Watching Videos While Driving? VC Sajjanar Issues Strong Warning — Drivers Will Face Action

In a powerful road safety alert, IPS officer VC Sajjanar cautioned motorists against the growing and dangerous habit of watching YouTube videos or streaming content while driving. Calling it an open invitation to death, Sajjanar said that distracted driving is not just a violation of traffic rules but a criminal act that endangers innocent lives.

He stressed that even a moment of carelessness behind the wheel can result in irreversible tragedy.

"Driving While Watching Videos Is a Crime"

According to VC Sajjanar, drivers are responsible for ensuring safe travel for passengers and others on the road. However, many are falling into the trap of watching entertainment content while operating vehicles.

He issued a clear warning:

Strict action will be taken against negligent drivers

Public safety must not be compro-

mised for entertainment

Sajjanar also reminded ride aggregator platforms that it is their responsibility to monitor the behaviour of their drivers. Companies must ensure that no driver engages in distracted driving while transporting passengers.

The Telangana IPS officer encouraged passengers to come forward and report dangerous driving immediately instead of staying silent.
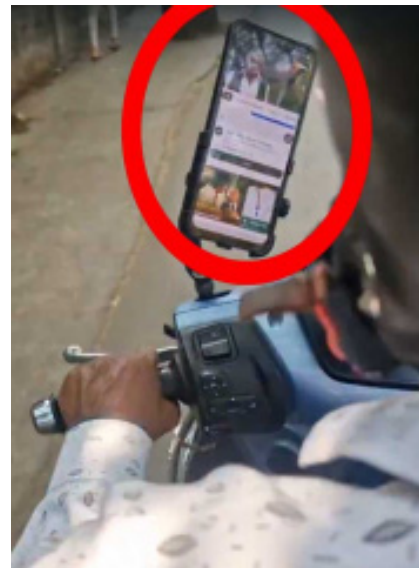
He stated:

If you see your cab, bike taxi, or auto driver watching videos while driving

If the driver is distracted or handling a phone dangerously

If your ride feels unsafe

Passengers should file a complaint without hesitation to help prevent accidents.

VC Sajjanar emphasized that one

person's entertainment should never become a curse for innocent people on the road. The distracted driving safety alert aims to create awareness and reduce accidents across Telangana, especially in Hyderabad and Cyberabad limits.

The message ends with a reminder to all motorists:

HYDRAA Commissioner Reviews 30-Year-Old Drainage Issue in Himayatnagar, Launches Urgent Drive to Fix It

A long-standing 30-year-old drainage problem in Himayatnagar's Adarsh Nagar Basti finally received official attention on Tuesday when HYDRAA Commissioner Sri AV Ranganath conducted an on-site inspection. Acting on resident complaints, the commissioner examined how sewage water was failing to flow properly and instead entering homes, polluting borewells, and contaminating drinking water.

Residents explained that sewage and rainwater from the upper Himayatnagar area regularly flood their locality. Despite the Hussain Sagar drain being only 100 yards away, the sewage still overflows, especially during the rainy season. Himayatnagar Corporator Mahalakshmi Ramangoud accompanied the commissioner and briefed him on the long-pending issue.

Locals told the commissioner that

they have been struggling with the drainage issue for nearly three decades. Floodwater mixed with sewage regularly enters houses, damaging property and posing health risks. They expressed relief when HYDRAA Commissioner Ranganath assured them that the problem would be resolved completely from the basti area up to the Hussain Sagar drain.

HYDRAA Commissioner Sri AV Ranganath instructed officials to immediately survey the flow direction of sewage and floodwater and begin corrective work without delay.

Key directives included:

Identify the exact flow path of sewage and floodwater

Replace damaged pipelines up to 6 meters in length

Install larger pipelines to accommodate future requirements

Ensure that the drainage line connects seamlessly to the Hussain Sagar drain

Repair the damaged 35-meter retaining wall near Hussain Sagar

Water Board officials informed the

commissioner that several pipelines had deteriorated over time, leading to leakage and contamination. They recommended upgrading the drainage system based on future population growth and water flow patterns.

Officials Accompany the HYDRAA Commissioner During Inspection

Several key officials joined the inspection, including:

HYDRAA DFO Sri Yajjanarayana

Water Board DGM Sri Krishnayya

GHMC DE Sri Praveen Kumar

HYDRAA SFO Sri P. Dattu

Sri CH Srinivas

Other concerned department staff

Relief for Residents as HYDRAA Promises Complete Resolution

The inspection by HYDRAA Commissioner AV Ranganath brought renewed hope to Adarsh Nagar Basti residents who have lived with sewage overflow and contaminated water for 30 years. With immediate action ordered and a clear plan laid out, locals feel optimistic that their long-standing drainage problems will finally be resolved.

Telangana BJP protests against CM Revanth's 'anti-Hindu' remarks

Hyderabad: Telangana BJP's women and youth activists on Wednesday held a protest here against Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy's alleged anti-Hindu comments.

The workers of the BJP's Mahila Morcha (women's wing) and Yuva Morcha (youth wing) raised slogans against the CM during the protest at the party's Telangana headquarters at Nampally here.

Describing Reddy's comments as shameful, BJP Mahila Morcha's state unit president Shilpa Reddy demanded an apology from him.

The BJYM activists, who squatted on the road, were removed from the place by the policemen.

Telangana BJP president N Ramchander Rao had called for protests, including burning of effigies, across the state on December 3 against Reddy's comments.

Union Ministers G Kishan Reddy and Bandi Sanjay Kumar and other BJP leaders condemned the Chief Minister's alleged anti-Hindu comments, and called for unity of Hindus in Telangana.

Addressing the executive meeting of the ruling Congress here on Tuesday, Revanth Reddy said the grand old party takes everyone along, and it is home to people with different mindsets.

Union Minister Prahlad Joshi claimed that "only someone connected to the lineage of Aurangzeb" would make such comments.

"Insulting Hinduism and disrespecting Hindu beliefs has become a habit for Congress and its friendly parties. Whether in Karnataka, Kerala, or now Telangana, the Chief Ministers appear to represent only one community. These leaders have become excessively sensitive about others while making fun of Hindus and Hindu beliefs. It has become a pattern," he said.

BJP MP Sambit Patra also condemned the statement. He said, "Whether it is Maulana Madani or the Congress Party, both seem to speak in the same tone today. I begin with a strong condemnation of the Congress because the language used by the Telangana Chief Minister for Hindu deities is not only objectionable but hateful. It reflects deep-seated contempt for Hindus. Revanth Reddy said there are three crore Hindu deities — different gods for bachelors, those who marry twice, vegetarians, and even people who drink. What kind of language is this? These are ideas taught under Sonia and Rahul Gandhi's guidance. They still do not understand that they are losing state after state. The more they insult Hinduism, the more defeat they will face. Hanuman Ji has already burnt the Lanka of Congress. They will pay for this insult."

However, reactions within Congress were mixed. Congress MP Imran Masood said, "I do not know exactly what he said, but the choice of words should always be such that no one's sentiments are hurt."

Congress spokesperson Surendra Rajput said, "Sanatan Dharma teaches that 'Hari Anant, Hari Katha Ananta.' We have 33 crore deities. Sanatan Dharma is vast and not confined to a single scripture. Whether one formally accepts it or not, everyone is considered Sanatani. Revanth Reddy's statement should be seen in a broader, contextual manner."

Journalists to hold 'Maha Dharna' over long-standing issues, police take security measures

The president of the State Working Journalists' Union (TUWJ) K Virahat Ali announced that a 'maha dharna' will take place in front of the State Information Bhavan in Masab Tank today i.e December 3. This demonstration aims to address the ongoing neglect and issues faced by journalists over the past 12 years.

However, The police are prepared to welcome the demonstrators as they gather to voice their concerns and advocate for necessary reforms in their profession and established security measures at the State Information Bhavan in Masab Tank

Speaking at the Basheerbagh Press Club on Tuesday, Ali emphasized the urgent need for the government to initiate the implementation of promises made during the assembly elections. Journalists from various districts are expected to participate in the protest.The TUWJ is calling for immediate action on several key issues, including the establishment of an accreditation policy, the revival of the health insurance scheme, and the allocation of house plots to eligible journalists.

Special trains to Sabarimala from Telangana from December 13

Hyderabad: In view of the heavy rush of devotees travelling to Sabarimala, the South Central Railway (SCR) has announced special train services from December 13 to January 2 connecting various stations under its jurisdiction with Kollam Junction in Kerala.

A total of ten special trains, including both onward and return services, will be operated, the railway authorities said in a statement on Tuesday, December 2.According to the schedule, the Sirpur Kagaznagar–Kollam special train (No. 07117) will depart on December 13. It will halt at Bellampalli, Mancherial, Ramagundam, Peddapalli, Jammikunta, Warangal, Kesamudram, Mahabubabad, and Khammam stations, before proceeding via Vijayawada and Tirupati to reach Kollam.Similarly, two special services from Charlapalli to Kollam (Train Nos. 07119 and 07121) are scheduled to depart on December 17, 20, and 31. These trains will run via Secunderabad, Begumpet, Lingampalli, Shankarpalli, Vikarabad, and Tandur, proceeding through Guntakal, Chittoor, and Katpadi en route to Kollam.The Hazur Sahib Nanded–Kollam special train (No. 07123) will leave Nanded on December 24. It will pass through Nizamabad, Armoor, Korutla, Jagtial, Karimnagar, Peddapalli, Jammikunta, Warangal, and Khammam, and continue its journey via Vijayawada, Tirupati, and Kottayam to reach its destination.Return services from Kollam Junction to Charlapalli will be operated on December 15, 19, 22, 26, and January 2.

CM Chandrababu Engages with Farmers in Nallajarla

In a significant engagement with the agricultural community, Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu visited Nallajarla in East Godavari district as part of the 'Rayatanna Meekosam' programme. During his visit, the CM interacted with farmers and their families, discussing key issues and concerns affecting their livelihoods.

As part of the initiative, Naidu raised awareness about the government's five guiding principles aimed at improving the farming sector. He conducted an inspection of the agricultural fields in the area, seeking detailed reports from officials on the current practices and conditions.

Additionally, the Chief Minister took the time to visit the various stalls set up for the occasion, further demonstrating his commitment to supporting and uplifting the local farming community.

Drones and CCTV cams play key role in law & order: SP

Penukonda: District Superintendent of Police S Satish Kumar said that drones and CCTV cameras have become vital tools in maintaining law and order and preventing crime.

He made these remarks on Wednesday evening at the Penukonda Circle Office, where representatives of a Korean organisation handed over advanced surveillance equipment to the district police. The Korean delegation presented the SP with six Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) CCTV cameras, one night-vision drone, and one day-vision drone, together valued at Rs 15.5 lakh.

Telangana CM orders action after stray dogs maul differently-abled boy

Hyderabad: Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy on Wednesday ordered action to control stray dogs after a seven-year-old speech-impaired boy was severely injured in the attack by a pack of stray dogs in Hyderabad.The Chief Minister, who is in Delhi, reacted to the incident that occurred on Tuesday in Hayathnagar.Premchand was severely injured in the attack by street dogs.According to the Chief Minister's Office (CMO), Revanth Reddy was deeply moved upon reading the news about the incident.He spoke to CMO officials and directed them to ensure the child receives the best medical treatment. He wished for the child's quick recovery.The Chief Minister instructed the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) Commissioner to provide immediate necessary assistance to the child, visit the hospital to check on the child, meet with the family members and take steps on behalf of the government to support them.

The Chief Minister also directed officials to take immediate necessary actions to control street dogs. He stated that such incidents should not recur in the future.

Cyclone Ditwah causes rainfall in parts of Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh, the consequences of Cyclone Ditwah have led to persistent rainfall, particularly affecting the city of Nellore since Tuesday night. Low-lying areas have been inundated, with floodwater entering numerous homes, causing significant distress to residents.

The Magunta Layout Railway Underbridge has been severely impacted, leading to the suspension of traffic in the area. Meanwhile, in the Kodur con-

stituency of Annamayya district, heavy rainfall over the past four days has resulted in overflowing streams and canals, transforming ponds and puddles into large bodies of water.

The Gunjana River is currently flowing with great intensity, further exacerbating the situation. Additionally, the Tirupati-Kadapa main road has been rendered treacherous due to potholes caused by the rainfall, complicating travel for motorists. Floodwater has reached roads in various locations, creating further challenges for those trying to navigate the affected areas.

Gita Jayanti celebrated at Malayala Sadguru Seva Samajam

Tirupati: Sri Malayala Sadguru Seva Samajam marked its 55th annual celebrations with great pomp here on Tuesday.

As part of the celebrations, a three-day Gita Jayanti was conducted with devotion and spiritual manner.

Swamijis from prominent ashrams arrived to conduct special pujas for Malayala Swamiji. Women participated actively by chanting Gita Parayanam, Lalitha Sahasranama Parayanam, and Vishnu Sahasranama Parayanam throughout the event .

Speakers emphasized the Bhagavad Gita's role in guiding lives toward excellence. They noted that reading it brings the merits of studying all Vedas and epicsVidyananda Giri Swamy, Sampurnananda Swamy, Sarvatmananda Swamy, Avadani Amudala Murali, Hemant Kumar and Rayalseema Rangasthali Chairman Gundala Gopinath Reddy were present.

Collector inspects school and health centre in Chippagiri

Chippagiri: District Collector Dr A Siri directed teachers to ensure zero dropout rate among Class 10 students and achieve 100% pass results in the upcoming SSC examinations.

During a surprise inspection at Zilla Parishad High School, Chippagiri on Tuesday, the Collector reviewed attendance, interacted with students and staff, and instructed the Headmaster to personally counsel parents of dropout students and bring them back to school.

She emphasized that students who migrate with parents for work must be accommodated in seasonal residential hostels to prevent discontinuation of education. Speaking directly to Class 10 students, Dr Siri advised them to set life goals, avoid distractions such as excessive TV and mobile usage, and dedicate themselves to studies to secure a better future.

She also raised awareness about the consequences of child marriages. The Collector announced that a 100-day action plan for SSC results will commence from December 6, involving daily subject revision sessions and evening assessments, with mandatory data upload to the district portal.

She inspected midday meal arrangements and sanitation, directing officials to improve quality and ensure additional tap connections within a week.

As part of the visit, the Collector reached out via phone to two dropout students, Teja Kumar and Rohini, counselling them to return to school and continue education for a brighter future.

Officials including Mandal Special Officer Ranganath Babu, DEO Samuel Paul, and MEO Savitri participated in the programme.

Later, Dr Siri inspected the Primary Health Centre in Chippagiri and stressed the importance of timely identification and registration of pregnant women to reduce maternal and infant mortality.

Reviewing OP and pregnancy registers, she instructed medical staff to ensure strict duty discipline, monitor high-risk pregnancies, maintain adequate stock of medicines, and provide patient-friendly healthcare services.

The Collector interacted with a new mother in the maternity ward to assess service quality and advised ASHA workers to register pregnancies immediately and conduct regular follow-ups. DMHO Dr Bhaskar Raju and PHC staff accompanied the inspection.

HCL recruitment at Ananthalakshmi Engg College

Anantapur: Maintec (HCL) Bangalore, a leading company, conducted campus recruitments at Ananthalakshmi Engineering College, and 400 final year B.Tech Computer Science, Electronics and Electrical Engineering students of the college attended this recruitment process, said the college principal, Dr Kutala Srinivasulu.

The HR managers of these companies conducted the recruitment process for the students through written test, group discussion and technical rounds.

Out of these, 139 students were selected as trainee engineers and the company representatives announced an annual salary of Rs. 2.4 lakhs for them, said the college's Campus Recruitment and Skill Development Director, Dr M Surendra Naidu.

He said that the special training provided in the college for skill development of the students has helped a lot in the recruitment process.

The students who were appointed in the campus recruitment were congratulated by the college chairman M Anantharamu, vice chairman M Ramesh Naidu, principal Dr Kutala Srinivasulu, director of campus recruitment and skill development Dr M Surendra Naidu and the faculty.

No villager will be affected by Gudipalli Reservoir: Savitha

Somandepalli: Andhra Pradesh BC, EWS Welfare, Handlooms and Textiles Minister S Savitha on Tuesday assured that the proposed Gudipalli Reservoir will not cause any inconvenience or loss to local residents. She stated that the government would proceed only after consulting the villagers and stakeholders, and a final decision will be taken based on their feedback.The Minister also announced that several new industries would soon come up in the Penukonda region. Earlier, she laid the foundation stone for the ?2.80-crore BT road between Gudipalli and Tungodu and reviewed development works across Somandepalli mandal.

She highlighted initiatives including ?4.5 crore under MGNREGS for CC roads, drains and 40 Gokulam sheds, ?3.33 crore under JJM for drinking water facilities, and the inauguration of a ?50-lakh new hospital building. Plans are underway to construct an ST hostel at Naginayanicheruvu, while proposals for Kapu and BC community buildings have been sent to the government.Minister Savitha said ?242 crore has been disbursed to 26,852 women through DRDA–Velugu, and handloom tools worth ?29 lakh were provided to 80 weavers with a 90% subsidy. A ?1.16-crore handloom cluster was established benefiting 164 weavers.She challenged the Opposition for a mandal-wise debate on development, asserting that several road works stalled during the previous regime have now been revived and will be completed by March.Reiterating that Gudipalli residents will face no hardship, she said discussions would be held soon with Hindupur MLA N Balakrishna and officials. She credited Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu for ensuring drinking and irrigation water across Rayalaseema, including through the Gollapalli Reservoir.In addition, the Minister announced that applications for free skill-development courses under PMKVY are open at the Skill Hub in Sri Paritala Sriramulu Government Degree College, Penukonda, until December 15.

We need accessibility rules that are based on principles

.The Court reasoned that the Rule was drafted in a discretionary tone whereas the corresponding provisions (Sections 40, 44, 45, 46, 89) in the Act imposed a mandatory obligation for the government. This was significant as Rule 15 was a statutory provision under which the accessibility guidelines of respective departments and ministries were notified. Key examples include the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs' guidelines for creating barrier-free environments, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' bus body code, and other accessibility standards established by the Ministries of Sports, Culture, and Information and Broadcasting.The Court observed that these guidelines allowed discretion to the ministries and departments, which is antithetical to the mandatory language of the Act. Moreover, striking down Rule 15 also meant that the accessibility guidelines notified under the Rule lost their statutory authority. As a result, the Court gave the government three months to develop minimum mandatory accessibility requirements to govern all the sectors.The judgment is a stark reminder of how accessibility guidelines have been created in silos without the identification of normative principles that will ensure universality and intersectionality to those guidelines. Thus, while formulating new guidelines, there needs to be a shift towards a principle-based framework on accessibility rules.

The idea of accessibilityThe Court deliberated in detail on the difference between accessibility and reasonable accommodation. Accessibility and reasonable accommodation both originate within the principles of substantive equality of the Constitution. Accessibility is now accepted as a right woven throughout the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Conversely, reasonable accommodation is a facilitator of substantive equality where specific challenges are dealt with in a specific context. Therefore, both concepts should be understood as interdependent and complementary to each other, where accessibility builds the edifice through standardised accessibility standards from the outset, while reasonable accommodation ensures tailored solutions for those individuals who might still face inaccessibility in a specific context.The idea of accessibility is not static, and the conceptual contours and corresponding tools have evolved regularly. For instance, with the advent of Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things and their incorporation into social interactions, the understanding of digital accessibility has evolved simultaneously. This makes it necessary to modify the nature, extent, and type of digitally accessible tools that can ensure broader inclusivity.The shifting threshold also needs to be understood in the context of phased realisation of accessibility. The Court in Rajive Raturi observed that the existing guidelines are framed in a way that establishes long-term goals of accessibility without setting the minimum standards requiring immediate implementation. Hence, the minimum accessibility threshold shall be envisaged on a sliding scale wherein the baseline moves forward at

periodical intervals. Canada has developed a comprehensive road map to achieve full accessibility by 2040, focusing on harmonising standards across the country through two work streams, with periodic reviews every five years to adapt to changing needs.

The RPwD Act defines barriers in the broadest form possible, wherein intangible barriers such as attitudinal barriers are recognised in addition to tangible barriers such as infrastructure. This has modified how accessibility is viewed and understood within physical and digital ecosystems. Thus, it is necessary to evolve accessibility parameters in theory and practice to overcome tangible and intangible barriers. For instance, the evolving understanding of disability is an aspect that informs the attitude of society and, hence, directly relates to the attitudinal barrier. Thus, accessibility must also align with this evolution of disability understanding to be truly inclusive.The understanding of universal design has also evolved over time. It is not just limited to persons with disabilities but also includes every vulnerable community, such as women, children, and the elderly. This reflects a tacit recognition of the universality of disability, which is not identified as an individual's incapacity to perform but rather the composition of the environment in which one operates. Disability may arise from a high cognitive workload causing an inability to focus and control emotions, temporarily broken limbs, unavailability of ramps to a pregnant mother, age-related complications, etc. Thus, the rules should be applicable across groups, providing accessibility in the general sense and not exclusive to persons with disabilities.Compliance with social audit

Section 48 of the RPwD Act mandates the Central and State governments to regularly undertake social audits of all general schemes and programmes to ensure they do not have an adverse impact on the needs and concerns of persons with disabilities. Social audits play a vital role in developing and strengthening the accountability of the government and service providers. For instance, regular social audits of schemes providing assistance technologies to persons with disabilities can assess the bottlenecks in the delivery of services, identify the changing needs of individuals, and provide better devices.However, due to the lack of standardised guidelines under the RPwD Rules, there is no clarity on the scope and methodology of social audits. This might lead to inconsistencies among the Centre and the States, lack of awareness, and insufficient training for auditors. Therefore, clear guidelines and operationalisation of social audits at a larger scale will help identify the changing nature of disability-related challenges and make targeted interventions to enhance service delivery through concerned schemes and programmes.

Rules have to be understandableThe earlier accessibility rules across departments and ministries suffered from bureaucratic complexity regarding their mandate. There were too many technicalities and of-

ten contradictory accessibility mandates from multiple ministries that confused the complying entities. For instance, a sporting complex has multiple guidelines for accessibility from the Ministry of Urban Affairs and Housing, Sports, Transport, and others. This led to not just a failure to provide objective parameters but also increased the compliance cost for such establishments. During the proceeding under the redressal mechanism, the complex and overlapping guidelines also delayed the relief sought by persons with disabilities.The new accessibility rules must be direct, understandable, and prac-

tical to ensure effective implementation. The ambiguity in department/ministry jurisdiction that plagued the earlier rules should also be addressed by having a nodal authority, ideally, the sector regulators, and in the absence of it, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment should adjudicate on rules.The deadline for releasing the new accessibility guidelines is February, subject to extension. Thus, there is a necessity for diverse sectors, both private and public, beyond social services such as financial, technological, transport, to deliberate upon the minimum rules of accessibility.

Government schools should also comply with safety norms, says Karnataka High Court

Observing that government schools are not exempt from various safety norms that are prescribed for private aided and unaided schools, the High Court of Karnataka has directed the Principal Secretary, Department of School Education and Literacy, to formulate a detailed action plan within six weeks and submit a report on how the government schools will also comply with those norms.The court also directed the Secretary to create a portal within the department's website to provide details of the norms to be adhered to by all schools under various laws, the status of compliance by each school, and provision for the schools to upload the compliance status to conditions imposed by the authorities while granting recognition, etc.

Petition of private schoolsJustice Suraj Govindaraj passed the order on a petition filed by Organisation for Unaided Recognised Schools (OURS), Bengaluru, and some private unaided schools. The petitioners had questioned a 2022 circular issued by the department mandating schools to submit certificates for structural stability of the buildings and fire safety clearance, sanctioned building plans, etc.

The court did not find fault with the government seeking the certificates as these are the norms that the school au-

thorities are required to follow under various other laws and building bylaws depending upon the location of the schools as a pre-condition for granting recognition or renewal of recognition.However, the court found substance in the contention of petitioners that all safety-related norms are enforced only on private schools and not on government schools, while pointing out that non-adherance by government schools appears to be a major lacuna which is required to be addressed by the government.

Obligation to followThe government has to act as a model citizen and comply with all applicable rules which it requires a private citizen to comply with, the court said, while observing that "when the State imposes certain rules, regulations and obligations to be followed by private individuals or organisations, the State and or its entities, if involved in the very same activity, are also duty-bound to follow such rules, regulations, and obligations as imposed on private individuals or organisations."

Considering that the petitioner-schools have been imparting education for several years, the court has granted them time till the commencement of the next academic year to comply with the requirements under the local municipal laws.

Resisting transparency, eroding public trust

Last year, presiding officer Anil Masih was caught on CCTV camera manipulating votes in the Chandigarh mayor elections to help the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secure victory. The incident underlined the importance of infusing transparency in the electoral process to detect and prevent election fraud. It is ironic then that even before the year ended, the Central government brought an amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict public access to election-related records.

The amendment came days after the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to provide information under Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules. Copies of Form 17C and CCTV footage of the Assembly elections in Haryana were among the records sought by the petitioner.Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules provides a framework for people to obtain information related to elections. Rule 93(2) originally stated that other than the records specifically exempt under Rule 93(1), all papers relating to elections shall be available for people to inspect and take copies of. The amendment to Rule 93(2) narrows the scope of people's right to information by adding a qualification that only "papers as specified in these rules relating to the election shall be open to public inspection". Records related to the electoral process, including Form 17C, video recordings and CCTV footage, will potentially get caught in the cross hairs of the new amendment.

Delays that led to doubtsThe role of the ECI in the matter is particularly disconcerting. One of the safeguards in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to prevent the ruling party from arbitrarily misusing its power to frame rules is that the rules can be made only "after consulting the Election Commission". It is baffling why the institution vested with the responsibility of ensuring free and fair elections is opposed to transparency, especially at a time when serious questions have been raised about the sanctity of the electoral process.

In the general elections of 2024, the ECI did not put out voter turnout figures in absolute numbers after the completion of voting in the initial phases. This, coupled with an unusually high revision of 6% in voter turnout in some phases of the election, without any explanation, prompted a public demand for disclosure of Form 17C. Part I of this Form is filled by the Presiding Officer of each polling station at the close of voting and is submitted to the Returning Officer of the constituency. It contains information on the voter turnout and the number of votes recorded in the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). Part II is filled on the day of counting by noting the votes secured by each candidate as recorded in the EVMs. The documents reveal whether or not voter turnout tallies with the votes polled and counted.Several political parties also sought copies of Form 17C after the general elections, claiming an abnormally large increase in voter turnout between the figures declared by the ECI at the close of polls on the day of voting and the final turnout declared a few days later. For instance, an ally of the BJP, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), claimed a massive increase between the two figures in some constituencies in Odisha, raising doubts about the integrity of the election process. In the Assembly

elections held in Haryana and Maharashtra, similar concerns were raised and applications were again filed seeking copies of Form 17C and other election records.

Refusal to disclose informationUnfortunately, all these requests were stonewalled by the ECI. In a petition to the ECI, the BJD complained that even its candidates were denied copies of Form 17C, despite making requests under the Representation of the People Act and the Right to Information Act, 2005.Further, when the matter of proactive disclosure of Form 17C was agitated in the Supreme Court, the ECI opposed it on the specious grounds that there is no legal mandate to share Form 17C with anyone other than the candidates and political parties through their designated polling agents. In fact, it claimed that there is a "one-to-one relationship between each Form 17C and its possessor" and its unrestricted disclosure is amendable to mischief as people may morph the images. Further, it argued that there is no technical facility to scan the documents.The ECI's reluctance to share copies of Form 17C is inexplicable. Copies of Part 1 of Form 17C are given to polling agents who are present at the booth and there is no prohibition on their further dissemination. In Digital India, the claim

that Returning Officers don't have the technical facility to scan and upload a couple of thousand pages is scarcely credible.On December 26, 2024, more than six months after the general elections, the ECI released a set of 42 statistical reports terming it a "Treasure Trove for stakeholders including academicians, researchers, election watchers worldwide". This too had no data from Form 17C, which would conclusively resolve the vexed issue of difference between votes polled and

counted.Transparency is key to ensure public trust and participation in the electoral process. In 2024, the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bonds scheme as being violative of a voter's fundamental right to information. A challenge to the new amendment has already reached the apex court. Rather than wait for the verdict of the judiciary, the ECI and the BJP would do well to realise that this amendment has no place in a democracy and withdraw it.Anjali Bhardwaj,

Meghana Prakash makes polymer clay jewellery

The next time you gift a book to a bibliophile, pair it with a miniature book pendant for an extra touch of joy. Bengaluru-based software professional-turned-jewellery designer Meghana Prakash (@theclayarte) began creating these pendants to diversify her offerings beyond her signature floral designs. "Book lovers were overjoyed seeing the pendants," Meghana shares, highlighting the charm they bring to her collection.Meghana Prakash is a self-taught polymer clay jewellery designer who started crafting as a hobby, alongside quilling. What began as a weekend passion evolved into a full-time profession two years ago. Meghana was drawn to polymer clay for its pliability and versatility, which allowed her to experiment with diverse designs. "It's a new medium, and learning resources are limited, so I discovered its potential through trial, error, and YouTube tutorials," she explains. Her diploma in jewellery design Jd institute of fashion technology, Bangalore also helps refine her creative process and articulate her designs effectively.When asked about the most challenging aspect of her work, Meghana reveals, "For me, it's the design phase. Once that's clear, everything flows smoothly. I work primarily with my fingers, as it helps me control pressure and shapes more precisely, using tools only when necessary." Her hands-on approach highlights the artistry and meticulous effort behind her creations.Polymer clay products are baked to enhance their durability, making them both drop-proof and slightly flexible. Meghana, who works from her home studio in Bengaluru, is a regular at events, including Comic Con, where her jewellery

Israel-Hamas draft ceasefire deal: A look at the terms and tensions

If the Israel-Hamas ceasefire deal goes according to the current draft, then fighting will stop in Gaza for 42 days, and dozens of Israeli hostages and hundreds of Palestinian prisoners will be freed. In this first phase Israeli troops will pull back to the edges of Gaza, and many Palestinians will be able to return to what remains of their homes as stepped-up aid flows in.The question is if the ceasefire will survive beyond that first phase.

That will depend on even more negotiations meant to begin within weeks. In those talks, Israel, Hamas, and the U.S, Egyptian and Qatari mediators will have to tackle the tough issue of how Gaza will be governed, with Israel demanding the elimination of Hamas.Without a deal within those 42 days to begin the second phase, Israel could resume its campaign in Gaza to destroy Hamas – even as dozens of hostages remain in the militants' hands.Hamas has agreed to a draft of the ceasefire deal, two officials confirmed, but Israeli officials say details are still being worked out, meaning some terms could change, or the whole deal could even fall through. Here is a look at the plan and potential pitfalls in the draft seen by the Associated Press.During the first phase, Hamas is to release 33 hostages in exchange for the freeing of hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. By the end of the phase, all living women, children and older people held by the militants should be freed.

Some 100 hostages remain captive inside Gaza, a mix of civilians and soldiers, and the military believes at least a third them are dead.On the first official day of the ceasefire, Hamas is to free three hostages, then another four on the seventh day. After that, it will make weekly releases.Which hostages and how many Palestinians will be released is complicated. The 33 will include women, children and those over 50 — almost all civilians, but the deal also commits Hamas to free all living female soldiers. Hamas will release living hostages first, but if the living don't complete the 33 number, bodies will be handed over. Not all hostages are held by Hamas, so getting other militant groups to hand them over could be an issue.In exchange, Israel will free 30 Palestinian women, children or elderly for each living civilian hostage freed. For each female soldier freed, Israel will release 50 Palestinian prisoners, including 30 serving life sentences. In exchange for bodies handed over by Hamas, Israel will free all women and children it has detained from Gaza since the war began on Oct. 7, 2023.Dozens of men, including soldiers, will remain captive in Gaza, pending the second phase.During the proposed deal's first phase, Israeli troops are to pull back into a buffer zone about a kilometer (0.6 miles) wide inside Gaza along its borders with Israel.Smoke rise over the northern Gaza Strip as seen from a position on the Israeli side of the border on January 13, 2025 in Southern Israel, Israel.Smoke rise over the northern Gaza Strip as seen from a position on the Israeli side of the border on January 13, 2025 in Southern Israel, Israel. | Photo Credit: Getty ImagesThat will allow displaced Palestinians to return to their homes, including in Gaza City and north-

ern Gaza. With most of Gaza's population driven into massive, squalid tent camps, Palestinians are desperate to get back to their homes, even though many were destroyed or heavily damaged by Israel's campaign.But there are complications. During the past year of negotiations, Israel has insisted it must control the movement of Palestinians to the north to ensure Hamas does not take weapons back into those areas.Throughout the war, the Israeli military has severed the north from the rest of Gaza by holding the so-called Netzarim Corridor, a belt across the strip where troops cleared out the Palestinian population and set up bases. That allowed them to search people fleeing from the north into central Gaza and bar anyone trying to return.

The draft seen by the AP specifies that Israel is to leave the corridor. In the first week, troops would withdraw from the main north-south coastal road — Rasheed Street — which would open one route for Palestinians returning. By the 22nd day of the ceasefire, Israeli troops are to leave the entire corridor.Still, as talks continued Tuesday, an Israeli official insisted the military will keep control of Netzarim and that Palestinians returning north would have to pass inspections there, though he declined to provide details. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss closed negotiations.

Working out those contradictions could bring frictions.Throughout the first phase, Israel will retain control of the Philadelphi Corridor, the strip of territory along Gaza's border with Egypt, including the Rafah Crossing. Hamas dropped demands that Israel pull out of this area.In the first phase, aid entry to Gaza is to be ramped up to hundreds of trucks a day of food, medicine, supplies and fuel to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. That is far more than Israel has allowed in throughout the war.For months, aid groups have struggled to distribute to Palestinians even the trickle of aid entering Gaza because of Israeli military restrictions and rampant robberies of aid trucks by gangs. An end to fighting should alleviate that.The need is great. Malnutrition and diseases are rampant among Palestinians, crammed into tents and short on food and clean water. Hospitals have been damaged and short of supplies. The draft deal specifies that equipment will be allowed in to build shelters for tens of thousands whose homes were destroyed and to rebuild infrastructure like electricity, sewage, communications and road systems.But here, too, implementation could bring problems.

Even before the war, Israel has restricted entry of some equipment, arguing it could be used for military purposes by Hamas. Another Israeli official said arrangements are still being worked out over aid distribution and cleanup, but the plan is to prevent Hamas from having any role.Further complicating matters, Israel's government is still committed to its plan to ban UNRWA from operating and to cut all ties between the agency and the Israeli government. The UN agency is the major distributor of aid in Gaza and provides education, health and other basic services to

millions of Palestinian refugees across the region, including in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.If all of that works out, the sides must still tackle the second phase. Negotiations over it are to begin on Day 16 of the ceasefire.Phase two's broad outlines are laid out in the draft: All remaining hostages are to be released in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and a "sustainable calm."

But that seemingly basic exchange opens up much bigger issues.Israel has said it will not agree to a complete withdrawal until Hamas' military and political capabilities are eliminated and it cannot rearm — ensuring Hamas no longer runs Gaza. Hamas says it will not hand over the last hostages until Israel removes all troops from everywhere in Gaza.So the negotiations will have to get both sides to agree to an alternative for governing Gaza. Effectively, Hamas has to agree to its own re-

moval from power — something it has said it is willing to do, but it may seek to keep a hand in any future government, which Israel has vehemently rejected.The draft agreement says a deal on the second phase must be worked out by the end of the first.Pressure will be on both sides to reach a deal, but what happens if they don't? It could go in many directions.Hamas had wanted written guarantees that a ceasefire would continue as long as needed to agree on phase two. It has settled for verbal guarantees from the United States, Egypt and Qatar.Israel, however, has given no assurances. So Israel could threaten new military action to pressure Hamas in the negotiations or could outright resume its military campaign, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has threatened.Hamas and the mediators are betting the momentum from the first phase will make it difficult for him to do that.

Motorola unveils tough and affordable Moto G Power 2025 with premium features

Hyderabad: Motorola has launched its 2025 Moto G series featuring Moto G and Moto G Power with exemplary toughness, packing everything without a premium price. The Moto G Power is priced at a mere $299.99. It is built with IP68 and IP69 water-resistance ratings to withstand harsh handling. This makes it tougher than most flagship devices protecting it against water submersion, high-pressure jets, and dust.What makes the Moto G Power a fairly strong contender for a tough phone is its

MIL-STD-810H certification, giving it quality ratings for drops, temperature extremes, and high humidity.

It conducts short drop tests which prove it can survive falls from tufted distances of close to four feet with temperatures between -4°F and 140°F.A big 6.8-inch display featuring Gorilla Glass 5 and 120Hz refresh rate makes the Moto G Pwer ideal for broadcasting, gaming, and scrolling. Along with a powerful 5,000mAh battery supporting 30W wired and

Carterpuri residents fondly recall Jimmy Carter's visit which gave the village its name

When Atar Singh, a 71-year-old resident of Carterpuri in Haryana, heard the news of the demise of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, it reminded him of his elder brother Kartar Singh who passed away about two months ago. The two had met the U.S. President about 46 years ago in 1978 when Mr. Carter had visited India during the term of then Prime Minister Morarji Desai.During the trip, Carter visited the otherwise non-descript village, then known as 'Daulatpur-Nasirabad', on January 3, 1978, and it made a permanent mark on the village which was named after him following his visit.

The villagers since then have declared January 3 a holiday and have celebrated every pivotal moment in his life, including his winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, with grandeur. They are now mourning Carter. A chowk on the outskirts of the village with a signed photo of Carter is decorated with yellow marigold flowers, and a banner reads, "Heartfelt tribute, may god grant peace to his soul."Even as their memories fade away, many elders in Carterpuri have made sure that the story of the connection between the village and Mr. Carter does not die with them. Mr. Singh says, "When my brother Kartar Singh, who was the village postmaster, was alive, he made a file with pictures of the visit and every article written about the trip. I will continue the tradition for him until I live and later our children will."Letters from CarterCarter's office continued to write letters back to the village for a long time after his visit.Arjun Singh and his elder brother Surjan Singh were college students when the U.S. President visited. Now in their 70s, they recall how their parents told them stories of the visit of Carter's mother to the village as a volunteer for the peace corp.Bansari Devi, 67, says her eldest son, who is aged 50 now, was in her arms the day Carter and his wife Rosalynn Carter visited. She remembers that the villagers had borrowed one of her dupattas to present to Ms. Carter but it never came back. She jokes, "My old dupatta must have travelled more than I did."The villagers remember how massive security deployment had shrouded the village two days before Carter's visit. Lala Ram, 71, said, "They had horses, police, army people and so many other things; villagers were asked to stay indoors for hours before his visit." Some others recall that how Carter walked every corner of the village and even visited the then newly inaugurated Gobar Gas plant without making any fuss about it, and how it made them feel respected."More than 5,000 people from neighbouring villages had come to see the President; it upgraded our status as a village of importance, and we have kept it close to us since then. Carter, despite never visiting again, made sure to always reply to our letters to him in some form," said Ram Sukh Yadav.The villagers had presented the Carters with several gifts, including a pair of shoes made by the local mochi, a red and yellow dupatta, traditionally given to expecting mothers, a sandalwood carving of Lord Krishna

UPI duopoly's rise and market vulnerabilities

The rise of Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in the eight years since its launch has been meteoric, with the UPI ecosystem now accounting for nearly eight in every 10 digital transactions in India, with a value of over ?20.60 lakh crore in August of this year alone.This success, however, is no small feat for a country like India, which is characterised by low digital literacy and a historic reliance on cash, and is deeply reflective of the critical role UPI has played in fostering public trust in digital payments.

UPI's continued success will heavily depend on whether its ecosystem can maintain and build upon such public trust, which will, in turn, depend on the ecosystem's performance on metrics such as resilience, reliability, and openness to innovation. This is particularly important as UPI's penetration remains at 30% of the population, which is impressive for a new payments technology, but shows how much of India remains to be brought into the digital payments fold. Achieving this will require substantially new innovations in everything from service offerings to app design and the overall product base of the UPI ecosystem to make it relevant for the remaining 70% of the country.A major hindrance is the extreme market concentration of two Third Party App Providers (TPAPs) in the UPI network — Phone Pe and Google Pay. Together, they control over 85% of the total market share, whereas the next biggest player, Paytm, controls merely 7.2%.Major risks

The emergence of a duopoly, especially a foreign-owned one, at a relatively early stage in the UPI ecosystem creates three major risks. The first is the increased systemic vulnerability. High market concentration in the payments space can lead to single points of failure, where any sudden stoppage or break in services can have ripple effects across the entire financial structure. Given that nearly eight out of 10 transactions carried out via UPI in a month take place on either PhonePe or GooglePay, these two apps have effectively become such single points of failure. For a system as critical as UPI to remain robust, it is essential to develop failsafes and backup mechanisms to ensure the system continues to function smoothly.Second, there is the risk of decreased competition and innovation in the payments and financial ecosystem. By consolidating a disproportionately large share of the market and user base, the two dominant TPAPs benefit from a scale that creates high barriers to entry for smaller and newer market participants. Given that all service providers in the UPI network are subject to a zero-charge framework for users, they primarily compete to achieve user scale, which they then leverage for commercial purposes by cross-selling other financial products.The widespread scale of operations and user base that the two foreign-owned TPAPs have consolidated creates an inherently uncompetitive market. The lack of competition also disincentivises investment in new innovations, as the existing dominant players need not do anything more to maintain their current positions.

Third is the risk of foreign dominance. Both TPAPs in the duopoly are foreign-owned — PhonePe by Walmart and GPay by Google. No Indian TPAP or service provider can realistically hope to compete against the dominant TPAPs without billions of dollars in funding. Further, this foreign ownership creates multiple potentially new lines of failure, including data protection and backdoor access to sensitive information of Indian citizens, many of which Indian regulators might not even be aware of. It is therefore prudent policy to encourage the development of Indian TPAPs, which can
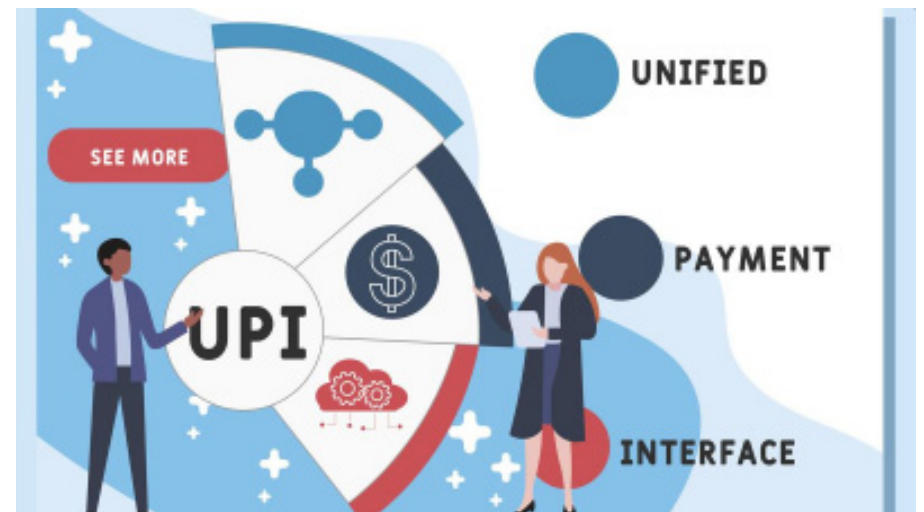
A major hindrance is the extreme market concentration of two Third Party App Providers (TPAPs) in the UPI network — Phone Pe and Google Pay.

strengthen the UPI ecosystem by providing a counterbalance to the current dominant platforms. This is not an argument against having foreign-owned UPI players or service providers, but rather a call to create a more level playing field for Indian apps and developers.

While the existing duopoly has been repeatedly flagged for its associated risks by regulators and parliamentarians alike, it remains to be substantially addressed. In 2020, the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) issued a circular instructing all TPAPs to cap their market share at 30% of the total volume of transactions processed via UPI during the previous quarter and imposed an upper limit of two years for implementation. However, the NPCI subsequently extended this deadline. Four years later, the two TPAPs in question are no worse for the wear, with PhonePe alone accounting for 48.36% and Google Pay for 37.3% of market share in volume, as of August 2024. It is now being reported that such delays could continue beyond this year.To further add to the troubles of Indian developers, recent reports suggest that the NPCI may potentially increase the market share cap from 30% to 40%. However, every subsequent extension given by the NPCI, with any potential increase in the market share cap, will only allow the dominant TPAPs to consolidate their hold.Under the right conditions and with the right incentives, however, the UPI ecosystem has every potential to offer smaller market participants a level playing field where they can innovate and compete with larger established players. As UPI enters its next phase of growth in both reach and innovation, the implementation