is very helpful.

Can we expect a new product from you in the near future? Also, any plans to launch a motorcycle?
A lot of work is going on at Ather. Our focus is to first build the platform. It took us five years to build the 450 platform and then we built many products on it. So, we are in a similar stage in terms of motorcycle and new products. We are working on two new platforms. When will they be converted into a product? I think I might not be able to answer that, but there is a lot of work happening to make a robust platform that can quickly turn out products.

How are you looking at the growing competition in the EV market?
I feel competition is good, especially when it comes to new technologies. For example, let's say if you had only ChatGPT, you may not be comfortable. Now you see Google is also offering a chatbot. When you see many people offering it, you become comfortable. And the same thing happens in the EV industry. With more OEMs, you get comfortable as a user and you start using technology. Competition is very helpful.

With the expansion of the R & D facility, what exactly are you looking at?
It is not good enough to build quality products alone, you have to build them faster. You have to disrupt yourself every 6 months. Personally, I have a vision for the entire R&D team that they don't settle, but keep disrupting every 6 months.

MONEY-WISE

RIDING THE STORM WITH LARGE CAP MFs

FINANCIAL ADVICE

ASHOK KUMAR
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He can be reached at ceolotus@hotmail.com
(Views expressed here are personal)

THERE is a growing school of thought in the market that large cap funds are a relatively safer haven to ride the ongoing selling storm at the Indian bourses. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) in October 2017, defined a Large cap fund as an open-ended equity-oriented mutual fund scheme that invests at least 80% of its under management (AUM) in large cap stocks. SEBI further defines a large-cap company as those listed companies which are ranked from 1st to 100th company in the Indian stock exchanges in the terms of market capitalization.

Market capitalization is calculated by multiplying the number of a company's shares outstanding by its stock price per share. Every quarter, the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) publishes a list of the top 100 companies by market cap. Fund managers usually follow this list when making investments in large-cap stocks.

Historically, large cap funds have provided relatively better stability to the portfolio during volatile market conditions as compared to mid or small cap funds. Since its component, large-cap companies are relatively well-established and of reasonable size, are presumed to be safer. Conversely though, on the upside, it may not offer the same growth opportunities as compared to a small or mid-cap fund.

Since large-cap funds qualify as equity assets, any sale made within a year from the date of purchase is liable for Short Term Capital Gain (STCG) and attracts 20% tax. For any sale made after the investment has completed a year, Long Term Capital Gains (LTCG) tax is applicable at 12.5% on capital gains over ₹ 1.25 lakh.

Those investing in Large Cap funds must do so knowing that the underlying asset is equity with all its attendant risks. Yet, investing in large-cap funds is often used as a core long-term investment strategy as it is perceived to be less risky than mid-cap, small-cap, multi-cap and flexi-cap funds.

Yet, it would be prudent to note that it is less risky only when compared to Small Cap and Mid-cap mutual funds. No equity investment is completely risk-free. Also, since risk & returns are directly related, the returns too are lesser when compared to small-cap and mid-cap funds in a market that is trending upwards.

It is thus a natural corollary that since it is a pure equity fund, the investment should ideally be for a long period to generate better returns.

While there may be select periods where the near-term returns are superior to the long-term returns, more often than not, and particularly since the underlying asset is equity, the long term returns of a large cap fund outscore its near-term returns.

Given the recent battering of mid and small cap stock in the Indian market following unprecedented selling by Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs), a lot of fund managers have sought refuge in the large cap space to weather the ongoing storm. Many also believe that the rebound too will begin there from, especially given the relative valuation comfort provided by this space.

MONEY MATTERS

HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF THE STOCK MARKET SELL-OFF

FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE

RAJAS KELKAR
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THERE is a lot of chatter on social media about the fall in the equity markets in India. There are estimates galore about the amount of wealth eroded due to this sell-off. Nithin Kamath of Zerodha has articulated that trading volumes have slumped across categories. That could mean lower commissions for brokers and lower securities transaction tax for the government. Foreign portfolio investors sold about $40 bn worth of Indian shares in six months, and worries about US trade relations are offered as explanations for the fall.

You may want to note that expectations of tomorrow's profits influence share prices. The way the above factors affect Indian shares needs to be understood well.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) put out a report on India's macro fundamentals last week. The global institution expects India's economy to grow steadily over the next few years. "Real GDP is expected to grow at 6.5% in 2024/25 and 2025/26, supported by robust growth in private consumption on the back of sustained macroeconomic and financial stability," said the institution in its latest review of the Indian economy. Businesses need such macroeconomic and financial stability besides growth. That means companies riding on that economic growth will continue to grow profits. The market thumb rule is that profits grow more than twice that rate.

With a correction in share prices, companies that generate business and profits riding on India's economic growth and consumption are likely to get attractive. According to one media report, several large-cap companies are trading at a valuation last seen before the pandemic in 2020. However, many mid-cap to small-cap companies trade at a multiple that is much higher than five years ago despite the current sell-off. The sell-off will likely continue in richly valued companies as investors are unlikely to give that high premium they once enjoyed. There is a reason for that. Foreign investors have other options. They have quality businesses trading at a discount to their fundamentals in markets like the US, China and other countries. Expect foreigners to continue to sell Indian equities and Indian domestic mutual funds to pick up shares at lower levels.

EXPRESS ILLUSTRATION

That may not be such a bad thing. Price-to-earnings ratios of 80 to 100 are difficult to justify forever. Those levels show expectations of profit growth were sky-high. A stock market phase where share prices are catching up with profit growth is better for investors than the one where profits are trying to meet expectations. If share prices fall due to a sustained sell-off by foreigners but profit growth remains the same, market valuations can go from overpriced to attractive.

You must know the sectors affected by global trade issues and US economic growth. India's exports to the US are relatively lower than those of China, Mexico, and Canada. Any trade war would hurt export-centric businesses in these countries first. There is a reaction in the IT services sector stocks. That is visible in the sharp fall in the Nifty IT index. You may want to carefully listen to company managements on the US market outlook in April 2025.

Stay Calm

It is usually not the advice you heed when things are volatile. However, you need to figure out a way to stay calm. If you are trading in the stock market by borrowing, you may want to unwind your positions and pay off these loans. However, you must not rush to pull out your money if you are a long-term investor. A conversation with your financial advisor can help you calm your nerves. If you are confident about your future income and are a long-term investor, you should look at the correction in the stock market as an opportunity.

Revision in GDP nos raises data quality concerns

DIPAK MONDAL @ New Delhi

THE recently announced GDP estimates for third quarter of 2024-25, second advance estimates of 2024-25, and revised & final GDP estimates of 2023-24 & 2022-24 show drastic revision in some of the estimates made earlier.

For example, the 2023-24 GDP growth estimate has been revised sharply upwards by 100 basis points to 9.2% from the earlier 8.2%, making the growth during the financial year one of the fastest in the last decade. Similarly, the gross value added (GVA) has been revised upwards from 7.2% to 8.6% for FY24. The second quarter 2024-25 GDP growth numbers were revised upwards by 40 basis points, from 5.4% to 5.8%. There were other revisions as well. The 2022-23 final GDP growth has been revised down by 20 basis points to 7.6%.

Smaller revisions in GDP estimate numbers are a common practice, what baffles analysts and economists are the massive revisions. As Madhavi Arora, economist, Emkay Global Financial Services, quips: "Massive upward revisions to past years and quarters have made the GDP forecast exercise extremely dynamic." Projections that miss actual numbers by such a large margin lead to wrong policy decisions by the government as well as private entities. If accuracy of government data becomes a suspect, the effectiveness of policy making comes under scrutiny as well.

"One of the sharpest revisions in recent years makes it difficult to interpret the data appropriately. Data revisions are understandable as the statistics office has access to more data as compared to provisional estimates. Yet quality of data remains a concern," Kunal Kundu, India Economist at Societe Generale Corporate and Investment Banking.

Kundu sees more issues with such sharp revisions in GDP numbers. He says the discrepancy component in GDP calculation should have moved closer to zero with more relevant data, but it remains unchanged. He points out that despite no major revision in WPI data, the GDP deflator changed significantly in certain periods.

Why the revisions

Shubhada Rao, economist and founder QuantEco, an independent economic research firm, explains: "Provisional GDP numbers usually rely on listed firms' data. The unlisted (unorganised) firms' data is usually available with a lag. It is likely that unlisted firms fared better and hence such a substantial upward revision."

According to Manoranjan Sharma, chief economist, Infomerics Ratings, this is a multi-layered issue and involves greater data coverage, changes in research methodology and adoption of best practices elsewhere to make the process of data computation more scientific and realistic. "My limited point here is that such periodic data revisions should not be summarily dismissed but need to be carefully considered in the light of the transforming big picture and the granular details to make an objective assessment of the comprehensive national income growth process," says Sharma.

Sunil Kumar Sinha, professor of Economics at Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh, explains that generally in an upswing, initial estimates tend to underestimate the GDP and hence revisions tend to push GDP upwards and vice versa. He says even during the 2004-2009 period revisions pushed GDP upwards and sharply for a year or two.

NCLAT dismisses Deloitte Haskins and Sells' plea

PTI @ New Delhi

APPELLATE tribunal NCLAT has dismissed petitions by Deloitte Haskins and Sells and its two associates, challenging the admissibility of the second interim investigation report by the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO) on Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IFIN).

The petitions also contested the compilation submitted by the government (MCA) to the tribunal. The compilation included documents related to the IFIN investigation report and the amended request regarding the proceedings against them to freeze their assets based on the second interim report by SFIO.

A two-member bench of the NCLAT upheld an earlier order issued by the Mumbai Bench of the National Company Law Tribunal. On July 22, 2024, the tribunal ruled that the second interim SFIO report, along with the accompanying documents, could be considered for both interim relief and the final declaration. "We, thus, are of the view that the second SFIO Report as well as the compilation of documents filed by the Union of India before the NCLT was fully admissible and can be looked into by the NCLT for proceeding under Section 212 (14A) and no error has been committed by the Adjudicating Authority (NCLT) in rejecting IA No 65 of 2024," the NCLAT said.

Holt beats Mochizuki to win Bengaluru Open

American tennis player Brandon Holt clinched his second ATP Challenger title of the season with a fluent 6-3, 6-3 win over Japan's Shintaro Mochizuki in the Bengaluru Open final in the city on Sunday. Organised by the Karnataka State Lawn Tennis Association (KSLTA), the Bengaluru Open is an ATP Challenger 125 tournament.

Vindication for Varun in Dubai

Mystery spinner takes five-fer as India defeat Kiwis to set up semifinal clash against Oz

GOMESH S @ Chennai

India's spinner Varun Chakravarthy (2nd from right) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of New Zealand's Will Young in Dubai on Sunday | PTI

VARUN Chakravarthy will remember what happened on November 5, 2021 at the Dubai International Stadium. Fast-tracked into the Indian team, Varun had played all three matches in the 2021 T20 World Cup, but as they faced an early exit, the spinner was also dropped from the set-up.

About 1,213 days on, Varun was back at the same venue, playing in an ICC event for India. This time, however, he was not the villain. Instead, Varun rose to the occasion and became the hero, taking a five-wicket haul — his first in the format — as India beat New Zealand by 45 runs to finish on top of Group A. They will play Australia in the first semifinal at the same venue on Tuesday.

While it might seem like a straightforward comeback story, there is more to it. In fact, Varun was not even in the preliminary Champions Trophy squad India had named in January.

Varun — while going back to the drawing table after being dropped in 2021, taking his time working on his craft — slowly made his mark yet again in the shortest format. And he persisted and showed consistency, especially for Kolkata Knight Riders in the Indian Premier League, playing a crucial part in the title win last year. Soon, a comeback in the T20I format followed, but the ODI debut didn't happen. If there was a chance of him going to Dubai for the CT, the ideal scenario at the time was to have him in the squad for the three ODIs against England at home. However, he was named only in the T20I side.

Varun had been one of the most consistent spinners in the Vijay Hazare Trophy over the past couple of years, finishing second on the wickets tally on both occasions. Truth be told, he was on the radar of the selectors as they were at the venue watching him go about his business. And yet, when he was not named in the ODI squad against England, it seemed like Varun had to wait for his chance.

What did he do? Ran through England in every chance he got in the T20I series. So much so that he was added for the three ODIs at the last minute. With Varun, the question was never about his skills or ability to take wickets, but about how he copes with the strain of the 50-over format at the highest level.

The moment Varun showed that he could hold his own, adding to the fact that India were playing on slowish surfaces in Dubai, it was a no-brainer to add him to the Champions Trophy squad. Even then, getting a game was not straightforward. This is a team that already fields Kuldeep Yadav, Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel in the playing XI regularly. Unless one gets injured/rested or India decides to go with four spinners, Varun was not going to play.

And so he patiently waited not wasting most of his tricks in the nets. It is something captain Rohit Sharma spoke about ahead of the tournament. "If he's got a certain weapon that he wants to just put it out there when it actually matters, I'm more than happy if he wants to do that. But he's got something different which is why he is here with us – whatever I have seen of him in the past 8-9 months, has been extremely impressive. So that is why we wanted to bring him here and see what he has," Sharma said at the time.

When the time came, Varun did just that. He started by beating the defences of Will Young and then even as New Zealand tried to build a partnership, Varun persisted. The reward came when he trapped Glenn Phillips and Michael Bracewell one after another. By the time he was done (5/42), Varun had secured India a dominating win against their nemesis at global events.

While it was his first ODI at an ICC event, Varun has shown enough for India to retain him on the Dubai pitches in the knockouts. And come the semifinal against Australia on Tuesday, Sharma would be hoping that Varun would use the intended weapon to get them across the line.

Brief scores: India 249/9 in 50 ovs (Iyer 79, Axar 42, Hardik 45; Henry 5/42) **bt** New Zealand 205 in 45.3 ovs(Williamson 81; Chakravarthy 5/42, Kuldeep 2/56).

Semifinal line-up

March 4: India vs Australia, Dubai

March 5: South Africa vs New Zealand, Lahore

Vidarbha players and support staff celebrate their third Ranji Trophy triumph in six years in Nagpur on Sunday | PTI

Tours in monsoon, match practice: Vidarbha's mantra

FIROZ MIRZA @ Chennai

SOON after Vidarbha lost the Ranji Trophy final to domestic heavyweights Mumbai on March 14 last year, all stakeholders including coaches and management felt the need to chalk out strategies for the upcoming season. A lot was discussed during a meeting after that loss including the areas where the team needed to work on, roping in youngsters and giving them enough match practice ahead of the 2024-25 season.

In their bid to begin early, the Vidarbha Cricket Association zeroed down on probables for both red and white ball competitions in June and July last year. Monsoon remained an issue for this planned early start as the region receives heavy rain during that season. So it was decided to travel to places where rain could not play spoilsport and hence began the tour of Solapur in Maharashtra in July followed by a trip to Puducherry the next month and participation in the KSCA tournament. Amid all this, the players also had sessions with a mental trainer and sports psychologist to have that mental toughness during the close contests.

All those efforts put in around the year eventually bore fruit as Vidarbha overcame Kerala by virtue of a 37-run first-innings lead in Nagpur to lift the Ranji Trophy on Sunday.

"It all started soon after we lost the Ranji final last year," Usman Ghani, Vidarbha head coach told this daily. "The VCA provided all resources to make sure the team has an edge over their rivals when the season begins," Ghani added. And they really had the edge as they demolished the field winning six out of seven league matches, beating their opponents comprehensively in the quarterfinal (Tamil Nadu) and semifinal (Mumbai) before the ultimate glory in the final.

"The message was clear: dominate the proceedings. The players were confident as irrespective of their experience, they all had prepared well thanks to days' matches we played in Solapur, Puducherry and KSCA tournament. We should have won the Vijay Hazare tournament but lost the final to Karnataka," opined the coach.

Vidarbha had won the Ranji title in 2017-18 and 2018-19 and were a force to reckon with in domestic cricket even if they didn't win the premier tournament. It was in the same period the VCA decided to hire services of mental trainers and sports psychologists. "Amber Arondekar, a corporate trainer and Dr Swaroop Savanur, a renowned sports psychologist from Pune, worked with all Vidarbha teams from time to time. The former was with the senior men's team till last year while Dr Savanur has been working with the women's team and junior boys. It definitely helped the players as the sessions made them mentally tough. They learnt how to be positive in difficult situations and also inculcated self-belief in them. They also learnt how to be ruthless and dominating irrespective of their opponents. Overall we played fearless cricket during the whole season."

Yash Rathod finished as the leading run-scorer of the tournament with 960 runs from 18 innings at an average of 53.33. Similarly, the young left-arm spinner Harsh Dubey, who created history by taking the most wickets in a Ranji season (69), led the bowling chart. He also scored 476 runs making him the Player of the Tournament.

Brief scores: Vidarbha 379 & 375/9 in 143.5 ovs (Danish Malewar 73, Karun Nair 135, Darshan Nalkhande 51 n.o; Aditya Sarwate 4/96) drew with Kerala 342. Vidarbha won by virtue of the first innings lead.

VCA ANNOUNCES CASH AWARDS

The VCA announced a cash reward of ₹3 crore for the team. The VCA also felicitated Akshay Wakhare on his retirement. "The Vidarbha Cricket Association announced a cash award of ₹3 crore to the victorious Vidarbha team (players only)," the VCA said in a release. Dubey was awarded ₹25 lakh while Karun Nair (863 runs) and Rathod were awarded ₹10 lakh each. Besides, the VCA announced ₹15 lakhs for head coach Usman Ghani; ₹5 lakhs each to assistant coach (Atul Ranade), physio (Dr Nitin Khurana), S&C coach (Yuvraj Singh Dasondhi) & video analyst (Amit Manikrao); ₹2 lakhs each to manager (Jitendra Darbha), side-arm specialist (Yash Thorat) & masseur (Rajsingh Chandel).

The players were confident as irrespective of their experience, they all had prepared well thanks to days' matches we played in Solapur, Puducherry and KSCA tournament.

— Usman Ghani, VCA head coach

Bengaluru FC and East Bengal FC players in action during their ISL match | ISL

BFC end East Bengal's playoffs aspirations

AGENCIES @ Kolkata

SUNIL Chhetri's late equaliser for Bengaluru FC ended East Bengal FC's playoffs aspirations after a 1-1 draw in the Indian Super League here on Sunday.

The Blues held an overwhelming 67.9% of the possession, but needed the added time of the second half to grab a point from the fixture, ending East Bengal FC's playoff charge.

The Red and Gold Brigade, placed eighth, have 28 points from 23 games now, and could get to a maximum of 31 with one game remaining, which would still fall short of the currently sixth-placed NorthEast United FC (32).

East Bengal FC made a statement start with some telling moves that sparked a livewire inside the Bengaluru FC defensive third.

They particularly found openings on the right side of the Blues' backline, with Naorem Mahesh Singh embarking on an industrious run inside the 18-yard area before squaring the ball for Dimitrios Diamantakos.

The striker dazzled with his impressive footwork and launched a thunderous effort on target that was saved at the centre of the goal by Gurpreet Singh Sandhu. That did not deter the East Bengal FC frontline, as they kept exploring dynamic ways to break their way through to get the lead.

The moment came through Saul Crespo, who was determined to find his footing within the penalty area. Saul momentarily lost balance though, but laid a short pass for Raphael Messi Bouli still. Messi Bouli cut in from the right, and shot from the centre of the box into the bottom left corner in the 11th minute, as Sandhu could not get his hands to the end of the shot.

EXPRESS READ

'Dream' Thai MotoGP win for Marquez

BURIRAM: Six-time world champion Marc Marquez used all his experience to fight back from a mid-race wobble to outduel his brother Alex Marquez for a "dream" win in Sunday's season-opening Thai MotoGP. It completed a dominant debut for his new factory Ducati team, with pole-sitter Marquez having romped to victory in Saturday's sprint at the Buriram Circuit for a maximum 37 championship points.

Prague Masters: Pragg joins Aravindh in lead

PRAGUE: Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa scored his second victory on the trot, outwitting Vincent Keymer of Germany to join compatriot Aravindh Chithambaram at the top on three points after the end of the fourth round of the Prague Masters here. Aravindh survived some initial hiccups before signing peace with Sam Shankland of the United States.

Mexico Open: Maiden ATP title for Machac

ACAPULCO: Tomas Machac captured his first ATP title on Saturday, beating Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina 7-6 (6), 6-2 to win the Mexico Open in Acapulco. Machac, the eighth seed who was ranked just 65th in the world a year ago and came into the week ranked 25th, is projected to make his top 20 debut when the new rankings are released on Monday.

Shuttler Yeo captures German Open crown

CHENNAI: World No 13 Yeo Jia Min of Singapore captured the women's singles title of the German Open, a BWF World Tour Super 300 event, on Sunday. Yeo, who had reached the quarterfinals of India Open earlier this year, beat Vietnam's Nguyen Thuy Linh 21-16, 21-17 to bag her first tile of the season.

Rifle head coach Deepali 'excited' and hopeful of good season

ANMOL GURUNG @ Chennai

SHOOTING was one of the very few sports that helped India capture the coveted Olympic medals during the 2024 Paris Games. After some period of relaxation, the shooters have been looking to recalibrate and gradually find their zone ahead of competitions ahead. There were some notable scores during the national trials that were conducted recently and now, the shooters are set for a national camp ahead of their first international competition this year. It's a phase that national rifle coach, Deepali Deshpande, is excited about. "This is the first year in the new Olympic cycle. This time we have a very strong bench strength. It is a very interesting situation right now. We have to maintain it for the next three, four years now," she noted.

More shooters to get chance

With rich talent pool in place, the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), the governing body of the sport in the country, and the coaches are looking to ensure that more shooters can get the platform to display their talents. "More shooters will be getting exposure tours this time. It won't be just No 1, 2 and 3 ranked shooters. The last Olympic cycle was very short, so we need to plan well. This year will be more about training and preparing teams and assessing the shooters. There are many established shooters who have been around for a long but there are some new faces in the squad and we need to check their performances at the international level," the Dronacharya Awardee said.

National camp from March 14

During the upcoming national squad camp, which is expected to be held from March 14, as many as eight shooters (at least) are expected to be part of it. Following the camp, the shooters (all disciplines), who have been selected based on the rankings, will depart for Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Lima (Peru) for two World Cups. The first batch of shooters are expected to leave by March 25 and the second batch are scheduled to leave on March 29.

"These are new ranges. We don't know what kind of targets they'll have. Generally, all new ranges tend to be windy. The Peru range is windy I suppose and I have no idea about Argentina. Learning how to adapt to different demands is very important for the shooters," Deepali noted.

Full story: newindianexpress.com

Atletico go top of table after defending champions Real Madrid stumble at Betis

AGENCIES @ Barcelona

LA Liga champions Real Madrid suffered a 2-1 defeat at Real Betis on Saturday, which coach Carlo Ancelotti said was a "big blow" to their title defence, while Atletico Madrid took advantage to move top of the table. Diego Simeone's side scraped a nervy 1-0 win against Athletic Bilbao, fourth, to lead Barcelona and Real Madrid by two points.

For Betis, Isco scored the winner from the penalty spot against his former side Madrid, third, with Barca in action on Sunday against Real Sociedad and able to reclaim top spot with a win.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti picked a strong line up, with no breathing room in the title race, despite the impending Champions League clash against rivals Atletico.

"If we play like this on Tuesday we will not win," said Ancelotti, whose side have one win in their last five Liga matches. The visitors took the lead at the Benito Villamarin stadium through Brahim Diaz but Betis struck back with a Johnny Cardoso header, as Real Madrid missed the suspended Jude Bellingham. Isco secured the Andalusian side a deserved victory with a penalty early in the second half.

Isco (L) celebrates scoring his team's second goal against Real Madrid | AFP

"It's a big blow. We have to react," continued Ancelotti.

"We started well, but later we did not have the same level of commitment, the game got out of control against a side that played better than us and deserved to win." Isco returned to action in December after missing several months with a broken leg and has hit top form in recent weeks. "About halfway through the first half we stepped up our game, and I'm happy with the win against the best team around these days," said the playmaker, who won several major trophies with Real before departing in 2022.

Man City survive scare

MANCHESTER: Manchester City survived a scare to beat giant killers Plymouth 3-1 and progress to the FA Cup quarterfinals late on Saturday. Plymouth had shocked Premier League leaders Liverpool in the previous round and were on course for another stunning upset at the Etihad when Maksym Talovierov headed them in front on 38 minutes.

With FA Cup glory City's only realistic hope of silverware this season, Pep Guardiola surprisingly rotated his side with Erling Haaland among those left on the bench.