

Low, middle income Indian families one hospitalisation away from financial ruins

Hyderabad: Low and middle income families in India are just one hospital admission away from a major financial ruin. Individuals suffering from multiple health complications and seeking treatment at private hospitals face a huge risk of catastrophic health expenditure, either as an outpatient or inpatient, a recent study said. Over half of patients (51 percent) with multiple morbidities (two or more chronic health conditions) face significant financial burden in private hospitals. The out-of-pocket expenses for outpatient care on private hospitals average Rs 950 while inpatient care costs soar to Rs 60,438, a clear indication of the immense financial challenge of accessing quality healthcare for middle and low-income families in India.

The research 'Assessing the financial burden of multi-morbidity among patients aged 30 and above in India', published in BMC Health Services Research (January 15, 2025), highlights how low and middle-income families financially struggle while accessing quality health care in India. As part of the study, the research team analyzed health care data of 26,905 patients from across the country. "Patients with multiple morbidities rely on private healthcare, which exacerbates the financial burden on them, as private care is often associated with higher out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE), placing a significant strain on these individuals," the researchers said. In outpatient care, the out-of-pocket expenditure for medicines is Rs 682 for such patients and in inpatient wards, the cost of purchasing the medicines is a staggering Rs 21,206. Needless to say, even the diagnostic tests that are taken-up for patients with multiple health complications is higher in private hospitals. The research



study indicated that a typical patient with multiple health complications incurs at Rs 10,807 towards diagnostic tests alone. The study indicated that expenditure for people with Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) like cancer, heart ailments, chronic kidney disease and liver ailments is even more. "Patients with NCDs incur higher out-of-pocket expenditure for both outpatient and inpatient

care across all illness categories. For multi-morbidity in inpatient care, the out-of-pocket for those with NCDs is Rs. 75,882, compared to Rs. 53,196 for patients without NCDs.

- 51.3 percent of patients with multiple health issues suffer huge expenses in OPs
- 69.6 percent of inpatients in private hospitals suffer catastrophic health expenditure
- 79.9 percent of inpatients from rural areas

- suffer catastrophic health expenditure
- 80 percent of elderly inpatients in private hospitals suffer high medical expenses
- Patients with more than one chronic health conditions face financial ruin

- Due to multiple health complications, 60 percent of patients prefer private hospitals
- Low and middle income families suffer major out of pocket expenditure in India

What are Uniform Civil Code rules that Uttarakhand government has approved

New Delhi: The Uniform Civil Code (UCC) comes into effect today, January 27 in Uttarakhand, making it the first State in independent India to implement such a law. The rules will also apply to the people of Uttarakhand living outside it. The landmark legislation will be rolled out at around 12:30 pm. State Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami will also unveil the UCC portal, just ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the State on Monday, January 27. The law's implementation was a major commitment of the BJP in the run-up to the 2022 Assembly polls which saw the party storm to power for a second consecutive term, something never done by any other party in the State since its creation in 2000. The rules proposed by the Shatrughan Singh Committee for the UCC initially presented to the Chief Minister on October 18, 2024, were subject to some revisions.

The rules

The extensive 400-page document has been condensed to under 100 pages, with only provisions concerning registration of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and live-in being retained, sources said. The revised UCC rules no longer include the proposal for a separate process to handle disputes related to personal law. It ensures equal rights in property for both sons and daughters. Polygamy will be prohibited, and monogamy will be the norm under the landmark legislation. The UCC requires men who have attained the age of 21 and women who are 18 years of age to enter a union through marriage. Though the marriages will be solemnised as per religious customs of the couple, the registration of the marriage will be mandatory. There will be no distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children



now as the law aims to abolish this distinction over property rights. Once the UCC is implemented, all children will be recognised as biological offspring. The law will also

ensure that children adopted, born through surrogacy, or conceived via assisted reproductive technology will be treated equally to biological children.

Trump tariff threat: India should reciprocate if U.S. imposes additional duties on domestic goods

India should respond with equal measures if the newly elected U.S. President Donald Trump imposes higher tariffs on domestic goods, trade experts say. They noted that India has previously implemented retaliatory customs duties on several U.S. products, such as apples, in response to what it deemed "illegal" tariffs imposed by America on certain steel and aluminium products. In December last year, Mr. Trump has said India charges "a lot" of tariffs, reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for what New Delhi will impose on the import of certain American products.

"India should respond firmly and in equal measures," economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) Founder Ajay Srivastava said. In 2018, when the U.S. taxed Indian steel and aluminium, India retaliated by raising tariffs on 29 U.S. products, recovering equivalent revenue. "This measured response showed India's capability to protect its trade interests while staying balanced," Mr. Srivastava said. He added that Indian exporters may face high customs duties for goods like automobiles, textiles and pharmaceuticals if the new U.S. administration decides to pursue the 'America First' agenda. Trump shocks in 2025 | What lies in store for India? | Worldview0 seconds of 10 minutes, 39 seconds Volume 0% Watch: Trump shocks in 2025 | What lies in store for India? | WorldviewHe also said that if Mr. Trump would tighten H-1B visa rules, it may impact the growth of Indian IT firms. Over 80% of India's IT export earnings come from the U.S. The U.S. is India's largest trading partner, accounting for over \$190 billion of annual trade. Sharing similar views, international trade expert Abhijit Das said that additional duties by the U.S., if implemented, will lock the market for Indian goods. "Of course, India should retaliate with equal measures," Mr. Das said, adding that imposing retaliatory customs duties would strengthen India's position in negotiating the removal of "illegal" tariffs in the future. "In the case of imposition of duties by the U.S., India should explain why those are illegal and if not withdrawn, we should not hesitate in taking retaliatory measures," he said adding Mr. Trump has complaints in several sectors like agri goods, industrial products, services, intellectual property rights and digital trade. Consult stakeholders Another expert said that the Indian government should do a comprehensive consultation with the stakeholders and prepare itself to deal with any such move by the new American authorities. Trade experts further stated that Mr. Trump's claim that India is an "abuser" of import tariffs is unfair as many nations including America protect their domestic industries by imposing high customs duties on certain products. In October 2020 also, Mr. Trump labelled India as the 'tariff king'. According to WTO's World Tariff Profiles 2023, the U.S. also imposes high duties on items like dairy products (188%), fruits and vegetables (132%), coffee, tea, cocoa and spices (53%), cereals and food preparations (193%), oilseeds, fats and oils (164%), beverages and tobacco (150%), fish and fish products (35%), minerals and metals (187%), and chemicals (56%). International trade expert Biswajit Dhar also said that Trump would increase tariffs in various sectors as he has to follow his call for MAGA (Make America Great Again). "India has a trade surplus with the US and they have

flagged this issue earlier several times. We have always favoured consultations, we have not done things unilaterally. But if things do not work out, we should also consider proportionate measures," Mr. Dhar said. However, certain exporters are of the view that Mr. Trump will not go ahead with its threat as a number of U.S. companies have shown interest to invest in India and any move to impose duties will impact them also. "I think, India-US trade relations will be strengthened further," Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) President Ashwani Kumar said. The exporters added that in fact, India will get an opportunity to increase exports to the U.S. if America would impose higher duties on Chinese goods. Going by the data, during 2001-23, at a Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR), India's exports to America rose by 10.48%. In this period, the US imports from the world have grown by 4.76 per cent.

They added that the two economies have strongly integrated with each other through various agreements, including the



IEPF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity) and other bilateral mechanisms. The U.S. is the largest trading partner of India in 2023-24. India's exports stood at \$77.51 billion, while imports aggre-

gated at \$42.2 billion in the last fiscal. During April-December this fiscal, the country's exports to America rose by 5.57% to about \$60 billion, while imports grew by about 2% to \$33.4 billion.

Sri Lankan media spotlights Dissanayake's 'balancing act' with India and China

Following Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's recent, four-day visit to China, analysis and commentary in local media pointed to the leader's "balancing act" with Beijing and New Delhi, Colombo's two key partners vying for greater strategic influence on the island. During Mr. Dissanayake's state visit from January 14 to 17, 2025, close on the heels of his India visit in December 2024, he announced a \$ 3.7 billion investment — "one of our largest FDIs" — from Sinopec for a refinery in the southern Hambantota district. Meanwhile, addressing a public rally of supporters following his return, President Dissanayake said his government is discussing a joint venture with India to refurbish world War II era oil storage tanks in the eastern Trincomalee district and develop it as a hub, referring to a project that many past governments have discussed. Around Mr. Dissanayake's visit, Sri Lanka and China issued a 21-point joint statement, covering various bilateral matters. Sri Lanka sought more Chinese investment, and the two sides committed to the early conclusion of a comprehensive free trade agreement. Further, Sri Lanka reaffirmed its "strong commitment" to the one-China principle, recognising Taiwan as an "inalienable part" of China's territory, and said it "will firmly support China on issues related to Xizang and Xinjiang". While the joint statement made no mention of Chinese marine research vessels calling at Sri Lankan ports, an issue New Delhi remains highly sensitive to, the two sides agreed to continue maritime cooperation, and "pool their strength to build a maritime community with a shared future." In its coverage since, Sri Lankan media pointed to the comparable, red-carpet honour and ceremonial welcome accorded to President Dissanayake in both New Delhi and Beijing. In its latest editorial, weekend newspaper Sunday Times observed that the two joint statements, issued with the governments of



India and China, were "similar in content and intention". "Both aspirants for global power status and leadership roles in the Global South are wooing Sri Lanka through a strategic lens: India through its 'Neighbourhood First and SAGAR' framework and China through the BRI," the editorial noted, adding: "It seems that Sri Lanka has agreed to both jealous suitors, rendering its future balance of relations an extremely fraught tightrope walk." Meanwhile, Colombo-based analyst and disinformation researcher Sanjana Hattotuwa highlighted Sri Lanka's "careful diplomatic balancing" in both statements. Sri Lanka's joint statement with India focused heavily on "specific development projects" and "granular implementation details", while its statement with China emphasised cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and broader economic frameworks, he observed. Weekend newspaper Sunday Morning took the view that "India, which came to Sri Lanka's rescue during the financial crisis, will understandably feel slighted, for although it pushed for finalisation of sev-

eral large-scale projects...the Lankan delegation pushed for more time to study the projects. However, such concern does not appear to be applicable to the Chinese, where 15 agreements were signed, sealed, and delivered with lightning speed." In his recent column titled 'AKD's tightrope walk between China and India', Senior journalist and political commentator V. Thanabalasingham wrote that maintaining "a non-hostile" approach to China and India "will undoubtedly be a long-term challenge for the Sri Lankan Government." Critics' take Following announcements on agreements inked with China, some detractors slammed the Dissanayake government for merely taking forward predecessor governments' initiatives with India and China, or for "compromising" Sri Lanka's interests. Pubudu Jayagoda, from the Frontline Socialist Party — formed in 2012 by a breakaway faction of Mr. Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP or People's Liberation Front) — accused the government of allowing India to control Sri Lanka's north and east.

Master Every Moment. The all-new BMW X3 launched in India.

Hyderabad :The all-new BMW X3 was launched in India on the second day of the Auto Expo 2025. Locally produced at BMW Group Plant Chennai, this Sports Activity Vehicle (SAV) will be available in the country in both petrol as well as diesel powertrains. The all-new BMW X3 can be booked at BMW dealerships across India and at www.bmw.in. Deliveries will commence from April 2025.

Over two decades, the BMW X3 has reigned supreme as the best-selling premium model in its class, globally. It was the BMW X3 that first established the SAV segment in the premium midsize class and it plays a key role in the global success story of BMW X models. First-generation BMW X3 was the first vehicle to offer the BMW xDrive intelligent all-wheel-drive system. Now in its fourth-generation avatar, the all-new BMW X3 makes its way to India with dominant road presence, completely redefined interiors and best-in-class technology.

Mr. Vikram Pawah, President and CEO, BMW Group India said, "With the launch of the all-new BMW X3, modernity, presence, and sporting flair have reached unprecedented heights. As the fourth generation of the iconic Sports Activity Vehicle, the X3 embarks on a new era. Now even

bigger than before, it has reinvented itself with a reimagined design, unparalleled luxury and a new digital character. But some things don't change - the versatile all-new BMW X3 delivers outstanding all-terrain performance, power and efficiency. Adventure is calling out louder than ever!" The car is available at an ex-showroom price of –The all-new BMW X3 xDrive20 M Sport , INR 75,80,000 The all-new BMW X3 xDrive20d M Sport INR 77,80,000 *Price prevailing at the time of invoicing will be applicable. Ex-showroom prices inclusive of GST (incl. compensation cess) as applicable but exclude Road Tax, Tax Collected at Source (TCS), GST on Tax collected at source, RTO statutory taxes/fees, other local tax cess levies and insurance. Price and options are subject to change without prior notice. For further information, please contact the local authorised BMW Dealer.

The car is available in following paintworks – Dune Grey Metallic, Alpine White, Brooklyn Grey Metallic, Individual Tanzanite Blue and Black Sapphire Metallic and the following upholstery options: Veganza Espresso Brown and Veganza Calm Beige.

Service Inclusive and Service Inclusive



Plus further reduce cost of ownership. Customers can choose from a variety of service plans according to duration and mileage. The packages cover Condition Based Service (CBS) and maintenance work with plans starting from 3 yrs / 40,000 kms, package extension available up to 10 yrs / 2,00,000 kms. An option to extend the warranty program up to 10 years is also available.

Thanks to BMW India Financial Services, customized and flexible financial solutions are designed as per individual require-

ments. Customers can experience unparalleled convenience and savings with BMW 360° finance plan. Customers can discover the joy of owning the all-new BMW X3 with BMW 360° at a monthly instalment starting at just INR 77,999 per month, wherein additionally, they have complete peace of mind owing to the assured buyback at the end of tenure.

Further, the purchase can be enhanced and customized by financing BMW Service Inclusive, BMW Secure and Extended Warranty packages too.

Pearl Academy launches India's First Meta Campus at Comic Con Bengaluru 2025



Hyderabad :In a groundbreaking move that is set to revolutionise the landscape of education in India, Pearl Academy, the country's leading creative education institutions, has launched India's first Meta Campus at Comic Con Bengaluru 2025. This initiative marks a historic milestone in the institution's 32-year legacy, pushing the boundaries of education by integrating cutting-edge technology with creativity in a fully immersive virtual environment. The Pearl 2.0 Meta Campus takes the educational experience to unprecedented heights, offering visi-

tors the chance to explore the institution's diverse offerings, including programs offered, introduction to the faculty, student project showcase, student engagement events, and much more – all within a futuristic metaverse. It's not just a campus; it's an experience, designed to transform how we learn, engage, and interact in the world of education.

In a first-of-its-kind concept, the Meta Campus serves as a digital twin of Pearl Academy's physical campus, spread across a series of immersive zones. Each zone represents different academic disciplines, com-

plete with interactive touchpoints such as a virtual counsellor that answers real-time queries, 3D installations, live fashion shows, student work showcases, 'spin the wheel' activities, coin smash challenge, photo booth, and more. Visitors at Comic Con had the unique opportunity to experience the Meta Campus firsthand, using VR headsets for an even deeper, more immersive journey into the future of education. They interacted with the Virtual Counsellor and competed for exciting merchandise in the Coin Smash Challenge, an interactive game within the Meta Campus. Talking about the launch, CB Arun Kumar, Dean, Communication Design, Film and Gaming at Pearl Academy, said "We are

absolutely thrilled to launch India's first Meta Campus at Comic Con Bengaluru 2025. This initiative is a testament to Pearl Academy's commitment to staying at the forefront of creative education.

As the OGs of creative education in India, Pearl Academy has carved a niche by nurturing creativity and equipping students with the skills to thrive in the dynamic worlds of Communication Design, Product Design, Fashion, Interiors and Business Management. Through this immersive virtual experience, we are embracing the future of learning, where technology and creativity converge to provide our students with an exceptional, future-ready educational experience."

Inauguration of Telangana Prisons Department Retreat 2024

Hyderabad :The Telangana Prisons Department Retreat 2024 was inaugurated today by the Chief Guest, Sri K. Ramakrishna Rao, IAS, Special Chief Secretary to the Government, Finance & Planning Departments, Government of Telangana. The event was graced by the presence of Dr. Soumya Mishra, IPS, Director General of Prisons & Correctional Services, along with Sri Y. Rajesh, IG of Prisons; Sri N. Murali Babu, IG of Prisons; Dr. D. Srinivas, DIG of Prisons (Hyderabad Range); Sri M. Sampath, DIG of Prisons (Warangal Range); and other senior prison personnel. The retreat focused on key issues



such as technology, drug addiction, overcrowding, security, welfare, and women's prisons, with the aim of enhancing prison administration and reforms.

Students from India achieve top results in Outstanding Cambridge Learner Awards



Hyderabad :The International Education group at Cambridge University Press & Assessment (Cambridge) is delighted to announce the winners of the Outstanding Cambridge Learner Awards in India. The awards celebrate the outstanding academic achievements of secondary school learners in India in the November 2023, March and June 2024 Cambridge examination series.

In total, 228 students in India received awards, for exceptional performance in Cambridge IGCSE™ and International AS & A Level examinations across a wide range of subjects. The winners, felicitated at a ceremony in Mumbai, include 82 students who won 'Top in the World' awards for achieving the highest mark in the world in a single subject, and 110 students who attained the highest mark in India in a single subject. The awards show that students in India are performing particularly well in Mathematics followed by English. In India, 88% of the students who have excelled in the 'Top in World' Award category are from Mathematics and English disciplines, with Mathematics alone accounting for 80%. The Outstanding Cambridge Learner Awards programme celebrates the success of students taking examinations awarded by Cambridge International Education in over 40 countries around the world. Cambridge qualifications prepare and equip learners with the skills they need to thrive at university and beyond. The world's best higher education institutions recognise Cambridge qualifications and value the critical thinking skills, independent research abilities and deep subject knowledge that Cambridge learners bring to university.

Vinay Sharma, Sr VP, Cambridge International Education South Asia, said: 'Con-

gratulations to our learners who have achieved remarkable success. Cambridge learners are at the heart of everything we do. Every element of a Cambridge education – the curriculum, teaching and learning, resources and assessment – is carefully designed to help learners reach their potential and thrive in life. We also sincerely thank

parents and educators for their unwavering support towards our learners.' The awards also celebrate the achievements of those learners who have been recognised for 'High Achievement', based on outstanding performance in subjects which are not yet so widely taken in India, and learners who have achieved the total highest cumulative marks

across a number of subjects. The winning students out-performed thousands of candidates worldwide who sat Cambridge examinations.

Cambridge has over 160 years' experience in delivering international exams and provides education to nearly one million students every year.

Challenge Your Limits: BMW Motorrad India launches the new BMW S 1000 RR.

Hyderabad :The new BMW S 1000 RR has been launched in India on the second day of Auto Expo 2025. This heavily popular super sport bike will be available in the country as a completely built-up unit. Bookings are open now throughout the BMW Motorrad dealer network and deliveries will commence from April 2025 onwards.

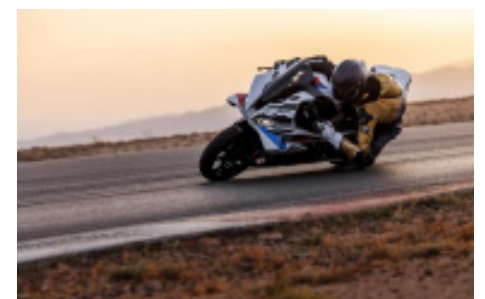
Mr. Vikram Pawah, President and CEO, BMW Group India said, "The new BMW S 1000 RR continues with its endless strive for improvement and success securing its leading position. It is a favourite amongst racing enthusiasts looking out for the next thrill. The new BMW S 1000 RR with even higher track performance is the Superbike icon. BMW Motorrad has once again set emphasis on the sporty aspirations and the BMW DNA, making what's good even better." The introductory ex-showroom prices starts from: The BMW S 1000 RR - INR 21,10,000

*Prices prevailing at the time of invoicing will be applicable. Delivery will be made ex-showroom. Ex-showroom price (in-

clusive of GST and compensation cess) as applicable but excludes Road Tax, RTO statutory taxes/fees, other local tax / cess levies and insurance. Prices and options are subject to change without prior notice. For further information, please contact your local authorized BMW Motorrad Dealer.

The dynamic design of the new RR is supported by three attractive colour options - Black Storm Metallic, Bluestone metallic (with Style sport) and Light White solid / M Motorsport (with M Package).

Riders can further customise with two optional packages – Dynamic and M. The Dynamic package sharpens the RR's racing qualities for added performance and comfort. The package includes: DDC electronic chassis, which is exclusive to use in motorsports here, for optimum damping and optimum road contact in every riding situation, additionally Electronic cruise control and heated grips are also included. The M package sharpens the sporty profile of the RR. Exclusive Light white/M Motorsport paintwork is only included in this package



and gives the motorcycle a powerful look. The package includes: M Sport seat for optimum support on the hunt for crucial milliseconds. Weight-optimised M Carbon wheels with M Tapes for maximum riding dynamics. In addition, the M footrest system and the black fuel filler cap. To enable customers to own BMW Motorrad motorcycles of their choice, BMW Financial Services India offers flexible and hassle-free finance solutions. What's more, it goes beyond just motorcycles – with accessories financing, ensuring that you're fully equipped for all your riding experiences.

Blenders Pride Fashion Tour: 'The One and Only' Gateway into an Iconic and En Vogue World.

Hyderabad :Blenders Pride Fashion Tour unveils its most iconic edition yet, creating 'The One and Only' world where fashion is just the beginning. The tour's 2025 edition will unleash a cutting-edge avatar that transcends into the extraordinary, bringing stellar showcases across global fashion, music, and entertainment that inspire pure awe. Joining forces once again with Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI), the Fashion Tour will celebrate its glamorous and indulgent essence, with some of India's most sought-after voices in fashion, together with India's most desirable style icons, that will undoubtedly get the country talking.

In each city, the tour will create distinct narratives, showcasing unique interpretations of its iconic world. It will set course in Gurugram, with a magnificent celebration of India's one true fashion icon, Rohit Bal, reliving his artistic genius with over 70 renowned personalities from fashion, Bollywood, Media and Business, who have been his closest tribe over the years. In Mumbai, the tour will present a statement-making fashion spectacle with Tarun Tahiliani, set against the iconic backdrop of the glamour capital of India, that breaks through the norms of contemporary Indian fashion, redefining it for the world. Take its alluring world to the boom town cities of Chandigarh, Guwahati and Vizag, the tour will turn each destination into a groundbreaking milestone that sets the ultimate benchmark for the future of fashion. In Chandigarh, Kanika Goyal with Jacqueline Fernandez will present an electrifying concept fusing street-style art with the lustre of haute fashion. In Guwahati, Jaywalking with Tiger Shroff will bring his unique perspective



GURUGRAM | MUMBAI | CHANDIGARH | GUWAHATI | VIZAG

by blending his abstract creativity with the laid-back essence of AT-LEISURE. In Vizag, Bloni by Akshit Bansal with Tamannaah Bhatia will set the front row to the future, crafting a collision of fashion with futuristic technology. Kartik Mohindra, Chief Marketing Officer, Pernod Ricard India said, "This year's edition of Blenders Pride Fashion Tour marks yet another bold step in our vision to become

'The One and Only' gateway into our iconic and en vogue world. Together with FDCI, we're creating an unmistakable realm where every designer, celebrity, and experience will converge to create a spectacular fusion of creativity. The tour diversifies its trail into newer cities, where our young consumers are poised to be inspired by global fashion icons & experiences, leaving them in awe of

the brand." Sunil Sethi, Chairman, FDCI expressed, "FDCI is thrilled with its collaboration with Blenders Pride Fashion Tour, bringing together the two powerhouses of fashion, that amplifies our commitment to shaping its future. We're creating an impressive new edition that will catch the ever-evolving pulse of global fashion and will fascinate audiences nationwide."

Beyond parental consent: Why India needs an age appropriate design code



India is at a fascinating digital crossroads. We're witnessing the first generation of true digital natives, with an active under-

18 internet user base, and a striking percentage of these users actively engaging with internet connected devices, daily. At the

backdrop of this is a heightened sense of tech optimism - with India emerging as a digital powerhouse. While the past decade has seen considerable debate in India around content moderation, these conversations have largely centred on free speech and allied considerations. There is a conspicuous gap in addressing youth safety concertedly--and the implications of this are far reaching. The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act and draft rules, while well intentioned, do not address the issue holistically. A parental consent-led approach is, by design, limited in its ability to meet our goal of ensuring u-18's online safety. In India, there is an evident digital literacy gap between u-18s and their parents. In rural India, where only 29% of women have internet access compared to 52% of men, parents, especially mothers lack the ability to give informed consent. That over 20% of internet users use shared devices adds to this complexity. For u-18s in low-income or marginalized families, stringent verification processes may mean exclusion. What India needs is a well-considered, contextual framework that moves beyond a parental consent binary, and addresses the connection between technological access, developmental psychology, socioeconomic mobility and digital literacy. A systems-based approach requiring the inter-

ests of a child to be taken into consideration in product design and development ensures that child safety and privacy are embedded into the core of digital platform design and operation. One such approach is the development of an Age Appropriate Design Code (AADC) or Children's Code, as developed in the United Kingdom, California, and several other jurisdictions. These laws have driven significant improvements from online platforms to better safeguard their users. This approach ensures that products are tailored to the age of the users, applying suitable standards in an age appropriate manner. In an AADC framework, high privacy settings are the default, with minimal data collection and retention. AADCs also require the creation of parental control tools. The concept of appropriate design is foundational to our approach at Snapchat: our teams, products, policies, and partnerships apply safety by design principles to keep Snapchatters safe and to safeguard their privacy. We are strong supporters of regulation which promotes the safe and responsible design of online platforms. This is a complex exercise that needs separate, contextual consideration, outside of the broader debate on personal data protection. It requires a framework that accounts for the age range of the audience, the complexity of the service provided.

'Like Don Bosco and St Mary's': Assam's iconic govt schools, which lagged as private ones raced ahead, are getting a makeover

But Sumi now has a new school building to look forward to. Her Bezera Higher Secondary School in Assam's Kamrup district will be the first to be upgraded with more space and better facilities under a state government plan to overhaul the infrastructure of old government schools in each Assembly constituency. Sumi is most looking forward to her school having enough classrooms and teachers to allow classes to be divided into sections. Assam School, Bezera school, Assam Bezera Higher Secondary School, Assam government school, Indian express news, current affairs The new building of the Bezera Higher Secondary School in Kamrup district of Assam. (Sukrita Baruah)

The Bezera school, established 75 years ago, is the oldest and used to be one of the most prestigious in the area. Its historic, traditional-style building was demolished over a year ago to give way to a gleaming new three-storey structure with an investment of Rs 8 crore. In the intervening period, Sumi and other students were moved to makeshift classrooms in a separate building. While this is the first old government school in Assam to have its infrastructure overhauled under the plan, work is underway to modernise three such schools in each of the 126 Assembly constituencies in the state, with each project estimated to cost Rs 8-10 crore. Inaugurating the new building during the school's diamond jubilee celebration last week, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who is also the local MLA, declared that these vernacular-medium schools would be comparable to "Don Bosco and St Mary's" — convent schools that have long been held as the finest in the state. Principal Debendra Nath Deka, who is also an alumnus of the school, said that while the old school building had 12 rooms, the new one has 34.

"The infrastructure will include laboratories, tinkering labs, computer labs, and smart classes. It is an Assamese-medium school, but in the next academic session starting in April, it will be dual medium, with both Assamese and English. We now have 806 students in the school from nursery to Class 12. We hope that when people see the new school building, they will see it as no less than a private school and enrol their children here," he says. The school's surroundings are rural, and its students are primarily from lower and lower-middle-class families. Its prestige has dwindled over the years, but its current staff — many of whom are also alumni — hope the redevelopment will reverse the slide. Apart from new infrastructure, the school has other needs, too — teachers point out that while there are 79 teaching posts, only 35 have been filled. While higher secondary classes currently face the challenge of too many students stuffed into a class because of a lack of rooms and teachers, enrollment is relatively thin in the lower classes. Several private schools have also come up in the area, reducing the appeal of the old government school, staff say. "There are 25 schools within a five-kilometre radius. Of these, there are two big private schools, and one is English-medium. Our school has survived while competing with these, which is a matter of pride in itself. Especially at the primary and middle school level, many parents would rather send

their children to a private school even though we provide free education. We hope and expect that many people will change their minds (with the redevelopment taking place)," says Bhupen Deka, an office assistant at the school and an alumnus. Jayram Singh Brahma, Joint Director of Secondary Education in the state government, says all the schools that will be similarly "upgraded" are old schools with an enrolment of over 500 students. The local MLA or their nominee will be the president of the School Management Committee of at least one such school in their constituency, making these "MLA model schools", he said. With work simultaneously taking place to add new model schools in tea garden areas, Brahma said the focus is also on addressing school dropouts. "According to UDISE (Unified District Information System for Education), the dropout rate at the secondary level is 26 per cent. So, the government is focusing a lot on reducing this through high-quality



schools," he said. At the inauguration of the new building of the Bezera school, class 12 student Jemim Akhtara was listening closely

to speeches about the promised facilities. "It looks good, and I am excited to start classes. I feel proud to be studying here," Jemim said.

A groom, a bride, a mare, and 200 cops — in Rajasthan village, Vijay weds Aruna



Rajasthan village, Rajasthan wedding procession, wedding procession, Bindoli wedding procession, Bindoli, Indian express news, current affairs Security personnel at the wedding procession in Ajmer district of Rajasthan on Tuesday. (Source: PTI) On Tuesday afternoon, the wedding procession of Vijay alias Gopal proceeded from his village of Srinagar, Rajasthan, to his would-be bride Aruna's village, Lavera, about 8 kilometres away. In the last leg of the journey, Vijay sat atop a mare for the traditional 'Bindoli' ceremony. It would have been a usual occurrence — except the mare and the procession were taken out under the watchful eyes of 200 cops from Ajmer's Nasirabad. Anticipating an untoward incident

and having experienced opposition from upper castes earlier, Aruna's father Narayan Khorwal, of the Scheduled Caste Regar, had approached local activists for help.

"Maine socha hum darte rahenge toh kaise kaam chalega (I thought, how will it work if we continue to be scared). My daughter is educated. There are two-three villages here where the circumstances with upper castes are such that we had to seek the administration's help... but today, everything was organised peacefully thanks to the administration and the police," Narayan told. Deputy Superintendent of Police (Nasirabad Circle) Jarnail Singh said, "It (Bindoli) was taken out peacefully and people from the other community were also present during

the procession. Around 200 policemen were deployed as a preventive measure." In July 2005, Narayan's sister Sunita too had faced similar circumstances, and her groom had to be escorted by the police. However, apprehending an untoward incident, the horse owner had vanished with the mare, and the groom had to take a jeep all the way. Last week, Narayan approached Ramesh Chand Bansal, Secretary of Manav Vikas Avam Adikar Kendra Sansthan, and told him of pressure from some locals to skip the mare for the procession as well as DJ music and bursting of firecrackers. Bansal then wrote to the National Human Rights Commission and approached Ajmer Superintendent of Police Vandita Rana.

The Ram Mandir and after

THE inauguration of a Hindu temple and consecration of a deity do not ordinarily make it to global headlines nor do they set alarm bells ringing for many. That the pran pratistha of Ram Lalla on January 22, 2024, did both stands to reason. The Ram temple in Ayodhya is not just a commonplace temple nor is Ram an ordinary member of the vast Hindu pantheon. It is the Ram Mandir built on the sacred ground where as legend has it Lord Ram was born — and where the temple that marked the event was destroyed and a mosque built on the same sacred spot by Islamic invaders. The myth and history are entangled. The violence for repossession of the ground is documented, which has turned it into the predominant focus of Hindu-Muslim conflict in North India.

More than the eminent gathering and official ceremonies, it was the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, not just as part of the distinguished crowd but as the mukhya yajman — the chief patron — appropriately attired as a Hindu devotee and supplicant, seeking the blessings of Lord Ram on behalf of the nation, that signalled the significance of the event. Modi's words "Dev se desh, Ram se rashtra" (from deity to country, from Ram to nation), the leitmotif of his inaugural address, are deceptive in their simplicity but are open to radically different interpretations. Put in context of events leading up to consecration, many sensed in the inauguration of the Ram Mandir and the Hindu rituals the symbolisation of an ongoing transformation of India from a constitutional state to the creation of a "civilisational" state where the government sees itself not merely as a party to a social contract with its citizens, but as the guardian and promoter of a nation's culture and traditions. The speech, seen in juxtaposition of the installation of a Sengol — a traditional sceptre — in the new Parliament building, with images of Prime Minister Modi paying obeisance to Hindu priests and seeking their blessings for the Indian Republic, signalled something spectacularly novel. The blending of Hindu symbolism and India's "Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic committed to Justice, Equality and Liberty for the people" gave the impression of the state moving towards a construction from which many, particularly those who subscribe to Abrahamic religions like Islam and Christianity, felt excluded. In retrospect, the expected electoral bonanza for the BJP in the parliamentary election of 2024, resulting from the deliberate intertwining of Hindu symbols and those of the state, did not happen. The momentum of Hindu mobilisation that was supposed to deliver a resounding victory of over 400 seats to the BJP-led NDA did not materialise. In fact, the BJP candidate — with a string of victories in the past in the Faizabad constituency where the Ram Mandir is located — lost the election. What went wrong?

Speculation in the media sometimes does not take into account the logic of electoral choice. Once the desired objective has been secured, people tend to look out for the next best thing. After the demand for the temple was met, the grim reality of unemployment, apprehensions about the abrogation of reservation for Dalits, and promise of caste quotas appear to have swayed many voters in the North, cutting into the support base of the BJP. To put it bluntly, electorally, Ram could not be sold twice. A critical perusal of developments in Indian politics during the year since the consecration of the Ram Mandir has some important lessons for

observers of the Indian state. They need to stay focused on the significance of two events, demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 and consecration of the statue of Ram Lalla in the Ram Mandir in 2023, built on the ground which many Hindus hold as sacred. Between the two iconic episodes hangs the tale of the moral foundation of the Indian Republic as we know it, and its long-term sustainability. To treat either event as terminal is infructuous. There is plenty of room to manoeuvre between defeatism resulting from the former and triumphalism and complacency of the latter, for citizens, policy makers and thinkers. In transitional societies, the passage from alien rule to independent statehood creates a pressing need to devise a collective identity that would bolster the state and bind the nation together. Protecting order, and simultaneously shaping collective identity, is the twin challenge that confronts leaders of post-colonial states during the phase of transition. The path towards an enduring solution is studded with potential dangers to the very survival of the state and social integration. It is but natural that subjects turned citizens should long to see the symbols that they consider sacred in their private lives in the public sphere, and have them woven into public institutions. Ignoring the religiosity of the masses in the name of dharmnirapekshata — a wall of separation between religion and the state — can be just as hazardous as imposing any particular religion on society as a whole. The former can produce a legitimacy deficit, leading to a sense of thwarted agency and disastrous explosions of righteous anger; and the latter



can keep the communal pot a-simmer, with the perpetual threat of tensions boiling over, as one can see from the breakup of Pakistan and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Recognising the faith of the majority — howsoever diffuse and thinly shared — as primus inter pares, while giving full legitimacy and ensuring basic rights to other belief systems on the lines of European states, might be the best way forward for the country. Especially when it has the world's largest cohort of the young, an estimated 230 million below the age of 18, a generation whose hope and aspiration can outweigh its burdens of history. What stand the government, there-

fore, takes on the Places of Worship Act 1991 — will be instructive and telling. Is every structure open to contestation or after the Ram Mandir, is there a need to take a deep breath, a step back? How will this square with sabka saath and sabka vishwas? These questions are not just one party's. For, to reflect on how the nation can manage this transition in an orderly and democratic manner, without the bloodshed of the English Civil War or the Spanish Reconquista, is a worthwhile challenge for all who are committed to human dignity and respect for the sense of the sacred that lies at the core of all belief systems, at the very heart of our republic.

Maha Kumbh: When Victorian morality collided with Naga Sadhu rituals

Far from the romanticised 'pacifist' and 'tolerant' stereotypes surrounding them, recent videos of a few sadhus beating up 'reporters' have surfaced from the ongoing Maha Kumbh, demonstrating an image of these holy men as unpredictable, status-conscious and ready for a duel at short notice and for perceived slights. This is nothing new. In general, throughout the colonial period when the Magh mela at Triveni Sangam was first repositioned as the Kumbh mela on the lines of the original Kumbh mela in Haridwar, the sadhus and their Akharas have sought to create an exclusive zone for themselves, where they could maintain complete supremacy. This, however, has never been allowed by the government of the day. Beyond being the world's largest gathering, the Maha Kumbh has historically been a site for contestation and dispute. Beyond its religiosity, in colonial times, the fair bore witness to numerous instances that, though now forgotten, helped shape its identity.

Naga Sadhus and Victorian morality While the British banned nudity, it was not easy to enforce it within the arena of a religious festival like the Kumbh. Going around stark naked was a practice and indeed became a key status marker for important Akharas. This contestation of sadhus' practice and British morality led to curious incidents that reveal how both sides resolved it. Sadhus, for instance, fought among themselves over the right to be naked, as recorded in 1861 and 1872, when the Nirmali akhara attempted to walk naked

and was immediately stopped by rival akharas, leading the British to ban all akharas from practising nudity.

This was seen as interference in religion and the British, having learnt their lessons from the 1857 mutiny, devised another way to ensure peace was not disturbed at Kumbh melas. Kama MacLean wrote in "Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad", "sadhus enjoyed their reputation as turbulent and difficult and interpreted British attempts to control them in interesting ways. By the 1880s, the authorities in charge of the mela had found that the most effective way to conduct the processions was to post a European officer to lead each akhara to the waters of the sangam. For the akharas, it was a mark of their importance that a European dignified their procession, and in one incident, at the 1882 Kumbh when an Indian Tahsildar was deputed to lead a procession, the akhara's mahant took it as a slight to the status of his sect and refused to proceed unless he was furnished with a white officer. One was duly supplied."

Failed attempt to monetise Hindu custom In true capitalist spirit, businessmen too began looking at the mela as a business opportunity. "Messers Watson and Summers", for instance, a business firm dealing in uniforms among other goods, hit upon an ingenious idea for the 19th century: they paid ₹200 to the mela fund and sought to collect the hair that pilgrims had 'offered' to the Ganga and sell them to wig-makers in Lon-

don. This is now a widely lucrative business at several temples most notably at the Balaji temple in Tirupati. But back in 1874, this was an entirely new idea. Hindu organisations were able to successfully thwart this attempt by asserting that their religious custom could not be turned into a commercial enterprise.

1924 Kumbh: Why Nehru defied the Bathing Ban

In 1923, heavy rains led to the erosion of the Ganga bank at the sangam making it extremely dangerous for bathing. The British government, therefore, banned bathing at the Ardh Kumbh. This was duly opposed by Hindus who, led by Madan Mohan Malviya, requested the government to undertake urgent repairs and release a sum of ₹20,000 to ensure pilgrims could take the ritual bath. But government inefficiency meant that there was a considerable delay in the release of funds leaving no time to repair the bank, therefore the ban remained in place.

Malviya was joined by Jawaharlal Nehru, who would go on to become the first Prime Minister of independent India, in challenging the ban. On the day before Sankranti, on January 13, 1924, Malviya telegraphed the officer in charge of the Kumbh that the ban was "illegal and improper and unjustly interferes with our liberty and performing our religious duties". The next day on Makar Sankranti when Nehru reached the Sangam it resembled a garrison town with heavy foot and mounted police deployed to prevent bathing.

Is sitting long hours for studies and exam stress behind low back pain in students? Here's why it could be sciatica

The clinic of Dr Vivek Loomba, pain physician, Indian Spinal Injuries Centre in Vasant Kunj, New Delhi, is full of students, most of them aspirants for various competitive exams. A 12th-grade commerce student from East Delhi complains of severe back pain that had been troubling him for over a year. No amount of pain relievers and sprays had given him lasting relief. As his pre-board exams involve long hours of sitting during prep sessions as well as during tests, he is in extreme discomfort. A first-year B.Tech student from Kurukshestra complains of severe back pain for months. Both of them have now been diagnosed as suffering from sciatica, a pain that originates in the sciatic nerve, the largest nerve in the body, running from the lower back down the back of each leg.

When is low back pain indicative of sciatica?

Low back pain is confined around the waist area, localised and is periodic. "In sciatica, the pain is persistent and caused by inflammation in the affected area which compresses or pushes out the nerve, usually sharp, accompanied by a burning, stinging sensation. Sometimes it feels like an electric shock. The pain is so severe that it worsens when moving, sneezing or coughing. Tingling or numbness in the back, butt, leg, foot, or toes is common," he says. For his first patient, Dr Loomba recommended an epidural injection, which is administered in the area around the spinal cord. "It relieved his pain by reducing inflammation from the trapped nerve. The second student needed a nerve and muscle relaxant medication," he says. The case studies are representative of the increase in the number of sciatica cases in teenagers he has been seeing over the past six months, mostly students from classes X and XI. "Long hours of studies, bad posture and lack of physical activity are some of the reasons why youngsters are suffering from sciatica, a condition often dismissed as being a problem of older adults," says Dr Loomba. What is causing sciatica in the young? 1) Study marathons, which involve sitting in one place, lead to muscle weakening. Additionally, there is a lack of physical activity among students preparing for exams. "Setting the alarm to allow yourself to get up every 30 or 45 minutes, stretching and moving around can relieve the pressure on spinal discs," says Dr Loomba.

2) Poor posture, slouching over desks or going with uncomfortable chairs misalign the spine, which can pull strains on the back and compress nerves. "Therefore, good posture involves sitting straight, feet placed flat on the floor. Use a chair that supports the back properly," says the doctor.

3) Nowadays, many teenagers are stuck in front of their screens, rather than engaging in activities that may impact the muscles of their core and back. "For improving overall spinal health, at least 30 minutes a day of exercise is worth doing: one can walk, stretch, or do yoga," says Dr Loomba. Teens should be put on a routine of yoga and swimming, taught to correct their posture by letting them learn to sit and stand appropriately and limit screen time.

4) Overloaded school bags put unnecessary stress on the lower back. "Always select a backpack containing padded straps. It should not weigh more than your body weight by 10 to 15 per cent. Also the weight

should be distributed equally," recommends Dr Loomba.

5) Extra weight increases pressure on your spine, thus aggravating sciatica. "The best way to cope with this condition is simply by keeping your weight in range. The diet should be balanced together with regular physical activity," he adds.

Why is early diagnosis important?

Many patients delay seeking the right care and rely on temporary solutions that do not address the root cause, eventually arriving in more severe conditions. Early diagnosis and targeted treatments are crucial to managing pain effectively.

Are there tell-tale signs that you should not ignore?

Dr Loomba asks patients to be vigilant about the pain radiating from the lower back to one of your legs, numbness or tingling, difficulty standing, walking, or bending. Severe symptoms include sudden loss of bladder control.

What can be done for immediate relief?

Dr Loomba suggests gentle stretches like lying on one's back and pulling knees toward the chest. "Apply cold packs for any



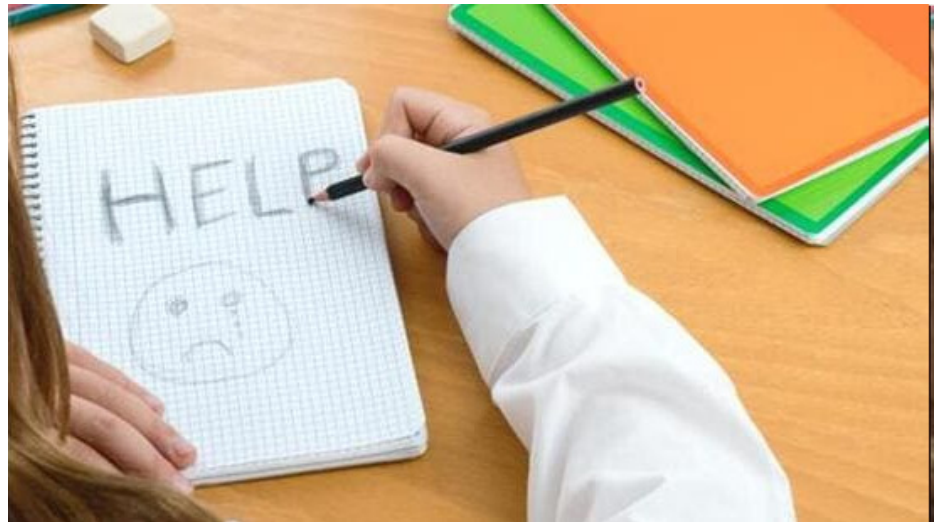
inflammation or swelling, whereas warm packs may be used to relax stiff muscles. Always consult a pain physician before taking any medication for pain management," he says. Long-term solutions include physiotherapy to strengthen the spine and increase flexibility, epidural steroid injections,

which reduce inflammation over time. "Surgical intervention is seldom required, usually reserved for those with severe neurological symptoms that cannot be managed. Approximately nine out of every 10 patients will have a good relief with conservative management," he says.

One in 12 children exposed to online sexual abuse: Lancet

Online child sexual abuse is a global public health issue escalating rapidly due to fast-paced development and access to social media and other virtual contexts. One in 12 children globally has, at one time or other, been exposed to online sexual exploitation or abuse, according to a new study published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* on Tuesday, the first such assessment.

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) is a global public health issue that is rapidly escalating due to fast-paced development and access to social media and other virtual contexts. It refers to a range of sexually abusive and exploitative behaviours that occurs either online or through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including online solicitation, online grooming, exposure to pornography, unwanted or pressured sexting, image-based abuse, sexual extortion, and sexual exploitation. According to the authors, the current study is the first systematic review and meta-analysis aimed at better understanding the global prevalence and nature of OCSEA. "By analysing the results of 123 previously conducted studies between 2010 and 2023, the prevalence of four broader OCSEA subtypes was estimated, finding that one in eight children were affected by image-based abuse (12.6%) and online solicitation (12.5%), one in 21 were affected by online sexual exploitation (4.7%), and one in 28 were affected by sexual extortion (3.5%," read the paper. However, the authors highlight the variation in estimates among available evidence and for different regions, suggesting that more research is needed to draw stronger conclusions about the scale of OCSEA, specifically in regions where the current evidence is either limited



or non-existent, i.e. West Asia, North Africa, and South Asia. The authors also added their results are of great relevance to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to make informed decisions about allocating resources and designing effective prevention and response programmes to protect children worldwide from OCSEA. In a review — simultaneously published in the journal — authors highlighted the need for new, collaborative policy action to protect children and adolescents against the potential mental health harms of artificial intelligence. The viewpoint published also in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* critically examines the current research challenges and limitations related to evaluating the mental health impacts of technology on children and adolescents. The authors argue that current research and policy approaches

to the mental health effects of social media and other digital technologies are inconsistent and often fail to address how different contextual factors can affect mental health. To prepare future generations to safely interact with artificial intelligence (AI), which the authors suggest will likely be integrated into their daily actions, the authors call for researchers and policymakers to closely examine how efforts to regulate social media have failed and apply those lessons to proactively mitigate the negative mental health effects of AI on children and adolescents. "Proactive technology regulation will depend on global collaboration between researchers, the technology industry, policymakers, practitioners, adolescents, and parents," they said in the review. "In cases of abuse among children that we see, online abuse has gained space.