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Costa Rica agrees to accept Indian migrants deported from U.S.

Costa Rica has agreed to serve as a "bridge" to repatriate illegal immigrants in the U.S., including from India and Central Asia, according to an official release on Tuesday (February 18, 2025). The first group of 200 migrants will arrive at the Juan Santamaría International Airport on a commercial flight on Wednesday (February 19, 2025), according to a statement by Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves Robles' office.

"The Government of Costa Rica agreed to collaborate with the United States in the repatriation of 200 illegal immigrants to their country. These are people originating from countries in central Asia and India," said the statement.

RTC to run special buses during Maha Shivaratri

Hyderabad: Transport Minister Ponnampalapati Prabhakar held a review meeting on RTC bus service arrangements during Maha Shivaratri here on Tuesday.

The Minister ordered the RTC authorities to run special buses to ensure that devotees going to Vemulawada, Srisailem, Edupayala, Keesara and Palakurthi temples, which are visited by a large number of devotees during Maha Shivaratri, do not face any difficulties.

PM Modi-Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim talks: Decide to elevate India-Qatar ties to 'strategic partnership'



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Qatar which is a major energy supplier to India on Tuesday (February 18, 2025) signed an agreement to elevate India-Qatar relationship to the level of a strategic partnership, officials here informed. The Ministry of External Affairs announced that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the visiting Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani discussed multiple issues including the unfolding Israel-Palestinian conflict in Gaza Strip and added that the two sides are also exploring the option of concluding a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani during exchange of MoU documents after a meeting, at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi, on February 18, 2025.

"Strategic partnership elevates the present state of bilateral relation to the strategic level. We are looking at deepening cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, energy, security as well as in the regional and international fora," said Arun Kumar Chatterjee, secretary (CPV&OIA) while briefing the media following the bilateral discussion between the two sides. Apart from that, the two sides also signed a double taxation avoidance treaty. India has signed strategic partnerships with Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia within the Gulf Cooperation Council member states. The official also confirmed that the situation in the West Asian region featured in the official talks saying, "both sides conveyed their mutual positions on Israel-Hamas war. India conveyed its own position, the Qatari side conveyed their own position." The visit of the Qatari Emir has drawn attention as it is being held just two days prior

to the five Arab states summit in the Saudi capital Riyadh which will take up the new proposals from the United States following the arrival of President Donald Trump. President Trump's proposal on the Gaza crisis has drawn attention because of the argument that the Palestinians of the region should be shifted out to neighbouring countries like Egypt and Jordan. India has not so far made its position on this new approach. MEA officials also avoided giving a clear answer to this approach which has drawn criticism as it would tantamount to ethnic cleansing. India supports two-state solution in bringing an end to the Israel-Palestinian crisis and had welcomed the ceasefire that was announced shortly before the swearing-in ceremony of President Trump on January 20, 2025..

Thirty-eight Qatari entities representing retail, food processing, hospitality, finance and energy sector participated in the deliberations where the two sides resolved to double bilateral trade to \$28 billion. The visit also gave the two sides to deal with a difficult issue as a former commander of the Indian Navy Purnendu Tiwary continues to remain in Qatari control though seven other prisoners who were detained in the same case in 2022 were repatriated in February 2024. Mr Chatterjee informed that the Indian diaspora is the largest working force in Qatar and that at present around 600 Indians are in Qatari prisons. "About 85 Indians have received such pardons during 2024," said Mr Chatterjee highlighting that Qatar has the provision of granting pardon. "His matter still remains subjudice in the local courts," said Mr Chatterjee elaborating on the condition of Commander Tiwary. The Hindu had reported on Monday that the seven former Indian navy officials who returned in February 2024 has written to the Qatari authorities seek repatriation of Commander Tiwary. "India and GCC are negotiating about having an FTA. Both India and Qatar are (also) exploring the signing of a FTA in the future," said Mr Chatterjee announcing that India is considering going ahead with a bilateral FTA with Qatar as discussion for an India-GCC FTA continues. The Indian side also said that the strategic partnership between the two sides would also have a security component, though a clear timeline for such a process was not clearly articulated. The Qatari side participated in a Joint Business Forum which drew participation of top business entities of Qatari and Indian sides.

Telangana to have new digital security policy and Cyber Defence Centre



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Telangana is set to launch a new digital security policy in line with India's personal data protection policy, Telangana IT Minister D. Sridhar Babu shared while speaking at the cyber security conclave SHIELD 2025 held in Hyderabad on Tuesday (February 18, 2025). The State is also in talks to set up a Cyber Defence Centre to protect citizens from the growing cybersecurity menace, the Minister added. He stressed India must now focus on manufacturing cybersecurity technologies. "We get about \$7 billion worth of cybersecurity stack and yet the Indian market remains in single digits. It is time now to move from the traditional approach. We must not be dependent on our external partners for these technologies," he said. Computers and mobile phones are the new treasures, underscored Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy. The Chief Minister said financial frauds and deep fakes on social media are the two critical concerns that need to be addressed urgently. The State also added three new facilities - Cyber Fusion Centre (CFC), Child Protection Unit (CPU) and Security Operation Centre (SOC) in the Telangana Cyber Security Bureau (TGCSB), which were inaugurated by the Chief Minister and the IT Minister.

National Cyber Security Coordinator and Special Secretary, Government of India Lt. Gen. MU Nair said that while the reach of wireless telephone connections and particularly 5G network has grown exponentially over the years, the country's cybersecurity remains vulnerable, "probably because it was an afterthought at the time of

rolling out the networks". Cybersecurity experts today need to be more involved and proactive as the response time is very short. The time between the attack and data exfiltration has to be low to ensure recovery, the official added.

The official said that the lack of skilled professionals in multiple sectors in the cybersecurity ecosystem is further complicating the challenges. He urged youth to explore cybersecurity as a prospective career as well as stressed for continuous upskilling for those working in the domain already. "Graduate and postgraduate programs in various sectors in this area are needed so the demand-supply mismatch can be addressed," he said. 93% tele-density in India Former Chairman of Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), R.S. Sharma said India has 93% tele-density (number of people using telecom connection), rising from about 37% only a few years ago. This growth comes on the back of 1.16 billion mobile connections and over 900 million internet connections in the country. Around 500 individuals including experts from law enforcement agencies, global tech giants, policymakers, and industry professionals from 14 different States came together for the SHIELD 2025 held at the Hyderabad International Convention Centre (HICC) in a bid to outpace cybercriminals. Attendees flocked to the 'Technology Experience Zone', where futuristic AI-driven investigation tools ranging from deep-learning-powered threat detection to password-less authentication using biometric neural networks, were on display. The most eye-catching feature was the Humanoid Robo, an AI-powered interactive machine designed to engage with delegates, offering real-time demonstrations of how artificial intelligence can predict, prevent, and respond to cyber threats. The section featured live cyberattack simulations, where Red Teaming and Blue Teaming experts recreated real-world hacking scenarios and demonstrated how to counteract them in real-time. Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, DGP (Cyber Security Bureau) Shikha Goel visiting stalls at the cyber security conclave SHIELD 2025 held in Hyderabad on Tuesday. Another highlight were the AI-powered surveillance drones, which experts said were being used to protect critical infrastructures, monitor public spaces, and assist law enforcement in tracking cybercriminals.

Kavitha slams Congress government over caste survey poor outreach

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Hyderabad: BRS leader and MLC K Kavitha on Tuesday criticised the Congress government for its failure to mobilise people for the caste census re-survey in Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC). On the first day, only 43 requests were received for enumeration, highlighting the lack of effective outreach. Kavitha, in a post on social media, questioned the seriousness of the Congress government in conducting the re-survey and demanded transparency regarding the outreach efforts and results. She emphasised the need for a robust campaign to ensure maximum participation and accurate data collection. The Telangana caste census re-survey aims to fill the gaps left by the initial survey, but the lukewarm response on the first day raises concerns about its success, she said.



Russia, US to name negotiators on ending Ukraine war: Washington



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Washington said Russia and the United States will name teams to negotiate a path to ending the war in Ukraine as soon as possible, as the superpowers met on Tuesday (February 18, 2025) in Saudi Arabia without Kyiv or the EU. However, no specifics on a possible meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin emerged from the gathering in Riyadh, the first high-level official Washington-Moscow talks since Ukraine's 2022 invasion.

Some European leaders, alarmed by Trump's overhaul of U.S. policy on Russia, fear Washington will make serious concessions to Moscow and re-write the continent's security arrangement in a Cold War-style deal between superpowers. On Tuesday (February 18, 2025), U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov agreed to "appoint respective high-level teams to begin working on a path to ending the conflict in Ukraine as soon as possible", the State Department said. Washington added the sides had also agreed to "establish a consultation mechanism" to address "irritants" to Russia and America's relationship, noting the sides would lay the groundwork for future cooperation. Russia offered less detail on the outcome of the talks, saying: "We discussed and outlined our principled positions, and agreed

that separate teams of negotiators will be in touch on this topic in due course."

"It is still difficult to talk about a specific date for a meeting between the two leaders," said Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign policy aide. Russia sketched out some of its perspectives on future talks to ending the fighting in Ukraine, arguing that settling the war required a reorganisation of Europe's defence agreements. Moscow has long called for the withdrawal of NATO forces from eastern Europe, viewing the alliance as an existential threat on its flank.

LoP Rahul Gandhi criticises govt over CEC appointment, submits dissent note

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

New Delhi: Leader of Opposition (LoP) in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, has strongly criticised the Centre for appointing Gyanesh Kumar as the new Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) in a late-night decision. Kumar, a retired IAS officer from the Kerala cadre, replaces Rajiv Kumar following his retirement. LoP Rahul Gandhi questioned the urgency of the appointment, pointing out that the composition of the selection committee is under judicial review. "By violating the Supreme Court order and removing the Chief Justice of India from the committee, the Modi Government has exacerbated the concerns of hundreds of millions of voters over the integrity of our electoral process," Rahul Gandhi said in a post on X on Tuesday. LoP Gandhi, who was part of the selection meeting, submitted a dissent note to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

President Droupadi Murmu grants prosecution sanction against AAP leader Satyendar Jain

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

President Droupadi Murmu has granted the sanction to prosecute AAP leader and former Delhi Minister Satyendar Jain in a money-laundering case being investigated by the Enforcement Directorate, sources said on Tuesday (February 18, 2025). The sanction against the 60-year-old former Delhi Health Minister was sought under section 218 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita. The Ministry of Home Affairs had requested the President for providing sanction to prosecute Jain on the basis of an Enforcement Directorate (ED) investigation and the presence of "adequate proof", sources said.

Section 218 of the BNSS governs the prosecution of public servants and judges. It outlines the procedure for bringing charges against the accused for alleged offenses committed while performing his or her official duties. The ED is now expected to file a fresh supplementary chargesheet informing the court about the approval of the prosecution sanction of the President, sources said. The



federal agency booked Jain in a money-laundering case linked to alleged hawala dealings, and arrested him in May 2022. Jain held the health, power and a few other portfolios when he was taken into ED custody.

He is currently out on bail and has been charge-sheeted by the ED.

Telangana to soon launch Cyber Security policy, says IT Minister Sridhar Babu



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Hyderabad: IT Minister D Sridhar Babu said the State government would soon launch a cyber security policy in compliance with India's digital personal data and protection law. Telangana has been proactive in developing cyber security ecosystem and focusing on countering cyber threats, he said. "The government is in discussions to establish cyber defence centre in Hyderabad. It will safeguard citizens and government entities from cyber threats," Sridhar Babu said at the Cyber Security Conclave 2025 here on Tuesday.

Earlier, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy said official statistics disclosed that cyber criminals looted Rs.22,812 crore in the country last year. Cybercrime was posing a big threat to the country's economy as well as the citizens, he said, adding that fake news was another big threat these days and misinformation on social media is creating chaos in the society. Telangana was one among a few States, which established a fully functioning Cyber Security Bureau

and a dedicated cyber crime helpline to protect citizens from cyber frauds and crimes, he said. "I appeal to all to share the 1930 cyber helpline number which works round the clock," Revanth Reddy said, adding that the State government had started seven new dedicated cybercrime police stations last year.

BJP, Shiv Sena slam Telangana govt for alleged appeasement

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Hyderabad: The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena have termed as appeasement the permission given by the Telangana government to Muslim employees to leave offices early during the holy month of Ramzan. "Appeasement politics at its peak," posted BJP MLA T. Raja Singh on social media platform X. "Telangana govt allows early leave for Ramzan but ignores Hindu festivals. Equal rights for all, or none," wrote Raja Singh, who represents Goshamahal constituency in Hyderabad.

Continuing the practice that was followed in united Andhra Pradesh and under BRS rule in Telangana, the Congress government issued an order allowing Muslim employees to leave the offices early during the fasting month of Ramzan, beginning in early March.

Chief Secretary Santhi Kumari on February 15 issued an order allowing Muslim employees to leave offices an hour early during the holy month.

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Beyond deportation

Planeloads of illegal immigrants are coming to India from the US, and it doesn't really matter how many of them belong to which state. They are all Indians, and their deportation is an embarrassment for the whole nation, not just their respective states. The political blame game over their plight is just a diversionary tactic. Successive Central and state governments failed them so badly that they put their lives on the line to reach the US. Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in Washington that India would take back any verified Indian illegal migrant in America — New Delhi doesn't have much choice anyway — and also crack down on human traffickers who exploited vulnerable people. Insisting that he wanted to go beyond repatriation, the PM called for a joint fight against the menace. Such collaboration, however, should not be confined to India and the US. It must involve the Union as well as state governments, besides civil society and the people at large, as they are all key stakeholders.

In Punjab, it's a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. Over the past 15 years, the state has been ruled, in turn, by the Akali-BJP alliance, the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party. Passing the buck will not solve the lingering problem, which needs to be confronted unitedly, prioritising the state's long-term interests.

It's unfortunate that deportees continue to be shackled even after India flagged their unacceptable treatment with the US authorities. The fact that all flights with deportees are landing in Amritsar is another troubling issue. But these matters should not be allowed to obscure the larger picture. A major challenge for governments from here on is to persuade those who have returned to stay on rather than embark on another misadventure — and also to dissuade others from choosing a perilous course in a desperate pursuit of their American dream.

India's opportunity at the AI Action Summit



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

In early January, India accepted France's invitation to co-chair the AI Action Summit on February 10 and 11 in Paris. This summit will be the third of its kind, following meetings focussed on AI safety in the U.K. (2023) and South Korea (2024). In addition to AI safety, the agenda at Paris is to focus on innovation, public interest AI, future of work, and AI governance issues — presenting India an opportunity to continue its global engagement on AI safety and also amplify the voice of the Global South on broader AI issues. This article outlines how India can leverage the opportunity to advance three key priorities for the Global South. Doing this could also strongly position India to host the next such summit, which brings together decision makers on AI policy, industry at the forefront of AI development, and civil society representatives for an inclusive dialogue on AI.

The first meeting in Bletchley Park focussed on the safety of 'frontier AI models', the emerging risks of AI, and launched the U.K. AI Safety Institute (AISi). The second meeting in Seoul expanded the scope of the conversation to multilateral collaboration on AI risk management through a network of AISis with countries/blocs such as the U.S., France, Singapore, Japan, and the European Union. With ministerial and high-level bureaucratic representation through the meetings, India has actively engaged in the global discourse on AI safety. As a next step, India's IT Minister recently announced plans of setting up an AI Safety Institute. In other multilateral fora with leadership roles, India has championed the cause for the Global South, which has not leveraged the transformative potential of AI as much as more developed parts of the world have. Under India's presidency in 2023, the G20 endorsed a "pro-innovation regulatory/governance approach" to balance AI innovation and the need to develop guardrails for AI. Soon after, the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) meeting hosted by India in December 2023 emphasised the need for "equitable access to critical resources for AI research and innovation" to underscore the need for enabling AI infrastructure for developing AI applications. India's vision for the Global South could now benefit from the broad agenda of the Paris meeting. To maximise this opportunity, India should focus on three key strategic priorities. First, India must advocate for democratising access to AI resources across the entire AI value chain. While India's domestic initiative of establishing a common computing facility with over 18,600 GPUs and 40% government subsidy sets a compelling example, the scope must expand beyond computing hardware. This includes ensuring equitable access to data sets, data storage infrastructure, cloud computing platforms, foundation models, and application development platforms. In addition, India should promote distributed computing solutions, an alternative to traditional computing infrastructure, and access to innovative safety tools like watermarking technology.

The promotion of open-source AI models deserves particular attention. DeepSeek's success demonstrates both the potential of open-source models and the need to address export control measures that currently constrain AI model development. India must advocate for more flexible cross-border transfer of AI technologies while maintaining appropriate safety standards. Second, India should call for developing a framework for identifying and prioritising AI use-cases relevant to the Global South's unique contexts. This approach ensures that AI applications serve local needs rather than becoming solutions in search of problems. Instances include early disease detection systems adapted to local healthcare infrastructure, personalised learning platforms that account for diverse educational contexts, and agricultural productivity tools calibrated to regional farming practices. The establishment of an AI use-case repository following the summit could provide guidance for the Global South in determining its priorities. Third, India must emphasise the importance of contextualising AI risks and safety measures for the Global South.

GBS-causing bacteria found in poultry products, Ajit Pawar says no need to panic



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

GBS, Ajit Pawar "There is no need to cull the livestock in the poultry farm; it should only be consumed after ensuring it is fully cooked," Ajit Pawar said. Though water contamination has been the primary cause of the surge in Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) cases in Pune over the past few days, it has now been revealed that livestock from the Khadakwasla area's poultry farms carry bacteria that cause GBS and are being sold throughout the city. "The GBS spur in Sinhadag Road area near Khadakwasla was considered only due to water contamination, but now it has been revealed that it is also due to consumption of chicken that are from poultry farms in the area upstream of Khadakwasla dam," said Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar Saturday. "There is no need to cull the livestock in the poultry farm; it should only be consumed after ensuring it is fully cooked. Doctors have also informed us that consuming undercooked infected chicken can cause infections in humans, so it is important to cook it thoroughly before eating."

Pawar said. The administration will provide detailed guidelines for citizens. He stated there is no need for citizens to panic. "It is safe to consume well-cooked chicken. The issue will also be discussed with the chief minister," he said. Pawar said the GBS situation is under control as not many new patients have been identified.

While testing live chickens from poultry farms upstream of the Khadakwasla Dam, the National Institute of Virology (NIV) collected 106 poultry faeces and cloacal swab samples. Of the 66 samples tested for *Campylobacter jejuni*, 23 returned positive results. Additionally, five out of 60 samples tested positive for norovirus, while testing of the remaining samples is still in progress. The NIV has detected water samples from private reverse osmosis (RO) plants in the area and from the tap water of affected residents that are positive for GBS-causing bacteria. The PMC has sealed the private RO plants selling water in cans. Additionally, they have begun providing tanker services to supply treated water to the most affected areas along Sinhadag Road. The well in Nanded, which was found to be the primary water source in the area, is bleached daily, while water chlorination has been increased before supplying it to the city. "The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is the agency responsible for issuing licenses for shops selling poultry products, so it should take on the responsibility of checking the poultry food and water sold in the area," said a civic officer. About one-third of GBS patients are from areas outside the Sinhadag Road region, spread across the city. He stated, "Water is likely the source of infection in the Sinhadag Road area, but poultry products and RO water are the reasons behind the cases found in other parts of the city."

'Where is Tara?': Man scours hospitals, returns to New Delhi railway station in search of his missing wife after stampede

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Gupteshwar Yadav's fingers tremble as he holds up his phone. On the screen is a photo of his wife, Tara Devi (50), captured in a moment of calm — her blue saree draped neatly over her shoulder, red sindoor bright against her forehead, her wrists adorned with bangles. "I lost sight of her in the crowd," the 52-year-old murmurs, standing on platform 14 at New Delhi Railway Station on Sunday, where the worst of the stampede had unfolded the night before. "I waited for her, but she never came." The stampede turned what was meant to be the family's pilgrimage to Kumbh, on board the Swatantrata Senani Express, into a night of devastation. At least 18 people died in the chaos. "It was impossible to move on your own," Guptaeshwar says, recalling the events that unfolded on Saturday. "I was just being pushed along." As the crowd swelled, he had turned back, searching for his wife, but the sea of bodies made it impossible to see beyond a few feet. "Everyone was just trying to survive, but there was no space, no air, nothing to hold onto," he says. In the frenzy, he felt himself shoved sideways, stumbling toward the platform and all he could think was, "Where is Tara?" He and his brother Chhiteshwar spent the night combing through hospitals, searching through the rows of bodies, and clinging onto a sliver of hope that Tara survived. "I think she is no more. But we can't give up," says Chhiteshwar. New Delhi railway station stampede Guptaeshwar and brother Chhiteshwar (in photo) spent the night combing through hospitals, searching through the rows of bodies, and clinging onto a sliver of hope that Tara survived. (Express Photo) A few feet away from where Guptaeshwar now stood, 40-year-old Digamber Mandal watched it all unfold. For 12 years, he has been running the small Geeta Press bookstall on platform 14. He has seen crowds swell during Diwali and Holi, watched impatient travelers argue with ticket collectors, and even witnessed the occasional scuffle over a reserved seat. But nothing prepared him for the terror of last night. "At first, it was just another busy evening," he recounts. "Devotees heading to the Kumbh Mela filled the platform, their bags heavy with belongings, their voices raised in excitement. Then came several announcements of trains being shifted to different platforms."

"That's when it started," he says. "People panicked."

'Stop whitewashing these serious incidents': AAP's Sanjay Singh blames Railways for New Delhi stampede



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

A day after a stampede claimed at least 15 lives at the New Delhi railway station, senior AAP leader and Rajya MP Sanjay Singh said that negligence and poor crowd management led to the tragedy, further alleging that the Railways never learnt lessons from its past mistakes. "It is very painful to see a lot of people and devotees lost their lives in the stampede... but the Railways is still trying to whitewash the incident... While the exact number of deaths is unclear, reports vary, with some claiming 15 fatalities and others suggesting 20. Eyewitnesses at the scene have indicated that the death toll might be even higher, but official confirmation is still pending. The incident has raised serious concerns about the safety and management of the station," he said Singh added, "Wherever such incidents occur due to the mismanagement of the Railways, it tries to maintain that no such incident happened. They try to hide the entire matter by saying there was no such stampede. But when the matter gets out, they try to cover up by saying we have ordered a high-level inquiry... When is the Railways going to take responsibility and give answers to the people? Many rail accidents have taken place earlier and people have lost lives." Discussing the scenes at the New Delhi railway station, Singh said, "Yesterday's video of people standing on platforms at the station was so shocking. But the railway team was nowhere to be seen. Why was a proper announcement and security not deployed in advance to manage the crowd? Even after the news of the stampede, the Railway minister refuses to acknowledge



No one knew which way to go. The foot overbridge was already packed, but suddenly, everyone was rushing towards it. It was so crowded that people like me could not even go forward after a point. He watched helplessly as the crowd got swept into the narrow staircase. "I wanted to help," says Mandal. "But I couldn't move amid the sea of bodies." As the minutes stretched, station staff arrived — too late to prevent the tragedy, but in time to carry the dead away. Mandal says he saw bodies being pulled from the stairway and couldn't bring himself to look at them. "I didn't want to see," he admits. "That's why I didn't take the stairs when I closed my shop later in the night. I crossed the tracks instead, just so I wouldn't have to step over the dead." By Sunday morning, the platform has been cleared. Ropes now sectioned off the areas where the worst had occurred and guards stood at every corner. The crowd is more orderly. But for Guptaeshwar and Chhiteshwar, and for families still searching for their loved ones, normalcy would not return so easily. "We woke up again at 7 am and started searching for Tara," Chhiteshwar says. "But we just can't find her." During the day, a high-level committee from the Railway arrives to begin the investigation. "We have secured all CCTV footage," says Narsingh Deo, Principal Chief Commercial Manager (PCCM), Northern Railways. "We are looking into all possible angles. Once the investigation is complete, action will be taken accordingly." As trains arrive and depart, Guptaeshwar continues staring at the sea of faces, searching for the only one that matters. He then heads to platform number 16 and files a complaint with the Railway Protection Force.

that such an incident took place. The Delhi L-G posts a tweet and then edits it after 29 minutes. What is happening? Are you here for this?" Singh said that similar accidents had occurred in Uttar Pradesh after platform numbers were changed, but the Railways administration repeated the mistake in Delhi. "Kya hum logon ki marne ki niyati ban chuki hai? Why are you deploying security now at the hospital? To guard the dead? Where were you when they were alive, struggling at the railway station? Why are you trying to hide the total number of deaths? Because you don't want to learn from your mistakes. Par aapko lage hue ghaav par namak chidakna hai..." he said. Further, taking a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Singh said, "God has been elected in 2014, so God cannot be criticised... But the BJP government should stop whitewashing these serious incidents and the railway minister should give answers to the people now."

Harish Rao questions Congress govt's failure to protect Telangana's water rights

Hyderabad: Former Minister and senior BRS leader T Harish Rao has lashed out at the Congress government for its silence over alleged diversion of Krishna waters by the neighbouring Andhra Pradesh.

He blamed Chief Minister Revanth Reddy and Irrigation Minister Uttam Kumar Reddy, for turning a blind eye while Andhra Pradesh continues to exploit Telangana's water resources unchecked. He demanded urgent action from the State government to pressure the KRM and stop Andhra Pradesh's water diversion before Telangana's reservoirs run dry. In a statement, Harish Rao said Andhra Pradesh has been diverting 10,000 cusecs per day from the Nagarjuna Sagar right canal for the past three months, amounting to 646 TMC in this water year alone. He questioned whether the Congress government even cares about Telangana's water interests.

Karnataka man hires contract killers to murder younger brother, visits Mahakumbh to divert police attention



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

A Karnataka man who allegedly hired contract killers to murder his younger brother and left for the Mahakumbh Mela in Prayagraj to prevent the police from suspecting him was arrested on Saturday. He was arrested after he returned to the southern state. On February 11, Krishne Gowda, 45, a farmer was killed in the Maddur taluk of Mandya district. During the probe, it emerged that Shivanjan Gowda, elder brother of Krishne Gowda, had hired contract killers for Rs 5 lakh.

A police officer said, "Krishne Gowda had run into huge debts which were cleared by his brother. In return, Krishne Gowda was supposed to transfer his property to his elder brother's wife. However, Krishne Gowda refused to hand over the property and filed a case in court. Also, he was speaking ill about Shivanjan Gowda's wife." Thereafter, Shivanjan Gowda hired contract killers Chandrashekar, Sunil, Ullas, Pratap, Abhishek, Srinivas, and Hanumegowda to kill his brother," he added. The police learnt about Shivanjan Gowda's role while interrogating the contract killers. Mandya SP Mallikarjun Baladandi said Shivanjan Gowda left for Prayagraj a day before the murder to avert suspicion. However, the Call Details Records (CDR) and other technical evidence suggested that they had planned the murder for at least two months, he added.

Patiala police arrest 2 US deportees in a 2023 murder case



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

The Patiala police in Punjab arrested two deportees from the US in connection to a murder case after their flight landed at the Amritsar airport on Saturday evening. Those arrested were identified as Sandeep Singh alias Sunny, a resident of Vikas Nagar in Rajpura under Patiala district, and Pardeep Singh. After the flight with the second batch of deportees from the US landed, it was found that the two were named in the murder case of one Swaran Singh in 2023.

According to the First Information Report (FIR), a copy of which is with The Indian Express, a group of people attacked Swaran Singh and his nephew Sachinder Singh on June 25, 2023. Swaran Singh received grievous injuries and succumbed to his injuries on his way to the hospital while Sachinder Singh survived the attack. The Rajpura (city) police booked five people for murder, attempt to murder, and rioting. Mandeep Singh Sidhu, Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG), Patiala range, was not available for comments.

Mohan Bhagwat calls for Hindu unity at RSS event in Bengal, says Hinduism accepts diversity

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat Sunday addressed a conference of RSS volunteers in Bardhaman in West Bengal, where he emphasised the importance of Hindu unity and the need to embrace diversity. "Hinduism progresses by accepting the world's diversity, understanding that unity exists within diversity," said Bhagwat, adding that the "selfless work of over 1,30,000 RSS volunteers without financial compensation nationwide contributes to India's progress".

"That's why we are saying we are not doing this to be successful; we are doing this to make a meaningful contribution to the progress of India. The Sangh has simply given values, thoughts and inspiration," he said. The public meeting was held after the approval of the Calcutta High Court. Earlier, the West Bengal Police had not permitted to hold it.

He used the example of Lord Ram to illustrate the importance of sacrifice and dedication to duty. "Here, no one remembers the kings, but they remember the king who spent 14 years in exile for his father, who gave the kingdom to his brother," he said. Bhagwat criticised past invasions and the notion that India was created by the British, asserting that the country's foundation predates British rule. "The attacks that started from the time of Alexander continued to happen; a handful of barbarians came; they were not superior to us, but they ruled over us. This happens again and again. This is not a country built by the British. In one of Gandhi's books, a young man asks what India will be like. The British have taught you that India is not one." He urged RSS volunteers to broaden their influence and collaborate to reinforce their shared ideology. "Hindus are those who embody India's characteristics and keep its diverse population united. RSS aims to organise Hindu society because it constitutes the responsible core of the nation," he said. Bhagwat stated that certain groups could not coexist with India's diversity, which led to the creation of a separate country. Hindus embrace global diversity, acknowledging that this diversity is what creates unity, he said.

Bhagwat said the RSS would not participate in any actions that could cause harm to others. He called on Hindu society to unite and organise, stressing the importance of being prepared to face challenges of any kind.

Mohan Bhagwat calls for Hindu unity at RSS event in Bengal, says Hinduism accepts diversity



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat Sunday addressed a conference of RSS volunteers in Bardhaman in West Bengal, where he emphasised the importance of Hindu unity and the need to embrace diversity. "Hinduism progresses by accepting the world's diversity, understanding that unity exists within diversity," said Bhagwat, adding that the "selfless work of over 1,30,000 RSS volunteers without financial compensation nationwide contributes to India's progress".

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'There is a perception that we are unnecessarily interfering': Maharashtra human rights panel chief lays out challenges



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

The acting chairperson of the Maharashtra State Human Rights Commission (MSHRC) and former IPS officer, Sanjay Kumar, shares insights into the commission's work, its challenges and its efforts to protect and promote human rights awareness in Maharashtra in an interview. Excerpts. Sanjay Kumar: The existence of the Commission itself makes a significant contribution to democracy because it is vital for the thorough functioning of a democratic government. In terms of our contribution, we focus on ensuring that human rights are upheld while the government performs its duties, ensuring no violations occur. Currently, we are addressing issues where underprivileged people are not treated properly. Our recent achievements include handling bonded labour cases and advocating for the rights of underprivileged communities. We also visit ashramshalas and work on improving their infrastructure and living conditions. In prisons, we visited an open jail that lacked drinking water facilities. During these visits, we make recommendations for improvements.

When the human rights of individuals from underprivileged classes are challenged, we come to their rescue. Each month, we receive approximately 700 applications, though 70-80 per cent do not fall under the purview of the Maharashtra State Human Rights Commission's regulations. However, as an institution, we continue to address and support these grievances.

Q. Given recent incidents where police officers in places like Beed and Parbhani have come under scrutiny, how do you believe the balance can be struck between maintaining law and order and ensuring the protection of human rights, especially during periods of social unrest?

Sanjay Kumar: There is a mandate that dictates the procedure the police department must follow in any given situation, outlining how they should react to violence, how to curb it, and what the rights of the police are. However, nowhere in the procedure is there any provision that grants the liberty or freedom to behave in a manner that is unjustifiable or not in line with the mandate. If a government officer violates the fundamental rights of a citizen, relief is available through the human rights commission as well as the constitutional courts. One can also approach the high court by filing a writ petition. However, once the issue is taken up by any constitutional court, the commission cannot intervene and proceed with the matter in parallel.

Q. How responsive has the state government been to the recommendations put forth by the MSHRC?

Sanjay Kumar: The government is required to respond to the recommendations made by the commission. There

are two High Court judgments: one passed by the Allahabad High Court and another by the Madras High Court, which states that it is binding on the government to respond, provided they seek judicial review in the High Court. According to Section 18(E) of the State Human Rights Act, the government is supposed to inform the commission about the decision they will take on the recommendations made by the commission within one month after receiving the copy. The Madras High Court has also stated that the government's right to seek judicial review is restricted if they fail to respond to the commission's recommendations, meaning they must be bound by it.

Q. One of the crucial mandates of the commission is to educate and raise awareness about human rights issues in Maharashtra. How are we doing so?

Sanjay Kumar: Every year, we conduct two internship courses for law students. These are month-long internships in which we invite students in batches of 25. We train them on the provisions of human rights laws and regulations and also spread awareness of our methods for conducting inquiries. Another medium we have chosen is allowing people from NGOs to visit the commission, observe its functioning, and interact with the team. Additionally, we have a collaboration with TISS, where students pursuing a master's degree in human rights and law come and work with us for a month, conducting research by visiting different locations. We have also written a letter to the director general of police, informing them that we would like to train police personnel on the Human Rights Act and procedures. Furthermore, we are planning to start an in-house certificate course lasting two days, which will be open to all citizens who wish to learn about human rights.

Q. What would you say are the most pressing challenges the MSHRC encounters in its mission to safeguard human rights in Maharashtra?

Sanjay Kumar: The challenges we face include the fact that the recommendations made by the commission, apart from compensation, should be viewed positively by the government. At times, these recommendations are neglected because there is a perception that we are unnecessarily interfering with its functioning. Currently, only 22-25 per cent of the recommendations are addressed by the government. Another challenge is the lack of proper office space. We had approached the government for this, and funds were previously allocated for the space. Unfortunately, this did not materialise because the person who was supposed to provide the land backed out. Also, the issue of employee permanency is a concern. Currently, we have around 54 people working in the commission, but only eight are permanent employees, while the rest are either on deputation or on a contractual basis.

Q. Do you think the current infrastructure and resources of the MSHRC are sufficient to effectively address the issues brought before the commission? Would you advocate for additional personnel or an increased budget to enhance the commission's functioning?

Sanjay Kumar: Currently, we have a sufficient workforce and do not face any budget shortages. However, the issue is that we do not have permanent employees at the MSHRC; instead, we are receiving resources on deputation from other departments. Our office is addressing some infrastructural requirements, so we don't have significant needs in that area. The number of members in the commission cannot be increased unless we amend the Act, which currently stipulates three members. We also do not have a budget shortage, as the government provides adequate funding. However, there are some challenges regarding whether we should transition to a fully digital or paperless system, as much of the work is still done manually. If we decide to go fully digital, we will need to submit a fresh proposal.

West Bengal Madhyamik exams:

Girls outnumber boys in continuation of trend

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

The West Bengal Board of Secondary Education's Madhyamik Class 10 exams began on February 10. This year, 9,84,910 students are participating in the exams. Approximately 5,55,000 are girls, and 4,28,000 are boys. This means that girl candidates outnumbered boy candidates by around 1,27,000. According to sources in the education department, this trend has been consistent for nearly 14 years. Sources in the education department said this was because of several initiatives the state government took to prevent child marriages and promote girls' education.

According to statistics from the state education department, in 2011, the number of girls who took the Madhyamik exams outnumbered boys by approximately 25,000. In 2016, the percentage of girl students appearing for the exams was nine per cent higher than that of boys, and in 2018, it increased to 12 per cent higher than the boys' percentage. Sources indicated that during the Covid pandemic in 2021 and 2022, 11 per cent more girl students participated in exams than boys. This increase in the number of girls exceeding boys is attributed to various state government schemes encouraging girls to pursue education. Over the years, the state government has introduced several schemes, such as Kanyashree (financial aid for girl child education) and Sabooj Sathi (free cycles for



students). According to officials, the state government has implemented several schemes to empower women, such as Laxmi Bhandar, Rupashri Prakalpo, and Sastho Sathi (which provides health care in the name of the woman of the household). However, there are concerns regarding the dropout rates among boy students in rural areas. Sources in the department indicate that many boys, especially in rural areas, drop out of school to seek employment. Officials report that numerous schemes are available to encourage girls to continue their education. In contrast, boys often leave school as they migrate to other states in search of work to help support their families.

Past US offers of fighter aircraft amid Chinese air threat to India

The recent offer of F-35 stealth fighter aircraft by the US to India has sparked a debate on whether India should accept the offer, given the time required to develop its own fifth-generation fighter, or opt for the Russian Su-57. The fact of the matter is that the Indian Air Force (IAF) needs to increase its fighter squadron numbers and part of those numbers must include the most modern aircraft available. While the situation is certainly not dire, it is one that keeps strategic experts awake at night. The US has historically been more concerned about the Chinese threat to India than about Pakistan. It has not shied away from arming Pakistan to the teeth, even in the face of vociferous Indian opposition. But the US has gone out of its way to assist India whenever the Chinese have posed a threat. Historical records accessed from US State Department Archives reveal how the US military made a detailed assessment of IAF requirements against the Chinese soon after the 1962 war between India and China. In that conflict, India refrained from using

the IAF in a direct attack role on the advancing Chinese troops for fear that the IAF would not be able to ward off a Chinese air attack on Indian cities. Records dating back to 1964 indicate that the US assessment at the time was that China posed only a limited air threat to India. "The Chinese Air Force has the capability to conduct operations from present locations against northeast India using the IL-28 jet light bomber, and against nearly all important Indian targets with a few TU-4 piston-engined bombers. MIG-19, MIG-17, and MIG-15 jet fighters and TU-2 piston-engined attack aircraft could be brought into action, and the area coverage by the IL-28 could be increased by moving forward into Tibet-Sinkiang," says one document. The US thought that operations from these forward bases would entail serious logistical support problems and reduced capability due to high altitude. Because of these issues, it was not believed that the Chinese would move forward in force except to support a large-scale assault on India.

'I wanted to enter US from Arizona': Deportee blames agent who made him cross border in state Trump lost



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Son of a shopkeeper at Patti in Punjab's Tarn Taran district, Yashpal Singh was likely one of the most informed immigrants on the "donkey route". He had developed an understanding of US politics, with which he wanted to increase his chances of living the American dream. He said his agent, however, shattered all his dreams. The deportees who landed at Amritsar airport late on Saturday were mostly those who entered the US just before or soon after President Donald Trump took office. Knowing Trump's politics, Yashpal wanted to enter the US from the Arizona border. His agent, however, pushed him into the US from the California border.

"I started from Delhi on December 16. The first agent landed me in Nicaragua. Then we somehow reached Mexico, where they kept us waiting for one month. We were aware that Trump was set to become President and he would tighten the norms. So we wanted to enter the US before Trump came to power. But our agent kept us waiting, and we were made to enter the US only on January 24," he said. "Our second demand after Trump became President was not to enter from the California border because Trump got defeated in California, so he had put more vigilance on the Mexico border with California. He was always more critical of immigrants in California. It was because the Trump administration believed that California authorities were soft on immigrants. So they deployed stricter officers at the California border with Mexico," he said.

Yashpal had a smart plan. "We wanted to cross from the Arizona-Mexico border because it was more relaxed as Trump won this state. He was not much focused on immigrants landing in Arizona. I knew some youth from India who had crossed from Arizona on the same date we entered from the California border. But they went through because authorities were less strict at the Arizona border, and they would allow the immigrants to present their case at court," he said. Yashpal said, "I paid Rs 44 lakh to the

agent, and still he made me cross the wrong border that I had warned against. The difference between the point we crossed in California and the point where we wanted to cross in Arizona is less than 40 km. We missed our chance by just 40 km." After taking office for the first time, in 2017, Trump expanded the criteria for deportation. He pushed for the removal of immigrants who lacked proper identification or had questionable documentation. "Now all immigrants reach the US with their legal passports as there are high chances of deportation if you are undocumented. Once a person has entered, their statement is recorded and they are given an alien number. But we were not given alien numbers. They were not ready to take our statements. They can decline recording statements and issuing alien numbers when the immigrant is proved to be a criminal or there is a problem authenticating their identity. What was worse was that some of those who were issued alien numbers were also deported. Ideally, after the issuance of an alien number, one is given a chance to appear in a local court to present their case within three months," Yashpal said.

Explaining his ordeal, Yashpal said, "We were not physically tortured. But they would keep us in rooms with air conditioners. It is already cold there, and living under AC is no less than torture. They would give us a polythene sheet to cover our bodies, and we would keep shivering. We were not given proper food. They gave us two apples a day, a very small quantity of rice and one bread for the whole day. I remained on this diet for around 25 days. My weight has reduced." Yashpal said, "We were not wearing turbans when we landed at the airport. They had removed our turbans. SGPC provided us Siropa, but these were not long enough as these are used only to honour someone and not to tie on the head. So I borrowed a cap to cover my head." "We came to know that we would be deported when they shackled us. We demand the government make agents return our money," said Yashpal. Yashpal said some of the illegal immigrants were hopeful that India would not allow more deportation flights in the wake of the uproar in Parliament over the treatment of the first batch. "There are still thousands of immigrants from India awaiting their fate on the Mexico-US border. The hue and cry in the Indian Parliament over the deportation of the first flight gave hope to those still waiting in Mexico and who had not entered the US. They thought that now the Modi government would not allow more flights with deportees to land in India and hence entered the US. There was this false impression that no more flights would deport immigrants to India because we observed that some countries were not ready to take back their immigrants, and it would strengthen the case of such immigrants to stay in the US. So Indian immigrants thought the same would be the case with them."

Jewellery worth Rs 24 crore of former CM Jayalalithaa handed over to Tamil Nadu govt



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

After two decades, former Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalithaa's movable assets worth Rs 24 crore including several gold ornaments were handed over by a special court in Bengaluru to the Tamil Nadu government on Saturday. Following a court order directing the return of Jayalalithaa's seized assets to the Tamil Nadu government, the transfer process began on Friday. An armed police contingent was assigned to escort six sealed boxes carrying the valuables – more than eight years after the former chief minister passed away. The convoy, led by an SP-ranked officer, included 40 police personnel in six vehicles, with the 'gold truck' securely positioned in the middle.

Among the gold ornaments were a gold-coated sword, a crown, a plate, a waist belt, and a figurine resembling Jayalalithaa, along with gold watches, pens, bangles, and earrings. Some pieces were even studded with diamonds. These items, along with silver articles and land documents, were seized from Jayalalithaa's Poes Garden residence in Chennai and brought to Bengaluru in 2004. This followed the establishment of a special court in Bengaluru to hear the disproportionate assets case against Jayalalithaa and her associates – Sasikala Natarajan, V N Sudhakaran, and J Ilavarasi. In 2014, Special Judge John Michael D'Cunha convicted all four, sentencing them to four years in prison. Jayalalithaa was fined Rs 100 crore, while the others re-

ceived fines of Rs 10 crore each. Special Public Prosecutor Kiran S Javali on Saturday stated that the Tamil Nadu government could either deposit the gold with the Reserve Bank of India or auction it after evaluation. The amount spent on the trial will be recovered from Sasikala's fine, with the remaining amount transferred to the state government.

Corrupt officials harass lorry owner; he threatens to electrocute self in Peddapalli

Anil Goud, who staged the protest by climbing on top of his lorry, threatened to touch the live electric wires passing over the spot. He alleged that RTA officials were collecting Rs.8000 as bribe from each lorry and registering cases if the bribe was not paid by the owners.

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Peddapalli: Vexed over alleged harassment by officials, a lorry owner Anil Goud staged a protest in front of the Peddapalli RTA office against officials. Anil Goud, who staged the protest by climbing on top of his lorry, threatened to touch the live electric wires passing over the spot.

He alleged that RTA officials were collecting Rs.8000 as bribe from each lorry and registering cases if the bribe was not paid by the owners.

Officials had registered cases on four of his lorries. However, they were not taking any action on lorries owned by big lorry contractors though they were operating and carrying overloads.

A native of Basanthnagar, Anil Goud, had engaged his vehicles for fly ash transportation. Knowing about the incident, police rushed to the spot and convinced Anil Goud to get down from the vehicle.

Aam Aadmi Party: The 'common' party



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

In the summer of 2011, Anna Hazare, a Maharashtra-based social activist, started a fast-unto-death protest in the national capital's Ramlila Maidan, seeking a 'Jan Lokpal Bill' to fight corruption. The movement 'India Against Corruption' was quick to catch the public imagination, pulling thousands into the sprawling grounds at the heart of Delhi, as it grabbed national and international headlines. Many thought it was India's moment of revolution. The then United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government was forced to engage with the 'Team Anna' to draft a Jan Lokpal Bill. But as their demands were not satisfactorily met, Arvind Kejriwal, one of the chief architects of the movement, and others left Mr. Hazare behind and formed a political party on November 26, 2012 — the Aam Aadmi Party (Common Man's Party). The party's main aim was to fight corruption, and surprising many political observers, it came to power in Delhi in December 2013, with the outside support of the Congress. Mr. Kejriwal, an IIT graduate who had worked as an IRS officer, was sworn in as the Chief Minister.

Tasting success in Delhi, the party was ready to spread its wings beyond the capital, and ahead of fighting against the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, Mr. Kejriwal read out a list of corrupt political leaders, while addressing party members in Delhi in January 2014. The list included P. Chidambaram, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Kapil Sibal, Farooq Abdullah, Sharad Pawar and Rahul Gandhi. "This is just the beginning and the list will grow. Should they be defeated this time or not?" he asked the audience.

AAP won 67 out of 70 seats in 2015 in Delhi and returned to power in the State in 2020 by winning 62 seats. The party came to power in Punjab in 2022 and later that year, won five seats in Gujarat with 12.9% vote share. This performance led to the party getting the 'national party' status in 2023, in just a little over 10 years since its formation.

But along this journey, founding members Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav were expelled, while many others left the party. As AAP grew, the power also consolidated in the hands of one man — Arvind Kejriwal. Fast forward 11 years. AAP leaders, including Mr. Kejriwal, now share stage with many of these leaders and is part of the opposition alliance 'INDIA', along with the Congress. Over the 12 years since its formation, the AAP seems to have slowly slid away from at least some of its founding ideas and in many ways become similar to another 'aam party' (common party) from 'aam aadmi party'. From fighting corruption as its core idea to hardly talking about it now; from Mr. Kejriwal travelling in Delhi Metro and an old blue WagonR car to swanky SUVs now; from statements of Mr. Kejriwal not taking bungalows to a controversy of renovating his government bungalow for over ₹30 crore today — the list of changes and contradictions goes on, each one pushing the AAP a little more closer to any other political party.

One-man army The AAP has come a long way politically from the Ramlila Maidan. After coming to power in Delhi in December 2013, the AAP government resigned after 49 days as it was not able to table a 'Delhi Jan Lokpal Bill' in the Assembly, lacking necessary numbers. Mr. Kejriwal then went back to the people of Delhi and they gave the AAP a historic mandate of 67 out of 70 seats in 2015, and the AAP returned to power in 2020 by winning 62 seats. The party came to power in Punjab in 2022 and later that

year, it won five seats in Gujarat with a 12.9% vote share. This performance led to the party getting the 'national party' status in 2023, in just a little over 10 years since its formation. But along this journey, founding members such as Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav were expelled, while many others left the party. As the party grew, the power also consolidated in the hands of one man — Mr. Kejriwal — and his inner circle.

In January 2021, the party quietly amended its constitution, changing a clause that prevented anyone from holding a post for more than two consecutive terms of three years each. This made way for Mr. Kejriwal to continue as the national convener, the highest post in the party. The AAP has in many ways become synonymous with Mr. Kejriwal and the party's manifesto is even called "Kejriwal's Guarantees". Over the years, the AAP's electoral politics has crystallised into a promise of welfare and subsidies, peppered with Hindu symbolism and nationalism. Mr. Kejriwal does not shy away from saying they are building 'Ram Rajya' in Delhi and even built a 30-foot-high replica of the 'Ram Mandir' in Delhi, using public funds as part of Diwali celebration of the Delhi government and did puja with his Cabinet colleagues at the replica.

During the anti-CAA protests in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, Mr. Kejriwal tactfully stayed away. He even said he would have got the roads cleared of the protesters if his government had control of the Delhi Police. In 2019, the AAP voted in favour of the abrogation of Article 370 and the Bill stripping Jammu and Kashmir of Statehood. In the run up to the 2025 Delhi Assembly election, Mr. Kejriwal did not campaign in many areas with sizeable Muslim population such as Mustafabad and Okhla. One of the hardest blows the AAP received since its inception was in 2022, when allegations of a scam in the Delhi excise policy started to shake the AAP, leading to the arrest of senior leaders, including Mr. Kejriwal and his trusted deputy Manish Sisodia. The AAP supremo, who came out on bail in September last year, resigned as the Chief Minister, stating he wants to prove his innocence in 'Janata Ki Adalat' (people's court) as the court case will drag on for years. Atishi, Mr. Kejriwal's confidante, succeeded him as Chief Minister for the remaining term. Both Mr. Kejriwal and Mr. Sisodia lost the election along with the AAP when results were out on February 8.

As dust settles on the Delhi polls, the AAP is left with a question: what hurts more? The party losing power in Delhi or the party chief losing the election? For the AAP, which contests elections in other States, including in Punjab in 2022, on Mr. Kejriwal's face value and the 'Delhi Model' of governance, it will be hard to recover from the combination of both the losses. Party insiders say the shift in middle class voters to the BJP cost them the election. But many workers say the distance between the leaders and the workers has also grown as the party grew. With just 22 out of 70 seats in Delhi now, it is the worst performance of the AAP since it was formed. Another question is that will the AAP, which has almost never been without power in Delhi, survive five years or more without power? Unlike the Left or the BJP, where people rise through the ranks over years if not decades to become MLAs or Ministers, many of the AAP leaders had reached those positions almost overnight without cutting their teeth in politics for years. That said, the AAP's vote share in the Delhi election was only 2 percentage point less than that of the BJP. In contrast, the Congress is behind the saffron party by almost 39 percentage points. Also, a change in law by the Union government in May 2023, which negated a Supreme Court judgment, and gave the control of the bureaucracy in the Delhi government to the Union government-appointed Lieutenant-Governor. This is a crucial factor in Delhi, which is not a full State. Many AAP supporters believe that the party's fortunes could have been different if Delhi was a full State. It would be mistake to write off the AAP as it has time and again demonstrated the ability to bounce back from setbacks. But what is to be seen is whether the party, having moved away from many of its core ideas, will be able to stand out from other parties or whether the public will see it as just another political party.

What scientists make of R&D allocations in the 2025 Union Budget

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

The Budget provides an overall and possibly unprecedented thrust on research and innovation by setting aside Rs 20,000 crore for DST towards research in the private sector, including corporates and startups. There is a focused attempt to bring together academia, private sector and startups to work on national missions, such as the AI and quantum missions already underway, and the newly announced nuclear mission (to set up small and modular reactors), the geospatial mission, and others. Abhay Karandikar delivering an address at KLE Technological University, Hubballi/A key focus of the funding trend is to boost research, development and innovation. The dedicated fund of Rs 20,000 crore is part of the Rs 1 lakh crore corpus fund announced in the budget of July 2024 to boost private sector R&D, especially in deep tech and sunrise sectors. DST will be the nodal ministry driving this fund. This will be a major step towards creating strategic autonomy in some key technology sectors. The National Geospatial Mission has been announced with an allocation of Rs 100 crore for FY 2025-2026 to develop foundational geospatial infrastructure and data. The mission will help implement the National Geospatial Policy 2022, notified by DST with the goal of expanding the access and use of geospatial data and making India a world leader in the geospatial sector.

The Union Finance Minister has also announced several initiatives to boost science, technology, and innovation in the country including the Nuclear Energy Mission, initiatives in clean tech, Atal Tinkering Labs, and the Centre of Excellence on AI in Education.

The Union Budget demonstrates a strong commitment to advancing India's biotechnology sector, aligning closely with the DBT's objectives. The Rs 3,446.64 crore allocation reflects a significant increase of 51.45% from the previous year's allocation. An allocation of Rs 20,000 crore has been designated to support private-sector-driven research. Recently, the government also approved the 'Bio-RIDE' scheme to foster innovation, promote bio-entrepreneurship, and strengthen India's position as a global leader in biomanufacturing and biotechnology. The Budget introduces several initiatives that align closely with DBT's mission to advance India's biotechnology sector. The support for private sector research is expected to accelerate advancements in areas such as gene-editing, personalised medicine, and sustainable agriculture.

The proposal for a light-touch regulatory framework based on principles and trust is a progressive step. Simplifying regulations and updating outdated laws will enhance the ease of conducting biotech research and development, facilitating faster translation of scientific discoveries into market-ready solutions.

The National Mission on High Yielding Seeds will fo-



cus on strengthening the research ecosystem and developing high-yielding, pest-resistant, and climate-resilient seeds, aligning with DBT's efforts in agricultural biotechnology. Aligned with the government's 'BioE3 Policy' for fostering high-performance biomanufacturing, the National Manufacturing Mission (NMM) announced in the Budget aims to accelerate technology development and commercialisation. Additionally, it will drive the expansion of India's skilled workforce and boost job creation. Efforts are already underway to implement the BioE3 Policy in support of the NMM. Similarly, some of DBT's initiatives contribute to self-reliance programmes, such as the mission on minor oil seeds (with identification of new genes/alleles for linseed, sesame, niger, and safflower for accelerated genetic improvement, productivity enhancement, and sustainability). Another is a mission programme on "Characterisation of Genetic Resources", to sequence/re-sequence and characterise available germplasm resources of pulses such as chickpea. The Union Budget reinforces science, technology, and innovation (STI) as key enablers of national progress, aligning with CSIR's vision of advancing self-reliance and global competitiveness. The budget's focus on public-private partnerships, industry collaboration, and technology-driven entrepreneurship will accelerate innovation in manufacturing, healthcare, sustainability, and strategic sectors. For agriculture and rural prosperity, CSIR's Aroma and Floriculture Missions align with the Agri-Districts Initiative, promoting value-added farming and boosting farmer incomes. Similarly, CSIR's Millets Mission supports self-reliance in pulses and oilseeds, ensuring nutritional security and climate-resilient farming. The CSIR Cotton Mission aligns with the National Cotton Mission, strengthening India's position in global textile markets. The Indigenous Manufacturing and Smart Packaging Missions finds synergy with the NMM, driving innovation-led industrial growth. The Green Hydrogen Mission, spearheaded by CSIR, supports the clean energy transition. For youth-skilling, CSIR's Jigyasa Programme complements the Atal Tinkering Labs, fostering STEM education and research exposure.

Why is a new bill on foreigners coming? | Explained



The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is all set to introduce the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 in the second half of the Budget session that begins on March 10. The bill repeals all the four existing legislations that deal with immigration and movement of foreigners.

Why are fresh terms being drawn up?

According to the Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Bill, matters relating to foreigners and immigration are administered through the Foreigners Act, 1946, the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 and the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and The Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000. Three of these laws are from the "pre-Constitution period" brought during "extraordinary times" of World Wars I and II. The statement notes that while there is an underlying continuity and commonality of objectives among the four Acts, there are some overlapping provisions and a necessity to repeal the Acts and enact a new comprehensive legislation — The Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025. The proposed legislation is to be enacted to avoid multiplicity and overlapping of laws on passports or other travel documents in respect of persons entering into and exiting from India and for regulating matters related to foreigners including the requirement of visa and registration.

What are the significant provisions?

The Bill has six chapters comprising 35 clauses and bunched of existing laws into a single document. It clearly defines the functions of the Immigration Officer, the requirements of passport and visa, and matters relating to foreigners and their registration. Though the Bureau of Immigration (BoI) already exists, the Bill seeks to provide legal backup for immigration functions, the Immigration Officer and the BoI. It defines provisions relating to the obligations of universities and educational institutions, hospitals, nursing homes, and medical institutions to admit any foreigner. There was no defined rule earlier for such institutions; foreigners were asked to register with the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO). Presently, it is mandatory for hotels and guest houses to share the passport details of foreigners with the police. The Bill also has provisions relating to foreigners whose movements are restricted, the power of civil authority to control places frequented by foreigners and the provisions relating to the liability of carriers and their obligations. The Bill retains the provision on the "burden of proof" to prove that a person is not a foreigner on the person.

What is the provision for entry and stay of foreigners?

The Bill introduces the clause — "threat to national security, sovereignty and integrity of India and relations with a foreign State" — among the grounds to refuse the entry or stay of a foreigner in the country.

The proposed law states, "... no foreigner shall be allowed to enter into or stay in India if he is found inadmissible to do so on account of threat to national security, sovereignty and integrity of India, relations with a foreign State or public health or on such other grounds as the Central Government may specify," adding that the decision of the Immigration Officer shall be final and binding. Earlier too, foreigners have been denied entry but the reasons were not explicitly mentioned in any legislation or rules. Many foreigners and persons of Indian origin have been denied entry based on executive orders. According to Foreigners Order, 1948, a foreigner may be denied entry if he or she is a threat to public safety, if the foreigner carries an infection or is affected by mental illness, if the passport or visa is

invalid, faces extradition or has been previously denied entry into the country. The Bill mentions the power of the Centre to issue orders for the removal of foreigners, to delegate and exempt. Presently, Section 3 of the Foreigners Act 1946 empowers the Central government to prohibit, regulate or restrict the entry of foreigners into India or, their exit or stay. Section 5 of the Passport Act 1920 also has the provision for the removal of a foreigner who has entered without documents or a visa.

What are the penal provisions in the Bill?

The penalty for entering India without a passport or travel document in the proposed legislation is imprisonment for five years or a fine up to ₹5 lakh or both. Using or supplying forged or fraudulently obtained passports or other travel documents or visas shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term not less than two years, but may extend to seven years, and a fine of not less than ₹1 lakh but which may extend to ₹10 lakh, the Bill proposes. Overstaying beyond the visa limit shall be punishable by three years and a fine up to 3 lakh.

Does the Bill allow States to detect and deport undocumented migrants?

Yes. The Ministry of Home Affairs informed the Jharkhand High Court last year that since the "Central Government does not maintain a separate federal police force exclusively dedicated to the task of detection and deportation of foreigners staying illegally, action in this regard has been entrusted to the State police." According to guidelines issued on April 24, 2014, and July 1, 2019, a foreigner can be deported after completion of the sentence/court proceedings by the State government if he/she has a valid travel document/passport and no other court case pending. In case the foreigner does not have a valid travel document, it should be obtained from the embassy or High Commission.

What about detention centres?

The Bill does not use the term 'detention centres'. Clause 13 says foreigners are "required to reside at a place set apart for the residence under supervision." Such places will be subject to conditions of maintenance, discipline and the punishment of offences and breaches of discipline as the Central Government may from time to time determine. The Centre may regulate access to places in India where foreigners whose movements are restricted are lodged. In 2019, following a Supreme Court directive, the MHA finalised the "Detention Centre Manual" for restricting the movement of foreign nationals who are awaiting deportation due to non-possession of valid travel documents and to ensure that they are physically available at all times for expeditious repatriation and deportation. The manual notes that States require "no specific approval" from the Home Ministry to set up "detention centres /holding centres/ camps." It lays down that centres should be set up outside the jail premises and their numbers and size should be decided by the States keeping in view the actual number of foreigners to be housed as well as the progress in deportation proceedings.

What are the other mechanisms in place to track the movement of foreigners?

The MHA has asked States to constitute two committees to identify foreigners who entered India pre- and post-January 1, 2011, and have stayed on beyond the visa period. The details of foreigners who entered legally and are said to be flouting visa regulations are uploaded on the e-FRRO portal, which can be accessed by the local police. Their details are also shared with government departments running flagship welfare schemes, driving licence, and PAN databases so that action can be taken if documents have been obtained fraudulently. The MHA has also operationalised a Foreigners Identification Portal, which is accessible by the State police to upload the biometrics and other details of "illegal foreigners." The purpose of the portal is to enable the States to identify illegal migrants for deportation and to prevent them from procuring documents such as Aadhaar.

Will you threaten Tamil Nadu to accept Hindi, if we ask for our rightful share of funds?

Udhayanidhi Stalin poser to Dharmendra Pradhan

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Ministers of the Tamil Nadu Government took strong exception to comments on the three language policy by Union Minister for Education Dharmendra Pradhan on Sunday (February 16, 2025) and engaged in a war of words asserting Tamil Nadu's position against imposition of Hindi and for the rightful share of funds due to Tamil Nadu. Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin rejected Mr. Pradhan's observation that Tamil Nadu's position was politically motivated. "The politics for Tamils began only after we developed language and community affinity," he said. "Will you threaten Tamil Nadu to accept Hindi, if we ask for our rightful share of funds? Taunting Tamil Nadu is like touching fire. Do not over do it. You would understand it if you recall the history of Tamil Nadu after Independence," Mr. Udhayanidhi said in a social media post.

The Deputy CM said: "We are only asking for funds for our children's education. Do not be arrogant assuming you are in a position to give and we are in a position to



receive. Tamil Nadu will not be patient anymore!" Later in the day, Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu too echoed the sentiments of the CM. "When Tamil Nadu contributes 9% to the Union GDP without conditions, why should there be strings attached when it comes to getting our rightful share?" he asked, in a social media post.

PM Modi to French business leaders in Paris, says 'Everyone's progress is linked to India's progress'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has invited French companies to look at the immense opportunities offered by the India growth story and said it was the "right time" to invest in the country. In his address at the 14th India-France CEOs Forum in Paris, where he was joined by French President Emmanuel Macron, Modi noted the expanding bilateral business and economic collaboration and the impetus it has provided to the strategic partnership between the two countries. He highlighted India's attractiveness as a favoured global investment destination, based on a stable polity and predictable policy ecosystem. "Let me tell you all, this is the right time to come to India. Everyone's progress is linked to India's progress," said Mr. Modi. "An example of this was seen in the aviation sector, when Indian companies placed large orders for airplanes. And, now, when we are going to open 120 new airports, you can imagine the future possibilities for yourselves," he said. Inviting French business to join India's development journey, he said, "When

France's finesse and India's scale meet; when India's pace and France's precision join; when France's technology and India's talent unite... then, not just business landscape, but global transformation will happen."

PM Modi noted that India is becoming the biggest centre of diversification and de-risking, backed by a new generation of reforms outlined in the Union Budget earlier this month. He noted, "India and France are not just linked by democratic values. The foundation of our friendship is based on the spirit of deep trust, innovation, and public welfare. Our partnership is not limited to just two countries. "We are cooperating together to address global problems and challenges. During my last visit, we had outlined the 2047 roadmap for our partnership. Following that, we are pursuing cooperation in a comprehensive manner in every field." He pointed to areas such as aerospace, ports, defence, electronics, dairy, chemicals and consumer goods where Indo-French cooperation is already in action."

He who saves his country does not violate any law: Trump in defiance of legal challenges



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

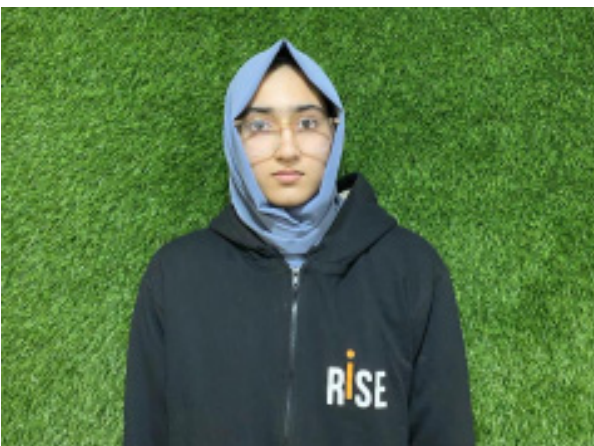
Echoing France's Napoleon Bonaparte, U.S. President Donald Trump on Saturday (February 15, 2025) took to social media to signal continued resistance to limits on his executive authority in the face of multiple legal challenges. "He who saves his country does not violate any law," Mr. Trump, a Republican, proclaimed on his Truth Social network. The White House did not respond to a request for more details.

The phrase, attributed to the French military leader who

created the Napoleonic Code of civil law in 1804 before declaring himself emperor, drew immediate criticism from Democrats. "Spoken like a true dictator," Senator Adam Schiff of California, a longtime adversary of Mr. Trump, wrote on X. Mr. Trump, who took office on January 20, has made broad assertions of executive power that appear headed toward U.S. Supreme Court showdowns. Some lawsuits accuse Mr. Trump of usurping the authority of Congress as set out in the U.S. Constitution. While Mr. Trump said he abides by court rulings, his advisers have attacked judges on social media and called for their impeachment. Vice President J.D. Vance wrote on X this week that judges "aren't allowed to control the executive's legitimate power."

"Washington lawyer Norm Eisen, who like Schiff worked on the first of Mr. Trump's two impeachment trials, said Mr. Trump's lawyers have repeatedly tried to argue that if the president does it, it's not illegal. Mr. Trump, whose longtime slogan is "Make America Great Again," attributed his survival of an assassination attempt in July to God's will. "Many people have told me that God spared my life for a reason, and that reason was to save our country and to restore America to greatness," he said after his election victory.

Pulwama's Simrah Mir shines bright with 99.39 percentile in JEE Mains 2025 – An inspiring tale of perseverance



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

She comes from a region where resilience is a way of life. When Simrah spoke over the phone, her voice exuded conviction which only comes with a sense of achievement. "At one point, I felt like giving up," she began. Yet even her recall of desperation was in an unwavering tone.

Hailing from Kashmir's Pulwama, a town often making the headlines for more negative than positive news, Simrah Mir has given a reason for the region to shine bright. Defying all odds stacked up against her, this young woman has brought immense joy and pride to the valley by scoring 99.39 percentile in the recently concluded JEE Mains this year. Simrah's is not just a personal victory but may well be an inspiration for countless students across Kashmir. Simrah, a student of a local government school, attended RISE coaching classes in Srinagar for JEE. RISE is a coaching institute in Srinagar started by three former IITians: Salman Shahid and Imbesat Ahmad, both alumni of IIT Kharagpur, and Mubeen Masudi of IIT Bombay. Mubeen is a Kashmiri, says Mr. Shahid. "We started our institute in 2015 since we wanted to do something for Kashmir. When we started out, only a handful enrolled in our classes. Today, every year, some three to four students from our institute go to IIT and 70 to 80 students go to NIT. Twenty percent of these students are girls," says Mr. Shahid. In an interview with The Hindu, Simrah spoke about her challenges, triumphs, and her fresh optimism for the road ahead. She says: "At times, there were internet shutdowns, and many times it was a fearful environment at my hometown. My parents sheltered me from everything, even from what happening around our near vicinity. Then I moved to Srinagar. It was difficult to travel up and down daily from Pulwama every day for the coaching classes. It's a long distance."

Unlike many students who set their sights on JEE early on, Simrah's decision to pursue engineering evolved over time. "It was a big step. Initially, I didn't know much about JEE. I joined the RISE Institute, and there I got to know about the exam and started looking at engineering as a career. Later, I faced difficulties in my preparation. I felt like giving up, but my parents constantly supported and motivated me," she continued.

What kept you motivated? What were the reactions of your parents, friends, and teachers to your preparations?

Initially, when I was searching for an interest, my par-

ents and relatives were pushing me towards medicine. I didn't like Biology and I'm not interested in Medicine. From an early age, I was interested in Physics and Mathematics; I wanted to know about the subjects. I studied by myself. I used to read books other than my textbooks. Physics and Maths interested me. Later on, I decided that it is a stream for me. I decided I had to take Mathematics and Physics as a career.

Any obstacles or resistance you came across while preparing for JEE? Did you ever think about what would happen if you didn't get selected?

There were definitely moments of doubt. And I used to have them often. As I said, I felt like giving up. JEE is a tough exam. I did think about what would happen if I didn't get selected. But every time I felt low, my parents supported me. That helped me stay focused and push through the tough times. I recently spoke to some people in Assam and learned that language, infrastructure, and cultural barriers can be obstacles in education. Did you face any challenges like that?

Shifting to Srinagar was a big deal for me. I'm from Pulwama, and it was getting difficult. There were no coaching classes specifically for JEE preparations

I did think of going to Delhi or another State initially because there are good institutes there. But then I realised it might not be beneficial for me. I have never lived alone, and I felt like I should be close to my parents. In Kashmir, students usually prefer medicine and becoming doctors, especially girls. It's rare for a girl to take engineering as a career.

Did your school play any role in your success? Did they provide career counselling or extra classes for JEE aspirants?

There was enough career counselling but no extra classes specifically for JEE aspirants. Most students in my school focused on board exams. Nobody actually introduced the subject to me. I was inquisitive. There were some other students too who were genuinely interested to study and were inquisitive like me.

Which branch of engineering attracts you the most? And why? And have you thought about any specific college you would like to join?

I have not thought about it. Of course, I want to go to the best college. I want to go to IIT.

Personally, I want to take Computer Science Engineering, but I don't know exactly what will happen in the future. I haven't researched much yet. It also depends on my rank and how I perform in the JEE Advanced exam.

What do you wish to become eventually?

As of now, my goal is to pursue Computer Science Engineering. I would see where my passion takes me eventually.

What advice and tips you would want to give to JEE aspirants from your region?

In Kashmir, many students, especially girls, hesitate to choose engineering because it's not the common path. But if you genuinely enjoy Mathematics and Physics, you should give it a chance. It's important to be practical. JEE is tough, and there will be challenges. But if you take it step by step and stay disciplined, you can do it.

Germany's Scholz rebukes Vance, defends Europe's stance on hate speech and far right

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered a strong rebuke on Saturday (February 15, 2025) to U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's attack on Europe's stance toward hate speech and the far right, saying it was not right for others to tell Germany and Europe what to do. Mr. Vance lambasted European leaders on Friday, the first day of the Munich Security Conference, accusing them of censoring free speech and criticising German mainstream parties "firewall" against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). "That is not appropriate, especially not among friends and allies. We firmly reject that," Mr. Scholz told the conference on Saturday, adding there were "good reasons" not to work with the AfD.

The anti-immigration party, currently polling at around 20% ahead of Germany's February 23 national election, has pariah status among other major German parties in a country with a taboo about ultranationalist politics because of its Nazi past. "Never again fascism, never again racism, never again aggressive war. That is why an overwhelming majority in our country opposes anyone who glorifies or justifies criminal National Socialism," Mr. Scholz said, referring to the ideology of Adolf Hitler's 1933-45 Nazi regime. Mr. Vance met on Friday with the leader of AfD, after endorsing the



party as a political partner — a stance Berlin dismissed as an unwelcome election interference. Referring more broadly to Vance's criticism of Europe's curtailing of hate speech, which he has likened to censorship, Mr. Scholz said: "Today's democracies in Germany and Europe are founded on the historic awareness and realisation that democracies can be destroyed by radical anti-democrats." And this is why we've created institutions that ensure that our democracies can defend themselves against their enemies, and rules that do not restrict or limit our freedom but protect it," he said.

Sex work drives clade Ib mpox outbreak in DR Congo

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Genomic and epidemiologic data suggest that the rapid spread of mpox clade Ib in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was majorly (83.4%) linked to sex work within densely populated areas. Overall, 200/751 (26.6%) of the professional sex workers were infected during the study period. "The outbreak appears to be driven by sexual activity with professional sex workers linked to bars supporting the previously undocumented model of heterosexual transmission," notes a study. According to the team led by Dr. Marion Koopmans from the Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, Netherlands, genome analysis shows evidence for considerable underdetection. The study has been accepted for publication in the journal Nature Medicine.

The mpox clade Ib outbreak in DRC began in September 2023 in South Kivu. Though the study was limited to 670 cases during the period September 2023 to June 2024, the outbreak is still continuing. As of January 5 2025, more than 9,500 laboratory confirmed cases have been notified with an estimated case fatality rate of 3.4%. Most cases belong to clade 1b, which is highly transmissible and more virulent than the clade 2 virus.

In total, 670 cases were admitted to Kamituga hospital from 17 health areas. Of the cases, 52.4% were in females, and 47.6% in males. In contrast to other outbreaks in the DRC, only 15.5% (104/670) of suspected cases were children under 16 years. Of these, 45 were less than five years of age, with the majority of children 15-24 years old. Also, the number of cases among women were more than



in men (351 women and 319 men). Researchers collected samples from hospitalised patients, along with data on residence and possible exposures. During the study period, seven deaths from mpox were noted among hospitalised patients. Four of the seven fatalities were in young adults (20-30 years), and three of the four young adults were females. Fourteen pregnant women were hospitalised during the study period, of whom eight (57.1%) women aged 16-29 years suffered foetal loss (miscarriage). Five women suffered miscarriage in the first trimester of pregnancy, while three suffered foetal loss during the second trimester. Visual evidence of infection (pox-lesions) was present in one foetus, while one placenta tested positive for the virus. No samples were obtained from aborted fetuses, the authors write. Based on genomic sequencing, the researchers conclude that there have been several ongoing outbreaks with different origins, age groups involved and suspected modes of transmission.

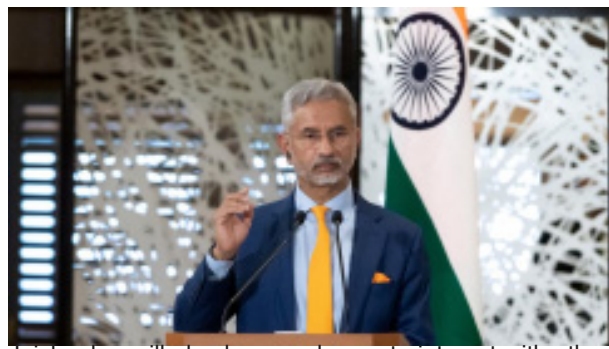
After Modi-Trump talks on Delhi-Dhaka tensions, Jaishankar to meet Bangladesh FM in Muscat

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Amidst troubled ties with Bangladesh, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar will meet Bangladesh Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain on the sidelines of the 8th Indian Ocean Conference in Muscat. Mr. Jaishankar, who will inaugurate the regional conference co-hosted by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Omani government, and organised by the India Foundation, will also meet with a number of other Foreign Ministers from about 27 countries. The Foreign Ministers of Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Bangladesh will be attending the annual conference. In a sign of the government's normalisation process of ties with China after the October agreement between the militaries at the Line of Actual Control, China's Special Envoy for Middle East Affairs Zhai Jun will attend, marking the first time an official from the country has been invited since the conference held in 2019.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong will address the grouping. Mr. Jaishankar, who accompanied Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Paris and Washington this week, attended the Munich Security Conference on Saturday before arriving in Muscat. Mr. Jaishankar will address the inaugural session of the Indian Ocean Conference on Sunday along with Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi and Mr. Balakrishnan. Mr. Jaishankar's meeting with the Bangladesh Foreign Affairs Adviser is particularly significant as it comes amidst spiralling ties between the Modi government and the caretaker government in Dhaka led by Muhammad Yunus, and deep concerns that Mr. Modi even raised with U.S. President Donald Trump during his visit to Washington.

While India has expressed alarm over the attacks on minorities after the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, as well as the treatment of Indian businesses by the new government, the Yunus government has demanded that India ensure that Ms. Hasina, who has taken shelter in Delhi, does not make political statements or address public rallies of the Awami League via video conference. A number of other irritants, over border security, water sharing and flood management, trade issues, the release of radicals and those accused on terror charges in Bangladesh have also been discussed between both sides, including during a visit by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to Dhaka in December. Mr. Jaishankar and Mr. Hossain will be tasked with taking forward the talks on resolving issues, as well preparing for a possible meeting between Mr. Modi and Mr. Yunus, as both are expected to attend the BIMSTEC regional conference in Bangkok on April 2-4. Mr.

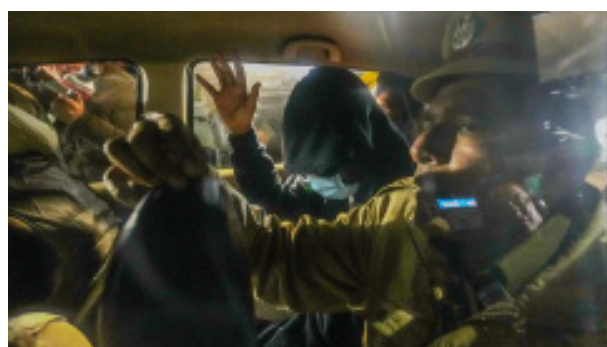


Jaishankar will also have a chance to interact with other counterparts from the region, and tackle issues testing ties with them. Sri Lankan Minister of Foreign Affairs Vijitha Herath will be in Muscat days after the Adani Group pulled out of a renewable energy contract after the Dissanayake government ordered a second review against it.

Maldives' Foreign Minister Abdulla Khaleel is expected to discuss talks for a Free Trade Agreement with India, after the Muizzu government has already operationalized an FTA with China. Nepal's Foreign Minister Arzu Deuba is expected to discuss dates for a bilateral visit by Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, who was sworn in in July last year, but has not so far received an invitation. In December, Mr. Oli travelled to Beijing for a bilateral visit, one of the first times India was not the first stop for a Nepali PM. All eyes will also be on a possible meet with Mauritius' Foreign Minister Dhananjay Ramful. New Delhi has been disappointed by the newly elected Mauritius government's decision to review the deal the previous government had struck over the transfer of Chagos Island that houses the U.S. Diego Garcia base, from the U.K. to Mauritius in line with international ruling over sovereignty issues.

India had played a "quiet but important" background role in the agreement, officials said, and Mr. Jaishankar, fresh from his visit to the U.S. and meetings there, may discuss the issue with Mr. Ramful. According to the organisers this is the biggest Indian Ocean Conference, with 29 Ministers, and more than 200 delegates from more than 45 countries, and regional groupings like SAARC, IORA, BIMSTEC and Gulf Cooperation Council participating. "The Indian Ocean region is home to... about three billion people, it is the most happening region, where 70% of global container trade goes through. Most importantly it is a region that is largely peaceful, connected not just by oceanic waters, but culture, history and civilisation," India Foundation president Ram Madhav, former general secretary of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party said, addressing a press conference previewing the conference in Muscat.

U.S. flight brings second batch of 116 deportees to Amritsar



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

A United States aircraft carrying a batch of 116 alleged illegal migrants from India, who were deported from the U.S., landed at Punjab's Amritsar International Airport on Saturday night.

This was the second group of Indian citizens to be sent back from the U.S. after President Donald Trump started a crackdown on illegal immigrants. On February 5, a U.S. military plane brought 104 illegal immigrants, in handcuffs and chains, to Amritsar, inviting sharp criticism from the Opposition. According to officials, of the 116 deportees, 65 are from Punjab, 33 from Haryana, eight from Gujarat, two each from Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, and one each from Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir. Sources said that most of the deportees are aged between 18 and 30. Some of their family members arrived at the airport to receive them. Relatives wait outside the airport ahead of the second batch of the immigrants' arrival from the US, in Amritsar. Earlier in the day, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann slammed the Centre over the landing of U.S. planes with illegal Indian immigrants at the Amritsar airport and asked the Union government not to make the holy city a "deport centre". The Bharatiya Janata Party hit back at the Chief Minister and accused him of playing politics over the deportation. A large number of people, especially youth from Punjab, travel abroad in hope of a better life. As the trend continued to grow, illegal and irregular migration proliferated. The magnitude of irregular migration from Punjab is believed to be substantial, but there is hardly any authentic data on this in

the public domain. Indians deported from the U.S. being escorted by the police as they leave the airport after their arrival, in Amritsar, early Indians deported from the U.S. being escorted by the police as they leave the airport after their arrival, in Amritsar, early After the first batch of migrants returned, the Punjab Police set up a Special Investigation Team to probe human trafficking and illegal migration. That batch of deportees comprised 33 migrants each from Haryana and Gujarat, and 30 from Punjab.

Twin panda cubs make public debut in Hong Kong

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's youngest celebrities, a pair of six-month-old panda cubs, met with their adoring fans in their first public appearance, on Sunday. The twin cubs, born August 15, are Hong Kong's first locally-born giant panda cubs. They are hosted at the theme park Ocean Park along with their parents and two other giant pandas that arrived from mainland China last year. Crowds flocked to the theme park on Sunday to catch a glimpse of the pandas inside their enclosure. Their caretakers were at hand as the pandas climbed up a tree trunk or slept on a swing. A large selection of panda-themed souvenirs was available. The cubs don't have names yet — they are being referred to as "Elder Sister" and "Little Brother." A public competition to name them was launched on Saturday following an event attended by Hong Kong leader John Lee and other officials. Residents can submit their name suggestions via the park's website. The twins can meet with visitors for five hours daily. Those who want to enjoy time with the cubs outside regular visiting hours, before the park opens, can pay 1,500 Hong Kong dollars (about \$190). With the cubs' birth, Hong Kong now has the largest number of pandas in captivity outside of mainland China.



‘More than happy to buy more US gas; can buy Russian oil via clean channel’: IOC Chairman Arvinder Singh Sahney



term? Russian oil and gas themselves are not under sanction. Yes, some of the entities, a couple of their insurance companies, and 180-odd ships have come under sanctions recently. Indian Oil and India are ready to import Russian oil, provided that all the three components of the trade—supplier, insurer, and shipping fleet—are not sanctioned. If Russian oil is delivered to our ports through a clean mechanism and the (price) cap is honoured, we are ready and willing to take it.

Since Russia is India's largest supplier of oil, how big an impact of the recent US sanctions do you foresee on oil supplies to India?

All of it (Russia's oil trade) is still not under sanctions. So, the non-sanctioned portion will continue to flow into the market. For Russia, only 1-2 million barrels per day (bpd) (of oil exports) may be impacted. Of the over 10 million bpd they produce, some is consumed inside Russia, while the rest is exported. The impact will be even less significant for India, as China is also a major buyer of Russian oil. And we have enough sources outside of Russia to compensate for any volume loss. Also, OPEC has some capped (oil production) capacities, which they can easily uncapped within 50 to 60 days. OPEC-plus can also produce more, Venezuela might also come into the picture, and the US is also ready to increase production. Guyana, Argentina, and Brazil are also coming into the picture... we are very well protected on the supply front.

Regular revisions in petrol and diesel prices have completely stopped over the past few years. Are you and other oil marketing companies (OMCs) looking to revert to routine price revisions?

If I talk as a customer myself, I am very happy in this situation. In the last three years, crude prices have been volatile. At one point, they were at \$115 (per barrel), but they went down to \$65 as well. At \$115, had we continued with the routine price revisions, we would have sold the fuels at something like Rs 250 per litre. You can imagine the kind of volatility that would be brought into the economy. Prices of essential commodities would have gone haywire. And then when oil falls to \$65, it goes haywire on the other side. So, the OMCs have taken a decision that we will try to insulate the customer from these vagaries to the extent that it doesn't start affecting our balance sheets.



tries," she said. Corporations have also used ISDS mechanisms via investment treaties to challenge government policies, environmental regulations and public interest laws, she said. Sitharaman said as per the Budget announcement, India will continue to build an investor friendly regime by revamping the model BIT of 2016 keeping in mind the interest of the nation. Multiple Western trade partners have cited burdensome investment treaty norms during ongoing negotiations. The Budget for 2025-26 has announced revamping the current model BIT to make it more investor-friendly and attract sustained foreign investment. India is currently in talks with the UK and the European Union for an investment treaty and is also expected to negotiate a BIT with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) region. Aanchal Magazine is Senior Assistant Editor with The Indian Express and reports on the macro economy and fiscal policy, with a special focus on economic science, labour trends, taxation and revenue metrics. With over 13 years of newsroom experience, she

Income Tax department activates section wise mapping of I-T Act, Tax bill

New Delhi: Income Tax payers can now match the sections of the I-Tax Act, 1961, with the corresponding clauses in the simplified I-T Bill, 2025, on the tax department portal. Also, Section to Section mapping as per Income Tax Act, 1961 and Section number as per New Income Tax Bill has been uploaded on the I-T department's website. A simplified Income Tax Bill, 2025, was introduced in the Lok Sabha on February 13 by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. The Bill, once enacted, will replace the 64 years old Income Tax Act which has become bulky over time with its traditional style of drafting and numerous amendments. The simplified Bill has a word count of 2.6 lakh, lower than 5.12 lakh in the I-T Act. The number of Sections is 536, as against 819 effective sections in the existing law. The number of chapters also have been halved to 23 from 47 currently. The Bill has 57 tables, compared to 18 in the existing act, besides formulae which make it easier for a taxpayer to calculate tax liability. It has removed 1,200 provisos and 900 explanations. In a post on X, the department on February 14 said it has activated the utility to check Section of the Income Tax Act, 1961, vis-a-vis corresponding clause of the new Income Tax Bill. A taxpayer can select the section of I-T Act, 1961, from a drop down menu and accordingly the corresponding clause in the I-T Bill will appear.

The way you slice your chicken can change the way it cooks and tastes

Preparing chicken is not hard, but knowing the right way to slice it can change your culinary game and make your life easy in the kitchen. Slicing chicken in different ways affects its cooking time, texture, and how well it absorbs flavours. Indianexpress.com spoke to celebrity chef Ananya Banerjee to understand the most common slicing techniques and their impact on the taste and texture of your dish:

1. Strips (Julienne)

Method: Cut the chicken into long, thin strips, about ¼ inch thick.

Impact: Cooks very quickly due to the thinness. Absorbs marinades and seasonings well. Stays tender if cooked quickly on high heat but can dry out if overcooked.

2. Cubes (Diced)

Method: Cut into uniform small cubes, typically ½ inch or 1-inch pieces.

Impact: Even cooking due to uniform size. Great for marinating since more surface area is exposed. Retains juiciness when cooked in sauces.

3. Butterfly

Method: Slice the chicken breast horizontally but not all the way through, then open it like a book.

Impact: Reduces cooking time for thick cuts, ensures even cooking and prevents dryness and is ideal for stuffing as it creates a pocket.

4. Paillard (Pounded Flat)

Method: Place a chicken breast between plastic wrap and pound it to an even thinness.

Impact: Cooks very fast and evenly. Results in a tender texture. Great for breadings and frying since it crisps up well.



5. Bias Cut (Diagonal Slices)

Method: Cut chicken breast at a 45-degree angle into thin pieces.

Impact: Increases surface area for marinades. Looks more presentable on the plate. Retains more moisture compared to straight cuts.

6. Shredded (Pulled)

Method: Cooked chicken is pulled apart into thin strands using forks or hands.

Impact: Absorbs sauces well. Creates a soft, juicy texture. Best when slow-cooked for tenderness.

7. Chopped (Rough Cuts)

Method: Roughly chop chicken into irregular pieces.

Impact: Quick and rustic preparation. Texture varies depending on the cooking method. Works well in mixed dishes like stir-fries or pasta.

Why are cancer patients more prone to oral infections? Expert decodes

In a podcast episode, Digital creator Dr Austin Lake in conversation with an oncologist shed light on the fact that cancer patients are more likely to get oral infections. Curious, indianexpress.com spoke to a health expert and unearthed the connection. Dr Sandeep Goyle, Head of Medical Oncology, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, Mumbai explained that oral infections are common among cancer patients due to their immunocompromised state, which can vary depending on the stage of the cancer and the treatment they are receiving. Cancer patients often receive treatments like chemotherapy and radiation therapy, which can cause problems in the head and neck regions, affecting the inner lining of the oral cavity. "Technically, the oral cavity already contains many bacteria, but because the inner lining is smooth and intact, it typically does not cause many infections. However, when the inner lining becomes damaged due to chemotherapy or radiation, these bacteria can cause further infection. That's why cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy, especially for head and neck cancer, are more prone to developing mouth ulcers and infections," he explained.

How can you prevent that?

According to Dr Goyle, the key to preventing infections is maintaining good oral hygiene. If oral hygiene is good, the chances of infection are reduced, which helps in preventing complications of chemotherapy. Certain medications can also predispose patients to fungal infections in the mouth. "If we limit the dosage of these medicines, fungal infections can be reduced. Patients who have conditions like diabetes or poor oral hygiene, or who smoke and use tobacco, are at an even higher risk. Eliminating or addressing these risk factors can further reduce the risk of infections," he said.



"Another important point is that when we give radiation to the head and neck region, a dental check-up should always be done first. If there are any decayed teeth or gum issues, they must be treated before starting treatment to prevent infections or ulcers later on," he added. Oral infections in cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and head and neck radiotherapy can either be prevented or treated early. Dr Goyle said that the most important factor is maintaining good oral hygiene. "If patients can do that, they have already addressed half of the problem. If an infection occurs, it's up to the doctor to identify it as soon as possible and treat it appropriately. This significantly reduces the problem for the patient," he mentioned. Thus, it is both the responsibility of the patient and the doctor. The patient must maintain proper oral hygiene, including regular practices like warm water gargles, salted gargles, or medicinal mouthwashes. The doctor's responsibility is to identify which patients are prone to infections and implement preventative measures early, rather than waiting for infections to develop.

‘Age no bar’: As Bhagyashree shows us the benefits of wall sits, find out why they are essential for women above 40



Bollywood veteran Bhagyashree's commitment to health and fitness finds expression through social media posts and videos, where she seldom shares tips and tricks that help her stay active. In one such recent video, she elaborated on the importance of doing wall sits. "All you have to do it sit! A great workout for your quads, core and over all lower body strength... the wall sit. This is something everyone should try, age no bar, time and place no bar. Keep your back pressed firmly to the wall and legs at a 90° angle. Start with 30 secs and try for a 2 minute routine," she shared insights in the caption of her Instagram post.

Indianexpress.com reached out to experts to understand the benefits of this exercise and how it can be a gamechanger for women in their 40s. Gajawelli Chandrashekar, Fitness Expert, Cult shared that for women above the age of 40, maintaining muscle mass, joint health, and overall stability becomes crucial for longevity and quality of life. And in this endeavour, one of the simplest yet most effective exercises recommend is the wall squat. Why, you ask? "Many women experience a natural decline in muscle mass and bone density as they age. Regular strength training is key to counteracting this, and wall squats offer a low-impact yet highly effective way to build lower body strength while protecting the joints," he explained.

1. Leg Strength Without Joint Strain: Wall squats target the quads, hamstrings, and glutes, essential muscles for daily movements like walking, climbing stairs, and standing up from a chair. Unlike traditional squats, the wall provides support, reducing stress on the knees while still delivering strength-building benefits.

2. Improved Knee Stability & Pain Reduction: For women experiencing knee discomfort, wall squats strengthen the muscles around the knee joint, improving stability and reducing pain. They are a great alternative for those who struggle with deep squats or lunges.

3. Core Activation & Posture Support: Holding a squat position engages the core muscles, improving balance and posture. This is crucial for preventing falls, a common concern as we age. A strong core also helps alleviate lower back pain. 4. Bone Health & Osteoporosis Prevention: Weight-bearing exercises stimulate bone density, helping to prevent osteoporosis. Wall squats provide the necessary resistance without excessive strain, making them perfect for women focused on long-term bone health.

5. Endurance & Stamina Boost: Since wall squats are an isometric exercise, they improve muscular endurance. Holding the position for longer durations builds stamina, making everyday activities feel easier and less tiring.

Cracks at AI Summit

Despite lofty objectives and the urgency of a cohesive global cooperation, the recently concluded Artificial Intelligence (AI) summit in Paris exposed divisions among major nations on how to harness emerging technologies for a larger public good and to bridge the digital divide. At the heart of the summit was the question of how AI should be regulated. The fact that the United States and Britain refused to sign the Summit Declaration that called for policies to keep AI "open, inclusive, transparent, ethical, safe, secure and trustworthy" shows the inherent contradictions in approach. However, 60 countries, including India, France, China and Canada, have signed the declaration. Some leaders at the summit, participated by representatives from over 100 countries, emphasised the need for the creation of a diverse and inclusive AI "ecosystem" that is human rights-based, ethical, safe and trustworthy while others voiced concerns that overregulation of the industry could stifle innovation and development of the technology.

The US, currently dominating the AI space, took a stand that stringent regulations could "kill a transformative industry" and criticised European regulatory frameworks for imposing "massive regulations" and creating "endless legal compliance costs" for companies. While Europe is seeking to regulate and invest, China is focused on expanding access through state-backed tech giants, and America is pushing for a hands-off approach in terms of regulation. India, on the other hand, struck a balanced position, pushing for collective global efforts to set standards that can mitigate AI risks. India also emphasised inclusivity, particularly for nations in the Global South, which face challenges in accessing AI infrastructure, compute power, and skilled

Vicky Kaushal's film sees a huge jump, collects over Rs 67 crore



Chhaava Day 2 box office collection: Vicky Kaushal and Rashmika Mandanna's period drama Chhaava, directed by Laxman Utekar, carried high expectations since its announcement. The film was anticipated to break Bollywood's dry spell at the box office, and it seems to be doing just that.

Following an impressive opening of Rs 31 crore, the film saw even greater momentum on its second day. According to Sacnilk, the Maddock Films production earned Rs 36.5 crore on Saturday, bringing its total collection to Rs 67.5 crore in just two days. Chhaava has proven to be Vicky Kaushal's biggest box office opener as compared to his last six films. The actor has also received immense appreciation for his role as Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj.

The overall occupancy for Chhaava on Day 2 was 50.39 percent. Pune had the highest occupancy of 89.25 percent with 704 shows, in Mumbai the film's occupancy was 74.75 percent with 1372 shows. Chhaava experienced higher occupancy rates in Hyderabad and Chennai compared to Delhi-NCR. In Hyderabad, the film's occupancy was 61.25 percent with 313 shows, while in Chennai the occupancy was 59.75 percent with 89 shows. In Delhi-NCR Chhaava had an occupancy of 36.75 percent with 1321 shows. Overall, Chhaava had 6407 shows running in India. The movie, which opened to mixed reviews, also stars Akshaye Khanna, Ashutosh Rana, and Divya Dutta in important roles.

Arm-twisting, blacklisting, and mud-slinging: The horrors of Bollywood's PR machinery unmasked

It is common for journalists working in entertainment-adjacent beats to receive text messages requesting them to deputize photographers for "celebrity spotting" at airports and restaurants. The timings are specified, and the subjects range from teenage influencers to A-list stars. It is also common for disgruntled actors and filmmakers to demand that negative reviews be toned down, or, in certain cases, altered to show them in a more positive light. On-the-record statements are disowned; co-stars are maligned; and, if the situation is dire enough, spouses are thrown under the bus. But the dirty work is always done by someone else: the publicist. Their jobs can range from booking flights to ordering coffee, but the bulk of their time is spent massaging the egos of celebrities, satisfying their every whim, and also fielding their complaints. spoke to individuals on both sides of the media industry — journalism and publicity — about the pressures they've faced in their careers. They described a landscape dominated by jealousy, vindictiveness, and entitlement. Every journalist that participated in this report admitted that a disproportionate level of control rests in the hands of a few, and that false narratives are established and executed in plain sight. Questions perceived as "controversial" are discouraged during interviews; negative reviews are targeted; favours are requested but rarely repaid. But in this community, there are also pockets of resistance, and a vocal contingent willing to rock the boat. A critic who worked at a digital platform said that he was asked to change "the last few lines" of his review of a streaming series produced by perhaps one of the biggest banners in the country. He described this as the worst case of PR pressure that he has ever faced. "You can still go and read it; nothing was changed. But they didn't want the show to reflect the brand. They were like, 'Keep your criticism to the show,'" he said.

The critic claimed that publicists working for a different streaming giant "fabricated lies" about him, which resulted in him being blacklisted. They stopped answering his calls or responding to emails; he was barred from attending junkets; screeners for shows and films, which are typically assigned to journalists prior to release, weren't sent to him. "They said that I broke a review embargo for one of their series, which I had absolutely not done. What advantage am I going to gain by publishing early? Eventually, a friend of mine started working in the PR team at the platform, and he revealed to me that they had increased the size of the lie. They'd told the international team that I had broken multiple embargoes," he said, adding that no proof was furnished by the platform to substantiate its claims. The critic eventually began to regain his footing, but only when his friend was involved in the title being promoted. "Nobody else would speak to me," he said, adding that platforms "selectively give access" only to critics prone to being positive. "They avoid the ones they know have a history of being more critical," he said.

A senior editor with experience in television, print, and digital, said that the industry wasn't as tightly controlled three decades ago as it is now. "When I started, there were precisely two channels, and there was print. The stars were very accessible. The PR game, as we know it, didn't exist," she said, adding that sometime during the early 2000s, "journalists started managing stars, and that's when the games started." The landscape changed entirely after the pandemic, the senior editor said. "Earlier, there were five or six players, but then, it exploded." She said that there has always been a "give and take" dynamic between journalists and publicists, but in recent years, she has noticed a disinterest in maintaining relationships. Major celebrities were willing to make trips to newsrooms during publicity tours back in the day; they would even wait outside without complaining. A few decades before this, journalists could simply walk onto film sets and interview actors. This would never happen now. The senior editor recalled how a young actor personally requested that he be interviewed before the release of his indie film in 2012. He is now regarded as one of the finest talents of his generation, and recently appeared in one of the biggest Hindi-language hits of all time. "Today, the same actor, you can't get access to him," the senior editor said. "Nothing succeeds like success. Now, you have to go through his PR (to get in touch with him). He won't respond himself." She recalled a story about another young actor that "no one was interested" in speaking to before the release of an acclaimed 2015 film. "The same actor is inaccessible now. He won't respond. He will only respond when you message him, 'Good film'." Another star, she said, "really misbehaved and cancelled all the interviews at the last minute" after his latest remake flopped critically and commercially. He also canned an appearance at a recent fashion show, and a different actor had to be flown in at the last minute as his replacement. An A-list Bollywood director who has worked with one of the three Khans on multiple occasions once made a group of journalists wait for eight hours just to talk to him. When the journalists arrived to the designated venue at the given time, they were told after a bit of prodding that the man they had come to interview was, in fact, hundreds of miles away in Kashmir. Over the next few hours, infrequent updates about his travels were begrudgingly provided to the increasingly irate group. Many had picked spots on the floor of the venue, a landmark five-star hotel. When the filmmaker finally arrived, chaos erupted as the angry journalists began to demand immediate access. Any schedule that might have been drawn up earlier was torn to shreds; it was every man for himself. The filmmaker, on his part, seemed to be unaware of the mismanagement. Not once did he apologise for keeping at least 30 journalists and videographers from some of the country's most reputed publications waiting all evening.



It is common for journalists working in entertainment-adjacent beats to receive text messages requesting them to deputize photographers for "celebrity spotting" at airports and restaurants. The timings are specified, and the subjects range from teenage influencers to A-list stars

A PR agency that represented "all the nepo-babies" mentored by an industry veteran "became too powerful" some years ago, the senior editor further revealed. This agency would allegedly grant interview access to "only three journalists." She said that often times, requests for interviews don't even reach the star these days. The gatekeepers only inform "the talent" about opportunities that would be favourable to them. "Now, with WhatsApp, they've discovered ghosting. They will ghost you," she said.

She praised a veteran actor, known for his youthful energy, for turning down an influencer's request to make a Reel, and said that many young stars, like the one who recently headlined a flop remake, take close interest in the marketing strategies of their films. "Some PR companies have started doing 'meet-and-greets' with stars. That's when interviewers became doomed. They'll fly people in to meet the star, take a few pictures, post them on their social media. It was done." Influencers, she said, are given strict deliverables by publicists, down to the number of posts they must share on their personal social media accounts. The senior editor wondered if influencer marketing, or cross-country "roadshows," actually translate into tangible revenue. Not too long ago, a group of journalists was stranded en-route to a Middle Eastern country for one such meet-and-greet with a big-budget film's struggling stars. One of the journalists, while passing time at the airport, posted a humorous video on social media, requesting the A-list star to "rescue" the group from their predicament. The star is known to play saviour roles. Within five minutes of the video being posted online, the journalist received frantic calls from publicists demanding that he take it down. The star had somehow seen it, and wasn't amused.

A publicist working with one of the big three streaming platforms said that the "pressures" of her job revolve around "managing high-profile clients' public images amid constant media scrutiny, handling crises like scandals or rumours, maintaining positive relationships with journalists, controlling negative narratives, and ensuring successful promotions." She said that "navigating dynamics between actors or filmmakers who aren't on the best terms can be particularly challenging during promotional campaigns," and that she has been tasked in the past with maintaining a "positive narrative despite any behind-the-scenes tension" between talent. She admitted that she has had to compromise on "personal values" to get the job done. "It's a tough balance, especially when you're tasked with managing narratives that may not sit right with your own sense of fairness. Over time, I've learned to develop a thicker skin, reminding myself that, at the end of the day, it's work. Every profession, in some form, asks you to make compromises or face challenges that push your boundaries. It's a part of the job, and finding ways to manage it without losing sight of your principles is something that comes with experience," she said. bollywood pr 2 An example of a social media post that is disseminated among journalists, requesting them to amplify stories about certain actors. The senior editor said that actors have become "very wary" of getting in trouble. "So, now, they've started asking for questions in advance. They send you talking points. I have had fights with people saying, 'You don't need to send me talking points.'" She said that "all the questions" at a press conference for a mega-budget international streaming series "were planted." The lead star, an Indian, had just appeared on a podcast where she had made several controversial statements, and she wasn't going to let anybody question her about them. It is also common for publicists to essentially hold journalists hostage by taking control of their interview footage, and then tampering with it before handing it over. By doing this, they can avoid making "requests" later on. When one "omnipresent" actor had a mid-interview meltdown, she forced the publicists in charge to remove that portion of the footage before handing it over to the journalist. No polite request was made; it was an order. This actor is a repeat offender. In addition to berating journalists, she was also seen publicly screaming at a publicist for getting her sushi order wrong. A fan-favourite actor, known for his acclaimed performances across three decades, lost his cool with publicists while waiting for an interview to be set up. Despite arriving late, he said that he should've been given more time to get ready. The actor, who often projects himself as a son of the soil, had an entourage of over half-a-dozen men. And even though he often talks about going hungry early in his career, he now finds himself in a position where he can complain about the size of his hotel suite.

Krystle Dsouza says she has 'no problem' if influencers take up acting projects: 'It will be very hypocritical of me to say...'



Actor Krystle Dsouza, who starred in several major TV shows, ventured into Bollywood, making her film debut alongside Amitabh Bachchan in Chehre (2021). In 2024, she appeared in Fardeen Khan's comeback movie Visfot. Despite her talent and popularity, the 'TV actor' label has been the biggest hurdle in her Bollywood career. In the latest episode of SCREEN's Dear Me, Krystle opened up about the discrimination she has faced from the film industry. She also shared her opinion on social media influencers taking over acting projects.

Talking about transitioning from one medium into another, Krystle revealed that going from TV to films has been difficult. She shared, "TV to OTT, the transition was smooth. I got to do something I wanted to do for a while. But from the web to film is difficult. Even thinking about it tires me sometimes. It's not easy to break through. There are too many people lined up, who already have a strong backing and lots of people supporting them. Coming as an outsider into the film industry is very tough. You need to have people who believe in you and not typecast you based on the work

you have already done, and give you a fair chance. I did find some gems that way in Rumi Jaffery, Anand Pandit, Sanjay Gupta, and Kookie Gulati." She added, "I have faced a lot of judgments while transitioning from TV to films. It still happens. Judgments like she is an overexposed face, nobody will accept her as a modern character. Even after leaving TV, some people still say, 'Oh she did that show where she played a docile character so nobody will accept her in a modern avatar.' Also, they feel like we TV actors ham, which I don't think is true. Film actors ham a little more than us. I have seen the difference in the treatment, even when you go to audition for a film as a TV actor. Sometimes as an influencer, you get the part because you are not an overexposed face on TV." Krystle D'Souza also shared her views on the debate about social media influencers stealing work opportunities from other actors, especially from TV actors. She shared, "Honestly, I don't mind if influencers take some roles. I feel there is enough sun for everyone. If there is work for them out there, they can get it. It will be very hypocritical of me to say that influencers should not be actors, because then why are actors doing influencing work? We are doing it. So if you step into somebody else's territory, why are you minding if they step into yours? If a producer thinks that 12 or 18 million followers will benefit his film, why not? I don't have a problem with anyone going into any field as long as you are good at it and value what you have. No one can take what is written for me."

On the work front, Krystle D'Souza is all set to star in the web series First Copy alongside Munawar Faruqi. She will also appear in films like Superboys of Malegaon, Aghathiyaa, Baida, and Kuch Sapney Apne. Nawaz Kohra is an enthusiastic entertainment journalist for the last 9 years, he has been a known face and successfully worked with some big publications. At IndianExpress.com, Nawaz majorly covers TV and OTT and also does video interviews. Having the best conversations with celebrities is what Nawaz loves.

Mammootty to unleash himself in another 'never-seen-before' avatar soon

Kalamkaval first look poster: There needn't be any second-guessing when it comes to calling Mammootty "Indiavin Maaperum Nadigar (India's legendary actor)" as he has consistently proven himself deserving of the title. From his remarkably diverse film choices and ability to take on intensely challenging roles to executing them with flawless precision, Mammootty has reigned as one of India's finest actors for decades. More recently, he has also been gaining even more national recognition for embracing unconventional roles that most superstars would typically shy away from.

Now, the Malayalam megastar appears ready to take on yet another intriguing and distinctive role in director Jithin K Jose's Kalamkaval, which carries the tagline "the venom beneath." The film's makers recently unveiled its first-look poster, instantly sparking curiosity among audiences. The poster shows Mammootty in a tense moment, locked in a fight with an unseen opponent. The character's effortless aggression and raw physicality are evident in his body language, expressions and the half-bitten cigarette dangling from his mouth — suggesting he jumped into the scuffle without a moment's hesitation. Reports indicate that Mammootty plays a grey-shaded character in the film, which stars Vinayakan in the lead. "Wait for another 'never-seen-before' Mammootty to be unleashed soon," the makers teased while sharing the poster on social media. On the occasion, they also released another poster featuring Vinayakan, depicted through a striking silhouette shot and introduced as "the other side of Kalamkaval." Produced by Mammootty Kampany, Kalamkaval is written by director Jithin K Jose in collaboration with Jishnu Sreekumar. The



film's music is composed by Mujeeb Majeed, with cinematography by Faisal Ali and editing by Praveen Prabhakar. Reports indicate that Mammootty plays a grey-shaded character in the film, which stars Vinayakan in the lead. Mammootty with actor Vinayakan on the sets of Kalamkaval. (Credit: Instagram/@mammoottykampany) The Malayalam megastar was last seen in the mystery comedy Dominic and the Ladies' Pursue, which marked Tamil director Gautham Vasudev Menon's Malayalam debut. Also starring Gokul Suresh, Sushmitha Bhatt, Vijji Venkatesh and Vineeth in key roles, the movie was met with poor reviews and ultimately underperformed at the box office.

Naga Chaitanya and Sai Pallavi's film remains steady, mints Rs 53.95 cr

Thandel box office collection Day 9: Thandel box office collection Day 9: Naga Chaitanya and Sai Pallavi's film earns Rs 53.95 crore in India. Thandel box office collection Day 9: Naga Chaitanya and Sai Pallavi's Telugu romantic drama Thandel is maintaining its momentum at the box office. According to Sacnilk, the film minted Rs 2.4 crore on Saturday, bringing its total domestic collection to Rs 53.95 crore net. Of this, the maximum amount—Rs 52.92 crore—came from the Telugu market. However, the movie failed to woo Hindi and Tamil audiences, as it collected only Rs 54 lakh from the Hindi version and Rs 49 lakh from the Tamil version.

Thandel began its box office journey on February 7, earning Rs 11.5 crore on its opening day. It continued its strong run over the first weekend, minting Rs 12.1 crore on Saturday and Rs 12.75 crore on Sunday. The film had collected Rs 49.4 crore within its first week of release. However, after the opening weekend, the film saw a consistent decline in collections. It was only on its second Saturday that Thandel witnessed an 11 percent increase in collections, earning Rs 2.4 crore. As per Sacnilk, the film's gross collection in India now stands at Rs 63.25 crore, while its worldwide stood at Rs 11 crore after nine days in theatres. On Saturday, Thandel recorded an overall 30.94 percent Telugu occupancy, with the highest occupancy of 40 percent seen during night shows. Sai Pallavi and Naga Chaitanya were last seen together in Sekhar Kammula's Love Story, which was a massive hit at the box office.



Thandel's opening collection of Rs 11.5 crore surpassed Love Story's opening day collection of Rs 10.50 crore. The film has also become the biggest hit of Naga Chaitanya's career. The actor has faced multiple box office failures since 2022, with his last film, Custody, turning out to be a major disappointment, earning only Rs 20 crore in its lifetime run. Thandel also features Aadukalam Naren, Divya Pillai, Karunakaran, and Prithviraj in pivotal roles. With music composed by Devi Sri Prasad and cinematography by Shamdat, the film is directed by Chandoo Mondeti.

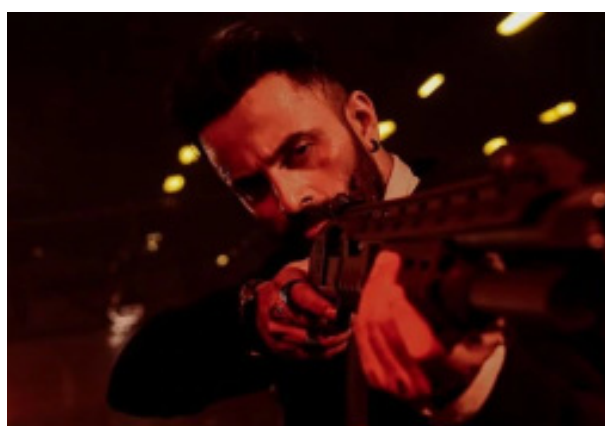
'Conclave' leads the pack at Britain's BAFTA film awards

London: Papal thriller "Conclave" leads the race for the 78th British Academy Film Awards on Sunday, with genre-bending musical "Emilia Pérez" facing a test of whether a multi-pronged backlash has made the former prize favourite an awards-season pariah. A plethora of movie stars — including Cynthia Erivo, Ariana Grande, Hugh Grant, Kate Winslet, Timothée Chalamet and Saoirse Ronan — are due on the red carpet at London's Royal Festival Hall. The awards, known as BAFTAs, will be watched for clues about who will triumph at Hollywood's Academy Awards next month. "Conclave" is nominated in 12 categories, in-

cluding best picture, best director for Edward Berger and best actor for Ralph Fiennes, playing a cardinal corralling conniving clergy as they elect a new pope. Mexico-set melodrama "Emilia Pérez" has 11 nominations, including best picture and best director for Jacques Audiard.

Best-actress nominee Karla Sofía Gascón, who stars as the film's titular transgender ex-cartel boss, is not expected to attend the ceremony. Gascón has withdrawn from promoting the film, which has 13 Oscar nominations, amid controversy over her social media posts disparaging Muslims, George Floyd and diversity at the Oscars.

Unni Mukundan was sure Marco would succeed in Kerala, but Hindi audience's response surprised him: 'We couldn't promote the Hindi version aggressively'



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

For Malayalam cinema, 2024 was nothing short of extraordinary. Not only did the industry deliver multiple blockbusters but also produced several exceptional films — unlike the previous year — garnering greater national recognition. However, given its consistent track record of crafting outstanding films, its performance was hardly surprising. But all were left in stunned silence when Malayalam cinema — often dismissed as “Pettikkadawood”, a derogatory term implying that the industry is as small as a pettikkada (a tiny roadside shop selling inexpensive items) and incapable of dreaming big — produced the bloody Unni Mukundan-starrer Marco (2024). Directed by Haneef Adeni, the film, which was marketed as “the most violent Indian movie”, shocked audiences with its unflinching depiction of bloodshed and gore. Although technically a spinoff of Haneef's Mikhael (2019), where Nivin Pauly played the lead and Unni portrayed the antagonist, the director crafted Marco by taking only select characters from the earlier film and reimagining them within a completely new narrative, thus resulting in an entirely fresh movie.

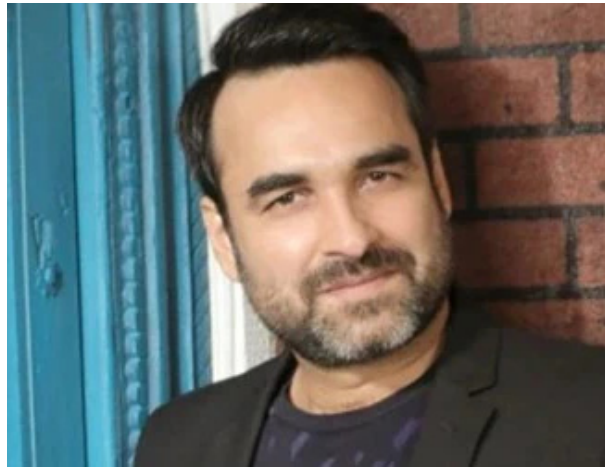
Cinema Anatomy | Why anti-caste films bother you, Gautham Vasudev 'Menon'? Because no takers for your movies glorifying extrajudicial killings, stalking and toxicity anymore? Despite facing criticism for its glamorisation of violence, Marco proved to be a massive success, grossing over Rs 115 crore worldwide and securing a place as the ninth highest-grossing Malayalam film of all time, before its OTT debut on SonyLIV on February 13. In an exclusive conversation with SCREEN, Unni Mukundan reflected on his journey with Marco, his tryst with success and failure, his acting career so far, and much more. As Marco wraps up its theatrical run as the biggest hit of your career, besides bringing you nationwide recognition, how are you feeling right now?

It's been an incredible journey, and I'm grateful for the response Marco has received. The numbers and feedback have been overwhelming, especially seeing how the film resonated across different regions. As an actor, you always hope for your work to be appreciated, but the way audiences have embraced Marco has been truly special. Marco is quite different from Mikhael in terms of treatment and aesthetics, right? So, how did the initial idea take shape? Did Haneef just set out to create “the most violent Indian film” and then bring in Marco into that or was the original plan to make a Marco spinoff that eventually evolved into “India's most violent movie”?

After playing Marco in Mikhael, both Haneef and I felt that the character had a lot more potential to explore. Over time, the idea of giving Marco his own story started taking shape, and we knew we had to get it right. While Marco is being talked about as “India's most violent film”, at its core, it's an emotional story about a man who will go to any lengths for his family. The film was never just about pushing the boundaries of action, it was about making sure the audience connected deeply with the character. The intensity and aesthetics may be different from Mikhael's, but the essence of Marco remains the same.

Did you ever expect Marco to bring you this much fame, or was it like a gamble?

Pankaj Tripathi opens up about Bollywood's disconnect with the audience: 'There is no magic in cinema anymore...'



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

National Award-winning actor Pankaj Tripathi graced the fifth edition of Expresso in Mumbai on Thursday. The terrific raconteur spoke about a variety of topics, including his childhood, the path to cinema from a small town in Bihar, and chipped in with what he feels is the reason for Hindi cinema's seemingly growing disconnect with the audience. “Why will the people connect to our films if we are not giving rooted stories,” asked the actor.

Pankaj pointed out that the cinema of the 90s and before had a sense of magic to it. “We were seeing characters walk and talk on screen, and felt connected to them. We laughed with them. We cried with them. But now, there is no magic anymore. Audience are looking for relatability, and they need a sense of connectivity with the character. They are in a quest for rootedness, which they are not quite getting anymore,” said the Mirzapur actor, who also pointed out how his film Bareilly Ki Barfi returned to the big screen recently, and won hearts all over again. “Rooted stories are of utmost importance. If Hindi cinema cuts off from its roots, then it is always going to be a problem.”

I always knew Marco was something fresh and unique, but more than a gamble it was an experiment as you never know which way it will go. I was confident about its success in Kerala, especially since it marked my return to the action genre after seven years. But the response from the Hindi audience genuinely surprised me. Unlike big-budget action films that usually do well outside their home market, we didn't have the resources to promote Marco's Hindi version aggressively; it was mostly digital promotions. So, seeing the love it received from the Hindi audience was unexpected, but incredibly rewarding and can say the gamble played in our favour. Since Marco pushed the boundaries of what's deemed acceptable in on-screen depictions, is there anything you would never do on screen, even if the character required them?

It is always about the story, the narrative and the character arc that I prioritise above everything else.

Both of your biggest solo hits, Marco and Malikappuram, differ greatly from each other in genre and aesthetics. Have you finally unlocked the formula for winning in commercial cinema? I always believed in diversifying my roles rather than being confined to a single image. Around 2018, I made a conscious effort to take on projects that showcased different aspects of my craft, rather than just sticking to the action-hero persona. Films like Meppadiyan,

Shefeekinte Santhosham, Jai Ganesh and Malikappuram were all part of that journey, each offering something unique in terms of genre and storytelling. I wouldn't say there's a fixed formula for success, but having a clear vision and staying committed to it has definitely helped. It took years of patience, persistence and strategic choices to get to a point where I could do what I truly enjoyed.

I am truly grateful for the results Marco has given me and I accept it with utmost humility as I don't take anything for granted. Now it is about continuing the efforts and looking forward to the road ahead.

Your career has seen both massive highs and significant lows. How do you handle triumphs and setbacks?

They are both part of an actor's journey and over the years, I've learned to take them in stride. But over a period of time, I realised that resilience is key and you can't run away from setbacks; you have to face them head-on. I've understood that patience and choosing the right roles matter the most. Marco is a spinoff of director Haneef Adeni's Mikhael, where Nivin Pauly played the lead and Unni Mukundan portrayed the antagonist. Dubbing Marco's journey as incredible, Unni Mukundan told SCREEN he's grateful for the response the film received. There's a common saying that goes, “It's lonely at the top”, and cinema, in particular, is infamous for being a field where people often feel isolated. Do you also experience that, or have you built a strong support system in the industry?

It can be a lonely place at times, especially with the pressures that come with success. But I believe having the right people around you makes all the difference. I've been fortunate to build meaningful relationships within the industry, who offer guidance and support when things get tough. At the same time, my family and close friends outside of the cinema have been my biggest anchors, keeping me grounded. Their support helps me navigate the highs and lows without feeling isolated. Having a strong support system, both personally and professionally, is essential in a field like this.

What are your dreams for the future? And, which upcoming projects are you most excited about and eager for the audience to see?

Right now, I'm really excited about Get Set Baby — it's a film that's close to my heart, and I can't wait for everyone to see it. As for Kannada films, I've always been open to exploring new industries and languages. It's about finding the right story and character that resonates with me. My focus is always on good content, and I'm looking forward to what's next, wherever it might take me!

When asked about what he thought of his Gangs of Wasseypur director Anurag Kashyap's recent comments about Bollywood, especially the issue of not encouraging originality, and going behind profit margins and tried-and-tested templates, Pankaj Tripathi asserted his complete acceptance of this assessment. “After Stree, look at the number of horror comedies that got made. After a point, people will neither get scared nor will they laugh,” pointed out Pankaj, who went on to compare it with the spate of item songs that ruled the roost in Hindi cinema. “When I asked why there were so many of them, the filmmakers said that they were adhering to the public demand. But... which public sits and writes letters to them demanding the inclusion of such songs? It is all the makers' decision to go behind what they think is the formula for success. If there is no space for experimentation, people will get bored very easily,” said the actor. In fact, taking the example of his own career, Pankaj argued, “

D Anand Ratna Kumar to lead RSB Hyderabad team in All India Civil Services Hockey Tournament

Hyderabad: D Anand Ratna Kumar has been named captain of the Regional Sports Board Hyderabad team for the All India Civil Services Hockey Tournament for Men and Women, scheduled to be held in Andhra Pradesh from February 15 to 28.

Squad: D Anand Ratna Kumar (C), MD Munthag, B Arvind, Mustak Ahmed, G Suman, K Srinivas, G Narayana, K Chinna Apparao, L Rama Krishna, V Manikanta, P Surya Prakash, P Tej Kiran, N Sellamuthu, V Ganesh, N Veera Babu, R Shiva Kumar, BGS Krishna, D Murali Krishna; Coach: K Ravi Chandra Prasad, Manager: P Venkateswarulu.

Rajat Patidar appointed Royal Challengers Bengaluru captain ahead of IPL 2025



GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Bengaluru: IPL franchise Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Thursday named Rajat Patidar as its captain for the upcoming season starting March 21, replacing South African Faf du Plessis who was released from the squad last year. Patidar was among RCB's retained players before the mega auction in November 2024 and has the experience of leading Madhya Pradesh in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. (The 31-year-old, who signed up with the franchise in 2022, guided Madhya Pradesh to the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy final where his side lost to Mumbai by five wickets last year. “Rajat has the simplic-

ity, (he) cares about the people around him, we have closely seen how he has led Madhya Pradesh, we really liked it.” RCB chief coach Andy Flower said at the franchise event to announce Patidar's elevation. The right-hander was also the second-highest run-getter in the premier domestic T20 tournament, behind Ajinkya Rahane, scoring 428 from 10 matches at an average of 61 and a strike-rate of 186.08. Patidar takes over from du Plessis, who was released after captaining the team from 2022 to 2024. The 40-year-old South African will play for Delhi Capitals this season.

Prior to the announcement on Thursday, there was some speculation about Virat Kohli returning as captain of the franchise. Kohli was the RCB captain from 2013 to 2021 and has a fine record though he could not land them the title. The 36-year-old led RCB in 143 matches, the second-longest stint as captain after the legendary Mahendra Singh Dhoni for Chennai Super Kings. He congratulated Patidar on the appointment. “Myself and the other team members will be right behind you, Rajat,” Kohli said in a video statement shared by the franchise.

“The way you have grown in this franchise and the way you have performed, you've made a place in the hearts of all RCB fans. This is very well deserved,” he added. Kohli had a fine run as RCB captain, though he could not land them the title. The 36-year-old led RCB in 143 matches, the second-longest stint as captain after the legendary Mahendra Singh Dhoni for Chennai Super Kings. Under him, the team won 68 games and logged 70 losses and four no-results. In 2016, Kohli had led the franchise to the IPL final, and made 973 runs, to date the highest for a batter in a single IPL season. In IPL 2024, Kohli was the top run-getter with 741 runs at a strike rate of 154. The franchise conceded that Kohli's name was also discussed for the leadership role.

Yashasvi Jaiswal added to Mumbai's Ranji Trophy squad for semifinal vs Vidarbha

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Yashasvi Jaiswal Ranji Trophy The explosive left-handed opener had impressed in the 2024-25 Border-Gavaskar Trophy with 391 runs in five Tests at an average of 43.44, including one century and two half-centuries. After missing out of the Champions Trophy squad, Yashasvi Jaiswal was on Thursday drafted into the Mumbai Ranji Trophy squad ahead of their semifinal clash with Vidarbha on February 17. Mumbai outclassed Haryana by 152 runs in their quarterfinal match at Kolkata on Tuesday.

Jaiswal had previously played for Mumbai in the Ranji Trophy this season but could muster only 4 and 26 as his team went down to Jammu and Kashmir in a shocker of a result. Things didn't get better for Jaiswal in the Indian setup with the youngster then joining India for the 3-match ODI series against England where despite making his debut in the format in Nagpur, he could just score 15. After that, he had to sit out the next two ODIs as India went on to win the series 3-0. Jaiswal, who was in the preliminary squad for the upcoming Champions Trophy, was on Tuesday moved to the list of non-travelling substitutes alongside Shivam Dube and Mohammed Siraj, meaning they will travel to Dubai for India's matches only if necessary. The explosive left-handed opener had impressed in the 2024-25 Border-Gavaskar Trophy with 391 runs in five Tests at an average of 43.44, including one century and two half-



centuries. The upcoming last-four stage clash between Mumbai and Vidarbha will be a rerun of the Ranji final between the two teams last season, in which the former won to lift their 42nd title in the premier domestic tournament. The team was picked by the senior selection committee of Mumbai Cricket Association consisting of chairman Sanjay Patil, Ravi Thaker, Jeetendra Thackeray, Kiran Powar and Vikrant Yelgati. Mumbai squad: Ajinkya Rahane (Captain), Ayush Mhatre, Angkrish Raghuvanshi, Amogh Bhatkal, Suryakumar Yadav, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Siddhesh Lad, Shivam Dube, Akash Anand (WK), Hardik Tamore (WK), Suryansh Shedge, Shardul Thakur, Shams Mulani, Tanush Kotian, Mohit Avasthi, Sylvester Dsouza, Royston Dias, Atharva Ankolekar, Harsh Tanna.

Up to 3 years in prison for attempt to blackmail Michael Schumacher's family for \$15.6M

GNS News Agency, Feb 18

Three men have been found guilty in a case of attempted blackmail against Formula 1 great Michael Schumacher's family. The perpetrators demanded 15 million Euros (USD 15.6 million) from the family to avoid releasing hundreds of private photos and videos of the family as well as digitised copies of Schumacher's medical records.

A district court in Wuppertal, western Germany, sentenced the main defendant to three years in prison, while his son received a six-month suspended sentence and a fine of 1,200 Euros, news agency dpa reported on Wednesday. The main defendant had previous convictions. Another defendant, a former security guard for the family, received a two-year suspended sentence and a fine of 2,400 Euros for aiding and abetting the other two men. Judge Birgit Neubert said the former security worker made the most significant contribution to the crime through his breach of trust, dpa reported. The family has shielded Schumacher from public view since his serious skiing accident in December 2013. Schumacher was skiing in the French Alps at Meribel when he fell and his head hit a rock, resulting in a near-fatal brain injury. Since being transferred from hospital in September 2014, the seven-time F1 champion has been cared for privately at a family home in Switzerland. The Schumacher family was threatened with



the release of the private material on the darknet. The public prosecutor's office said some 900 pictures and nearly 600 videos of the family and Schumacher's digitised medical records were confiscated from the perpetrators. A hard drive remained missing. Representing the Schumacher family, lawyer Thilo Damm said the family will appeal in the case against the former security guard, against whom they wanted a four-year prison term. While the other two defendants confessed to the charges, the security guard's lawyer denied the charges and demanded an acquittal. He said his client had not stolen the sensitive data. Schumacher retired from F1 in 2012 after winning 91 races, and five straight titles with Ferrari from 2000-04. The German driver's other two titles were with Benetton in 1994-95.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Asha Sobhana ruled out of tournament due to injury

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Asha Sobhana Injured RCB WPL Asha Sobhana of Royal Challengers Bangalore celebrates getting the wicket of Shweta Sehrawat of UP Warriorz during match eleven of the Women's Premier League 2024 between UP Warriorz and Royal Challengers Bangalore held at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium Ahead of their Women's Premier League opener against Gujarat Giants on Friday, Royal Challengers Bengaluru announced that allrounder Asha Sobhana has been ruled out of the tournament due to a knee injury. The franchise announced that wicketkeeper-batter Nuzhat Parween will be Sobhana's replacement this season. “Unfortunately, our champion all-rounder, Asha Sobhana, has been ruled out of #WPL2025 due to a knee injury! Star wicketkeeper-batter Nuzhat Parween will replace her for the season!”, the franchise posted on X. Asha had sustained the injury at a T20 World Cup against Australia in Sharjah just after the toss and had to be replaced. This is the latest injury blow to RCB with the defending champions also losing Sophie Molineux, who pulled out af-



ter a knee injury. Meanwhile, Mumbai Indians have picked Parunika Sisodia as a replacement for an injured all-rounder Pooja Vastrakar for the Women's Premier League, the franchise said on Thursday. The WPL starts on Friday with a match between defending champions RCB and Gujarat Giants in Vadodra. Parween, the wicketkeeper from Railways has represented India in 5 T20Is and will join RCB for her base price of Rs 30 lakh. Vastrakar was ruled out of the third edition of the WPL due to an injury.