

## Gopichand inaugurates International UBE Conference at Yashoda Hospitals-Hitech City

Yashoda Hospitals-Hitech City hosted a 2-day International Conference and Live Workshop on Unilateral Biportal Endoscopy, inaugurated by Pullela Gopichand. Experts highlighted the rise in spinal issues, advances in minimally invasive spine surgery and the global collaboration fostered through UBE Con-2025.

Hyderabad: Yashoda Hospitals-Hitech City hosted a 2-day International Conference & Live Workshop on "Unilateral Biportal Endoscopy," which was inaugurated by senior badminton player and Indian Coach Pullela Gopichand, along with Managing Director of Yashoda Hospitals Group, Dr G S Rao.

Speaking on the occasion, Pullela Gopichand said, "Sports injuries are a major concern in India. Spinal problems, especially low back pain (LBP), are very common among Indian athletes."

Dr G S Rao said, "The field of minimally invasive spine surgery, which is

modernising and expanding its scope, has become a platform for sharing medical knowledge among medical professionals from different countries to focus on the latest innovations in medical science."

Yashoda Hospitals-Hitech City, Senior Neuro & Endoscopic Spine Surgeon Dr Balarajasekhar Chandra said, "Global UBE Con-2025 is not just a conference, it is a platform to make minimally invasive spine surgery accessible to patients across the globe in a precise and safe manner."



## GHMC enables instant approvals for 27 merged ULBs on BuildNow App

Hyderabad: With merger process of 27 ULBs into the GHMC at a brisk pace, the GHMC commissioner R V Kaman on Friday issued an official statement that necessary modifications were made to the Instant Registration/Instant Approval applications in the BuildNow app and made live to the property owners of these 27 ULBs.

Hence, all the applications can be submitted under Instant Registration and Instant Approval in BuildNow and will be processed by the newly re-designated GHMC circles (old 27 ULBs) as per the existing process, he said.

## Mild tension at Tank Bund during Ambedkar death anniversary event

Hyderabad: Mild tension was reported during the death anniversary observance of Dr B R Ambedkar at Tank Bund on Saturday.

The incident occurred around noon, when Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka and film producer and Chairman of Telangana Film Development Corporation, Dil Raju, who arrived to pay floral tributes at the Ambedkar statue, were confronted by members of the Mala Sangham. The protesters raised slogans demanding immediate amendments to the Scheduled Caste classification law and surrounded the Deputy CM, leading to tense moments at the venue. The police personnel who were present there immediately intervened and dispersed the agitators from the spot, restoring normalcy. No untoward incidents were reported. Following the incident, additional force was deployed at the spot.



## Farmers celebrate ACB arrest of Hanamkonda Additional Collector Venkat Reddy

Hanamkonda: Several farmers from Urugonda village of Damera mandal in the district celebrated in front of the Hanamkonda collectorate after the arrest of Hanamkonda Additional Collector A Venkat Reddy by ACB.

It might be recalled that Venkat Reddy, the in-charge district educational officer (DEO), and two education department staff were caught by ACB on Friday for demanding a bribe of Rs 60,000 for the renewal of a private school in

Hanamkonda.

A group of farmers whose lands were acquired for a Greenfield Highway arrived at the collectorate in a rally on Saturday carrying a flex banner with Venkat Reddy's photo on it. They burst firecrackers and distributed sweets.

Speaking to the media, the villagers said they were happy that Venkat Reddy, who prevented them from getting proper compensation for their lands, was caught by ACB. They complained

that despite orders from the district Collector and Greenfield Highway officials for the payment of compensation, Venkat Reddy forced them to give him money.

The farmers demanded that Venkat Reddy be removed from government service and that the assets acquired beyond his income be confiscated immediately. They recalled that in 2008, while working as the RDO of Nalgonda, he was suspended on

charges of having assets beyond his income and later faced corruption charges while working as the RDO of Jangaon.

But there was no change in Venkat Reddy and he continued his corrupt practices. If he was allowed to continue in service, it would cause problems for the people, the farmers alleged. The farmers' celebration has now become a topic of discussion in political and official circles.



## Acid attacks against women in India — a national shame

If the continued acid attacks against women in India, despite stringent laws, constitute a collective shame, the excruciatingly slow trials in such heinous cases make a mockery of the system. The fact that nearly 88 per cent of the acid attack cases are still pending trial is a grim reminder of the serious flaws in the criminal justice system. The Supreme Court has rightly described as a national shame the unending ordeal of acid attack survivor Shaheen Malik, whose case has been pending since 2009. The court has directed all high courts to submit details of pending cases within four weeks. The official figures on acid attacks — 207 cases registered in 2023 as per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data released in 2025 — don't present a complete picture as many incidents go unreported and, in some cases, the survivors would be forced to withdraw their complaints. According to a study, nearly 78 per cent of the acid attack cases are due to the rejection of a marriage proposal or sexual advances. The victims face life-long medical needs, job loss, social ostracism and mental-health trauma, and many slip into poverty and cannot pursue long legal battles. Of the 735 acid attack cases slated for trial nationwide, around 649 remained pending from prior years, with only 86 new cases entering trial in 2023. Given this sad state of affairs, the apex court has asked the Centre to consider amending the law so that the survivors are covered under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act and can access various welfare schemes.

This is a welcome suggestion. If implemented, it can go a long way in helping victims rebuild their lives. An acid attack leaves the survivor scarred for life. In 2013, Parliament made amendments to criminalise acid attacks and to provide compensation to survivors for medical expenses. Until 2013, acid attack was not recognised as a separate offence under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). After the Criminal Law (Amendment Act) 2013, Sections 326A and 326B were inserted in the IPC, providing punishment for acid attacks. The amendment was brought about primarily to control and prevent acid attacks, a type of gender-based crime against women. The minimum punishment under these provisions is imprisonment for 10 years, which may be extended to imprisonment for life and a fine, and should be as per the victim's medical expenses. Another area of concern is the unchecked over-the-counter sale of dangerous acids in the country. In 2013, the Supreme Court had imposed stringent curbs on acid sales. As per the order, vendors are required to obtain a licence and maintain a detailed record of buyers, specifying the purpose for which the acid is intended to be used. However, this directive is observed more in the breach than in the practice. The lethal liquid is sold without ID checks and, in many cases, even the bottles are not labelled.

## Chaos at RGIA: IndiGo cancels 169 flights in a day

Flight cancellations by IndiGo continued to cause severe inconvenience, with approximately 169 flights, including 84 departures and 71 arrivals cancelled at the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport (RGIA) until Friday evening.

The widespread flight cancellations have led to chaos at RGIA, leaving thousands of passengers stranded. The disruption has persisted over the past four days, with Friday witnessing the highest number of cancellations. On Thursday, the airline cancelled a total of 74 flights. Nearly 300 flights have been cancelled over the four-day period.

Passengers at the RGIA were seen pursuing IndiGo staff, urgently enquiring about the cancellations. Many were openly arguing, questioning why the airline had scheduled flights when its operational support was clearly inadequate.

Andhra Pradesh Minister K Partha Sarathi was also among those stranded at the airport while attempting to travel to Vijayawada. Furthermore, Ayyappa devotees, including Swamys bound for Sabarimala, were visibly agitated by the cancellations. The Andhra Pradesh Minister intervened, contacting Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu by phone, and successfully ensured the Ayyappa devotees were accommodated on a flight. However, the Andhra Pradesh Minister ultimately had to leave the airport and travel to



Vijayawada by road.

In a formal statement, IndiGo said: "The last two days have seen widespread disruption across IndiGo's network and operations. We extend a heartfelt apology to all our customers and industry stakeholders who have been impacted by these events. IndiGo teams are working diligently and making all efforts with the support of MOCA, DGCA, BCAS, AAI and airport operators to reduce the cascading impact of these delays and restore normalcy. We continue to keep our customers apprised of any changes to their scheduled flights and advise them to check the latest status at <https://goindigo.in/check-flight-status.html> before heading to the airport. IndiGo deeply regrets the inconvenience caused and remains focussed on streamlining its operations at the earliest."



## Hyderabad task force seizes drugs worth Rs 23.5 lakh

The Commissioner's Task Force Central Zone team, working in coordination with the Saifabad police, has successfully arrested three drug peddlers near the IMAX open ground. Authorities seized 100 grams of Brown Sugar, 1,350 grams of dry 'ganja', seven mobile phones, and a Honda motorcycle, with the total haul valued at Rs 23.5 lakh.

The accused Mohd Gulam Jilani (42, from Jharkhand), Feroz Bin Ali alias Sahil (20), and Suleman Khan (22), both from Attapur were apprehended while moving suspiciously late at night, in the act of procuring and supplying narcotics.

Interrogation revealed that Jilani sourced the drugs from contacts in Odisha via an individual named Afsar. Jilani travelled to Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Jaleswar, and Balasore in October to ac-

quire 115 grams of Brown Sugar and 1,350 grams of 'ganja' for Rs 3.5 lakh, returning by bus on 1st November.

Feroz and Suleman were buying small sachets from Jilani at Rs 5,000 per gram and then reselling them to consumers for Rs 8,000 to 10,000, earning a profit commission of up to Rs 3,000 per gram. They confessed to selling 3 grams to Mohd Ahmed on 4th November for Rs 24,000, which tragically led to his overdose death in Shivrampally.

The peddlers and the seized contraband were handed over to the Saifabad Police Station for further action under Deputy Commissioner of Police Vaibhav Gaikwad Raghunath. These successful bust underscores the Hyderabad police's sustained crackdown on drug networks that fuel addiction and fatalities.



# Villages In Partnership (VIP) Launches Grassroots Democracy Awareness Drive Ahead of Gram Panchayat Elections

Mahabubnagar: Emphasising that real democracy lies with the people and not merely with political parties, VIP has launched a special awareness campaign across select mandals of Wanaparthy and Mahbubnagar districts ahead of the upcoming Gram Panchayat elections.

Dr. Nagender Swamy Executive Director of VIP noted that although democracy is meant to be people-centric, citizens at the grassroots are often excluded from policymaking and development discussions. To address this concern, VIP is conducting awareness programmes in Chinnachintakunta, Deverkadra and Koukuntla mandals in Mahbubnagar district and Atmakur, Amarchinta, Madanapur, Amarchinta, Khila Ghanapur and Peddamandadi mandals in Wanaparthy district, involving volunteers from chosen wards and Gram Panchayats. The aim is to

strengthen participatory governance by educating people at both the ward and Gram Panchayat levels.

The campaign highlights the crucial role of Ward Members in village leadership and governance. It underscores that Ward Members are the voice of every street and that strong wards ultimately build strong Panchayats. Leadership, according to VIP, begins at the ward level where Ward Members are elected to listen, empower and act. They lead the way from the doorstep to the Gram Sabha, ensuring that citizens' needs are reflected in Panchayat decisions.

VIP is also stressing the importance of Ward Members as the bridge between people and the Panchayat. They connect citizens to power, link needs with solutions, and translate village voices into meaningful action. Their commitment is to deliver on public

concerns and ensure effective communication between the community and the administration.

The initiative further highlights that Ward Members are the first responders to local problems—solving issues where they begin, within the community. They listen to every concern, handle challenges ranging from water supply to welfare schemes, and serve as guardians of grassroots justice.

Focusing on inclusion, the campaign reminds people that Ward Members ensure no voice is left unheard. They champion participatory democracy by representing every home and every hope, fostering empowered wards and empowered citizens.

Through this awareness programme, VIP aims to strengthen true grassroots democracy, ensuring that the spirit of governance flows from every doorstep to the Gram Sabha.

## Two years, zero justice: BJP hits out at Revanth govt over BC youth's suicide

Hyderabad: Telangana BJP State unit President N Ramchander Rao has strongly condemned the Congress government following the tragic suicide of BC youth Sri Sai Ishwar Chari in Medipalli, Medchal-Malkajgiri district. Rao described the incident as "proof of the collapse of social justice in Telangana" and held the



government responsible for neglecting Backward Classes (BCs).

According to reports, Ishwar Chari, a cab driver residing in Jagadgirigutta near Jeedimetla, originally from Pocharam village in Pulkal mandal, Sangareddy district, attempted suicide due to frustration over the non-implementation of 42 per cent reservation rights for BCs. Rao alleged that the Congress government, despite being in power for two years, has failed to honour its promises to BC communities, leaving them deprived of opportunities and dignity. Rao accused the government of betraying BCs by not clearing fee reimbursement arrears, failing to release funds to BC Corporations, and ignoring welfare commitments. He compared the current administration to the previous KCR government, claiming both regimes have perpetuated injustice and discrimination. "This is not just the grief of one family; it reflects the government's treatment of BCs across Telangana," he said.

The BJP leader demanded that Chief Minister Revanth Reddy and the Congress government be held accountable for the incident. He urged immediate action to implement promised reservations, release funds to BC Corporations, and clear pending arrears for BC students.

"The BJP will continue to fight for the rights of BCs and for social justice in Telangana. The people themselves will put an end to this arrogant and unjust rule," Rao declared, calling the suicide a wake-up call for the state.

## Centre integrates FPOs to fortify national agricultural value chains

Hyderabad: The Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare has detailed several key initiatives aimed at integrating Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs) into national agricultural value chains, thereby enhancing their capabilities in procurement, processing, storage, and marketing systems. Responding to a query from K Laxman in the Rajya Sabha, Union Minister of State Ramnath Thakur highlighted the progress under the Central Sector Scheme on Formation and Promotion of 10,000 FPOs.

Under this pivotal scheme, 10,000 FPOs have been formally registered. Each FPO is eligible for up to Rs 18 lakh over three years as management support, equity grants of up to Rs 15 lakh, and credit guarantees of up to Rs 2 crore. The scheme also provides vital support through training, market linkages, and convergence with other government programmes. FPOs are further being supported with input and 'mandi' licences, while weekly webinars and e-commerce enablement are strengthening their integration into agricultural value chains.

As of 31st October 2025, a total of 4,642 FPOs are successfully linked with the National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) platform. Furthermore, 236 FPOs have received credit-linked subsidies under the PM Formalisation of Micro Food Processing Enterprises (PM-FME) Scheme, while 1,590 FPOs have availed benefits under the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF). The

PM-KISAN scheme continues to benefit individual farmers rather than FPOs themselves.

To improve credit accessibility, 2,583 FPOs have obtained collateral-free loans under the Credit Guarantee Fund of the 10,000 FPO Scheme. The government is also proactively promoting digital infrastructure by linking FPOs with crucial platforms such as ONDC, e-NAM, and Government e-Marketplace (GeM), enabling wider market reach and better price realisation, the Minister added.

FPOs are additionally being connected with private sector entities, agri-business organisations, and startups through exhibitions, 'melas', and Business-to-Business (B2B) linkages. Industry experts are regularly engaging with FPOs via webinars to guide them on sustainable partnerships and effective market strategies. Thakur emphasised that these comprehensive measures are designed to boost farmer incomes, ensure sustainable value chain integration, and empower FPOs as key drivers of rural economic growth.





## Special weekend train from Charlapalli to Shalimar to ease Dec rush

To efficiently manage the extra rush of passengers during the early December travel period, the Railways has announced a special weekend service operating between Charlapalli and Shalimar. This decision involves a single pair of services and aims to provide crucial additional capacity as seasonal movement towards Odisha and West Bengal increases significantly.

Train 07148 is scheduled to depart Charlapalli on 6th December, running overnight through major junctions including Vijayawada, Rajahmundry, Visakhapatnam, and Berhampur, before finally reaching Shalimar on the morning of 8th December.

The return service, Train 07149, will commence its journey from Shalimar on 8th December, covering key junctions such as Kharagpur, Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Balasore, Vizianagaram, and Guntur, before arriving back at Charlapalli on 9th December.

The special train will run with 24 CBC coaches, featuring a variety of accommodation options, including AC, Sleeper, and General class, ensuring ample space for long-distance travellers. Railway officials stated that the service is intended to alleviate crowding and support smooth travel during this particularly busy period for interstate passengers.

## Trivikrama Rao appointed as Official Language Commission chairman

Vijayawada: The state government has appointed P Trivikrama Rao as chairman of the 'Mandali Venkata Krishna Rao Official Language Commission,' following a fresh notification issued in Telugu on Friday. The commission, earlier known as the AP Official Language Commission, was recently renamed by the Government of AP.

The post had been vacant, prompting the State to constitute the new committee to strengthen the use of Telugu as the official language in administration. The commission will function for two years, beginning from the date of its formation. An officer of additional/assistant/executive officer rank from the Official Language Services will serve as the commission's executive officer.

The commission is tasked with reviewing the use of Telugu across government departments, inspecting offices, framing procedures for official language implementation, restricting unnecessary use of English, and submitting recommendations to the State government for the development and effective usage of Telugu.

## Police portals back online after cyber attack diverts users to betting sites

The official websites of the Cyberabad and Rachakonda police commissionerates have been successfully restored after remaining offline for weeks following a hack. Unidentified perpetrators tampered with the sites, redirecting unsuspecting users to illegal gaming and betting pages. Visitors attempting to access vital information, such as police station contacts and services, were instead met with "site can't be reached" errors, effectively severing public access to essential information.

The Cyberabad police flagged the breach on 15th November when their IT cell detected the malicious redirects, prompting an immediate shutdown as a se-

curity precaution. The Rachakonda portal followed suit, remaining offline for over a week amid similar issues. A Delhi-based cybersecurity firm, working under the supervision of the National Informatics Centre (NIC), conducted thorough audits, patched the identified vulnerabilities, and oversaw system upgrades. Both sites were finally restored by Thursday after rigorous testing. Officials have confirmed that no data breach occurred, with zero evidence of compromised information. This attack follows a discernible pattern of cyber threats targeting Telangana's digital infrastructure, coming shortly after the 11th November hack of the Telangana High Court website.

## Sajjala calls the drive a historic show of public anger

Tadepalli: YSRCP state coordinator Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy claimed that the one-crore signature campaign against the alleged privatisation of government medical colleges has emerged as one of the most disciplined and historic public movements in the party's history. He said the extraordinary response reflects people's clear opposition to Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu's policies, which he warned would cause long-term damage to future generations.

Addressing a Zoom conference with Parliamentary constituency observers and state presidents of affiliated wings, Ramakrishna Reddy noted that the campaign has received overwhelming support from all sections of society, far exceeding expectations. More than one crore signatures were collected within just a week, and the numbers continue to rise.

He announced that constituency-level submissions will be held on December 10, district-level events on December 13, and the final representation will be submitted to the Governor on December 16. He urged leaders to ensure that December 13 becomes a statewide show of strength, with rallies in every district drawing over 10,000 cadres.

He directed affiliated wings to remain fully active and instructed Parliamentary Observers to coordinate closely with local leadership to maximize par-



ticipation from mandals to districts.

He stressed the importance of documenting and digitizing all signatures with full party support, underscoring that the campaign must highlight people's opposition to medical college privatisation.

He added that YSRCP president Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy is closely monitoring the movement, and it is the collective responsibility of every leader and cadre to motivate people and uphold this historic struggle. Calling for absolute sincerity during this crucial week, Ramakrishna Reddy said the campaign is setting a new model for public mobilization and will stand as a landmark moment in Andhra Pradesh's political and social history.

## All arrangements in place for ODI today

Visakhapatnam: Andhra Cricket Association (ACA) president Kesineni Sivanath said that all arrangements have been completed for the ODI between India and South Africa at the ACA-VDCA International Cricket Stadium as part of the IDFC First Bank Series scheduled on Saturday.

The president along with secretary Sana Satish Babu and other members of the ACA reviewed the arrangements here on Friday for the match. Interacting with the police officials, they took stock of the security and traffic regulation measures being taken and offered suggestions.

The ACA officials examined the facilities for the spectators, including drinking water, restrooms, medical facilities and fire safety, were in place.

Special attention was paid to the VIP and VVIP galleries, the movement of dignitaries and their security arrangements.





## Pawan Kalyan Advocates for Tribal Development and Eco-Tourism in Andhra Pradesh

Andhra Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan has outlined vital strategies to enhance income sources for forest-dependent tribal communities in Alluri Seetharamaraju district. During a recent teleconference with district officials, Kalyan focused on pivotal issues such as tribal development, eco-tourism, the marketing of forest products, and the creation of employment opportunities.

Emphasising the need for sustainable income avenues, Kalyan stressed the importance of strengthening the manufacturing, processing, and marketing of forest products. He highlighted the growing demand for forest and organic products, suggesting that encouraging tribal involvement in these areas could significantly boost their income.

Furthermore, Kalyan urged the development of eco-tourism initiatives that would benefit both the environment and local communities. By transforming the district's natural landscapes, waterfalls, and



forested regions into tourist attractions, he believes that employment opportunities for young people could be generated.

Kalyan also pointed out that there are substantial prospects for horticulture crops in the agency areas. He proposed linking these opportunities with the Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS/MGNREGA) to enhance benefits for farmers and workers. He asserted that an increase in horticultural activity would lead to greater employment and economic

growth in the region.

The Deputy Chief Minister's suggestions aim to improve the living

standards of tribal communities while promoting sustainable development in Andhra Pradesh.

## State govt clears `2,428 cr upgrade with new SPV

Vijayawada: The state government approved the creation of a new special purpose vehicle to execute the Centre's Amended BharatNet Programme (ABP) in the state, clearing the way for a major expansion and upgrade of rural broadband infrastructure. The move follows the Union government's in-principle approval of Rs 2,428 crore for the project, which aims to deliver high-speed connectivity to gram panchayats and unconnected villages under a revised, state-led implementation model.

The BharatNet initiative, funded through Digital Bharat Nidhi (formerly the Universal Service Obligation Fund), is among India's largest digital infrastructure programmes, designed to close the rural connectivity gap by extending affordable broadband access and enabling e-governance, telehealth, digital education and rural enterprise networks. The Union Cabinet approved the programme's amended architecture in August 2023 with an outlay of Rs 1.39 trillion, including capital expenditure of Rs 42,847 crore and ten-year operating costs of Rs 48,717 crore under a Design-Build-Operate-Maintain model.

Under the approved framework, Andhra Pradesh will establish Andhra Pradesh BharatNet Infrastructure Limited (APBIL) as the new implementing SPV, featuring equal representation from the State government and the Department of Telecommunications (DoT).

## Srikalahasti temple tops statewide devotee satisfaction survey

Tirupati: The Srikalahasteswara temple has secured the first place in the state in the Government's temple performance feedback for pilgrim satisfaction. The survey, conducted for all major temples in the state except Tirumala, recorded a 72.7 percent satisfaction rate for the Srikalahasti temple, placing it at the top. Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu congratulated Srikalahasti MLA Bojjala Venkata Sudhir Reddy on the achievement. The MLA's supervision and coordination with the temple administration led to improvements in darshan, basic facilities, sanitation and transparency in operations over the past months.

Devotees who participated in the survey expressed high satisfaction with the fast darshan, cleanliness, queue management and the polite behaviour of the staff. Many were pleased that with a Rs 500 ticket they could directly enter the inner sanctum without relying on brokers or middlemen. This change, implemented under the supervision of MLA Sudhir Reddy, brought transparency, fairness and dignity to the entire darshan experience. The accomplishment marks a significant turnaround from the situation during the previous YSRCP regime, when devotee numbers declined, service standards dropped and allegations of mismanagement and corruption increased.

According to the temple authorities, during those five years, even the hundi income failed to cross Rs 1 crore. Now, the temple has seen rapid development.

## PTMs help parents know learning abilities of children

Eluru: District Collector K Vetrisevi said that parent-teacher meetings will greatly contribute to improving the level of education standards in government schools.

She participated in the Mega PTM-3 programme held in a festive atmosphere at Smt Garapati Hymavati Devi Zilla Parishad High School on Friday along with Denduluru MLA Chintamaneni Prabhakar.

Speaking on the occasion, she said that every parent can achieve best results by knowing the learning ability of their children and improving them.

She said teachers should work hard to achieve a hundred percent pass rate in government schools and implement a 100-day action plan for this. Teachers should find out which students are lagging behind in which subjects, focus on them and organise special classes accordingly. She would provide necessary infrastructure for the school, and in return, she wanted students to

The project scope includes upgrading the existing BharatNet network, extending IP-MPLS ring connectivity to roughly 480 newly identified gram panchayats, and integrating operations and maintenance of both the BharatNet and APSFL Phase-



I networks under a single EPC contractor. The government said unifying network management would reduce fragmentation and enhance reliability across rural broadband routes.

The Infrastructure and Investment Department will now proceed with issuing tenders on behalf of the SPV to implement the programme based on the Union government's approved budget.

Officials said the upgraded infrastructure will serve as a long-term digital backbone supporting public services and private-sector telecom expansion in rural Andhra Pradesh.



# Why is Delhi's air quality deteriorating? | Explained

With the withdrawal of the southwest monsoon and the onset of winter, the air quality in Delhi has started to nose-dive. This week, the city and its adjoining territories have consistently recorded particulate matter (PM 2.5) levels exceeding 300, or 'very poor' air quality, and forecasts suggest that this could worsen in the coming days. As is now an established pattern, the decline in air quality coincides with the burning of farm stubble, primarily from Punjab.

What is the contribution of stubble burning to air pollution?

Stubble burning refers to a traditional practice of farmers burning the remnants of paddy stalks after harvesting. This method is often the quickest way, as farmers in Punjab and Haryana have a narrow window of October and November to clear their fields and sow wheat for the winter. The environmental impact of stubble burning has been known since the 1990s. Agricultural researchers, while analysing the economics of rice-wheat cropping pointed out that rising labour costs made it expensive for farmers to collect rice stalks strewn across the field that resulted from the use of mechanical devices such as rice shredders and combine harvesters. Though the burning of rice stalk was initially condemned as a waste of valuable manure, concerns were also raised about its harm to farmers' health. However, its link to worsening air quality in Delhi was quantified only over the last decade and a half. Today, the use of sophisticated instruments, modelling studies, and computational methods have enabled the estimation, almost daily, of stubble burning's contribution to air quality in Delhi. A study by the research and advocacy group Climate Trends of winter pollution trends in 2023 found a "strong correlation" between wind direction originating from Punjab and Haryana and the resulting pollution levels in Delhi. In the case of Punjab, during winter, 54% of the time the wind from the State blew towards Delhi, it led to a spike in air pollution; when the wind originated from Haryana, the figure stood at 27%. Every additional fire incident was correlated with an increase in PM2.5 levels of 12.44 units. Studies over the years, most recently in 2023 by a consortium of IIT Kanpur, IIT Delhi, TERI, and Airshed, Kanpur, found that from mid-October to the end of November 2022, the role of stubble burning to air quality was on average 22% and peaked to as much as 35%. This is fairly consistent with previous studies that have estimated the contribution of stubble burning to range from 20%- 40%. Based on these measurements, the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology-Pune (IITM-Pune) maintains an air quality forecast system that models the flow of airborne pollutants through cities. It shows the dynamic nature of stubble burning's impact on Delhi's pollution. For instance, from October 8 to 19 this year, farm fires accounted for less than 1.2% of the PM 2.5 load in Delhi. During this period, the average AQI stayed from 130 - 198 (or the 'moderate' pollution category).

However, on October 21, when stubble burning's relative contribution rose to 3.2%, Delhi's AQI immediately plummeted to 'very poor' (310). On October 23, when the relative contribution of burning reached the seasonal high of 16%, the index deteriorated to 364, still in the 'very poor' region. On October 26, the stubble burning contribution slightly dipped to 14.5%, and the AQI improved to 270 or 'poor' quality.

What is the inference from these observations?

The transitioning period from the withdrawal of the monsoon to the onset of winter causes a sharp drop in windspeed, and cause air pollutants to hover closer to the ground rather than being flushed away to the higher realms of the atmosphere. In this situation, any additional source of pollutants — such as from stubble burning — can dramatically spike the pollutant load in Delhi. Also, nearly 55% of the pollution in Delhi originates outside its territorial borders, as studies have shown. Thus, relatively small spikes can push the index as much as 100 points and change categories anywhere from 'poor' to 'very poor.'

So is stubble burning the sole villain in Delhi's pollution?

Urban Emissions, a research outfit that tracks air pollution trends nationally, reports that from 2016-23, the improving air quality reflected in the index going from a high of 285 in 2017 to a low of 173 in 2021. However, in six of these seven years, the index stayed above 216 and therefore within the AQI categorisation of 'poor' air quality. However, in Punjab, the farm fires reduced by over an order of magnitude from 17,467 in 2018 (as of October 25, that year) to 1,749 (October 25) this year. Fire incidents in Haryana too have halved since 2020. The paddy harvested in Punjab is more than twice that in Haryana and yet, this has only improved the index by 65 points at the most. Significantly, December, January, and February are officially considered the winter months by the India Meteorological Department and by this time, the atmospheric conditions that create a trap for pollutants and prevent them from being flushed out, grow stronger. However, stubble burning almost entirely ceases. Despite that, data compiled by Urban Emissions says, the air quality index has consistently remained in the 'very poor' and 'severe' (400+) category from 2016-23. This suggests that sources other than stubble burning contribute significantly to air pollution.

Which are these factors?

On October 25 this year, stubble burning was responsible for nearly 15% of Delhi's air pollution. On the same day, 'Delhi transport' which includes particulate matter from vehicles and vehicles crossing into Delhi was responsible for about 18% of the PM 2.5 load, according to the IITM's air quality forecast system. The IIT Kanpur, IIT Delhi, and Teri consortia analysis of the sources of pollution in Delhi found that the real-time source apportionment of PM 2.5 results show secondary inorganic



aerosols (SIA), which travel from beyond Delhi, contribute the highest to Delhi's pollution load. The average of winter pollution source apportionment shows SIA (32%) and biomass burning within and outside Delhi (24%) contribute the most followed by vehicles at 17%. The SIAs form when gaseous precursors like sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>), nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>), and ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>) react to form ammonium sulfate

or ammonium nitrate. In winter, the mean contribution of SIA from the sources within Delhi is 16% and the rest 84% from outside Delhi. In the last few years, policymakers have realised that the sources of air pollution can be tackled only via an airshed approach that requires coordinated action by multiple States including those beyond Delhi to evolve a joint response to the pollution crisis.

## South Korean scientists first to discover electronic crystallites in solids

Seoul: A group of South Korean scientists have discovered electronic crystallites in a solid material for the first time in the world, which is expected to help make progress in studies on high-temperature superconductivity, the science ministry said on Thursday. A research team, led by Professor Kim Keun-su at Yonsei University in Seoul, posted a paper, titled 'Electronic rotors and Wigner crystallites in a two-dimensional dipole liquid', in *Nature*, a prominent science journal, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT.

This marks the world's first experimental discovery of the structure, theorised by Hungarian American physicist Eugene Wigner in 1934, Yonhap news agency reported. Wigner crystal refers to a solid or crystalline formation of a gas of electrons enabled by strong repulsion between electrons at low electron density. Normally, a crystal formation is understood as an attraction between atoms.

"Until now, scientists have had a dichotomous perception of electrons: those with order and those without order," Kim said. "But our research found a third type of electronic crystallites with short-range crystalline order."

The discovery by Kim's team is expected to provide further clues to under-



stand better high-temperature superconductivity and superfluidity, long-standing problems in modern-day physics. High-temperature superconductors, materials with critical temperature, are considered to have the potential for creating innovations in the energy, transportation, and medical industries as they can be easily cooled with liquid nitrogen. Superfluids are also known to have potential practical uses in health care, the electronics industry, and others. Kim said his team observed an electronic crystallite, with a size of 1 to 2 nanometres, while measuring the energy-momentum relation of electrons doped from alkali metals through angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy and the Advanced Light Source, a specialised particle accelerator at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in the United States.



# Amazon has no clue what to do with Alexa, and the Echo family

Amazon, this week, announced their Q3 results. On a macro view, you'd probably find all seems well. I wasn't so sure, and dug a little deeper. Conspicuous by its absence in the financial report was any significant mention of the Echo smart devices. Of which Amazon has quite a few up for sale. Andy Jassy, Amazon president and CEO, did specifically reference the Kindle e-readers, Prime Big Deal Days, some fixtures on Prime Video, and "100 new cloud infrastructure and AI capabilities that we'll share at AWS re:Invent." Someone has to say it. Amazon has blown its first mover advantage. There was a time when the smartness, slickness and versatility of Echo smart devices and the companion smart home ecosystem was coveted. There was variety and utility. A choice of smart speakers and smart displays, across price points. Now, Echo devices just feel long in the tooth. Choose any of these devices still on sale, and the experience remains exactly as it was when they first arrived on the scene. Nothing about my interactions with an Amazon Echo Show now, feel significantly different to 2019, when it was launched (and I fondly remember my time at HT's sister publication, Mint, where I'd written about it at the time).

A glimmer of hope but that too is fading fast. Reminds me of September last year, and that remarkable demo in which David Limp, who was then Amazon's head of devices and services, said "Alexa, let's chat" and proceeded to give us a glimpse of the vision for the smart assistant that made smart assistants cool (sorry Google, Hey Google became cool because Alexa taught us smart assistants). A free flowing natural conversation with an AI assistant that sounded a lot different from what we know Alexa to sound like. Simply, better. The plan was, to have it available starting with the US, a few months later, with global availability at some point earlier this year. None of it has transpired according to plan. This envisioned evolution for Alexa was, and is, important. It'd have meant that crucial step forward from being a smart assistant, to a full-fledged AI chatbot. It'd have meant Amazon's Alexa large language model (LLM) competing with OpenAI's GPT which also underlines Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, Meta AI, Perplexity and a fast evolving Apple Siri which too will add OpenAI's models as an optional port for call for users. A "super agent", if you may, without throwing a shade on the capabilities of Alexa as we've known it over the years.

After pushing a case for smart assistants for years, tech companies suddenly found better value arriving elsewhere. "They were all dumb as a rock," is how Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella described smart assistants such as their own Cortana, in an interview earlier this year. To digress for a moment, this tells a lot about how tech companies see us consumers as guinea pigs willing to spend money for that privilege. Nevertheless, I'll take that up some other time. What does one make of Amazon's investments in AI company Anthropic, the latest being in March this year (this follows an earlier investment announcement in September last year), to

the tune of a reported \$4 billion. If the company wanted to replicate what Microsoft has with OpenAI for the new Alexa, it certainly didn't have the perseverance or attentiveness to do so. Anthropic has the very capable Claude chatbot, and they know what they're doing.

The reality is not just that Alexa hasn't really changed in the past year as we'd have expected it to; it seems Amazon believes it is a good idea to put the refurbished, smarter Alexa behind a subscription paywall. Want a smarter chatbot on your smart speakers and smart displays? Pay \$10 (or so; this is still a guess) a month. If not, keep using the older, less smart Alexa. After almost a decade of having Alexa available for free to users, Amazon is simply adding more resistance in a path it should logically leave undisturbed. If they have any intent of competing with AI companies that have built better chatbots and are much ahead in the generative models stakes. But then again, Amazon must be thinking if Tinder can have a subscription tier, if Evernote can still have the courage to demand a subscription, cloud storage expenses, and if Google or OpenAI can have subscriptions to unlock smart AI features, they can too. But, are any of them on as shaky a ground as Amazon are?

Software and the smart companion is one part of Amazon's AI problem. The other piece of that puzzle, is the Echo device lineup. Over the years, some iterations have worked while some haven't at all. That's par for course for any tech portfolio, but the funny thing is, most successes have come from the initial years of Amazon's Echo journey. I'll give you a virtual line in the sand — no Echo product since the redesigned Echo in 2020 and (if you really want to stretch it) the second generation Echo Show in 2021, has really caught attention. I mean, you wouldn't be queuing up for an Echo Pop. Then there is also the small matter of Amazon never really prioritising India for Echo releases. Incidentally, Statista's data suggests that as of February 2024, India registers the highest percentage of smart speaker ownership among 56 countries, with 38% of respondents saying they have a smart speaker at home. The United Kingdom was the second highest ranking country. This audience, in this part of the world, never got the battery powered Tap, the Echo Wall Clock, the Echo Loop smart ring and that gorgeous Echo Hub touch display which can be wall mounted too (I was personally rooting for this; alas, that holds little value in the face of Amazon's own resistance). There doesn't seem to be much in the pipeline in terms of the hardware side of things, to get you interested. In fact, Amazon may find competition is much tougher and rougher to contend with, than it perhaps did around 7 years ago when Echo devices arrived in India. The stagnation in the Echo smart device hardware, is symptomatic of wider sluggishness. Whether that's because of structural issues within Amazon, or Alexa LLM not being up to the mark (thought that seems unlikely), is concerning. The summary doesn't make for pretty reading. It has been regularly



mentioned that Amazon executives have labelled 2024 as a "must win year" for Alexa, with that division remaining unprofitable over the years. If charging for a "Re-

markable Alexa" is their idea of finding success, they may just find that 2024 is fast running out. The ecosystem needs strong Amazon play in the consumer AI space.

## The prophecies of AGI

A week ago, James Cameron, the director of science fiction movie Avatar announced that the reality of AGI coming into being was scarier to him than the fiction around it. The same week researcher Miles Brundage who worked as a Senior Advisor for AGI Readiness at OpenAI resigned from his position, announcing on his Substack that no one was ready for AGI.

Not a day goes by before someone — in the government, civil society or corporate industry mentions artificial general intelligence or AGI — and perhaps with good reason. In the last decade, AI as a technology has dramatically changed much of how every discipline works and it shows no sign of slowing. This year, two Nobel Prizes went to AI scientists. At a pub in Mountain View where I live, someone joked that the Nobel committee might give the Nobel Prize in Peace to someone working in AI policy (It didn't). As the field of AI matures and we get adjusted to seeing this technology roll out in our phones, browsers and life, conversation is shifting to a somewhat nebulous idea of achieving AGI — a vague singularity vision of the technology where AI will exceed human intelligence. AGI is also known as "strong AI", "full AI" or the ability of a machine to perform "general intelligent action."

Imagine a single human intelligence, say AGI advocates, now put it together with millions of intelligences working in a hive mind to solve humanity's biggest problems. That's the moment when proponents of AGI — academicians, venture capitalists, founders, billionaires, and researchers amongst them — start sounding like prophets or science fiction authors. These tech-first capitalistic imaginations of the world have always been popular with technologists — including Effective Altruists, Effective Accelerationism — perhaps harking back to billionaire Andreessen Horowitz's philosophy around a technology-led soci-

ety, titled The Techno-optimist Manifesto.

In the last few weeks, technocratic visions of AGI utopias have flooded the internet written by CEOs, investors and billionaires — this philosophy's prophets. A few weeks ago, Sam Altman reiterated his oft quoted vision of AGI through 'The Intelligence Age' where he says "the future is going to be so bright that no can do it justice by trying to write about it now" — a call out to a new "Intelligence Age". He adds that near-limitless intelligence and abundance energy will fix the climate, establish a space colony and discover all physics. Dario Amodei, CEO and co-founder of Anthropic published an idea titled Machines of Loving Grace in where he describes AGI as creating a "country of geniuses in a data center" that will "solve very difficult problems, very fast".

In a similar vein venture capitalist Vinod Khosla shared his philosophy titled AI: Dystopia or Utopia? which again imagined what a world will look like post achieving superintelligence. "We're on the cusp of a near-infinite expansion of brain power that can serve humanity," he says, adding that AGI will bring in "unparalleled abundance" and a "post-scarcity economy" where every human has robots, e-tutors, self-flying aircrafts, personal assistants, synthetic physicians in a society of "boundless abundance".

These ideas are different from narrow definitions of AGI that businesses came up with in the last 12 months. Last year, Google DeepMind listed six levels of AGI in a scientific paper, which introduced a measurement framework for levels of AGI performance, generality and autonomy. In July, OpenAI followed with its five-level system to achieve AGI that included starting at conversational AI and progressing through reasoners, agents and innovators into AI systems capable of functioning as entire organisations.



# Meal costs are rising faster than earnings: Data

On average, the cost of a healthy meal has increased by 52% in October 2024 compared to the same month last year. Meanwhile, average salaries and wages have increased in the range of 9 to 10%. Already, casual labourers spend a larger proportion of their monthly income on food than those in salaried jobs. This gap has widened further in the past year. Households, where women are sole breadwinners, in particular, bear heavier burdens. For this analysis, it has been assumed that an average Indian family will be able to meet their daily dietary needs if they consume food equivalent to two thalis per day, spread across breakfast, lunch and dinner. Non vegetarian items were not considered due to lack of past data. Vegetable prices were sourced from Mumbai and for other items Maharashtra was chosen as an exemplar, due to the availability of consistent data. Wages data was also taken from the same State.

The following graphs show the weight of commodities required to prepare two thalis daily and their average retail prices in Mumbai (for vegetables) and in Maharashtra (for other items) in Oct. 2023 and Oct. 2024. The % change in prices is also depicted. The retail prices of vegetables were ascertained from the National Horticulture Board's dashboard. Retail prices of items other than vegetables were obtained from the Department of Consumer Affairs' dashboard. The rise in thali prices can be directly linked to the significant increase in the cost of most vegetables. The retail prices of tomato, potato, and garlic have notably surged during this period. Between October 2023 and October 2024, tomato prices shot up by 247%, potato prices by 180%, and garlic by 128%. On an average, the retail price of all vegetables used in the thali collectively increased by 89%, while that of non-vegetable items is grew by only 1.5%. In the same period though, the prices of tur dal and rice dropped by 2.6% and 0.7%, respectively. Other items, such as salt, sunflower oil, and wheat, underwent only moderate price hikes, ranging between 3% and 18%.

**Share in wage: Measuring affordability** In the charts below, for regular workers, the average salaries earned during a calendar month in Maharashtra were considered. For casual labourers, average earnings per day of those engaged in works other than public works were considered. Values were sourced from the Periodic Labour Force Survey report (October to December quarter -2023). Data for 2024 was arrived at by calculating the compound annual growth rate for the previous five October to December quarters. The analysis assumes that labourers got paid on all days, including rest days, which may not usually be the case.

**Average wage/salary** The following graphs depict the increase in the wages and salaries of daily labourers and regular workers in Maharashtra. The wages are extrapolated to estimate the monthly earnings of a labourer. The data for women and men are depicted. The average daily wage of men in Maharashtra increased from ₹451/ day, in October- December 2023 to ₹492/day

in October- December 2024. The corresponding figures for women were ₹293 a day and ₹324 a day. These figures were then calculated for 30 days to arrive at their monthly earnings. The average monthly salary of men in Maharashtra increased from ₹24,321 in October- December 2023 to ₹26,509 in October- December 2024. The corresponding figures for women were ₹18,959 and ₹20,928. Cost of meals as a share of wagesThe graphs depict the retail cost of making two thalis every day for a month at home, as a share of monthly wages and salaries. The figures are in percentage. Data for women and men are depicted separately. The cost when considered as a share of wages earned, increased from 22.6% of a male casual labourer's monthly earnings in 2023 to 31.4% in 2024 - an 8.8 point increase. The corresponding figures for a female casual labourer was 34.7% and 47.6% - a 12.9 point increase. The cost when considered as a share of a male regular worker's monthly salary increased from 12.6% in 2023 to 17.5% in 2024- a 4.9 point increase. The corresponding figures for a female worker was 16% and 22%-a 6 point increase. The analysis shows that food expenses already exerted a disproportionately higher burden on households in which women were sole breadwinners. In the past year, this burden has increased further. Share of wages and salaries spent by such households on making a healthy meal, increased by 12.9 points and 6 points respectively, higher than those for men.



# Caught in intersections, the Harris multicultural tent

“They have a woman who is Black, although you would say she’s Indian, but she is Black... a lot of people didn’t know....” said Republican nominee in the U.S. presidential race, Donald Trump, in a recent podcast. He was bringing up his opponent and U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris’s race yet again. By raking up this issue periodically, Mr. Trump has been trying to sharpen the fault lines in the multicultural tent that the Democratic Party fashions itself as. Democrats hope Ms. Harris’s multiple identity tags — Indian, African-American and woman — could help fuse these voting groups in her favour. But conflicts between these collectives are real, and Mr. Trump is playing on these, ahead of voting day on November 5.

Race and admission policiesThe debate on affirmative action in the United States is instructive in understanding the tensions between Indians/Asians and African-Americans. In August, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) released demographic data of the incoming class of 2028, the first cohort of students after the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on June 29, 2023 (*Students for Fair Admissions vs Harvard*) that taking race into consideration in university admission was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause

of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Between the classes of 2027 and 2028 — after race considerations were removed from admissions — the racial composition of students changed dramatically at MIT. In the fresh batch, about 16% of students are African-American, Hispanic, Native American and Pacific Islander compared to the recent average of their share at 25%. For African-Americans alone, the share dropped from 15% to 5%, between the two batches. The share of white students dipped by one percentage point, from 38 to 37. The Asian-American students were the gainers from all this. The share of this group, which includes Indians, jumped from 40% of the 2027 class to 47% in the batch of 2028.

One of the key arguments that Students for Fair Admissions, the petitioners, brought before the Supreme Court was that race factored admission policies discriminated against Asian students, which in turn undermined both merit and diversity. In the absence of race considerations, more of them would have been admitted, they argued. The defendants were Harvard University and the University of North Carolina, two premier institutions. The Fourteenth Amendment that came into force after the Civil War guaranteed that “all per-

sons, whether coloured or white, shall stand equal before the laws of the States". It was meant at that point to protect the African-American population. U.S. affirmative action and progressive politics were tailored largely around the African-American-white binary, and the Native Americans, but demographic changes that turned the country into a multiracial country have complicated the race debate. Concurring with the majority judgment of the Supreme Court, Justice Clarence Thomas, an African American, wrote: "... university admissions policies ask individuals to identify themselves as belonging to one of only a few reductionist racial groups. With boxes for only 'black,' 'white,' 'Hispanic,' 'Asian,' or the ambiguous 'other,' how is a Middle Eastern person to choose? Someone from the Philippines? Whichever choice he makes (in the event he chooses to report a race at all), the form silos him into an artificial category. Worse, it sends a clear signal that the category matters."

When more universities release demographic data for the latest batch, the impact of the court ruling will become more clear, but MIT's data is likely to be indicative. Meanwhile, the Asian-American campaign against race conscious admission policies is expanding.