

Xmas celebrations marked by goodwill in Shadnagar

PNS ■ RANGAREDDY

Shadnagar MLA Veerlapalli Shankar emphasised the significance of Christmas as a symbol of goodwill and a tribute to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The MLA actively participated in the Christmas celebrations across various villages in the Shadnagar Constituency, including Reddypalem, Fatimapur, and Shadnagar town of Kothur Mandal in Rangareddy District.

MLA Veerlapalli Shankar, alongside Christian community, offered prayers in local churches and highlighted the spirit of unity and faith that Christmas represents. Pastors extended blessings to the MLA and other attendees, wishing for divine grace upon the government and all those present.

Speaking on the occasion, MLA Shankar described Christmas as a holy day that holds deep spiritual significance for Christians worldwide. He reflected on the teachings and sacrifices of Jesus Christ, noting that the festive embodies faith, love, and hope.

The MLA also remarked on the festive traditions, such as family gatherings, gift exchanges, carol singing, and feasts, which bring people closer and strengthen bonds of harmony.



Shadnagar MLA Veerlapalli Shankar at a church during Christmas celebrations in Shadnagar on Wednesday

BID TO WARD OFF WILD ANIMALS

Farmers switching to tobacco cultivation

PNS ■ MAHABUBABAD

In a bid to tackle the increasing damage caused by wild boars and monkeys to their crops, a group of farmers in the Kothaguda and Gangaram mandals have turned to tobacco cultivation. The farmers in villages in Gangaram mandal have collectively cultivated tobacco on 80 acres of land.

Previously, crops like maize, paddy, sorghum and red gram were frequently damaged by wild animals, but the farmers noticed that these animals do not touch the tobacco fields. This led to the expansion of tobacco cultivation. Last year, just six farmers grew tobacco, but this number has increased to 25 farmers in the current season.

The input cost of cultivating tobacco is about Rs 50,000 per acre, with yields ranging from 10 to 15 quintals per acre. The support price for tobacco this year is Rs 15,000 per quintal, making it a lucrative crop for the farmers. After harvesting, various organisations purchase the tobacco from the farmers, ensuring a good market for their produce.

Kothaguda Agriculture officials highlighted that the tobacco crop has proved to be more profitable for farmers. The Agriculture Department has also conducted an awareness programme on crop rotation and methods to protect crops from wild animals.



As a result, many farmers have been encouraged to grow tobacco.

A farmer explained that wild animals, including monkeys, would not enter tobacco fields because of the strong smell of the crop. This natural deterrent has significantly reduced crop damage, leading to higher yields and increased profits for the farmers.

Yeturi Srinivas, another farmer added that tobacco cultivation is providing farmers with substantial prof-

its due to higher yields. The crop requires minimal maintenance—mainly removing weeds and watering the plants. If seedlings are planted in October, the crop is ready for harvest by February, further contributing to its appeal.

This shift to tobacco farming is a practical solution to the challenges posed by wild animal interference while offering farmers a more rewarding and sustainable income.



Beechupally Gurukul Boys' Government School students during their sit-in outside the Collectorate in Gadwal on Wednesday

'HARASSMENT' BY GURUKUL SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

Students walk 20 km to take up with Collector

PNS ■ JOGULAMBA GADWAL

As many as 200 students of the Telangana Gurukul Boys' Government School and Junior College at Beechupally, under the Erravalli Mandal in Jogulamba Gadwal district, walked nearly 20 kilometres to reach the District Collectorate. They came together to explain their issues to Collector BM Santosh and represent their grievance.

The students poured out their grievances to the Collector, saying that the food in the hostel was of poor quality, and when they brought this to the principal's attention, he targeted and physically assaulted them. They also accused the principal of expressing anger towards the students. The students further alleged that the principal was suspending students and selling the seats in the Gurukul school to new students. The students demanded that the principal be suspended.

They further complained to the Collector that the principal, Srinivas, was harassing them and demanded action against him. In response, the students marched from Beechupally to the Collectorate in Gadwal, covering a distance of nearly 20 km on foot, passing through the school

and college premises, to present their issues.

The students spoke to the media, explaining why they had taken to the streets. They accused the principal of consistently harassing them on the pretext of discipline and even physically beating them. They claimed that study materials were not being distributed. They said that the teaching was of poor quality. Furthermore, they stated that there were not enough toilets for all the students in the Gurukul School, and they were forced to relieve themselves in the open, near trees or hills. They also alleged that they were not served meals according to the menu. The students emphasised that their main objective in walking to the Collectorate was to bring these issues to the Collector's attention.

Additionally, the students accused the principal of selling the vacant seats in the 6th grade and mentioned that they had evidence of this. Gadwal MLA Krishna Mohan Reddy interacted with students at Veerapuram and spoke to the Collector on the phone. Although the police and revenue officials from Itikyala tried to intervene and gather information, the students continued their march. Since about 200 students were marching, the police were deployed to ensure security.

STREET FIGHT LEAVES MAN SEVERELY INJURED

PNS ■ NALGONDA

In the Devarakonda mandal of Nalgonda district, youth from Tatikole village fought with each other on the street, resembling a scene from a movie. The clash lasted for almost an hour. It is believed that the incident happened as sequel to a bike dispute on Dasar day. The incident was recorded on a CCTV camera, and the police are investigating the matter.

During the clash on Sunday night between two groups in Tatikole village, Palsa Mahesh and Madhu suffered head injuries and fell unconscious. Madhu, who was severely injured, lost consciousness at the spot.

Villagers, after seeing his condition, took him to the Devarakonda Government Hospital. The injured youth was brought to the hospital around 12 am on Sunday. Due to the severity of his injuries, he was later transferred to a hospital in Hyderabad. His condition is state to be critical.

Villagers claim that the youths are addicted to narcotic substances and are indulging in violence.

Grand Christmas celebrations held at Fatimapur Church

PNS ■ RANGAREDDY

Shadnagar witnessed vibrant Christmas celebrations at the Fatimapur Church in Kothur mandal with former Shadnagar MLA Y Anjaiah Yadav and Mahbubnagar MLC Naveen Kumar Reddy participating in the festive event.

Speaking on the occa-

sion, Anjaiah Yadav highlighted the compassion and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, emphasising His role as a savior who dedicated His life to humanity. The event was marked by warmth and camaraderie as the leaders extended their greetings to the Christian community of the constituency.

The community also hon-

oured Anjaiah Yadav, MLC Naveen Reddy and other dignitaries present at the event. The celebrations also saw the participation of several prominent leaders, including Kadempalli Srinivas Goud, Emme Satyanarayana, Devender Yadav, Doli Ravinder, Jagannathan Reddy, and Mende Krishna Yadav.



Former MLA Y Anjaiah Yadav and MLC Naveen Kumar Reddy participating in Christmas celebrations at Fatimapur Church on Wednesday

Police tightening grip on child sex abusers in Adilabad

PNS ■ ADILABAD

In contemporary society, the destruction of forests, heinous deeds that affect people of all ages and the unyielding aggression of wild animals persist. Despite the existence of stringent laws, the mindset of individuals driven by lust remains unchanged. Within the united Adilabad district, there has been a rise in child abuse cases with numerous incidents remaining concealed from public awareness. Youngsters, who ought to serve as protectors of future generations, have fallen prey to habits, becoming addicted to alcohol and drugs, and have transformed into predatory figures, perpetrating grievous offenses.

Despite the Central and State governments enacting laws for the protection of girls and women, the attitude of sexual predators has not changed, leading to a rise in atrocities against girls in Adilabad district. Some victims seek police help, while many others, due to the shame, guilt and fear, are forced to stay silent, and village councils impose fines to keep such incidents hidden.

Recently, at Gudihathinur in Adilabad district, a young man, under the influence of alcohol, attempted to sexually assault a minor girl. The family members and locals protested, beat up the suspect, and set his house on



Police conducting patrol at Gudihathinur village in Adilabad district

fire. Earlier, in Mancherial district, a young man lured a minor girl into a forest and attempted to sexually assault her. A girl, who was subjected to abuse, managed to escape and informed her family members, who then filed a complaint with the police. A case was registered against the accused.

In the united Adilabad district, 133 child abuse case were reported and police invoked Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) during this year. A total of 127 POCSO cases have been registered this year.

Every day, somewhere, people under the influence of drugs or alcohol are behaving like beasts and committing sexual abuse on children.

Crimes against women and girls are on the rise in the united Adilabad district. Some of these incidents are coming to light, while others remain unreported by due to the fear of loss of honour. Many people do not file complaints due to the fear of further harassment.

When someone speaks kindly, children tend to approach them, thinking that everyone is good and trustworthy. However, some individuals, with good intentions, end up exploiting children for sexual purposes.

For boys, it is important to teach them how to respect other children, especially women and girls around them. For girls, it is crucial to teach them what to do if anyone mis-

behaves with them, says social worker Dr Krishnam Raju. He has been advising parents to keep constant watch on their children and ensure that they do not fall prey to drug abuse.

Through police and legal departments, the 'She Teams' are also creating awareness about the safety of girls, the child abuse continues.

Following the incident at Gudihathinur I village, the police woke up and cracked down on miscreants. Violence is erupting time and again because of miscreants are running amok times and again. Now, the police have chalked out a strategy and are tightening grip on child sex abusers. Prohibitory orders are still in force to ensure that violence do not erupt once again.

Student in private junior college commits suicide

PNS ■ WARANGAL

A first-year student of a private junior college died by suicide in her hostel room in the early hours of Wednesday.

According to police, Sridevi (17), a student at Eksila Junior College in Hanamkond, was found hanging in her hostel room. The College administration reported the incident to the police.

The police arrived at the hostel and shifted the body to the government hospital for post-mortem.

The police registered a case and an investigation is underway.

Meanwhile, members of various student unions staged a protest in front of the college, demanding that a criminal case be registered against the college management and that recognition be cancelled. The students alleged that the girl had taken the extreme step due to harassment by management.

Komatireddy donates advanced medical equipment to government hospital

PNS ■ NALGONDA

Minister of Roads and Buildings Komatireddy Venkat Reddy has donated advanced medical equipment worth Rs. 30 lakh to the Nalgonda Medical Children's Health Centre through the Prateek Foundation.

"Inform me of any need, and I will arrange it within 24 hours," he told the officials and added that "not all work can be done by governments. As fellow human beings, we should do some service."

Speaking to the media later, the Minister said that when the District Collector brought the issue of a shortage of medical equipment at the Newborn Care Centre in the Nalgonda Government General Hospital to his attention, he immediately called the District Medical and Health Officer and with a contribution of Rs 30 lakh, arranged for advanced medical equipment to be set up within 24 hours.

The Minister highlighted that Nalgonda is the second most populous district after Hyderabad. He mentioned that the Government General Hospital in Nalgonda receives around 1,500 outpatients and over 1,000 inpatients daily. Approximately 600 deliveries take place per month. He recalled that 12 years ago, when he was an MLA, the Newborn Care Centre was set up, and now, through the Prateek Foundation, advanced medical equipment worth Rs 30 lakh has been given to the centre.

He explained that with the new equipment, conditions such as jaun-



Roads and Buildings Minister Komatireddy Venkat Reddy inspecting the advanced medical equipment at the Government Hospital in Nalgonda on Wednesday

dice, low birth weight, inability of mothers to breastfeed, and various other issues that hinder immediate breastfeeding can now be addressed effectively. He further emphasised that the emergency medical treatment provided by doctors in the government hospital for newborns and deliveries would benefit the poor.

Recently, advanced 108 ambulance vehicles were also allotted to the district and the Minister urged people to make the best use of them. He also stated that he would begin inspecting Gurukul residential schools next week to review the facilities provided to students.

District Collector Tripathi expressed her gratitude for the Minister's swift action in providing necessary medical equipment for the Newborn Care Center.



Sridevi

ACROSS THE STATES



Man hacked to death for opposing drug abuse

A 60-year-old man was allegedly hacked to death by a gang of men for opposing drug abuse in the district, police said on Wednesday. The incident occurred at a village under the jurisdiction of Varkala police station at 8.30 pm on Tuesday. The victim, identified as Shajahan, was allegedly attacked by the gang for reporting their drug use to the authorities, police said. Shajahan sustained severe injuries and was rushed to Thiruvananthapuram Medical College Hospital, but he succumbed to his injuries. No arrests have been made so far, police said, adding that a search is ongoing for the suspects involved in the crime. The body of Shajahan has been handed over to his relatives following a post-mortem examination, they added.



UP Police bust cattle smuggling racket , 8 held

Bhadohi police intercepted two large containers labelled "postal vehicles" on NH-19 here during a routine check on Wednesday, and found that 85 cattle were allegedly being smuggled in it, officials said. Eight members of a suspected cattle smuggling gang were arrested during the operation, according to officials. The containers were stopped near Babu Sarai in the Aurai police station area early in the morning. Upon hearing unusual noises coming from the closed containers, we decided to open them. One container held 55 calves while the other contained 35, all tightly bound in a cruel manner," said Station House Officer (SHO) Ajit Kumar Srivastava. Srivastava said that during the unloading of calves, one container driver attempted to flee. The police teams chased the vehicle for about 10 km as the cattle smugglers attempted to flee and eventually intercepted it near Kothra village," he said. All eight suspects were apprehended during the chase. Upon interrogation, the suspects confessed that they were transporting the calves from Dehri-on-Sone in Bihar to sell them in Kanpur and Unnao districts of Uttar Pradesh.



Baby girl found in 'Ammathottill' on Christmas morning

A three-day-old baby girl was found in the "Ammathottill" (baby cradle) of the Kerala State Child Welfare Committee here in the early hours of Christmas Day. This is the 22nd baby received at the Thiruvananthapuram 'Ammathottill' this year, an official release said. Later, she was named as Snigdha. Over 2,400 people, including media personnel and members of various sections of society, suggested names via social media and in person after State Health and Women and Child Development Minister Veena George invited the public to suggest a name for the baby, making the event even more memorable. The name was chosen through a draw. "Out of the suggested names, it was Janu, a two-year-old girl from the Child Welfare Committee, who picked the paper with the name 'Snigdha', she wrote in a Facebook post later in the evening. George participated in the ceremony online, and the Committee's General Secretary, G L Arun Gopi, was also present.

Man tries to immolate self near parliament

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A man in his early 30s tried to immolate himself near the new Parliament building on Wednesday afternoon, an official of the Delhi Fire Service said. A call regarding the incident near the Railway Bhawan opposite the Parliament building was received at around 3.35 pm and a fire tender was pressed into service, the official said. The security personnel deployed near Parliament rushed the man identified as Jitendra, a resident of Bagpat in Uttar Pradesh, to the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, he said. "He set himself on fire at the roundabout



near Rail Bhawan. The local police and railway police along with some people immediately extinguished the fire and the person was sent to the hospital," an official statement said. According to initial investigations, he took the extreme step due to a dispute with some individuals back home in Bagpat, it said.

Modi slams Congress for ignoring Ambedkar's contributions

LAYS FOUNDATION STONE OF KEN-BETWA PROJECT



PNS ■ KHAJURAHO

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday accused Congress of ignoring Dr B R Ambedkar's contribution to the development of water resources in the country as he laid the foundation stone of the Ken-Betwa river linking project in Madhya Pradesh. Speaking at the programme at Khajuraho in Bundelkhand region, Modi said that in the 21st century, only the nations with adequate and well-managed water resources can advance. The PM's comments about Ambedkar came amid the controversy over Union Home Minister Amit Shah's recent remarks about the iconic leader and the Congress's nationwide protests over the issue.

Ambedkar's vision and far-sightedness contributed significantly to the strengthening of the country's water resources, their management and dam construction, Modi said. Ambedkar played a crucial role in the development of major river valley projects and formation of the Central Water Commission, he added. "Ask anyone...after the country got independence, who thought about the visionary subject of Jal Shakti? Even my journalist friends will not be able to answer because the truth was suppressed to give credit to one person....water resources of India, construction of dams, the vision for all this -- it was of one great man -- Babasaheb Ambedkar," he said.

"But Congress never gave credit to Babasaheb for the efforts related to water conservation and big dams," Modi claimed. "The major challenge of the 21st century is water security. In the 21st century only those countries which have adequate water resources with proper management will move forward," he said. Talking about the development projects carried out by the government of late Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Modi said for years Vajpayee was a teacher for several workers like him. Scholars and analysts should select 100-200 parameters and assess the performance of various governments, those of Congress, the Left, "family-oriented people (dynastic parties)" and coalitions, he suggested.

Belagavi dons festive look to host centenary Cong session

PNS ■ BELAGAVI (KARNATAKA)

The border town of Karnataka will take a dive into history for the next two days, reminiscing about the lone Congress session that Mahatma Gandhi presided over a century ago. The Congress session, held on December 26 and 27, 1924, stands as a pivotal moment in the Indian freedom struggle. During the session, Gandhi appealed for spinning Khadi and called for non-cooperation, which became a major movement in pre-independence India. The key organiser of the event was Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, who was referred to as the Khadi Bhageratha of Karnataka. He was a torchbearer of the freedom struggle in Belagavi, then known as Belgaum.

'Governance reforms must begin at grassroots level'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Jitendra Singh on Wednesday said that the governance reforms must begin at the grassroots level to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change. In a significant step towards strengthening grassroots governance, he launched the 'Viksit Panchayat Karmayogi' initiative on Good Governance Day, celebrated every year to mark birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The initiative, which is part of the broader 'Prashasan Gaon Ki Aur' campaign, aims to enhance the capacity and competence of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by equipping elected representatives and officials with the tools and knowledge required for effective governance and participatory planning, said



Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel. He emphasised "that governance reforms must begin at the grassroots to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change as well as to fill up the capacity gaps". Piloted in Odisha, Assam, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh, the initiative leverages e-learning platforms, AI-powered chatbots, and mobile apps to bridge knowledge gaps and enhance service

delivery, Singh said. He said that this program aligns with the government's broader mission to decentralise governance and foster participatory decision-making at the grassroots level. The initiative is expected to create scalable models of citizen-centric governance, enabling PRIs to drive equitable and sustainable development across rural India, according to a Personnel Ministry statement.



Military standoff with India ends in Ladakh, long freeze over

PNS ■ BEIJING

It was a breakthrough year in India-China ties after a near freeze in their ties for over four years -- the longest since the 1962 war -- with an agreement to end the eastern Ladakh military standoff. After "amassing of a large number of troops by China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh" in April-May 2020, as External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said in a recent statement in Lok Sabha, resulting in the Galwan valley clash in June 2020, there had been a breakdown in the relations between the two Asian giants. The post-1962 war chill lasted till the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988.

This time, the two countries held periodic talks between the top commanders and through the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC), resulting in disengagement in stages from four points -- the Galwan Valley, the Pangong Lake, Hot Springs, and Gogra -- in eastern Ladakh by creating buffer zones. Finally, on October 21, India and China firming up an agreement on patrolling and disengagement of troops along the LAC in eastern Ladakh at the remaining friction points of Depsang and Demchok. The agreement led to the first structured meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS summit at Kazan in Russia soon after, their first in five years. Subsequently, Jaishankar met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Brazil in November where they reached an understanding that the Special Representatives (SRs) and the Foreign Secretary-level mechanisms will be convened soon. Constituted in 2003 to comprehensively address the vexed dispute of the India-China border spanning to 3,488 kms, the Special Representatives mechanism is headed by NSA Doval and Foreign Minister Wang. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh too met his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' meeting in Vientiane in Laos in November.

Delhi CM may be arrested in a fake case: Kejriwal

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal claimed on Wednesday that Delhi Chief Minister Atishi may be arrested in a "fake" case by the central investigative agencies at the behest of the BJP. Addressing a press conference, Kejriwal, who was flanked by Atishi, said, "We got to know from our sources that a meeting was held and investigative agencies have been ordered by the BJP to arrest CM Atishi in a fake case." The BJP is trying to distract AAP from campaigning for assembly polls, he alleged. "We came to know that they are preparing a fake case on Atishi in the transport department, and they want to halt the scheme of free bus rides for women," the AAP chief said. "I will not let the scheme of free bus rides for women stop till I am alive,"



Kejriwal, who is out on bail in a case related to the excise policy 'scam', asserted. He also claimed that central agencies have been instructed to conduct raids on all senior leaders of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) before arresting Atishi in the coming days. "Raids will be conducted on me, Manish Sisodia, Sanjay Singh, Saurabh Bharadwaj, Satyendar Jain and Atishi. Their goal is to distract us from our election preparations and campaigning and to

entangle us in other matters," Kejriwal said. Atishi said that AAP has always worked with honesty and would continue to do so without any fear of agencies. "I am confident that if their agencies file false cases against me or even arrest me, the truth will eventually prevail. I have full faith in the justice system of this country. Just as all our senior party leaders who were falsely implicated were eventually granted bail after the truth came out," she said.

Defeat forces inimical to country's progress: Dhankhar

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Wednesday stressed on the need for citizens to adopt a "nation first" mindset to counteract forces, both internal and external, that struggle to accept India's rapid progress. Dhankhar, who was speaking at a convention of organic farmers in Medak district of Telangana, also underscored that dialogue is the only way to address problems in a democracy. "Today, I see that farmers are worried about certain issues. If any section of society is worried, it is necessary to resolve it positively and without delay. In a democracy, the only way to resolve issues is through dialogue. I have said on numerous occasions that dialogue is the only way to find solutions to problems in a democracy," he said.



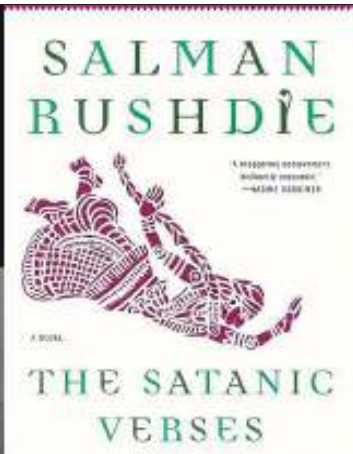
AFTER 36-YEAR BAN

'The Satanic Verses' returns to India

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie's controversial book "The Satanic Verses" has quietly returned to India 36 years after it was banned by the Rajiv Gandhi government. A "limited stock" of the book, which caused a furor against its author and content that was deemed blasphemous by Muslim organisations the world over, has been selling at Bahrisons Booksellers in the national capital for the past few days. "It has been a few days since we got the book and the response has been very good so far. The sale has been good," Bahrisons Booksellers' owner Rajni Malhotra told PTI. The book, priced at Rs 1,999, is only available at Bahrisons Booksellers stores across Delhi-NCR. "@SalmanRushdie's The Satanic Verses is now in stock at Bahrisons Booksellers! This groundbreaking & provocative novel has captivated

readers for decades with its imaginative storytelling and bold themes. It has also been at the centre of intense global controversy since its release, sparking debates on free expression, faith, & art," the bookseller said in a post on X. Manasi Subramaniam, Editor-in-Chief, Penguin Random House India, also posted on the social media platform, quoting Rushdie. "Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true." At long last, @SalmanRushdie's The Satanic Verses is allowed to be sold in India after a 36-year ban. Here it is at Bahrisons Bookstore in New Delhi," she wrote. Other booksellers, including Midland Book Shop and Om Book Shop, do not plan to import the book. In November, the Delhi High Court closed the proceedings on a petition challenging the Rajiv Gandhi government's ban on the import of the novel, saying since



authorities have failed to produce the relevant notification, it has to be "presumed that it does not exist". The order came after government authorities failed to submit the notification dated October 5, 1988, which banned the import of the book.

"In the light of the aforesaid circumstances, we have no other option except to presume that no such notification exists, and therefore, we cannot examine the validity thereof and dispose of the writ petition as infructuous," the court said. The book ran into trouble short-

ly after its publication, eventually leading to Iranian leader Ruhollah Khomeini issuing a fatwa calling on Muslims to kill Rushdie and his publishers. Rushdie spent nearly 10 years in hiding in the UK and the US. In July 1991, the novelist's Japanese translator Hitoshi Igarashi was killed in his office. On August 12, 2022, Lebanese-American Hadi Matar stabbed Rushdie on stage at a lecture, leaving him blind in one eye. Even though the book is available for purchase at Bahrisons, it evoked a mixed response from readers, especially due to its price. Bala Sundaresan, a tech entrepreneur, who has always wanted a physical copy of the book was surprised to hear the price. "I would rather wait some more time till an Indian print of the book is available. I was only interested in it because of the controversy that has surrounded it for decades, (I am) not really a Rushdie fan," the 33-year-old said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Extradition dilemma

Bangladesh's request to extradite Sheikh Hasina raises critical questions about India's role as a key player in South Asian politics

Bangladesh has formally requested India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India following her ouster on August 5, 2024. The request, conveyed through a diplomatic "note verbale," places India in a delicate position, requiring a careful balancing of international law, bilateral relations, and regional stability. This article explores the background of the situation, the implications of such an extradition, and the options available to India. Sheikh Hasina, a towering figure in Bangladeshi politics and leader of the Awami League, was ousted from power after a student-led movement erupted into nationwide protests. Despite the government meeting the protesters' demands, unrest persisted, which Hasina claims was orchestrated by Muhammad Yunus, Chief Adviser to Bangladesh's interim government. The protests culminated in her removal from power, prompting her to flee to India. The diplomatic note issued by Bangladesh's interim government reflects its intention to bring Sheikh Hasina back to face accountability or to address the political turmoil she left behind.



India and Bangladesh share a complex relationship shaped by historical ties, mutual interests, and occasional tensions. Extraditing Sheikh Hasina could be seen as India's support for the interim government, potentially straining ties with the Awami League, one of Bangladesh's major political forces. The political crisis in Bangladesh has already created ripples in South Asia. Any decision by India regarding the extradition could influence the region's political dynamics, including relations with other South Asian nations. Sheikh Hasina's safety and the fairness of any trial

are also suspect as she might face attrition upon her return. India would need to weigh these concerns against its international obligations under extradition treaties and agreements. How India handles this case may affect India's stance as a regional power and its commitment to democratic principles. India could provide asylum to Sheikh Hasina, citing humanitarian grounds or concerns about the fairness of legal proceedings in Bangladesh. This would align with India's historical role as a refuge for political exiles but might antagonise the interim Bangladeshi government. India could agree to extradite Hasina with conditions ensuring her safety, fair trial, and adherence to international legal norms. Such a move might help India maintain its relations with both the interim government and Hasina's supporters. India can also delay the extradition while engaging diplomatically with Bangladesh to seek a mutually acceptable solution. This would allow India to assess the evolving political situation and minimize potential fallout. While India's decision will undoubtedly influence India-Bangladesh relations, its impact will also resonate across the region. India must weigh its options carefully, prioritising both the immediate political implications and its long-term vision for South Asian stability.

PICTALK



The Jakhu Temple and its premises covered with snow after fresh snowfall, in Shimla

ONOP: A bold reform or a political gamble?



KALYANI SHANKAR

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushes forward with his vision of 'One Nation, One Poll' the nation waits to see whether this proposal will unite or divide

The introduction of a controversial bill, 'One Nation One Poll,' has created more controversy than acceptance. The BJP has been talking about it but introduced it, which has been sent to the joint select committee of the Parliament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in a hurry to fulfil the BJP's unfinished agenda. He had already opened the Ayodhya temple and got the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir. This long-awaited bill aims to streamline the electoral process for 28 states and eight union territories, with an electorate of nearly a billion voters. The bill has triggered widespread debate, significant interest, and opposition from various parties.



Though momentum is building for simultaneous elections, some questions need answers. They include whether Modi has the required two-thirds majority to pass the bill in Parliament. Is there a political consensus? Will the Opposition come on board? Is the timing of the bill right? Most Opposition parties reject the idea of simultaneous polls. They include the Congress, the Left parties, the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. They reject it mainly to settle political scores and apprehension that they may benefit the BJP. Former President Ram Nath Kovind chaired a nine-member committee recommending simultaneous polls last year, labelling it a 'game changer'. Thirty-two parties supported the concept, and 15 rejected it. The panel also advised that the Centre form a panel to oversee the implementation of this proposal. Also, there should be a joint electoral roll for all elections so that voters will use the same list for national, state, and local polls. Over the years, elections have become a standard feature, but the 'One Nation, One Poll' bill has the potential to reshape our election process. Proponents of the bill argue that it could

significantly reduce campaign costs, alleviate the strain on administrative resources, and streamline governance. This could ultimately benefit the public by reducing the frequency of elections, a prospect that should inspire optimism. Elections in India are held at different levels. The first is panchayat, followed by the district level, the state assembly level, and finally, the national level. They happen at different times, and the government wants to streamline the system. Interestingly, the idea of simultaneous polls is not new. Historically, it was a synchronised poll from 1952 to 1967. The premature dismissal of various governments and the consequential dissolution of Assemblies led to staggered polls. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dismissed many Opposition-ruled state governments. The most important thing is that the BJP needs the support of the allies and friendly parties. In the recent 2024 polls, the BJP was 40 short of a majority in the house and could form the government only with the help of JD (U) and Telugu Desam. Most opposing parties reject simultaneous polls, including Congress, the Left parties,



HISTORICALLY, IT WAS A SYNCHRONISED POLL FROM 1952 TO 1967. THE PREMATURE DISMISSAL OF VARIOUS GOVERNMENTS AND THE CONSEQUENTIAL DISSOLUTION OF ASSEMBLIES LED TO STAGGARD POLLS

the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. Even in the BJP, 20 MPs were absent while the bill was introduced. The Kovind panel also suggested having the votes in two parts. The first will be for Lok Sabha and Assembly votes, and the second for local groups. The bill faces significant constitutional, legal, and political challenges. The Kovind panel suggests amending Articles 83 and 172 to allow simultaneous elections. However, the BJP lacks the two-thirds majority for this amendment, and the Constitution needs clarification on concurrent polls. The potential impact on the federal structure of the country and the logistical challenges of conducting simultaneous elections for a billion voters are crucial factors to consider. Prime Minister Modi's main challenge is to gather enough support in Parliament. At the same time, the government must build political consensus and persuade the Opposition to agree. The Opposition has rejected simultaneous polls, fearing it might benefit the BJP. The 15 opposing parties hold 205 MPs, while Modi needs 362 votes to proceed.

A legal framework for simultaneous elections is essential to address mid-term government collapses and central political manoeuvring. The one nation, one poll approach reduces waste and election frequency, so the Opposition should consider it carefully and present any alternative proposals for public discussion. The One Nation One poll has been one of the poll promises of the BJP. Some core issues have already been addressed, such as the revocation of Article 370 and the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. In his third term, Modi wants to finish the unfinished agenda. Modi presents this legislation with a clear strategy: Whether he succeeds or not, he benefits. If the bill gets passed, it will be an advantage for the BJP government. If it fails, he can claim that he tried to enact reform but faced Opposition obstruction. Despite potential delays, it's important to debate the bill, as election spending ultimately comes from taxpayers' money. Now that the bill has been sent to a joint select committee, we must wait for its report. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP'S ACQUISITION PLANS

Madam — Trump is on a shopping spree to buy Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland, desiring to make Canada its 51st state with Trudeau as its governor. He wants the gifted Panama Canal back to his country. The Panama president has, however, expressed his disagreement with both his conditions, thereby creating another contentious issue ready to be dealt with in the near future. He is also eyeing Greenland to gain its strategic advantage for monitoring the missiles launched from Russia and China on the US and alternatively using it as a launching pad for the US missiles on them. Greenland being rich in minerals like uranium is another factor for its advantage to the US. More so, the greatest island on this planet is not green but mostly ice-filled, comprising glaciers that create many new waterways on its melting due to global warming each year, giving a wider area for its exploration. He is also creating a powerful force by enriching it with the recruitment of capitalists like Elon Musk and AI experts in his cabinet to act as resources for implementing his future plans. Indian brain drain forms a substantial part of his team, like Sriram Ramakrishnan, the AI expert, and such other talents that India has lost to another country at its cost for its inability to identify and hold them at the appropriate time. If this happens, the demography will start taking a new shape, and interrelation equations of friends and foes will change. India needs to withhold its talent by stopping its brain drain at any cost by providing them better than what they get abroad to discourage their move to foreign lands. However, the unpredictable nature of Donald Trump will keep the world guessing with fingers crossed till it actually happens in reality after he takes over as president, as for all you know, he may suddenly say one day "I was just joking."

R S Narula | Patiala

Shyam Benegal passes away at 90



The sad demise of legendary filmmaker and stalwart of Indian cinema Shyam Benegal at the age of 90 is an irreparable loss for both the cinema and the society. His historic contribution to parallel cinema will be written in golden words in the history of Indian cinema. He was the vanguard of the movement

of realistic and issue-based filmmaking, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. His directorial debut movie, "Ankur," in 1974 itself was a landmark in Indian cinema. Along with his timeless movies, he launched the careers of many highly accomplished actors, including Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. Besides his contribution to cinema, Shyam Benegal was a man of great values who never hesitated to speak his mind. Despite his ideological differences with the right wing and the Modi government, he opposed returning national awards as a mark of protest against the alleged increase in intolerance in India. He, himself a two-time chairman of FTII, did not support the strike of students of the institute against the appointment of TV actor Gajendra Chauhan as its chairman. Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

PRITHVI SHAW'S FUTURE IN DOUBT

Madam — Ravi Shastri once saw Sachin Tendulkar, Brian Lara and Virender Sehwag in Prithvi Shaw. He was a player "born to play cricket," Shastri had said of Shaw. A ton on test debut against the West Indies in 2018 and a blistering 52-ball 70 in the next announced Shaw's arrival on the big stage. But Shaw played his last test for the country in 2020. He was part of the Indian ODI team for a little more than a year. Now at 25, he has not only been left out of the Indian team, but he does not find a place in the Mumbai side as well. His exclusion from the state team for the Vijay Hazare Trophy has effectively rendered all chances of Shaw making a comeback to the Indian team extremely slim because Indian cricket is bristling with talent and perseverance, hard to replace. Indiscipline, antics, and arrogance reportedly caused his downfall. Shaw was embroiled in frequent off-field controversies. While those could have been shrugged off, through his poor fitness and casual approach, he was apparently becoming a liability for teams. As rightly put by an

office bearer of the Mumbai Cricket Association, "Shaw is his own enemy." Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

CONCERN OVER SHAMI'S FITNESS

Madam — The team India has been endeavouring for over a period to gain the ground, where it's seen the bowlers and batters are totally at sea. Then, everyone wishing for Shami's comeback, which can drastically strengthen the tie of the team, especially the bowling attack, as he showcased his back-to-back top-notch performance in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, leading bowling length effectively. But once again, BCCI's update about his fitness, that he has been deemed not fit for selection in the remaining two tests due to concern over left knee swelling, has ruined countless hopes. Our wishes for his speedy recovery and the team's unparalleled persistence to heal up the millions' fresh wounded hearts. Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Lessons from yesterday: Reflections that shape a lifetime



SANJAY CHANDRA

The past is a treasure trove of memories and lessons, each shaping who we are and guiding us into the future

The past shapes our present. The present is past to make way for the future. We are left with fond memories. These memories also teach us invaluable lessons. I was prone to my share of mischief as a child for which I would get scolded by my parents. At such times, I was assured of a haven hiding behind my grandmother. She was impartial to both sides as she counselled my parents to be more indulgent and taught us to be well-behaved. I remember another afternoon. I returned from school excited about my outstanding results in the examinations. Unmindful of my mother's much-needed siesta, I woke her up. Still groggy, she hugged and blessed me, before continuing with her interrupted sleep. That one spontaneous gesture was my reward which would continue to inspire me throughout my life. My father usually rested and slept on Sunday afternoons. We tried not to disturb his sleep. One day, we might have been noisier than usual and ended up soundly thrashed by our father. I wit-



nessed a different facet of my father's personality later in the evening, as he gently expressed his regret for the outburst. I would remember in times to come that there was no shame in accepting if I was wrong. I remember the day I met the young girl who became my wife and life partner in the next few months. After the initial heady days, we buckled up to the serious business of making a life together. We have been married for 40 years. These have not been easy decades faced with the harsh realities of life. We never give up, whatever the setbacks. We continue to strive towards the common goal of leading a happy and contented life together. It is easier to face challenges and find solutions as a team. Another nostalgic memory is

from a long-ago holiday to the beach town of Puri. Our guest house was a couple of hundred meters from the beach. Our daughters were much younger. I was, and continue to be, a protective father, worrying about their safety. That one day, I sat on the veranda, fondly looking at the two children playing with sand on the beach. Their innocent efforts, many of which were unsuccessful, to mould a work of art out of the slippery sand, taught me not to give up. My mother kept a copy of Ramcharitmanas in her prayer corner. I read somewhere that you could find a solution to any problem in the epic. All you had to do was open any page, and the top line would help you find ways to tackle your most pressing

issue. I also tried it sometimes. I remember that a simple reading of the lines was not enough. What mattered was the action plan that I arrived at based on my interpretation, and the determination with which I pursued. Fair play, guiding the team members, impartiality, giving undivided time to team members however busy one might be, empathy, working for the team, pride in the performance of the team members, and out-of-box thinking, were only a few of the invaluable lessons that my experiences taught me. They have stood me in good stead through the rough and tumble of life. The words of psychiatrist, Abraham Twerski would resonate with many, "Ruminating about the past will get you nowhere. So go ahead and learn from the past whatever you can, and then put it behind you. Remember, there is nothing you can do to change it, but you can use its lessons to improve your future." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MANTRAS

The Divya Chikitsa Mantras stand out as a remarkable system for channelising divine energy



ASHWANI GURU JI

You might have heard of Sanjeevani Vidya given by Guru Shukracharya, which could bring back the dead to life, or of a certain herb called Sanjeevani buti, which brought back Lakshman to life. You may have also heard of the Madhu Vidya or Brahmaidya as possessed by Sage Dadhichi which could enable one to attain immortality, or the Chyawanprasha prepared by the Ashvini Kumars to restore the youth of Sage Chyawan.

These are not tales or works of fiction, the Vedic rishis were masters of Creation, the human body being a microscopic part of that. The proof that these were not fiction lies in the fact that most of the modern scientific discoveries have come from the Vedic shastras. You may visit www.dhyandivya.com to know which scientific discovery has come from which shastra. While most of the ancient Vedic healing sciences are lost in the dust of kaliyuga and most herbs have become extinct, a fraction of them still can be accessed and even that fraction is enough



to achieve amazing results. Divya Chikitsa Mantras as detailed in Sanatan Kriya is one such gem from the treasure trove of Vedic gyan. Divya Chikitsa Mantras use sound and vibrations to bring about the desired effect and changes in your body.

When done right their healing and transformational effects are apparent for all to see. A combination of 7 mantras they work to unblock certain nadis (energy channels) and awaken specific centres, to channelise the force of divine energies for a practitioner. It is said that the body of a deva resides in the mantra. This has been practically experienced by each one who has attended a yagya at Dhyana Ashram where complete forms of the deities were invoked through specific chants manifested in the Yagya Agni. For the mantra to bear fruit, it has to be received from a Guru who is Siddha in the mantra, in line with the ancient Guru Shishya Parampara. Guru channelises the force of the respective deity in the mantra and also imparts the dihwani (correct pronunciation) of the mantra. The efficacy of a Vedic mantra depends on the correctness of its chant; faulty pronunciation of even a single syllable changes the entire meaning.

Taittiriya Samhita narrates the story of Tvashta in this regard. Tvashta performed a sacrifice to destroy Indra. He used the mantra, 'indrashatru' to manifest his thought. However, he placed a lofty note on the word 'Indra' instead of 'shatru' because of which the meaning of the word changed from 'slayer of indra' to 'the one who will be slain by indra' and thus the son, Vrutra, so born to him was defeated by Indra, just because of a pronunciation defect. To quote from Panini Shiksha, a mantra devoid of the correct vowels (svar) and consonants (varna) is faulty and does not convey its intended meaning. It is like a verbal thunderbolt that harms the one who is chanting, as had happened in the case of erroneous pronunciation of the word, Indrashatru. The Vedic seers had mastered this incredible science of sound in the form of mantras, they were well aware of the high degree of specificity and precision that is required to harness the power of sound.

Shiksha, one of the six vendangas, deals with the science of proper pronunciation of words and laws of euphony. Volumes have been written on Shiksha by Panini, Yadnyavalkya and Vasishtha. Shatpath Brahman states that every alphabet of a word possesses some kind of strength and explains the secret of every alphabet. Therefore it is important that one partakes the vidya of mantras from a Guru. Reading from books /internet or hearing on television/social media and starting self-practice may have detrimental effects if the chant is not proper.

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

State budgets on the brink: RBI sounds alarm



UTTAM GUPTA

With outstanding debts exceeding the prudential threshold, the RBI urges states to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules to ensure sustainable financial management

According to a report on 'State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2024-25' released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on December 19, 2024, the consolidated gross fiscal deficit (GFD) of all State governments was contained within 3 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) during the financial years (FY) 2022-23 and 2023-24. For 2024-25, their GFD has been budgeted at 3.2 per cent of GDP. They have complied with the stipulation under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003 which requires them to keep it within the 3 per cent cap. But, the good news ends here. The report reveals that the total outstanding liabilities of States were 28.5 per cent of the GDP in March 2024. Though lower than the peak of 31 per cent reached as of March-end 2021, it remained significantly above the prudential debt-GDP ratio of 20 per cent mandated for the states under the Act.

Another measure of how a State government is managing its budget is its revenue expenditure (RE) about capital outlay (CO). While, the RE being on items such as salaries, wages, pension bills, subsidies etc essentially goes towards non-asset creating spending, CO results in the generation of capital assets thereby providing a foundation for income stream over some time. Greater emphasis on the latter is considered fiscally prudent whereas more of the former can lead to fiscal destabilisation. The record of many states on this crucial parameter is disconcerting. For all states, the total expenditure increased from around Rs 3428,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 5760,000 crore during 2024-25 (budget estimate). As regards RE, it increased from Rs 3018,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 4840,000 crore in 2024-25. The CO increased from Rs 410,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 920,000 crore during 2024-25. These numbers yield a ratio of RE to CO or RECO of 5.2 (4840,000/920,000).

In several states, the RECO is much higher than even this national average. For instance, in Punjab, at 17.1 it is more than three times followed by Puducherry (14.1), Kerala (10.6) and Delhi (10.3). There are some better-performing states too such as Manipur having the best ratio (2.4), followed by Gujarat (2.9) and Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (3.1). However, the abnormally high RECO of other states pushes up the national average. **How does it compare with the Centre?** The total expenditure of the Central Government increased from Rs 3042,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 4820,000 crore during 2024-25. Of this, the RE increased from Rs 2603,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 3709,000 crore during 2024-25. On the other hand, its CO increased from Rs 439,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 1111,000 crore during 2024-25. So, RECO for the Centre is 3.3 in 2024-25 (3709,000/1111000) against 5.2 for the States.

Barring a couple of good performers like Gujarat which is doing even better than the Centre, most of the states have been reckless in their revenue



BARRING A COUPLE OF GOOD PERFORMERS LIKE GUJARAT WHICH IS DOING EVEN BETTER THAN THE CENTRE, MOST OF THE STATES HAVE BEEN RECKLESS IN THEIR REVENUE SPENDING AND THAT INCLUDES A SHARP RISE IN EXPENDITURE ON SUBSIDIES

spending and that includes a sharp rise in expenditure on subsidies. Since 2018-19, subsidies given by the states have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore being the budget estimate for FY 2024-25). The RBI cites farm loan waivers, free or subsidised services like electricity, transport, gas cylinders, and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women as key areas of incipient stress. It suggests that states need to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules, time-bound glide paths for fiscal consolidation, and rein in subsidies and freebies so that it doesn't crowd out more productive expenditures. Such exhortations have been made umpteen times in the past not just by the RBI but also by several committees set by the government on 'expenditure reforms' from time to time. Now, we have more jargon like "next-generation" fiscal rules to convey the same message with greater intensity.

The RBI posits these rules as "combining the medium-term fiscal sustainability objective with short-term flexibility allowing state governments more maneuverability in dealing with exogenous economic shocks". The banking regulator goes on "these will involve inter alia, the use of data analytics, including machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI); improved data transparency and disclosure practices; and strengthening the institution of State Finance Commissions to deliver public services more effectively and scale up social and physical infrastructure." Put simply, the RBI expects the State governments to not just bring about policy reforms and refinements to better target welfare schemes - focusing primarily on the poor

sections of the society but also to galvanise the administrative machinery and institutions to deliver benefits efficiently and prevent misuse/diversion by making the best use of technology interventions.

Do the States understand?

The answer is a categorical 'no'. Forget a finely crafted system desired by the RBI and government committees, most of the states have put in place crude and non-transparent subsidy regimes call them freebies - a jargon for "something given free of charge" - all aimed at alluring voters and winning elections. The political parties have sought to cover under 'something' literally everything that touches the life of a person.

It includes free food, free health, free education, free LPG cylinder, free laptops, free transport, state support for marriage, and pilgrimage for the elderly; it's an unending list.

In the last couple of years, the freebies promised by them have become more brazen with parties coming out with 'cash transfers' to the account of voters. Such schemes mostly directed at women have won elections for the concerned parties in elections held during 2023 and 2024 in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana. The parties compete with each other in offering more. A common refrain is 'Who will promise more?'

Look at this. In the budget for 2024-25, Delhi finance minister Atishi announced the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana (MMSY) under which, the AAP government will give Rs 1000 per month to all the women

above the age of 18 in the national capital. Now, ex-Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has increased the amount to Rs 2100 per month. In response, the BJP has reportedly promised a still higher cash transfer of Rs 2500 per month. Let us be clear. Unlike 'normal' budget expenses which are planned and backed by well-orchestrated efforts to garner revenue, additional financial liabilities imposed by the freebies promised in the election manifesto affect the budgetary position of the State in a totally 'uncontrolled' and 'unplanned' manner. Moreover, these freebies don't have a sunset date meaning these will continue to be given 'eternally' - no matter which party rules. This is the surest invitation to fiscal catastrophe. Take the case of Delhi.

Already, without the MMSY, the financial position of the Delhi government has come to such a pass that CM Atishi has recently forwarded a request to the Centre seeking a loan of Rs 10,000 crore from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). Now, if AAP were to come to power yet again, MMSY @Rs 2100 a month would cost the exchequer an additional Rs 17,000 crore per annum.

Since 2018-19, state subsidies have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore (2024-25), courtesy freebies cult. This will increase exponentially, destabilising State budgets, and making a mockery of the much-touted fiscal consolidation drive. The Supreme Court has on several occasions observed that 'freebies are bad'. Will it force parliamentarians to enact a law to curb them?

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

Festive cheer meets smart choices: Navigating the real estate boom of 2024

By evaluating long-term financial goals, buyers can turn festive opportunities into lasting investments

With the festive season ongoing in full swing, there is a surge in consumer spending. This time is often marked by a flurry of purchases fuelled by tradition and sentiment. While the allure of buying a home can be particularly enticing during this festive period, buyers must approach such decisions with careful consideration. They must look beyond the festive fervour and reflect on key aspects that can guide them to make informed decisions.



RAHUL MEHROTRA

housing demand. This growth has spurred developers to launch new projects, resulting in the category representing 19 per cent of the total new launches during the first nine months of 2024. This trend is only going to grow further spurred by the festive season as buyers are investing in end-products that

offer better amenities such as club-house, larger living spaces, and modern facilities. Metro cities, in particular, have seen a wave of new project launches by developers this year, catering to various buyer segments. While luxury properties grab headlines, the affordable housing sector remains the backbone of India's real estate market as this is where buyers purchasing their first home find the most value. Having said that, many first-time homebuyers are compelled to buy a property given the abundant promotional offers and incentives provided by realtors. It is so because the festive season spurs confidence as it often coincides with salary increments, bonuses, and a general uptick in economic activity. However, buyers much before they scout for a property, should evaluate the long-term aspects. Questions such as - "Can I support paying the EMI?" or "Is it the right approach?" may seem overwhelming at first, but assessing one's worth is very crucial at this stage.

Interest Rate Matters The interest rate set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is a crucial factor in deciding other crucial interest rates. The repo rate is unchanged for the 10th consecutive time, and this implies that the Equated Monthly Installments (EMIs) are likely to remain manageable. Further to this, I believe there would be a pickup in demand for housing loans as the festive season progresses. Recent data from the RBI



reveals a remarkable 40 per cent increase in home loan deployment, highlighting the diminishing gap between monthly rents and EMIs. Additionally, 80 per cent of aspiring homeowners preferred home loans as the top choice for property acquisition this year.

Typically, possessions and property deliveries are scheduled in the latter half of November, aligning perfectly with the festive momentum. In addition to stable interest rates and EMIs, the array of offers and discounts available during the festive season can be another key factor of consid-

eration. However, it's essential to look for transparent offers that can help avoid hidden fees and unexpected costs. One should seek out reduced processing fees, flexible repayment plans, cashback schemes, and opportunities for negotiation that can make the festive season an advantageous time to invest. **What Should Buyers and Investors Do?** Investors and buyers must focus on long-term value by evaluating their income and cash flows to ensure manageable EMIs. The festive season can be an opportunity to reduce upfront costs and select properties in developing areas with strong amenities and connectivity for better appreciation. The predictability in EMI

outflows coupled with festive discounts can make the dream of homeownership more achievable. First-time buyers, particularly in the affordable housing segment, must rely on loans to bridge the financial gap as well as look for special offers and discounts. While festive discounts are great, buyers should align their decisions with pragmatic goals rather than being swayed by just sentiment. Buying a property during a festive season is certainly the start of a prosperous journey, but to truly benefit, one needs to have a stable financial plan - whether it's the first home or adding to one's portfolio. (The writer is MD & CEO, RHD FCL; views are personal)

IN BRIEF



Govt extends duty-free import of yellow peas

The government has extended the import of yellow peas without duty and MIP (minimum import price) till February next year. However, the imports are subjected to registration under online Import Monitoring System, with immediate effect, for all import consignments where Bill of Lading (Shipped on Board) is issued on or before February 28, 2025. "Import of yellow peas...is free without the MIP condition and without port restriction, subject to registration under online import monitoring system, with immediate effect, for all import consignments where the bill of lading (shipped on board) is issued on or before February 28, 2025," the directorate general of foreign trade (DGFT) has said in a notification.



Swan ties up with AG&P for India FSRU

Business tycoon Nikhil Merchant-run Swan Energy has lined up a floating LNG receipt and regasification unit for its proposed liquefied natural gas import project at Jafrabad in Gujarat, the firm said in a regulatory filing. Swan signed a Heads of Agreement with Singapore's AG&P Terminals and Logistics to form joint venture companies to provide a floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) and a floating storage unit to operate the Jafrabad terminal as well as for supplying LNG. A joint venture company (LNG supply company) will be incorporated "for the purpose of supplying LNG in India or any other jurisdiction", Swan said in the filing, adding it will hold 51 per cent equity stake and the balance 49 per cent equity stake shall be held by AG&P LNG. Another joint venture company (vessel company) will be incorporated "for the purpose of providing floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) and floating storage unit (FSU) to operate Swan LNG Pvt Ltd's LNG Terminal.



'Energy sector roadmap prepared for next 25 years'

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Wednesday said his government has prepared a roadmap for the state's energy sector for the next 25 years. The state government plans to provide solar energy facility for houses provided to the poor people under various schemes, he said at a 'meet-the-press' programme here. In the next two-three years, efforts will also be made to reduce the electricity tariffs, said Fadnavis, who holds the energy portfolio. "The energy sector is very important, and we have prepared the roadmap for the next 25 years," the chief minister said. "We also plan to make sure houses provided to the poor under different government schemes do not get electricity bills. These homes will be covered under solar energy," he said. Fadnavis said he has also focused on expediting the completion of pending projects, especially in the irrigation sector.

Govt committed to improve quality spending, cut fiscal deficit: Finmin report

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The government will continue its focus on improving quality spending, strengthening the social security net and bring down the fiscal deficit to 4.5 per cent of the GDP in FY26, a finance ministry document said.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to present the Budget for 2025-26 in Parliament on February 1. The Union government is committed to pursuing the glide path of fiscal consolidation as announced in the Budget for FY 2021-22 and to attain a level of fiscal deficit lower than 4.5 per cent of GDP by FY 2025-26, according to finance ministry statements on the half yearly review of the trends in receipts and expenditure and deviation in meeting the obligations of the government under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003.

The statements were tabled in the Lok Sabha last week. "The thrust will be on improving the quality of public spending, while at the same

time, strengthening the social security net for the poor and needy. This approach would help further strengthen the nation's macro-economic fundamentals and ensure overall financial stability," it said.

According to the statements, the Budget 2024-25 was presented in the backdrop of global uncertainties caused by the wars in Europe and the Middle East. India's sound macro-economic fundamentals have cushioned the country from the vagaries afflicting the global economy.

"It has also helped the nation pursue growth with fiscal consolidation. As a result, India retains its pride of place as one of the fastest growing economies in the world. However, risks to growth still remain," it said.



REC forms arm for renewable power evacuation in MP

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

State-owned REC on Wednesday said it has formed a subsidiary for the evacuation of power from renewable energy projects in Madhya Pradesh. Rajgarh III Power Transmission Limited has been incorporated as a wholly-owned subsidiary of its wholly-owned arm REC Power Development and Consultancy Limited (REPCDCL) on Wednesday, REC said in an exchange filing.

Rajgarh III Power Transmission Limited is a related party of REC Limited. The promoter, promoter group/ project companies do not have any interest in the new entity, except to the extent of its shareholding. The company has been incorporated as a Transmission System for the Evacuation of Power from RE Projects in Rajgarh (1500 MW) SEZ in Madhya Pradesh-Phase III. "After selection of the successful bidder in accordance with the Tariff Based Competitive Bidding (TBCB) guidelines, the company would be transferred to the successful bidder, along with all assets and liabilities," it said.

EPFO adds 13.41 lakh net members in Oct

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Retirement fund body EPFO has registered 13.41 lakh net new members addition in October 2024, according to showed latest payroll data. This signifies increased employment opportunities and heightened awareness of employee benefits, bolstered by EPFO's effective outreach initiatives, a labour ministry statement said on Wednesday. According to the statement, the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has released provisional payroll data for October 2024, revealing a net addition of

13.41 lakh members. As per the data, EPFO enrolled around 7.50 lakh new members in October 2024.

This addition in new memberships can be attributed to growing employment opportunities, increased awareness of employee benefits, and EPFO's successful outreach programmes, the ministry stated.

A noticeable aspect of the data is the dominance of the 18-25 age group, constituting

a significant 58.49 per cent of the total new members added in October 2024.

The net payroll data for the age group 18-25 for October 2024 is 5.43 lakhs.

This is in consonance with the earlier trend, which indicates that most individuals joining the organised workforce are young, primarily first-time job seekers. The payroll data highlights that approximately 12.90 lakh members exited and subsequently rejoined EPFO.



Three entities settle AIF rule violation case

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Three entities have settled with capital market regulator Sebi a case pertaining to the alleged violation of AIF norms and other regulatory rules after paying Rs 28.5 lakh towards the settlement charges.

The settlement fee was paid by the applicants (Utthishtha Virat Fund, Utthishtha Management Advisors LLP, and P Rama

Krishna) jointly and severally. The order came after the applicants proposed to settle the enforcement proceedings that may be initiated against them for the violation of the provisions of the Alternate Investment Fund (AIF) regulations. "In exercise of the powers...and in terms of the settlement regulations, in respect

of which the notice was issued, are hereby settled in respect of the applicants," Sebi's whole time members Amarjeet Singh and Kamlesh C Varshney said in the order on December 20. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) observed from the analysis of the Private

Placement Memorandum audit reports (PPM audit reports) of Utthishtha Virat Fund for FY 2022-23 that the continued interest of sponsor as of March 31, 2023, stood at 2.44 per cent of investible corpus. The regulator noted that the interest of the sponsor was lower than the limit of 2.5 per cent of the investible corpus as required to be maintained under AIF regulations, thereby Utthishtha Virat Fund flouted the rules.



FPI inflows into equities drop sharply in 2024

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

After a robust 2023, foreign investors significantly scaled back their investments in Indian equities in 2024, with net inflows amounting to over Rs 5,000 crore, as elevated domestic valuations, coupled with geopolitical uncertainties prompted investors to adopt a more cautious stance.

Looking ahead to 2025, FPI flows into Indian equities could see a recovery, supported by a cyclical upswing in corporate earnings, particularly in domestic-oriented sectors like capital goods, manufacturing, and infrastructure, Vinit Bolinjkar, Head of Research, Ventura Securities, said. However, elevated valua-



tions and cheaper alternatives in other emerging markets, such as ASEAN and Latin America, could constrain these inflows. Additionally, lingering concerns over a prolonged global recession may weigh on investor sentiment and

appetite for risk assets, he added. On the other hand, Feroze Azeez, Deputy CEO at Anand Rathi Wealth Ltd, believes geopolitical escalations, central bank interest rate cuts, and potential US tariff sanctions could act as tailwinds for FPI

inflows into Indian markets. As of now, foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have made a net investment of over Rs 5,052 crore in the Indian equity markets and Rs 1.12 lakh crore in the debt market (till December 24), as per data available with the depositories.

This followed the extraordinary Rs 1.71 lakh crore net investment in equities in 2023, driven by optimism surrounding India's resilient economic fundamentals. In contrast, 2022 witnessed the worst net outflow of Rs 1.21 lakh crore due to aggressive rate hikes by global central banks. Prior to the outflow, FPIs invested money in the last three years (2019, 2020 and 2021).

India Cements promoter Srinivasan resigns as UltraTech completes acquisition

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Leading cement maker UltraTech has completed the acquisition of promoters a 32.72 per cent stake in India Cements Ltd, following which N Srinivasan and other promoters of the South-based cement maker have stepped down.

The Aditya Birla Group firm has completed the acquisition of 10.13 crore equity shares of India Cements Ltd (ICL), representing 32.72 per cent of the equity share capital of the company.

"This, together with the existing shareholding of 7.05 crore equity shares (22.77 per cent) of the equity share capital of ICL, has resulted in the Company's shareholding increasing to 17.19 crore equity shares representing 55.49 per cent of ICL's equity share capital," UltraTech had informed in a late-night regulatory filing on Tuesday.

Consequently, ICL "has become a subsidiary of the Company" with effect from December 24, 2024, it added. On Wednesday, ICL informed that pursuant to the completion of the transaction and due to the consequent cessation of control by the existing promoters over the company, N Srinivasan has stepped down as Vice Chairman and Managing Director.

Besides, his daughter Rupa Gurunath, wife Chitra Srinivasan and V M Mohan have also stepped down from the board of the company, according to a regulatory filing by ICL.

Moreover, "pursuant to the consummation of the Transaction on December 24, 2024, UltraTech has acquired sole control of the company and has become the promoter of the company in accordance with the LODR Regulations",



informed ICL. Further, the board also recorded the resignation of certain independent directors - S Balasubramanian Adityan, Krishna Srivastava, Lakshmi Aparna Sreekumar and Sandhya Rajan with effect from the end of business hours on December 25, 2024, it added.

The board has also appointed four new directors - K C Jhanwar, Vivek Agrawal, E R Raj Narayanan and Ashok Ramachandran. Besides, three independent directors - Alka Bharucha, Vikas Balia and Sukanya Kripalu - have come on board of ICL.

Cement industry looks for growth improvement

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian cement industry, witnessing a consolidation and heightened rivalry between two corporate houses snapping smaller players, pins its hope on 2025 for an improvement in sales realisation, higher margins and acceleration in demand, expecting around 8 per cent sales growth helped by an increased government spendings on big-ticket infra projects. Over 50 MTPA (million tonnes per annum) capacity are being acquired for USD 4.5 billion by two leading players - Aditya Birla group firm

UltraTech Cement and billionaire Gautam Adani-led Ambuja Cements, besides organic expansion of the existing units as they have kept their war chest ready prowling for opportunities.

The industry faced challenges on numerous fronts in 2024, right from moderate capacity utilisation to lower sales realisation, which impacted the topline of several makers, contraction of margins and slower volume growth.

However, 2024 would also be known for big-ticket acquisitions by UltraTech and Adani Cement to consolidate their



positions and achieve their targeted growth ahead of time. Adani Cements, a lateral entrant in the sector, completed the acquisition of Saurashtra-based Sanghi Industries, Panna Industries and recently announced to acquire CK Birla group firm Orient Cement as part of its inorganic growth strategy. Besides, it has also snapped up small players facilities as My Home and its subsidiary ACC has also acquired

Asian Concretes and Cements. These acquisitions and expansions helped Adani Cement to cross a 100 MTPA capacity with a pan-India presence in 2024 within two years of entry in the sector, with 70 MTPA acquired capacity from Swiss firm Holcim.

The Adani group has plans in the works to raise this to 140 MTPA by FY28, just a shade below market leader UltraTech's current capacity of 156.66 MTPA grey cement. Aditya Birla group is also firing on all cylinders to maintain its lead, and has plans for 200 MTPA capacity by FY27. In

2024 it announced acquisition of South-based India Cements Ltd and is in the process of acquiring Kesoram Industries' Cement Business.

According to Deloitte India Partner Rakesh Surana, 2024 was a year of consolidation for the cement industry, marked by significant mergers and acquisitions. "This trend has highlighted a structural shift in the sector, with the largest companies accounting for a substantial share of the overall capacity. Currently, the top five cement producers collectively command an estimated 60-65 per cent of the industry's capacity," he said.

SERVING HUMANITY BY BRIDGING IT WITH HOPE

TEJAL SINHA
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In a world where hunger and inequality remain persistent challenges, organisations like No Food Waste stand as beacons of hope and compassion. Led in Telangana by Rtn. Dr. K Venkata Murali, this remarkable NGO has spent nearly a decade ensuring that excess, untouched food from events, hotels and homes finds its way to those who need it most. But the work of No Food Waste doesn't stop there—it extends its helping hands to encompass education, healthcare and livelihood support, transforming countless lives along the way. Dr. Murali and his dedicated team of volunteers exemplify the power of community, proving that a collective effort can create meaningful change, one meal and one act of kindness at a time.

For the past seven to eight years, the organisation has been making a tangible difference in the lives of countless individuals. The organisation operates with the mission of redistributing untouched, excess food from events, hotels and residences to those in need.

Dr Murali elaborated to us on the ethos and evolution of No Food Waste. "The main concept is to collect untouched, excess food and deliver it to nearby hunger spots or to people in need. Over the years, we've identified additional needs like medical support, education and livelihood assistance, and extended our efforts to help in these areas as well," he said.

Reflecting on the journey of the NGO, he expressed immense satisfaction. "Our volunteers have been instrumental in identifying genuine needs and ensuring that the help reaches the right people. The dedication of our team is commendable, and we owe much of our success to them," he noted.

However, the path hasn't been without its challenges. "The primary challenge has always been finding committed volunteers and accurately identifying genuine beneficiaries. When something is offered for free, many claim to be in need. It requires thorough due diligence to ensure the resources reach the truly deserving," he explained.

Managing the redistribution of cooked food presents another set of difficulties. "Cooked food has a very short shelf life—just two to three hours. It's crucial to deliver it before it becomes unusable. Identifying nearby hunger spots was tough initially, but now we have mapped over 550 spots in Hyderabad and across Telangana, enabling us to respond quickly," he said.

The NGO has strategically divided Hyderabad into seven zones for



With nearly a decade of unwavering service, the No Food Waste NGO has become a beacon of hope for the underprivileged, fueled by the dedication of its volunteers and the generosity of its donors. In an exclusive interaction with The Pioneer, Rtn. Dr. K Venkata Murali, director-Telangana of the organisation, offers a closer look at the challenges, triumphs and the collective effort that keeps this noble cause thriving.



better food distribution. Hunger spots have been identified across areas like Bala Nagar, Moti Nagar, Abids, ECIL and many others.

"We've ensured that wherever donors are located, there is a nearby hunger spot to bridge the gap swiftly," he added.

He also addresses other pressing needs. Under medical support, the NGO provides items like oxygen concentrators, wheelchairs, hospital beds and medicines. "One notable case involved a student who, after a serious accident, required a specialised hospital bed to recover over four months. We provided the bed free of charge, which not only helped him but has since benefited other patients as well."

In education, the NGO assists

with examination fees, college fees, laptops, mobile devices for online learning and books. Regular food distribution efforts include providing cooked meals to 1,500-1,800 people daily from two community kitchens, as well as distributing dry rations and seasonal necessities like blankets and fruits.

The success of No Food Waste is made possible through partnerships and individual donors. "The Rotary Club of Hyderabad North and Rotary District 3150 have been among our most consistent supporters for the past five years. Whenever a necessity arises, they are always the first to respond," he acknowledged. He also praised individual donors who consistently step forward to

help bridge the gap between resources and needs.

With Christmas and New Year approaching, they have planned several initiatives. "We are conducting blanket drives, distributing cakes and planning a special food distribution on New Year's Day. For us, every day is a day of service, and celebrations mean ensuring others have what they need," said Dr. Murali.

He further emphasised that the efforts of No Food Waste would not be possible without the generosity of donors and the dedication of volunteers. "We see ourselves as a bridge between donors and the needy. Our volunteers and the people who trust us with their contributions are the true heroes of this journey," he concluded.

No Food Waste continues to shine as an exemplary model of community service, proving that a committed team can indeed create a world where fewer people go hungry.



Sustainable housing for all

In the face of rapid urbanisation and climate change, the need for sustainable and affordable housing in India has never been more pressing. As the nation looks to build a greener future, the concept of green buildings is emerging as a critical solution. The housing finance landscape is evolving to promote and support these sustainable initiatives and practices, aiming to transform the way we build homes across the country.

Green buildings and sustainability

Green buildings are designed to minimise the environmental impact of construction and operation by using energy, water and materials more efficiently. These structures prioritise resource conservation, environmental responsibility and the well-being of residents. In India, adopting green building principles is critical for reducing carbon emissions and improving the overall quality of life. By implementing energy-efficient designs, sustainable water management practices, and effective waste disposal strategies, these buildings contribute significantly to the nation's sustainability goals.

The benefits of green buildings extend beyond environmental impact. They offer economic advantages by reducing utility costs for homeowners and enhancing property values. This makes them a preferred option for developers and buyers alike, prompting a shift in the housing finance sector towards supporting sustainable housing projects. As awareness grows, there is increasing pressure on financial institutions to integrate green building practices into their lending criteria, offering preferential rates for loans to developers who meet sustainability standards. This shift not only supports government objectives but also reduces risks associated with climate change, such as increased flooding and resource shortages.

Government objectives for green buildings

The Indian government's commitment to sustainable development is reflected in initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), which aims to provide affordable housing for all. A key focus is promoting green buildings through funding schemes, policy incentives and partnerships with organisations such as the Indian Green Building Council (IGBC) and the Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA), Excellence in Design for Greater Efficiencies (EDGE). These partnerships set standards for green buildings, enabling developers to access grants and incentives.

The government also encourages financial institutions to promote sustainable housing through green financing programs. This approach aligns with national and global sustainability goals, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. By advocating for energy-efficient designs and sustainable



practices, the government aims to reduce the carbon footprint of the built environment and support the transition to a greener economy.

Several targeted policies and schemes have been introduced to promote green building practices:

- Green housing funding:** Launched to provide low-cost/subsidised loans to affordable housing developers integrating green building practices into their projects. This funding helps bridge the financial gap between conventional and green construction by offering affordable credit at lower interest rates, encouraging builders to adopt energy-efficient techniques.

- EESL scheme for energy efficiency:** Through the Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL), the government provides financial support for energy-efficient appliances and systems in green buildings, including LED lights, energy-efficient air conditioning systems, and solar water heating solutions. This helps reduce energy consumption in residential units.

- PM surya ghar:** Muft Bijli Yojana - Managed by the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, this scheme offers subsidies to homeowners and RWAs for installing solar panels, promoting the use of renewable energy in residential buildings and reducing their carbon footprint.

- Multilateral agencies and development Financial Institution (DFIs):** Various agencies and DFIs started to provide loan facilities to Housing Finance institution for promoting green housing construction and sustainable practices. Here, focus is also on training, skill improvement, sustainable construction material and development of overall ecosystem for green affordable housing in India.

Role of housing finance in promoting green buildings

Housing finance institutions are increasingly recognising the value of incorporating green building practices into their lending criteria. By offering preferential loan rates to developers who meet sustainability standards, these institutions are helping drive the adoption of sustainable construction practices.

This shift not only supports government objectives but also mitigates risks associated with climate change, such as flooding and resource shortages.

For financial institutions, supporting green housing projects presents a significant opportunity to enhance their portfolios' resilience and contribute to a sustainable future. By focusing on energy-efficient buildings, these institutions can help mitigate environmental impact and provide better living conditions for homeowners. The integration of green building practices into housing finance is essential for fostering sustainable development and encouraging developers to adopt environmentally responsible construction methods.

Challenges and solutions

Despite the growing interest in green buildings, several barriers remain. High upfront costs, limited awareness among developers, and a shortage of skilled professionals are significant challenges. To overcome these hurdles, targeted education programs, financial subsidies and public-private partnerships are needed. These initiatives can help reduce costs and increase understanding of green building practices among all stakeholders. By providing financial support and technical guidance, the government and financial institutions can make sustainable housing projects more accessible, encouraging their adoption nationwide.

Redefining housing finance for a sustainable India requires collaboration across sectors—developers, financial institutions, government bodies, and the public. By prioritising green building practices and aligning with sustainability goals, the housing sector can lead the way in creating a resilient, sustainable housing ecosystem. As India continues its journey towards sustainable development, the principles outlined in this initiative will be key to building a future where housing is not only affordable but also environmentally responsible. By leveraging green financing, the housing sector can bridge the gap between economic development and sustainability, paving the way for a greener, more sustainable India.

(The author, Ajay Jaiswal, is the chief operating officer, at IIFL House Finance.)



Allu Arjun's arrest

In December 2024, Allu Arjun became embroiled in a controversy surrounding the tragic events at the premiere of his highly anticipated film *Pushpa 2* at Sandhya Theatre in Hyderabad. A stampede broke out during the screening, resulting in the death of a woman and critical injuries to her young son. Allegations surfaced that the event lacked adequate crowd management and safety protocols, with claims that Arjun attended the screening despite police advising against it due to safety concerns. This led to the actor's arrest, though he was later granted interim bail by the Telangana High Court.

Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek's divorce rumours

In 2024, rumours about Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan's divorce made headlines. Speculation arose during Anant Ambani's wedding, where Aishwarya and her daughter Aaradhya attended separately from the rest of the Bachchan family,



CELEBRITY TURMOIL 2024

The year 2024 was marked by a series of controversies that dominated headlines across various sectors. Ultimately, 2024 underscored the complexities of navigating fame, power, and public opinion in an age dominated by instant communication and constant connectivity.

ily, who appeared together, including Amitabh Bachchan, Jaya Bachchan and Abhishek. The absence of public birthday wishes for Aishwarya from Abhishek and the Bachchan family further fueled the rumors of a possible rift. However, the family dispelled these speculations by appearing united at Aaradhya's school event later in the year.

Arshad Warsi's comments on Prabhas



Arshad Warsi found himself at the center of controversy after commenting on Prabhas' portrayal in *Kalki 2898 AD*. During an interview with Samdisha Bhatia, Arshad candidly expressed his disappointment with the depiction of the character, saying, "Prabhas, I am really sad, why was he... he was like a joker. Why? I want to see a Mad Max. I want to see Mel Gibson over there. Tumhe usko kya bana dia year. Kyu karte ho aisa mujhe nahi samajh mein aata (What have you made of it? Why do they do such things I never understand)." His remarks were perceived by many as a critique of Prabhas, sparking backlash from fans. However, Arshad later clarified that his comments were directed at the characterization and creative choices in the film, not at Prabhas as

an actor. Despite the clarification, the incident stirred significant debate among fans and industry insiders.

Poonam Pandey's death hoax

In February, social media was abuzz with news of Poonam Pandey's alleged death due to cervical cancer, leaving her fans shocked and grieving. Heartfelt messages poured in from admirers, mourning the loss of the actor. However, it was later revealed that the news was a publicity stunt aimed at raising awareness about cervical cancer. The revelation sparked widespread outrage, with many calling the move insensitive and unethical. While the intention may have been to shed light on a critical health issue, the stunt backfired, drawing sharp criticism and tarnishing Pandey's image among fans and the public.

Salman and Shah Rukh Khan receive threats

This year was marked by heightened security concerns in the entertainment industry, with prominent actors Salman Khan and Shah Rukh Khan receiving serious threats. Salman, reportedly on gangster Lawrence Bishnoi's "hit list," faced five threats, including a shooting incident outside his residence earlier in the year, prompting increased security measures. Bishnoi's list is said to include comedians, politicians, and rival gang members, further intensifying the gravity of the situation. In November, Shah Rukh Khan received a chilling threat from an anonymous caller

demanding Rs 50 lakh and warning of fatal consequences if the amount was not paid. Swift action led to the arrest of a suspect, but the incidents have raised alarms about the safety of high-profile celebrities.



AR Rahman's divorce

AR Rahman left fans stunned with the announcement of his separation from Saira Banu after 29 years of marriage. In a joint statement shared through their lawyer, the couple cited significant emotional strain and unresolved tensions as reasons for their decision, despite their deep love for each other. The statement emphasised their request for privacy during this challenging time. Adding to the intrigue, Rahman's bassist Mohini Dey also announced her divorce on the same day, sparking speculation about a connection between the two events. Mohini swiftly denied the rumours, referring to Rahman as a "father figure" and dismissing the conjecture as baseless. The coincidental timing of the announcements created a flurry of discussion but underscored the personal challenges faced by both individuals.



what's brewing?



Christmas celebrations were held with great fervour at St Mary's Church Basilica in Secunderabad. The church was beautifully decorated with stars, angels and a majestic Christmas tree, creating a festive atmosphere. The church choir added to the festive spirit with melodious carols.



St. Philomena Girls High School in New Boiguda ushered in the festive spirit with a grand Christmas celebration. Father Udaya Bhaskar, headmaster of the school, set the tone for the event, highlighting that Christmas is a joyous celebration of love. The occasion was made even more special with a prize distribution ceremony, where students were felicitated by dignitaries including Yoga Guru Sarojani Rama Rao, Jyoti Raja P. Swarupa Rani and Dr. Hypno Padma Kamalakar from Nava Bharata Lions Club.

PARTY

Nagaratnam Naidu, a renowned farmer, has announced that this year's Sankranti celebrations will be a unique blend of nature and culture. The event, scheduled to take place on January 11, 2025 at his farm in Daira village, near Ramoji Film City, aims to bring people closer to nature and showcase the beauty of rural life. To kick-start the celebrations, Naidu inaugurated a poster at a gathering in Jubilee Hills, where he revealed the exciting plans for the event.



The Telangana Fistball Association is set to participate in the sub-junior and senior nationals, scheduled to take place in Dindigul, Chennai, from today. The competition will end on December 29. In preparation for the event, the association's president, Raghu Charan and treasurer, Vikram Sinha, along with Alphaores Narendra School, Armoor, distributed kits to the Telangana fistball players.

The Hyderabad Public School (HPS) announced the launch of "Flight of the Eagle", a stunning coffee table book that marks the institution's 100th anniversary. The book was officially launched at a special ceremony, which marked the presence of two of the school's most distinguished alumni, Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft and Shantanu Narayen, CEO of Adobe.



National Skill Development Corporation International (NSDC International) has partnered with PhysicsWallah (PW) to launch Bharat Innovation Global Private Limited (BIG), a pioneering initiative aimed at transforming India into a global education hub. BIG seeks to bridge the gap between academics and employability by providing flexible, technology-driven learning pathways that align education with the demands of the workforce, thereby enhancing the employability prospects of students.

FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



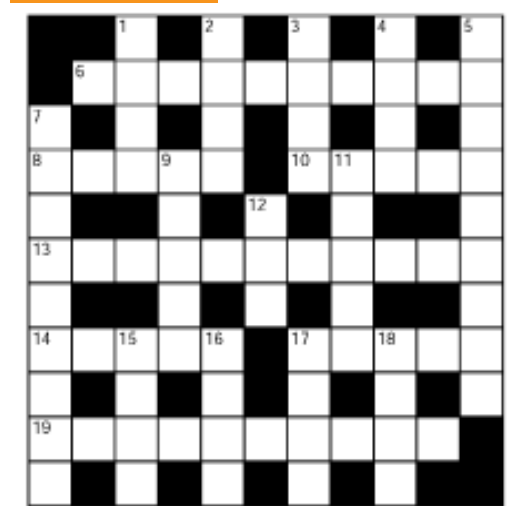
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



NANCY



SUDOKU



Yesterday's solution

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

Rules

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

ACROSS

- An aircraft sometimes used for rescuing people
- Lubricated
- A sorcerer's power
- A country in Europe
- This makes music in a church
- Very bad
- People in China and other countries eat with these

- Jump along on one foot in this game
- More than is needed
- Permit
- Write with this
- Become taller
- A bird builds this
- A liquid chemical that will burn your skin
- A counterfeit thing

DOWN

- In good health
- Discover
- The sound of an explosion
- A male deer
- A large reptile that lives in rivers in hot countries



GINGER MEGGS





TFI is meeting Chief Minister today: Dil Raju

The Telugu Film Industry (TFI) is in doldrums after the Allu Arjun arrest episode, where the Telangana Chief Minister announced that there are no benefit shows or ticket price hike in Telangana state. Also, there is a big gap between the Telugu Film Industry and the Telangana Government, so the TFI members will be meeting the Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy today. This was confirmed by the Telangana Film Development Corporation chairman Dil Raju.

"Yes, we are going to meet Chief Minister Revanth Reddy today morning at 10 am," said Dil Raju. "I am sending messages to everyone and whoever available in the city is coming, including actors, directors and producers," said Raju at KIMS Hospital. On Wednesday, Raju, along with producer Allu Arjun, producer Mythri Movie Makers and director Sukumar, together donated Rs 2 crore for the family of Prabhakar (Revanth's husband).

"We are also taking care of the family and we will do whatever we can permanently," said Dil Raju. When asked that Allu Arjun is also attending tomorrow's meeting, Dil Raju said, "Everyone is coming." He said he is arranging this meeting through FDC. "I am related to the film industry, so Revanth Reddy garu appointed me as FDC Chairman and it's my responsibility to fill the gap between the two," said Dil Raju. For another question, he said he didn't meet Allu Arjun, but said, "I will definitely meet him".

Megha Akash's another Telugu film is ready



After her marriage, Megha Akash is signing films, especially in Telugu. Though the actress made her debut with the film *Lie* in Telugu, but she didn't get much success here. After her debut few of her Telugu films released, but they didn't do well at the box-office. Now, another Telugu film of her, *Sahakutumbanam* is all set to hit the screens soon.

Uday Sharma is the director, while H Mahadeva Gowda and H Nagaratna are the producers. Ram Kiran is the lead actor in this film. The makers started the promotions and on that part, they released a lyrical video titled *Adi Dhaa Saaru* on Tuesday. According to the makers, the film is touted to be a clean family entertainer.

Interestingly, one of the best music directors, Mani Sharma is providing the music for this film. Anantha Sriram penned the lyrics and it has already struck a chord with audiences. Veteran actors Rajendra Prasad and Brahmanandam are playing important roles in it. Megha Akash's refreshing new look and her performance in the song have garnered praise, adding to the anticipation surrounding the movie.



No comedy, no suspense; *Srikakulam Sherlock Holmes* misses the spark

SURESH KAVIRAYANI
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Comedian Vennela Kishore has acted as the lead in a few films earlier and now another one, *Srikakulam Sherlock Holmes*, has been released on Christmas Day. Writer Mohan makes his debut as a director, while Ananya Nagalla plays one of the main leads. Distributor Vamsi Nandipati has taken over this small film, making it an interesting venture. The promotional videos are also interesting, and the film is a crime comedy. Here is the story and how it fares.

Story:

On May 21, 1991, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi left Visakhapatnam and landed at Sriperumbudur for a political campaign, where he was assassinated in a bomb blast. The same night, a girl named Pulidandi Mary was killed at Visakhapatnam beach. CI Bhaskar (Aneesh Kuruvilla) told journalists that he would catch the killer within a week, or else he would resign from his job. Since he had to work on the Rajiv Gandhi murder case simultaneously, he asked a private detective, Sherlock Holmes (Vennela Kishore), to solve the Mary case within a week.

Balu (Ravi Teja Dasyam) loves Bramarambha (Ananya Nagalla) and on her birthday, Balu arranged a cake-cutting ceremony at the beach, along with two of his friends. Balu, Brama, a suspended cop, three fishermen and others tell different stories about Mary's murder. Who killed Mary, and how did Sherlockholmes find the real killer? What was the motive behind Mary's murder? Did he complete the investigation within a week? This is the crux of the story.

Analysis:

Writer Mohan has worked as a writer for several movies and is an experienced writer. He has made his debut as a director with *Srikakulam Sherlock Holmes* and one expects a normal story from him due to his experience. However, to everyone's surprise, he comes out with a complete dud.

Generally, when one expects a detective story, one looks forward to at least some puzzle-like scenes and an interesting story. Moreover, with Vennela Kishore playing the title role of the detective, one expects some humor as well. However, the director fails to provide any of these elements in the film.

The story begins with the news of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in Sriperumbudur and the local police are on the streets to check for any unwanted incidents. At the same time, a murder takes place at the beach and then Sherlock Holmes enters the scene. One expects that it is not a complete suspense thriller but a routine film with a few entertainment scenes, considering Vennela Kishore's involvement. However, the director fails to provide even a single comedy scene or an interesting scene.

Watching the first half is tedious and one feels uneasy. Furthermore, Vennela Kishore's attempt at the Uttarandhra accent is completely absurd, and he fails to pronounce it properly, as he seems to have just read the dialogues given by the writer. To portray any accent convincingly, one needs to feel it and pronounce it naturally; otherwise, it will not come out nicely.

The director spoils the beautiful Uttarandhra accent by forcefully incorporating it into some characters. Sometimes they speak with a normal accent, and sometimes with a local accent. Since the title is *Srikakulam Sherlock Holmes*, the director intended to use the local accent. One wonders why the director chose Vennela Kishore for the role, as any actor could have done better.

It is boring to see Vennela Kishore playing the same kind of roles in many films. Only in the second half are there a few minutes of interest when the detective reveals the killer and the motive. Most scenes are repetitive, making the film boring to watch. Some dialogues are not up to the mark and a few are too vulgar.

Performances:

When it comes to the artists' performances, Ananya Nagalla stands out, playing an interesting role, especially in the second half. She plays a different role and this film helps her showcase

her performance from another angle. She is the only highlight of the film.

Vennela Kishore plays the title role, but he is a complete waste and his role is uninteresting. His accent, performance and character are all disappointing. He fails to contribute to the film with his presence.

Ravi Teja Dasyam plays a regular role and Siya Gautam is seen after a long time, but her role offers nothing. Prabhakar and Aneesh Kuruvilla justify their roles. There are many others in the film, but none of them are impressive.

Verdict:

Finally, *Srikakulam Sherlock Holmes* is a complete dud, lacking even a single impressive scene. There is no comedy, emotion, or suspense in this film, which is supposed to be a crime comedy. Writer Mohan has made a disappointing debut with this film and despite being an experienced writer, he failed to showcase his strong writing skills. Vamsi Nandipati, who surprisingly liked this film, made exaggerated claims, such as *Srikakulam Sherlock Holmes* being the highest grosser after *Pushpa 2*. This time, his judgment is completely wrong regarding this film.

Cast: Vennela Kishore, Ananya Nagalla, Ravi Teja Dasyam, Aneesh Kuruvilla, Baahubali Prabhakar, Bhadram, Nag Mahesh and others

Music director: Sunil Kashyap

Cinematographer: N Mallikarjun

Producer:

Vennapusa Ramana Reddy

Writer and director: Writer Mohan

Rating: 1/5

STANDALONE



Actor Dharma, who is set to appear in the upcoming film *Drinker Sai*, has always been a huge fan of Prabhas. At a recent event, the makers of *Drinker Sai* invited a special guest, Kiran Raj, who is known for being Prabhas' doppelganger. Interestingly, Prabhas himself had wished Dharma success for the film, making the occasion even more special.

Suhas's next is a sparkling romantic comedy

Actor Suhas began his career as a character artiste but soon transitioned to lead roles. He has achieved success as a lead actor with a diverse range of scripts and is now set to appear in another film titled *Oh Bhama Ayyo Rama*. According to the makers, this film is a romantic comedy. Ram Godhala is making his directorial debut with this film, while Malavika Manoj, known for her role in "Joe", is making her debut as the female lead opposite Suhas. Described as a sparkling comedy that is witty and playful, the film explores the dynamics between a young man and his romantic interest in a lighthearted manner. *Oh Bhama Ayyo Rama* is a unique love story. The makers have released a glimpse video from the film, which opens with a romantic scene featuring the lead pair driving in a vintage car. However, the mood shifts when the car breaks down, forcing the male lead to get out and push. Harish Nalla is producing the film, while Anita Hassanandani, known for her role in *Nuvvu Nenu*, is set to make a comeback with a prominent role in this film. Radhan is composing the music.



Pradeep Machiraju shakes his leg with Chandrika Ravi

Pradeep Machiraju is a known face after his shows on Television and also his characters in films. He is also played as lead actor in '30 Rojullo Preminchadam Ela' and the film is an instant hit because of its music. Now, Pradeep is coming up with his second film as lead actor, titled 'Akkada Ammayi Ikkada Abbayi'. Directed by duo Nitin and Bharath,

it promises to be a unique blend of romance and family drama. Deepika Pilli is playing the female lead, while produced by the Monks & Monkeys banner.

The film has already generated a lot of buzz, with the release of its first look and first single receiving a positive response. On this Christmas day, the makers released the film's second single 'Touch Lo Undu' fea-

turing Pradeep Machiraju and Chandrika Ravi. After the romantic ballad 'Le Le', which featured the lead pair, the second song 'Touch Lo Undu' brings in a lively, high-energy beat perfect for mass appeal. Chandrika Ravi adds a touch of glamour as she dances alongside Pradeep Machiraju in a lively and colourful setting. Sandeep Bolla has penned the story and dialogues.

Vishwak Sen's dual role doubles the excitement

Christmas has turned out to be much merrier for the fans as Telugu filmmakers are sharing glimpses of their upcoming films. Vishwak Sen has also unveiled his look from his forthcoming film, *Laila*. In this movie, he plays an unconventional role, showcasing his versatility by portraying both a male and female character.

Directed by Ram Narayan and produced by Sahu Garapati, the makers had earlier released *Laila's* eye look and a release date poster. The first look poster

of the film features Vishwak Sen in a stylish and affluent avatar.

As Sonu Model, he is seen with a tattoo around his neck and additional tattoos on his hands that read 'Sonu Lover' and 'Sonu Killer'. Although Vishwak Sen's transformation into a female character is remarkable, the complete look of this character has yet to be revealed.

This film also marks the debut of Akanksha Sharma as the female lead. *Laila* is scheduled for a worldwide release on Valentine's Day, February 14.



Visitors have exploited Australia's 'brittle' top order: Shastri

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Former coach Ravi Shastri has backed India to win the Boxing Day Test, saying the visitors have exploited Australia's "brittle" top order to have their "nose ahead" in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Shastri added that Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is "almost single-handedly" responsible for the visitors keeping the series levelled at 1-1. "I think India would take this, the way the series is poised. Any overseas team being 1-1, especially with the games being in Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane, they would take this. "Going 1-1 into Boxing Day is the best case scenario. I would say India have their nose ahead," Shastri told news.Com.Au. Australia's top order comprising Usman Khawaja, Nathan McSweeney and Marnus Labuschagne have been unable to

score against Bumrah. It has forced them to hand a debut to teenage sensation Sam Konstas while dropping rookie opener Nathan McSweeney. "It's been pretty brittle. When you look at this Australian line-up, it's been a long time since I've seen an Australian line-up where the top order is that brittle. India have exploited that and continue to exploit it," Shastri said. All-rounder Mitchell Marsh has also largely struggled for runs. In the last year, Labuschagne, Marsh, Khawaja and Steve Smith all had average less than 30 in Test cricket. "India is 1-1 in the series and that man (Bumrah) has almost single-handedly got India into that position," Shastri said. "As far as Konstas goes, I think he's very refreshing. He's got flair, he's got flamboyance. But Test cricket is Test cricket. His technique will tighten up and he will be the future for Australia." Shastri feels McSweeney was



unfortunate to have been axed after just three Tests. "McSweeney was very unfortunate. He did the hard yards but he's a middle order batsman. I see him travelling to Sri Lanka when the Australian team go there and rebuild his career from there. "But I think it's a good move getting Konstas in because you need someone who can take the attack to the Indian team, because the punches were coming from nowhere." India have won the last two series in Australia and now have the opportunity to become only the third touring side to win three consecutive series Down Under, joining the West Indies (1984/85, 1988/89, 1992/93) and South Africa (2008/09, 2012/13, 2016/17). "Massive. No team has done that in a long time. Australia hammers sides when they come here. For India to pull off three on the trot will be something special.

"But they'll have to play good cricket. I see Australia coming hard in this Test match, especially with the bowlers. It's the batting that'll be the challenge for Australia more than anything else." Shastri feels India has come to Australia with a strong intent to win. "India have come here to win, they haven't come here to fill in the numbers. Even when I was the coach, our mantra was to play extremely hard, fair and to win. "You have to think of a method to beat Australia and not just compete. You've got to plan properly, how to take your 20 wickets. India have done that and been very aggressive. "They've been in the face of Australia and give as good as they get. It's been entertaining and feisty stuff. The first day of the Boxing Day Test will determine which way the series will go," he added.



Cummins' message for Konstas: Have fun and don't overthink

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Australia skipper Pat Cummins understands what a teenager goes through on a high-profile Test debut and knows what he needs to tell the young Sam Konstas: "Have fun and don't overthink." Konstas, 19, is all set to make his debut against India in the Boxing Day Test, starting Thursday. Konstas has created a lot of buzz in Australian domestic cricket and his Test debut at the expense of Nathan McSweeney has become quite an event. When the skipper was asked about his feelings during his Test debut at 18, Cummins spoke about an element of naivety that can stop a kid from overthinking about how big a deal it is. "I spent a bit of the time wondering why or how I was there, how it happened so quick. I just remember being really excited and I think it's similar to Sammy (Konstas) this week. "There's a level of naivety that you just want to go out and play like you do when you're a kid in the backyard," Cummins said during the pre-match press interaction. "You just want to take the game on, have fun and not overthink. So that's the message to Sam. That's definitely how I felt as an 18-year-old, I was just really excited," Cummins fondly recollected. Cummins shared with

Konstas, how he, as a teenager, handled his debut back in 2011. "I was saying this to Sam the other day, I remember as an 18 year old I was thinking if I didn't have a great game it wasn't my fault, it was the selector's fault for picking me. "I was like, well they're the idiots that picked an 18 year old. You're so young starting out your career it's just its boxing day doesn't get any better than this so just enjoy the moment," he laughed. For Cummins, having 38-year-old opener Usman Khawaja, who is exactly double Konstas' age is a boon for the youngster as he will have calming influence at the other end even as youngsters with uncluttered mind always have an edge. "There's so much value in having experience and you've seen everything before. But there's almost just as many positives in having that freedom and naivety just to go out and see the ball and hit the ball." Indians can throw some challenges at some point. Even in a slump, Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant are players whom this Australian team really respects. There are two Test matches and there could be a pushback round the corner. "I really hope not but you know they're good players so no doubt they'll throw some challenges at us at some point." Asked if his opposite number Rohit Sharma's poor form is

an advantage, Cummins reminded Rahane's century at a stand-in skipper at Melbourne. "Look, hard to say. It was a good Test match here a few years ago. I think Rahane got 100 from memory. So yeah, it always seems like a boxing day every year is a cracking test match. Last year was a great Test match against Pakistan as well." The Indian team is in transition but Cummins wants to keep focus intact on his set of players. "Every team always has something they're kind of grappling with or trying to improve on. As I said previously, I'm really happy our team's travelling. "I thought after Perth we bounced back brilliantly in Adelaide and last week in Queensland. So for us it's about focusing on what we do well and getting excited for a great week." Head fit, Lyon is king at MCG, Boland is world class Head coach Andrew McDonald has already spoken about Travis Head being fit and the left-hander's extended net session was an indicator. Head had sustained a quadriceps niggle while batting in the second innings in Brisbane. "Trav is good to go. So he'll play. He just ticked off some final things today and yesterday. No stress, no kind of worries about injury with Trav. So he'll go into the game fully fit."

South Africa aims to seal its place in WTC final in test series against Pakistan

AP ■ CENTURION

South Africa will be eyeing a place in the World Test Championship final with an all-seam attack against Pakistan in the first test, starting Thursday. The Proteas need to win one of its remaining two test matches in this WTC cycle to guarantee a place at the Lord's final next year and captain Temba Bavuma believes expectations have risen in his team to do well in the two-test series. "There'll be pressure that comes with that," Bavuma said. "But to be honest with you, we're coming into the series to win the series 2-0. We understand that for us to do that, there's certain things that we need to do as a team: keep things simple, keep doing the small things right, and allow the results to take care of itself." South Africa has included four fast bowlers in the lineup with Corbin Bosch, who consistently bowls above 140 kph, set to play his first test at his hometown. Seasoned fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen will team up with Dane Paterson and Bosch to challenge Pakistan's batters on an expected pacey Centurion pitch where fast bowlers have a clear advantage over the last six years, picking up 227



wickets with spinners dismissing only 16 batters. Heading into the tests, South Africa's top-order batters did struggle against Pakistan in a rare 3-0 ODI whitewash with Tony de Zorzi, Ryan Rickelton and Tristan Stubbs all failing to read the offspin bowling of Salman Ali Agha in the opening game of the series. Whether it's easy, whether it's hard, we've got to find a way to do it," Bavuma said. "Whatever, I don't know, trauma that was there... Guys will have to deal with it."

Pakistan has long been struggling in test matches in South Africa, losing 12 and winning just two of the 15 test matches since it first toured the country in 1995. Pakistan's below-par show in South Africa includes its lowest test score of 49 at the Wanderers in 2013. Pakistan is lying at No. 7 in the WTC points table and Aaqib Javed is its fourth head coach in this WTC cycle with Mickey Arthur and Mohammad Hafeez quitting after one series. Jason Gillespie resigned just two weeks before Thursday's test.

Gillespie, who was hired by the Pakistan Cricket Board in April, had a horror start to his two-year contract when Bangladesh swept Pakistan in Pakistan 2-0 in the test series before England won the first test at Multan. Gillespie was removed from the selection panel and Javed masterminded Pakistan's back-to-back wins against England on two engineered spinning pitches where Noman Ali and Sajid Khan bagged 39 wickets. But Pakistan has brought in only Noman Ali for the two-test series in South Africa and is still contemplating whether to follow South Africa and go with an all-out pace attack. Shaheen Shah Afridi, who played in the preceding white-ball series in South Africa, has been surprisingly left out for the test matches. Naseem Shah and Babar Azam return to the test fold after missing the last two home tests against England while selectors have recalled seamer Mohammad Abbas after three years with the left-arm seam option of Mir Hamza in the squad. Abbas took 90 wickets in 25 test matches from 2017 to 21 before he ran out of selectors' favor despite his consistent performances for Hampshire in England and in domestic first-class cricket.

Head best batter in world, his performances against Bumrah exemplify fearless approach: Chappell

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Travis Head is the "best batter in the world" whose performances against Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy exemplify his fearless approach and "Australian way of batting", feels legendary cricketer Greg Chappell. Head has dominated the batting chart with 409 runs in the first three Tests with two hundreds and a fifty, and former Australia captain Chappell believes his simplicity and aggression are behind his success as a Test batter. "Head's performances against Jasprit Bumrah in this series exemplify his fearless approach. While most batsmen struggle to survive Bumrah's unorthodox action, sharp pace, and relentless accuracy, Head has treated him like any other bowler," Chappell wrote in Sydney Morning Herald. "By playing with intent and looking to score off Bumrah, Head has not only nullified his threat but disrupted his rhythm.

His ability to dispatch short deliveries with authority and drive fuller ones with precision has been remarkable, underscoring the strides he has made," he added. Chappell said Head's flourish in the recent years across formats is due to an uncluttered mindset. "From a raw, unpredictable talent to one of the most dominant male batters in world cricket, Travis Head has soared into his prime with an almost ethereal elegance," Chappell wrote. "His story is not just about overcoming challenges but about embracing a simplicity of style that has become his hallmark — one that allows his mind to remain uncluttered and his game devastatingly effective," he added. Chappell termed Head's 152 against England in the 2021-22 series as the "turning point". "The turning point came during the 2021 Ashes. Head's counterattacking 152 in Brisbane was a revelation. Walking in at 5-195, he transformed the game with a whirlwind innings, taking the opposition bowlers apart and



shifting the momentum firmly in Australia's favour," he wrote. "That innings wasn't just about

runs, it was a statement of intent, a declaration that he would play his way."

Chappell believes Head is one of the most feared batters in the world who can dictate terms

Bumrah equals Ashwin's record for rating points in ICC Ranking for Bowlers

PTI ■ DUBAI

Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah got a huge boost on the eve of the Boxing Day Test when he achieved the joint-highest rating ever by an Indian player, equalling the record held by spinner Ravichandran Ashwin in the ICC Ranking for Bowlers. The quick gained 14 rating points following his 9/94 in the drawn third Test at Brisbane to not only equal Ashwin's highest-ever 904 rating points but also consolidate his position at the top of the rankings. Bumrah has a chance to better Ashwin's rating points, which the now-retired off-spinner achieved in



December 2016, when the fourth match of the Border-Gavaskar Test begins at the MCG on Thursday. South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (856) and Australia's Josh Hazlewood (852) are trailing

the Indian pacer at the second and third place respectively. Charismatic Australian batter Travis Head's stellar run in the ongoing series against India helped him climb to fourth spot (825 rating

points) in the Test Ranking for Batters. He is still behind the England duo of Joe Root (895) and Harry Brook (876), and former New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson (867). Head smashed a scintillating 152 at the Gabba to follow up his century in the second Test at Adelaide. Compatriot Steve Smith's century at the Gabba got him into the top-10 once again. Among all-rounders, India's Ravindra Jadeja continues to lead the lead the chart with 424 rating points, while Australia skipper Pat Cummins earned his place back in the top-10, following his four wickets and 42 runs in the third Test at Gabba.

Cristiano Ronaldo takes family to Lapland for Christmas vacation

AP ■ HELSINKI

Soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo said it was "just a little cold" as he posed bare-chested in the snow before taking an icy dip in a pool during a Christmas vacation in Finland's Lapland region. The 39-year-old Portuguese international traveled with partner Georgina Rodriguez and their children, who met Santa Claus in a 10-minute video posted online by Ronaldo on Tuesday. The former Real Madrid and Manchester United great appeared to decline to ski with his family. He wished his followers — including 645 million on Instagram — a "Merry Christmas" in Spanish.

