Staggering 82% students from Classes III to V cannot read Class II level text

Hyderabad: At a time when Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy, who is also Education Minister, is boasting about the Young India Skills University and tie-ups with international institutions for skilling, students' learning skills present a gloomy picture in the schools.The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 report released on Tuesday exposed the wide gap between teaching and learning in the schools.As per the report, among students from Classes III to V, 82 per cent of children cannot read the Class II level content. Another concerning figure emerged that 51 percent of children cannot do at least subtraction.The students' learning worsened as they transitioned to the upper primary level with 53.6 per cent of them from Classes VI to VIII being unable to read the Class II level text.

Even more alarming is that 65 per cent of students from Classes VI to VIII failed to perform a simple division, a fundamental math skill expected by the end of primary school. The report also exposed the failure of the FLN programme, which was intro-

duced to improve foundational literacy and numerical skills among students.The survey report, which covered nine districts with 5,306 households released by Pratham, an NGO, has painted a grim picture of reading and arithmetic levels of the school children. Among Class III children, 7.8 per cent cannot even read a letter, only 26.5 per cent can read letters but not words or higher.Further, only 41.3 per cent are able to read words but not Class I level text or higher, 18.3 per cent can read Class I level text but not higher, and 6.2 per cent can read Class II level text. Much more alarming is that State students fared poorly than their counterparts from Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand in the survey.In fact, the percentage of Class III students who can read the Class II level text dropped from 19.9 per cent in 2014 to 6.3 per cent in 2024. Similarly, is the case with Class V and VIII students.Another startling data that has come to limelight is 1.6 per cent out of the total Class VIII students surveyed cannot read even a letter and only 7.7 per cent can read a letter but no words.As for Arithmetic, 2.1 per cent Class VIII students

cannot even recognise numbers from 1 to 9, 2.6 per cent can recognise numbers up to 9 but cannot recognise numbers up to 99 or higher.Further, 19.6 per cent students can

recognise numbers up to 99 but cannot do subtraction, while 34.6 per cent can do subtraction but not division and 41.1 per cent can do division.

Mindspace REIT acquires commercial space in Hyderabad for Rs 2,038 crore

New Delhi: Realty firm Mindspace Business Parks REIT has acquired 18.2 lakh sq ft commercial area in Hyderabad for Rs 2,038 crore to expand its rent-yielding portfolio.Mindspace REIT, which is listed on stock exchanges, will acquire 100 per cent equity of Sustain Properties Pvt Ltd, which

owns this 18 lakh square feet area. The shareholders of Sustain Properties will be allotted units in Mindspace REIT as consideration.

In a regulatory filing, Mindspace REIT informed that the board has approved "acquisition of 100 per cent equity shareholding

of Sustain Properties holding about 1.82 million (18.2 lakh) square feet of leasable area at Commerzone Raidurg, located at Raidurg, Hyderabad. The deal value is Rs 2,038 crore."Mindpsace REIT reported an 8 per cent increase in its net operating income to Rs 521.8 crore for the quarter ended December 2024 as against Rs 473.1 crore in the year-ago period. The company declared a distribution of Rs 5.32 per unit aggregating to Rs 315.48 crore for its unitholders.

The distribution comprises a dividend of Rs 3.20 per unit aggregating Rs 189.76 crore, interest of Rs 0.22 per unit, aggregating Rs 13.04 crore, repayment of SPV debt of Rs 1.88 per unit, aggregating Rs 111.48

crore and other income of Rs 0.02 per unit, totalling Rs 1.18 crore.For the December quarter of 2024-25 fiscal, the company declared 11 per cent higher distribution than the year-ago period.Mindspace Business Parks REIT, sponsored by K Raheja Corp group, was listed on the Indian bourses in August 2020.

It owns office portfolios in the Mumbai Region, Pune, Hyderabad, and Chennai.At the end of the third quarter, the company had a portfolio of 34.8 million (348 lakh) square feet comprising 26.8 million square feet of completed area, 4.6 million square feet of area under construction and 3.4 million square feet of future development.

Three from Bengaluru held for trading fraud in Hyderabad

Hyderabad: The Hyderabad Cybercrime police uncovered a massive trading fraud linked to cybercriminals operating across India, Nepal, and China and arrested three persons including two bank officials from Bengaluru in connection with the fraud on Wednesday.Preliminary investigation revealed that fraudulent transactions totaling Rs 23 crore had been routed through accounts created and managed by the suspects.The arrested persons are Shubham Kumar Jha, Deputy Manager, RBL

Bank, Bengaluru, Haroon Rasheed Imamuddin Dharawad, Assistant Vice President, Axis Bank, Bengaluru and R Mohan, fabrication business trader from Bengaluru.

According to the police, arrested persons and their associates had over a period of time opened hundreds of mule bank accounts and Gmail IDs using fake identities. These were further provided to cyber fraudsters operating from Nepal and China in exchange for nominal commissions.

Ayodhya a year later: A city, its officials trying to keep pace with pilgrim numbers

A year after the grand consecration ceremony for the Ram Temple, Ayodhya is a city in transition. All across what used to be a Nagar Palika Parishad with an estimated population of about 80,000, the makeover to a major pilgrimage site that gets as many visitors every day – going up to three times – is on.The construction of the temple has had to accommodate for this large footfall, even as the new deadline for its completion is now March 30, 2025.Around the city, roads are being laid, flyovers being built, a struggling traffic police, new hotels in different states of completion, restaurants that have replaced the local halwai, and brisk sales of replicas of the idol installed at the Ram Temple. Change is also visible in the menu of roadside dhabas, where idli-sambhar has replaced puri-sabji as the crowd favourite, as numbers from the South surge.With the authorities putting the footfall between 80,000 and 2.5 lakh per day, locals whose anger at their displacement due to the Ram Temple project was believed to have contributed to the BJP's shock defeat from the Faizabad Lok Sabha seat, feel that the pace of the construction works is crawling since the elections.Ram Prakash, who runs a "chakki" in a lane near the Ram Path from a rented accommodation, talks about his constant struggle with traffic and parking.

Ayodhya Mayor Girish Pati Tripathi says: "All the major civic works are complete, so are the major paths leading to the temple… The works that are on will also be completed soon."Ayodhya, Ayodhya Ram Temple, Ayodhya Ram Mandir Replicas of the Ram Temple idol have been popular among devotees flooding Ayodhya. Nripendra Misra, the chairperson of the construction committee of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, just spent three days in Ayodhya reviewing the progress of the construction work at the temple. After this, he says, he arrived at the date of March 30, 2025, for completion of the main temple, and of July 2025 for the construction of the temple's 1.1-km long "percota (periphery)".The works have to keep the rush of devotees in mind, Misra told The Indian Express. Currently, the numbers are averaging more than two lakh a day as many pilgrims are coming to Ayodhya from the Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj. On Mauni Amavasya day, falling on January 29, the numbers in Ayodhya could rise beyond 3 lakh, say authorities."There are issues in terms of very specialized work but overall the construction is going smoothly. The security of the devotees is the first priority, and we are trying to achieve the best results without compromising on that," says Misra.After completion of the main temple, including the 'Ram Darbar' on the first floor – the idols in white marble which will be installed there are being carved in Jaipur – their next target will be the percota, Misra says.Also coming up on the premises are seven temples dedicated to sages and saints, "symbols of social harmony of that era", Misra says.Ayodhya, Ayodhya Ram Temple, Ayodhya Ram Mandir After completion of the main temple, including the 'Ram Darbar' on the first floor – the idols in white marble which will be installed there are being carved in Jaipur. For the pilgrims waiting in long queues for a darshan, the hustle-bustle of the

construction is barely a distraction. Priya Kumari, who is in a queue outside the Hanuman Garhi Temple, says she is part of a group of 15 who have come from Vaishali in Bihar. "First we took a bath at the Kumbh and then arrived in Ayodhya yesterday… We will wait as long as it takes, but not leave without a darshan."The Maharishi Valmiki International Airport, inaugurated in Ayodhya in December 2023 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, ahead of the Ram Temple consecration, is also under development. Officials said that while the first phase is complete, under which 2,200 metres of runway was laid, its upgrade to 3,750 metres is likely to take another year. Once completed, it would surpass the size of the Lucknow airport's runway, officials said.They are exploring starting international flights soon given the response, they added.Currently, with an approximate footfall of 4,000 a day, about 10-12 flights operate daily, with almost 90% occupancy on planes coming from cities like Delhi, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Hyderabad. Initially, 17 to 18 flights operated daily, but the numbers have fallen since the troubled Spicejet reduced its flights from eight daily to three.

Ayodhya, Ayodhya Ram Temple, Ayodhya Ram Mandir Currently, with an approximate footfall of 4,000 a day, about 10-12 flights operate daily, with almost 90% occupancy on planes coming from cities like Delhi, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Hyderabad. Officials are now hoping to boost the number of pilgrims staying over in Ayodhya, giving its economy a boost. While about 60 new hotels are said to have taken permission to operate in the past one year, some are yet to begin work, and others like the Taj Group's are under construction.The Ayodhya Mayor said that while many star hotels have come up, they are focusing now on building accommodation available at "reasonable" rates. For the Mauni Amavasya rush, for example, preparations are on for a temporary tent city that can accommodate up to 10,000 people.

Ayodhya, Ayodhya Ram Temple, Ayodhya Ram Mandir Authorities put the foot-

fall between 80,000 and 2.5 lakh per day. Saurabh Kapoor, who owns one hotel in Ayodhya and is set to start building another near the Ram Temple, says: "The past year has been very competitive, but it is healthy. New hotels have come up but the demand has also increased. We have a rush on long weekends, special occasions. Like we are completely booked in advance for January 26 (Republic Day, falling on Sunday) and are expecting a rush on Mauni Amavasya," says Kapoor.Some of the major works which are pending are "Panch kosi" and "Pandrah kosi Parikrama Marg', which is about 60% complete as per officials at the Ayodhya Development Authority. The work on the 84 kosi Parikrama Marg covering six districts is also crawling.

Blow to global health body

Among a slew of executive orders Donald Trump signed, soon after taking over as the United States President for a second term, was the one that mandated America's withdrawal from the World Health Organisation (WHO), a development fraught with adverse implications for countries like India. The exit of the US is likely to have a huge financial impact on the global health body since it receives around a fifth of its funds from the country. Essentially, the UN body works with countries to strengthen their primary healthcare and helps them in tackling specific diseases. In India, the WHO participates in and supports several health programmes of the government, such as its work on neglected tropical diseases, HIV-malaria-and tuberculosis and antimicrobial resistance among others. More importantly, it plays a significant role in the country's immunisation programme, with WHO teams even monitoring vaccine coverage. A funding cut like this would mean they will not be able to effectively implement these programmes. In addition, the loss of expertise from the United States would also impact WHO's role of providing guidance. The development comes as no surprise as Trump's hostility towards the global body is well known. The order said the US was withdrawing "due to the organisation's mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic that arose out of China, and other global health crises, its failure to adopt urgently needed reforms, and its inability to demonstrate independence

from the inappropriate political influence of WHO member states".

The order also said the withdrawal was the result of "unfairly onerous payments" the US made to the WHO, which is part of the United Nations. When Trump was still in office the first time around, he was critical of the organisation for being too 'China-centric' in its tackling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump accused the WHO of being biased towards China in how it issued guidance during the outbreak. Under the Biden administration, the US continued to be the largest funder of the WHO and in 2023, it contributed almost one-fifth of the agency's budget. Under the Trump 2.0 administration, the US will cease negotiations towards the pandemic treaty the WHO is working on. The accord aims to better prepare countries to respond to pandemics, create a framework for global cooperation if a pandemic happens, and develop mechanisms for equitably sharing medical countermeasures such as drugs and vaccines. While there is no provision for withdrawing in WHO's constitution, the US Congress, at the time of joining the organisation in 1948, had laid down a condition that said the country could withdraw after giving a one-year notice and meeting the financial obligations of the current year. Some experts are now speculating that the vacuum created by the US exit is likely to be filled by China and countries from the global South, including India, which has emerged as the voice of the global South.

JSW MG Motor India partners with Kotak Mahindra Prime for EV Financing

Hyderabad :JSW MG Motor India today announced its partnership with KMPL to offer a finance solution for its innovative Battery-As-A-Service (BaaS) ownership program to EV customers. With this partnership, KMPL becomes one of the first leading auto financers to support the BaaS concept and will help in furthering its reach to prospective customers. BaaS is a flexible ownership program that significantly reduces the initial acquisition cost, ensuring an economical and hassle-free ownership experience. Launched in September 2024, BaaS has regenerated customer interests back to EVs, which has translated in the growth of EV sales. The growing consumer interest in this one-of-a-kind ownership model was a catalyst in KMPL joining the BaaS bandwagon and curate finance solutions for EV customers. Speaking on the occasion, Gaurav Gupta, Chief Growth Officer, JSW MG Motor India said, "Our pursuit for innovation is relentless and we remain committed to create experiences that enhances consumer delight. With BaaS, we have created a disruption in the market and created a benchmark in the Electric Car industry. It remains our priority to enhance its reach through various finance partners, to enable rapid EV adoption. I wel-

come and thank the KMPL team for partnering with us to extend the BaaS concept to customers. KMPL's vast network and connect with dealer partners will surely be an added advantage for an enhanced penetration of the unique BaaS concept, thereby boosting our EV sales." Sharing views on the partnership, Vyomesh Kapasi, Managing Director and CEO, Kotak Mahindra Prime Limited said "At KMPL, we are dedicated to driving innovation in vehicle financing. We are excited to partner with JSW MG Motor India on their pioneering BaaS EV ownership program. This collaboration aims to enhance the EV financing ecosystem in India by offering innovative and customer friendly finance products across various segments. We are confident that this partnership will further strengthen our finance offerings and support the adoption of electric vehicles."With BaaS, JSW MG Motor India has created a platform that provides the right momentum for rapid EV adoption, by splitting the battery cost from that of the body shell. This means that now customers can own an EV at an affordable price in India by opting for separate financing options for the body shell and the battery KMPL has had business relationship for channel finance and

retail finance with JSW MG Motor India since   the carmaker's inception in India in 2019.

Anantha Rehabilitation Center's Services Are Commendable: Sri Kamalasan Reddy, Director General, Drugs Control Administration & Director, Prohibition & Excise

Hyderabad:Anantha Rehab, South India's largest and most advanced rehabilitation center, has successfully completed its first year of service, marking a milestone in patient recovery and care. Over the past year, the center has become a beacon of hope for patients recovering from strokes, surgeries, trauma, and chronic pain. To commemorate this achievement, Anantha Rehab organized a grand event at the Anantha MK Institute of Medical Sciences in Begumpet, Hyderabad. The event was graced by Sri V. B. Kamalasan Reddy, IPS, Director General, Drugs Control Administration & Director (En-

forcement) (FAC), Prohibition & Excise, Dr. T. Ram Mohan Reddy, MLA of Parigi, Vikarabad District, and Dr. J. Venkati, DMHO, Hyderabad, among other dignitaries.Speaking at the event, *Sri V. B. Kamalasan Reddy, IPS, stated:*

"In today's world, even starting a small business is a challenge. Establishing a rehabilitation center and successfully celebrating its first anniversary is truly remarkable. Anantha Rehab has achieved this success not just by maintaining high standards but also through exceptional patient care and effective management. I extend my heart-

felt congratulations to the management and staff for this outstanding achievement."Over the past year, Anantha Rehab has helped transform over 1,100 lives. Patients who were once paralyzed are now walking again, those in comatose states have regained normalcy, and many suffering from chronic pain have found relief. The center's holistic and innovative approach to rehabilitation has empowered patients with independence and an improved quality of life.Speaking on the occasion, *Dr. M. Chandrasekhar, CEO of Anantha Rehab,* shared"Our goal is not just to restore health but to give our patients a

dignified and independent life. At Anantha Rehab, we combine advanced technology with personalized treatment plans to bring about a fundamental transformation in our patients' lives."

So far, Anantha Rehab has delivered over 30,000 therapy hours. The center pioneers non-invasive brain stimulation, advanced pain management techniques, and integrated transitional care. Anantha Rehab has played a key role in helping knee replacement surgery patients regain mobility faster and has provided pain-free lives to many suffering from chronic conditions.

"Everyone should adhere to road safety rules. Drive responsibily": CP Sudheer Babu IPS*

Rachakonda Commissioner creates a sense of collective responsibility towards Road Safety.

Hyderabad :A mega event *"Road Safety Month-2025"* was organized by the Rachakonda Police Commissionerate in collaboration with Rachakonda Security Council (RKSC) under the leadership of Chairman Sri G Sudheer Babu., IPS, Commissioner of Police, Rachakonda, to commemorate National Road Safety Month 2025. The event, held at ACE Engineering College, brought together students from ACE Engineering College, Vignan Women's Engineering College, and Sanskruti Engineering College, along with college bus drivers, auto drivers and drivers from Srinivasa tours and travels. Around 1200 plus participated in this Road Safety training awareness session.

Key dignitaries, DCP Road Safety Shri K Manohar, DCP Traffic-1 Shri S. Malla Reddy, and DCP Traffic-II Shri. V Sreenivasulu, shared insightful thoughts and advised the students to be mindful of their loved ones while driving. The event also featured parents of road accident victims, who shared their experiences and urged the audience to prioritize road safety.Commissioner of Police Sri G Sudhir

Babu IPS emphasized the crucial role of drivers and students play in ensuring road safety. He encouraged them to become "traffic warriors," supporting the police in preventing accidents. The commissioner appreciated the Rachakonda Security Council's efforts in promoting awareness on various safety issues. He stressed the importance of responsible behavior, urging students and drivers to remain vigilant while walking, cycling, or riding on the road. Furthermore, he took a pledged commitment from everyone to adhere to road safety rules, highlighting that this collective effort can make roads safer for all. The commissioner also acknowledged the support of ACE Engineering College management and appreciated and felicitated the volunteer services of traffic marshalsThe key participants in the event included the Chief Coordinator Ms Savithri Muthyala, Road safety-coordinators M R Rajesh and Jagan Yadav, Suryanarayana Rachakonda Security Council, and Road safety were also in attendance, along with Traffic CI Shri Joseph, Pradeep, traffic ACPs, SHO Ghatkesar, and Traffic Inspectors. Additionally, Smt Archana and Inspector Bhikshapati played important roles in the event.

HDFC ERGO's Optima Lite to make Health Insurance more Affordable Across India

health insurance solution that provides coverage at an affordable premium. Through the launch of this plan, the Company aims to make health insurance more affordable and accessible to the citizens of the country. Optima Lite is a variant of HDFC ERGO's flagship health insurance product – my:Optima Secure, which is one of the most preferred health insurance plans of India. Under the Optima Lite plan, the base sum insured amount is INR 5 and 7.5 Lakh. The customers can also avail benefits such as organ donor expenses, hospitalisation at home, emergency ambulance (road & air both) along with unlimited restorations of base sum insured in a year, under this plan. In addition to the launch of Optima Lite, HDFC ERGO has announced introduction of three new add-ons, which customers can pair with their existing HDFC ERGO health insurance solutions like Optima Secure and Optima Restore Limitless: Unlimited sum insured for a specified number of claims during the policy lifetime.ABCD Chronic Care: Coverage for chronic conditions like Asthma, Blood Pressure, Cholesterol, Diabetes (ABCD) after 30-day waiting period.

Parenthood: Provides coverage for maternity, IVF, and embryo freezing.The above add-ons will be available to the Indian citizens in February 2025. Further, with an aim to offer end-to-end convenience to the customers for the health-related exigencies, HDFC ERGO is launching 'Post Hospitalisation Cashless Claims' feature across all its health insurance solutions, allowing customers to access cashless post-

hospitalisation medication delivery at their doorstep. To avail this facility, customers will need to upload their post-hospitalisation prescriptions at Here App by HDFC ERGO, a unique insurance led ecosystem by the insurer. Upon necessary verifications by the medical team of the HDFC ERGO, the medicines will be delivered at the door step of the customers through a partner e-pharmacy of the insurer, thus, ensuring hassle-free access to prescribed medicines post-hospitalisation. This unique service by HDFC ERGO is expected to further its commitment towards customer service and provide greater convenience to its customers during their times of the team. Speaking about these newly launched health insurance solutions, Parthanil Ghosh, Director and Chief Business Officer, HDFC ERGO General Insurance, said, "As an important stakeholder in facilitating health insurance to the last mile and bringing in convenience to the lives of the customers against health-related emergencies, we at HDFC ERGO are introducing new health insurance solutions which can facilitate in health insurance inclusion till last mile. We believe that our newly launched health insurance solution - Optima Lite, will help in driving this agenda, and will aid in deepening the 'trust' of Indians in health insurance as a reliable safety net. Also, the three new add-ons and the cashless post hospitalisation pharmacy facility through our Here app is yet another testament of the Company to offer make health insurance accessible and convenient to our customers."

Hyderabad :HDFC ERGO General Insurance Company, India's leading private sector general insurance company, announced the launch of Optima Lite, a unique

Inorbit Mall Hyderabad launches "Sparkling Cyberabad" – A CSR initiative towards Urban Cleanliness

Hyderabad:Inorbit Mall Hyderabad with Nirmaan Organization, its NGO partnerand the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC), has launched an initiative to improveurban cleanliness across Cyberabad. As part of the project "Sparkling Cyberabad," six automated electric litter pickup machines will be strategically deployed in high-traffic locations to enhance sanitation and cleanliness in the city.The machines will operate across key areas such as Kondapur (Botanical Garden), Madhapur (Inorbit Mall, Durgam Cheruvu Park), Hitech City (Shilparamam Park, Hitech City food streets, Hitex Arch), and Gachibowli (DLF Street food area, Raidurg Metro Station). Operating six days a week, the machines will help keep public spaces, parks, and tech hubs cleaner, improving the overall environment for both residents and visitors.The project is part of Inorbit Mall Hyderabad's ongoing efforts to contribute to Hyderabad's sustainable growth under Inorbit Cares, its larger Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative. Key representatives from Inorbit Malls, K Raheja Corp, GHMC, Nirmaan Organization, and other stakeholders attended the launch event.Speaking at the event, Upender Reddy, GHMC Zonal Commissioner for Serilingampally Zone, said, "It is the first time that litter cleaning machines have been introduced in GHMC. We express gratitude to Inorbit Malls and K Raheja Corp for bringing about this transformative change that the city has been eagerly awaiting."Shravan Kumar Gone, COO – K Raheja Corp (AP & Telangana) emphasized the importance of supporting this project, noting its significant impact on the cleanliness and well-being of Hyderabad. He said,

"We are proud to support this initiative, which is a significant step towards making Hyderabad a cleaner and more sustainable city. This collaboration will improve cleanliness and inspire other organizations to adopt similar measures."Sharat Belavadi, AVP Operations – Inorbit Malls expressing his enthusiasm for the project said, "As the city continues to grow, so does its infrastructure. We wanted to give back to the community by creating a meaningful impact. We are thrilled to partner with Nirmaan Organization and GHMC to drive this initiative, ensuring that Hyderabad continues to grow as a cleaner, greener city."

Global study estimates Vitamin D as most common deficiency in diabetics, magnesium second-most

Vitamin D is the most common deficiency, affecting over 60 per cent of people with diabetes, according to a global analysis published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) Nutrition, Prevention & Health.The analysis, based on 132 studies conducted between 1998 and 2023 involving more than 52,000 participants, also found that magnesium deficiency affects 42 per cent of people with diabetes, while 28 per cent suffer from iron deficiency.Researchers, including those from the Indian Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR), Rajasthan, said that the study helps assess the global prevalence of micronutrient deficiency -- whereby levels of vitamins and minerals essential for healthy bodily function are far too low -- in people with type 2 diabetes.Women with diabetes were found to be at a higher risk of micronutrient deficits, also termed "hidden hunger," compared to men, the team found.The authors explained that risk factors for developing diabetes include genetic tendencies, along with environmental factors, such as a sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy diet and obesity.Studies have shown that micronutrients have a key role in the development of diabetes, by affecting how glucose is metabolised and insulin pathways. However, this study was aimed to resolve conflicting evidence from previous studies that mainly focused on one specific micronutrient, the authors said."The pooled prevalence of multiple micronutrient deficiency (vitamins, minerals and electrolytes) was 45.30 per cent among T2D patients," they wrote. Further, the prevalence was found to be higher in women with the condition -- at nearly 49 per cent -- compared to men.The analysis also found that vitamin B12 deficiency affects 29 per cent of diabetes patients globally .

Protection for women and children in Syria: A path to inclusive recovery

The Syrian civil war, now in its second decade, has wreaked havoc on the lives of millions, leaving a trail of destruction that extends beyond physical infrastructure to deeply affect the social fabric of the nation. Among those most affected are women and children, who face widespread displacement, violence, and systemic marginalisation. However, the post-conflict period presents a crucial opportunity to rebuild not only the nation's economy and governance but also its approach to human rights and equity. Fostering equal opportunity and protection for women and children can serve as a cornerstone of Syria's recovery, paving the way for a more resilient, inclusive society.

Women and children constitute a significant portion of Syria's internally displaced population and refugees, with over 6.8 million Syrians having fled the country and an additional 6.9 million displaced within its borders. Displacement brings vulnerability: many women have become sole breadwinners after losing male family members to the conflict, while children have been deprived of education, healthcare, and a sense of normalcy. Reports indicate that early marriages have surged as families resort to coping mechanisms to ensure their daughters' safety or economic survival. Similarly, children are being forced into labour, sometimes in hazardous conditions, to support their families. In addition to displacement-related challenges, women and children in Syria face entrenched societal inequities exacerbated by conflict. Women have limited access to decision-making roles, whether in governance or peace negotiations, while patriarchal norms restrict their participation in rebuilding efforts. Children, particularly girls, are often left out of school due to security concerns or discriminatory practices, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

To address these challenges, robust legal and institutional reforms are essential. Syrian authorities, in collaboration with international organisations, must prioritise the development of laws that protect women and children from violence, exploitation, and discrimination. For instance, implementing and enforcing laws against gender-based violence (GBV) can provide a critical safety net for women. This could include criminalising domestic violence and ensuring that survivors have access to legal aid and psychosocial support. Similarly, adopting child protection laws that prohibit child labour and early marriages, coupled with mechanisms to monitor their enforcement, can safeguard children's rights.

An example to emulate is Tunisia, which enacted a comprehensive anti-violence law in 2017 that criminalises domestic violence and establishes protective measures for survivors. While the contexts differ, Syria can adopt similar frameworks, ensuring they align with its unique socio-cultural and political environment. Education is a vital tool for breaking the cycle of marginalisation and fostering equality. Efforts must be made to rebuild schools, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas, and to provide girls with access to quality education. Community awareness campaigns can challenge stereotypes that discourage girls from pursuing education. Additionally, non-formal education programs, such as accelerated learning initiatives for those who missed years of schooling, can help children reintegrate into the education system. Economic empowerment is equally critical. Programmes that support female entrepreneurship and provide vocational training can help women gain financial independence, thereby reducing their vulnerability. For instance, microfinance initiatives targeting women have shown success in countries like Bangladesh, where organisations such as Grameen Bank have lifted millions out of poverty. Similar models can be adapted for Syrian women, focusing on industries such as agriculture, textiles, and handicrafts, which align with local market demands. The health care system in Syria has been devastated by the conflict, leaving women and children without access to essential medical services. Restoring healthcare infrastructure must include specialised services for maternal and child health, including prenatal care, immunizations, and nutrition programmes. Mental health is another critical area requiring attention. The trauma experienced by women and children—ranging from witnessing violence to enduring displacement—necessitates comprehensive mental health support. Mobile clinics, community-based therapy programs, and school-based interventions can address these needs. A notable example is the "Healing Through Play" programme implemented in Jordan for Syrian refugee children, which uses structured play activities to help children process trauma and build resilience.

Women's involvement in decision-making processes is indispensable for creating policies that address their needs effectively. Unfortunately, women have largely been excluded from Syria's peace negotiations and political reconstruction efforts. To rectify this, quotas can be introduced to ensure female representation in local councils and national governance structures. Evidence from post-conflict countries such as Rwanda demonstrates that women's active participation in governance can lead to more inclusive and equitable policies, benefiting the entire society. Moreover, fostering women's leadership at the grassroots level can create a ripple effect, empowering communities to challenge entrenched norms and advocate for broader societal change. Programs like UN Women's "Women for Peace" initiative, which trains women to mediate conflicts and participate in local governance, can serve as models for Syria. Changing societal attitudes toward women and children is as important as implementing structural reforms. Public awareness campaigns that promote gender equality, highlight the value of educating girls, and challenge harmful practices such as child marriage can help shift cultural norms over time.

Engaging men and boys as allies in these efforts is crucial. Programmes that encourage men to challenge patriarchal norms and support women's empowerment have been successful in various contexts, from India's Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) initiative to the global HeForShe campaign. Similar efforts in Syria can foster a culture of shared responsibility for achieving equality. International organisations, local NGOs, and community leaders must collaborate to ensure that programmes addressing the needs of women and children are culturally sensitive and sustainable. For instance, international funding can support the reconstruction of schools and healthcare facilities, while local NGOs can implement community-driven initiatives that reflect the realities of Syrian society. The international community must also prioritise accountability. Pressuring parties to the conflict to uphold international humanitarian law, particularly provisions that protect civilians, is critical for creating an environment where women and children can thrive. Holding perpetrators of war crimes accountable, including those responsible for GBV and the use of child soldiers, is equally important. Syria's post-conflict reconstruction presents a rare opportunity to address long-standing inequalities and create a more inclusive society. By prioritising the protection and empowerment of women and children, Syria can lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development. While challenges abound, the examples of other nations that have emerged from conflict demonstrate that progress is possible with the right combination of legal reform, education, economic opportunities, health care, and cultural change. The future of Syria depends not only on rebuilding its infrastructure but also on healing its people. Women and children, who have borne the brunt of the conflict, must be at the centre of these efforts. Their empowerment is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for ensuring a peaceful, prosperous, and equitable Syria.

How Myanmar's elections are shaped by conflict and control

As the crisis in Myanmar enters its fifth year, it is essential to reflect on the ongoing conflict that is becoming increasingly complex. The coordinated actions of People's Defence Forces (PDFs), Local Defence Forces (LDFs), and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) have dramatically changed the nature of the conflict in Myanmar. These resistance groups are showcasing their growing power and unwavering determination which has exposed significant vulnerabilities within the military, including significant loss of territory as well as recapturing of territories, low morale among troops and even challenges in recruiting new members. The PDFs and EAOs are emerging stronger with the capture of 80 towns and 200 military bases, in the bordering regions, especially in Rakhine, Sagaing and Kachin. The capture of a key regional military command in Lashio and the Arakan army seizing the last Myanmar military outpost, BGP-5 in northern Rakhine state, gaining full control of the border with Bangladesh signifies a major setback to the military.

Soon after the military takeover in 2021, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing formed the State Administrative Council (SAC) and formulated a five-step roadmap, which included two provisions, one to reconstitute the Union Election Commission (UEC) and second to conduct a free and fair elections. Since then, the UEC has been reformed, the meetings have been convened with pro-military parties, census has been conducted in a limited way and most importantly, the rules of registering as a political party changed. These changes among other provisions led to the exclusion of the National League for Democracy and 39 other parties from registering. At the beginning of 2024, he emphasised the vision to conduct elections which is expected to gain rigour in the 2025-26. Though the announcement of elections can seem to be a good starting point suggesting that the military is not anti-elections or anti-democratic, but is also reflective of the fact that the military is conditionally democratic. The military has ruled the country for more than seven decades and aims to hold on to its substantive political power. But the regime's plans and methods to hold elections raise concerns about credibility and inclusivity.

Let us look at the constitutional provisions of elections in Myanmar as well as how the military uses these provisions to ensure that it continues to rule indirectly as it did in the previous decade (2010-2020). As per the 2008 constitution, the House of Representatives (lower house) is composed of 440 single-member constituencies. Within this 440-member legislature, 330 are directly elected and 110 are nominated by the Commander-in-Chief from the Defence Services personnel. By law, it is not compulsory to hold elections in the whole territory, with 50% of territory, the elections will still hold legitimacy. The parliament can convene with 50% seats. There are reports that suggest that more than 70 per cent of the territory is held by the resistance forces, which are mostly the bordering regions. So, the military aims to hold elections in the heartland which roughly constitutes 165 towns.

Further the elections can also be conducted over a longer period of time for instance. So, giving space and time for the military to arrange for elections as and when the territory is under its control. Therefore, conducting elections in one third territory over a period of time will also be claimed as free and fair elections. Additionally, the elections will only be held in constituencies with multiple candidates as per the constitutional provisions. And if a sole candidate dies, a fresh election is conducted. The UEC may also decide not to hold elections in areas with unstable conditions. Previously in the 2010 and 2015 elections, and far more widespread in 2020 elections, particularly in conflict-affected areas like Rakhine, Chin, Kayin, Kachin, and Shan states, where ethnic armed organisations-controlled territory, the UEC made decisions about partial election cancellations. If the SAC proceeds with elections, it is likely that the UEC will continue using election cancellations as a tool to manipulate electoral outcomes. They can relocate polling booths to safer locations, which again would be in the military's interests. Elections are considered valid if at least 51% of registered voters participate and the candidate with the most valid votes wins. In case of a tie, a run-off election is held. So, what is predicted is conduct of elections but also possible run-off elections.Even the proposed shift from first-past-the-post to proportional representation (PR) is central to the military's reforms, aiming to boost the electoral prospects of the USDP. The PR system is framed as potentially benefiting smaller, ethnic-based parties, as it is assumed that ethnic voters will vote for these parties. However, this outcome is not guaranteed, as the success of these parties will depend on how electoral constituencies are defined, and whether the voting patterns align with the assumption that ethnic parties will not split votes. The new system will involve multi-member constituencies using closed party lists, with a largest remainder method, simple quota, and a threshold for seat allocation. The 330 seats in the lower house will remain, but 25 seats will be moved from ethnic states to the Bamar-majority regions, which could reduce the chances of ethnic parties. The specific details of how seats will be allocated to townships, as required by the 2008 Constitution, are still unresolved. Nonetheless, the UEC has started training officials on the PR system.And while the SAC is aiming to hold elections, possibly in 2025-26, the SAC is actively pursuing strategies to gain regional legitimacy by selectively engaging with international actors. The UEC has hosted delegations as well as visited several countries, including China, India, Brunei and Russia. These diplomatic exchanges are strategically aimed at bolstering the military's credibility on the international stage. In parallel, the UEC has implemented restrictive measures, such as obtaining approval from UEC before meeting foreign entities, thereby targeting political parties' interactions with foreign organisations. This selective engagement is part of a broader strategy to control the narrative surrounding the legitimacy of the elections, positioning the SAC as the recognized authority while limiting the ability of opposition groups and international actors to challenge its actions.Now the question about the elections credibility and legitimacy is raised. Especially countries in the region will accept the results of the elections, which are of course manipulated, it is essential that efforts are made to rectify this. Here regional countries can ensure that a dialogue is established between resistance forces and military. Anything done or achieved by force will not ensure a stable solution to the ongoing crisis. While there is an urgent need to reform the 2008 constitution to ensure free and fair elections, it is important that the provisions are at least revisited in a limited manner. First, an inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders is important to bring together concerns and expectations. Second, the elections must include all the 40 parties excluded earlier in addition to others who have emerged as a result of the ongoing crisis. Third, c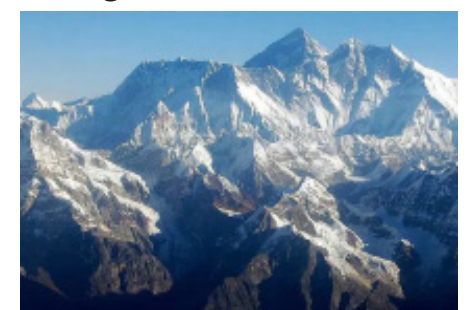hange the way in which the governance is structured in Myanmar. It is important to ensure devolution of power. Currently, the EAOs are holding de jure power and it is time that it becomes de facto. The elections should be held in parallel with devolution of powers, most importantly identifying strong federalism as a key feature of future Myanmar. The decentralisation of power will ensure the functional role of EAOs and NUG and thereby establish a balance of powers and accountability. The role of the military must be to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nation but also respect the constitutional mandate of a democratically elected government and federal structure. Democratic principles must be in place but also be functional for a diverse country like Myanmar.

Now you have to shell out more for climbing Everest

Kathmandu: Nepal has sharply increased permit fees for climbing Mount Everest by 36 per cent and also introduced a slew of measures aimed at controlling garbage pollution on the world's tallest peak, officials said.Under the revised mountaineering regulations, the royalty fee for foreigners climbing Everest from the normal south route in the spring season (March-May) has been raised to $15,000 from the current $11,000 per person.

The autumn season (September-November) climbing fee has increased from $5,500 to $7,500. At the same time, the permit cost per individual for the winter (December-February) and monsoon (June-August) seasons has risen from $2,750 to $3,750.

A Cabinet decision to this effect has already been made, though the official announcement is yet to come, said Arati Neupane, Director of the Tourism Board. The new fees for climbing the 8848.86-metre peak will come into effect from September 1, 2025, she added.The revised regulations, approved by the Cabinet will become effective once it is published in the Nepal Gazette. However, the royalty for Nepali climbers wishing to climb Everest will be increased by double from current Rs 75,000 to Rs 150,000 for autumn, she said.The last royalty fee revision was made on January 1, 2015, when the government switched from a group-based system to a uniform fee of $11,000 per climber for the spring season from the normal route.Climbing permits, previously valid for 75 days, will now be limited to 55 days. The reduced validity is aimed at streamlining climbing activities, the Kathmandu Post reported."Bookings already confirmed for the spring 2025 expedition will not be affected by this change," said Indu Ghimire, a joint secretary at the Tourism Ministry. According to Ghimire, the regulations have focused on garbage management, social security for high-altitude workers, and boosting government revenue.As per the amended rules, from the upcoming spring season, Everest climbers will be required to bring their poop back to base camp for proper disposal. Climbers must carry biodegradable bags to collect waste in the upper reaches.

This is just the start of an AI tech cycle: Google's Pat McCarthy

They came upon a fork in the road, and Google made its choice. A few days ago, the tech giant reworked its Workspace subscription plans to include the Gemini artificial intelligence (AI) functionality across Gmail, Docs, Meet and NotebookLM Plus, for business users. That negates the need for a separate Gemini Business add-on, otherwise a cost of around $20 per month, or ?1,500 for users in India. As Pat McCarthy, vice president of Google Workspace tells HT in a conversation, "the market previously was forcing customers to think about these as separate decisions." The change means existing Workspace subscriptions will see a $2 price increase to cover for the new AI capability bundle (real-world subscription numbers may not be exact, because companies often get customised contracts from Google).McCarthy, who was in India recently, believes Google Workspace has the scale to drive this simplification, and thereby a change which sees rapid AI adoption in organisations. Numbers back that theory—Workspace has been used in some form by more than 10 million businesses of different sizes globally, and more than 100,000 of these customer enterprises have begun to integrate Gemini AI in their workflows. He told HT about examples of Indian organisations that have done so too. Jindal Steel and Power, for instance, find Gemini useful in Sheets to help employees and team leaders submit and review progress on projects. At Zomato, Gemini is proving useful for primary research and analysis tasks, with employees manage emails and creating presentations. JK Cement employees find relevance with AI summarising documents and emails too. HCL Software made a recent switch to Google Workspace, since they need an AI driven solution completely delivered from the cloud. It is a similar transition story with Vodafone India, or Vi.Google's McCarthy talks to us about the structural changes to Google Workspace, data privacy, how India's businesses provide insights that become relevant globally and rapid evolution of AI-driven tech that the next year will bring. Edited excerpts.

There have been significant pricing changes for Workspace subscriptions. Have we reached that juncture that signifies a shrinking space between Workspace apps and the AI layer?

The market previously was forcing customers to think about these as separate decisions. We know for a fact that is not what customers want. They don't think about these things being separate, they think about the processes that exist inside of their businesses as being ubiquitous. Now, it's about how do you have the support of AI across those processes. We obviously have a distinctly different view, compared to others in the marketplace, about this.

Is this simplified pricing also indicative of an evolving business model with a growing need for revenues from AI, and would you classify this as a correction of previous AI pricing strategies that weren't attracting enough customers?

The Gemini business inside of Workspace is very strong. It is hitting its metrics and is on target. Therefore, it wasn't about the business of Gemini it is about what's better for customers. That's really

where this came from. My perspective has been through several tech cycles, and if you just imagined a tech cycle as a 24 hour day, we're presently in the first second of a 24 hour day. That's how early we are in this. I don't think about it in terms of commercial models and other dynamics. I think about it as an investment in our customers in the capabilities that we think they need to be really successful. When our customers are successful and when they understand that we have a differentiated offering in the marketplace, we'll be successful.

In an Indian context, how do you see enterprises and businesses adopting AI? Are there unique learnings from this part of the world, in terms of AI development as well as usage, which prove relevant elsewhere?
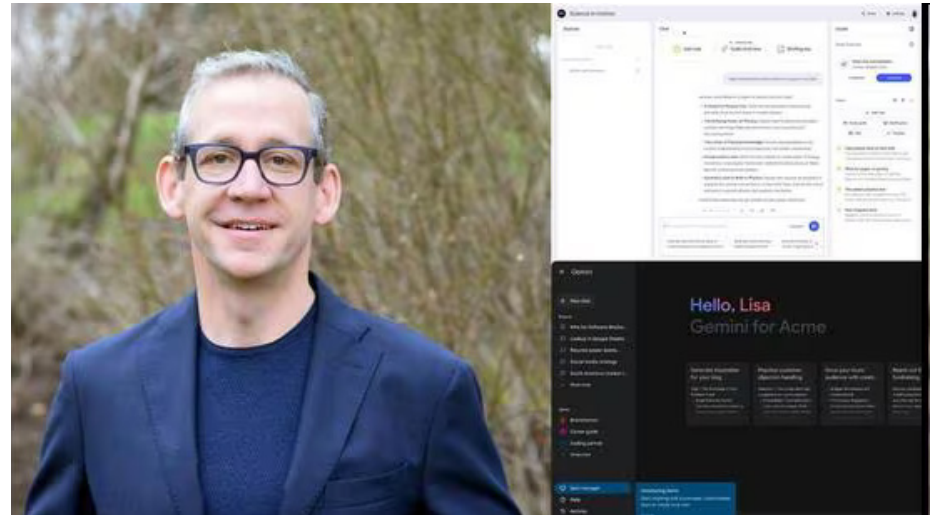
I believe India as a market is dynamic. We have institutions here, we have startups here and a set of companies in between. I have a strong belief having been coming to India for many years that east can lead west in thinking about how do we deploy technology, how do we consume technology and the next generation business processes. The Indian market from an age perspective is also very interesting. You know, one of the things that I hear often is, the next wave of knowledge workers don't want to use the solutions and tools that their grandfather used, and they want to use the next-gen platforms. They want to have this, and are very comfortable with this idea of assistance.They are not resistant to having Gemini and an assistant help being more productive. In fact, they will make decisions about where they work based on the portfolio of applications that are available to help them do their job. I've met with over 20 companies in a short amount of time that I've been here and I find the Indian companies to be very collaborative, even if they're competitors in the marketplace. They're free in sharing their ideas and their concerns, free in sharing how they think about the future and sharing the insights that they've learned That's an exciting dynamic in the Indian market in particular.

How challenging is the privacy aspect of all this and what sort of feedback do you hear from organisations in terms of how they want their data to be safeguarded?

Google is phenomenal on this particular topic, and that is because Google's origins and the spaces that they've operated in, data privacy has always been a core key tenant of how we've architected our solutions, and that includes how we've built our applications and our data centres. When we talk about our approach to privacy, whether that's through how we build our applications to how we train our models, our customers are incredibly comfortable that we've taken the right approach. We don't use our customers data to do any enhancements to our models, we don't use any of their content or their information or pull that back in to use in any way that would expose them to risk.

How do you see the AI roadmap, and with individual app updates for the broader Workspace, evolving over the next year?

McCarthy: It's going to be very fast paced. There are two angles to this. One, we're trying really hard to educate the broader marketplace, our service partners and others around about what's possible.

We've got a lot of education initiatives around that to make sure that the broader ecosystem is ready to support. Second, we're going to see a lot of experimentation in some of the more advanced areas like NotebookLM, Gems agent and more. Simultaneously, we will have customers look at their business processes and for that, we will have to find the most effective and efficient way given all of the capabilities to introduce a new product, reduce that time cycle and have a better understanding of product market fit in advance.The next 12 months will be a very exciting time around transformation. We see a lot of customers starting with their customers, and our customers are starting with questions such as, how can I improve my responsiveness to my customers or how can I make this a more empathetic engagement with like my customer?

Those would be the three horizontal aspects that we foresee, combined with I would say, a very strong spirit of usage of the advanced capabilities.

What triggers Guillain-Barré syndrome?

Hyderabad: Pune has reported over 20 suspected cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) in just a week. Patients, both children and adults, complained of symptoms linked to contaminated food and water, which caused diarrhoea and abdominal discomfort.

But, what is Guillain-Barré syndrome?

Guillain-Barré Syndrome is a rare, but life-threatening health issue in which the body's immune system attacks part of the peripheral nervous system. The syndrome affects the nerves that control muscle movement as well as those that transmit pain, temperature and touch sensations.This can result in partial or complete paralysis, loss of sensation in the legs and/or arms, and problems in swallowing or breathing, which can be fatal.While it is more common in adults and males, people of all ages can be affected.SymptomsSymptoms typically last

a few weeks, with most individuals recovering without long-term, severe neurological complications.

The first symptoms of Guillain-Barré syndrome include weakness or tingling sensations. They usually start in the legs and can spread to the arms and face.For some people, these symptoms can lead to paralysis of the legs, arms, or muscles in the face. In approximately one-third of people, the chest muscles are affected, making it hard to breathe.The ability to speak and swallow may become affected in severe cases. These cases are considered life-threatening.Most people recover fully from even the most severe cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome, although some continue to experience weakness.Guillain-Barré syndrome is rare. The cause of it is not fully known, but most cases follow an infection with a virus or bacteria.