

## Uncertainty over fate of fish seedlings distribution scheme poses threat to fishermen's livelihood

Hyderabad: Uncertainty looms large over the fate of free fish distribution scheme in Telangana, posing a threat to livelihood of fishermen in the State. While the South-west monsoon is expected to arrive in the State over next a couple of days, the State government has yet to initiate the tender process for procuring fishlings and shrimp for release into water bodies across Telangana. Last year, the State government released an impressive 85.60 crore fish seedlings into 26,357 water bodies and 25.99 crore shrimp into 300 water bodies at a total estimated cost of Rs 107 crore, boosting the income of fishermen. The scheme was initiated by the previous BRS government in 2017-18 to improve the livelihood opportunities for fishermen.

Traditionally, tenders for supply of fishlings and shrimp are invited before the monsoon, with the distribution completed between July and September. This process has historically provided substantial financial support to fishermen. However, despite the end of May, this year's tendering process has not yet begun, casting doubt on the continuation of the fish distribution scheme. In addition to the government-provided seedlings, fishermen often pur-

chased additional fishlings through their cooperative societies, leading to substantial incomes. Telangana boasts of the country's third largest inland water spread, covering an area of 5.73 lakh square km across various water bodies, including reservoirs.

Presently, Telangana ranks fifth in terms of freshwater fish production, valued at an estimated Rs 6,191 crore in the year 2022-23. This represents a three-fold growth compared to the fish production worth Rs 2,111 crore recorded in 2016-17. Over the same period, prawn production has also experienced considerable growth, rising from 7,783 tonnes valued at Rs 171.23 crore in 2017-18 to 14,142 tonnes worth approximately Rs 465 crore in 2022-23. Thanks to various intervention programmes implemented by the State government, both the average income levels of the Fishermen Cooperative Societies (FCS) and their members have seen significant increases.

"Due to complaints over quality of fishlings, the tendering process commenced only in the second week of June and release of fishlings was taken up during August-September. As a result, the yield



was not upto the mark. With no official statement from the State government, the uncertainty continues this year as well, with fishermen's community growing anxious over their fate," Anand Mudiraj, a fishermen leader from Karimnagar district said. Officials of the Fisheries department informed Telangana Today that though

they have prepared proposals for the tender process, there is no clarity from the State government whether the scheme will be continued or not. "We have no instructions to initiate the tender process till now. If the government intends to continue, we can complete the entire process and commence release of fishlings by July-August," a senior official said.

## AP leaders want Hyderabad to be continued as common capital



Hyderabad: With just one day left for Hyderabad to remain as common capital for Telangana and Andhra Pradesh as per Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, leaders from residuary State are making a re-

newed demand to continue Hyderabad as common capital. "All political parties in Andhra Pradesh should immediately raise the issue of continuing Hyderabad as common capital of Telangana and Andhra

Pradesh beyond 10 years period," former CBI Joint Director VV Lakshmi Narayana said on X. However, his demand was criticized by many on different social media platforms. "Dear sir, it may be impractical as well. High time Andhra Pradesh builds its own capital.. 2014 is 10 years back," Shachindra Rajavaram, an X user said. "It's immature to do that, let's build our own capital," Phani Gosala, another user replied.

Cutting across party lines, leaders have been making demands to continue Hyderabad as common capital for both the States. Andhra Pradesh Congress vice-president Kolanukonda Shivaji had also

demand that Hyderabad should be continued as common capital for another 10 years. Since the parties ruling the State in the last 10 years failed to build a proper capital for Andhra Pradesh, the status of Hyderabad as the joint capital of the two States should be extended for 10 more years, he said in a statement on May 23, according to reports. Former Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams Chairman YV Subba Reddy on February 16 reportedly sought an extension of Hyderabad's status as the shared capital of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana till the former's executive capital shifts to Visakhapatnam from Amaravati.

## Stepwells in OU to be revived

Hyderabad: Three historic stepwells in the Osmania University (OU) campus will soon get a new lease of life with University on Friday announcing collaboration with the Society for Advancement of Human Endeavour (SAHE), a voluntary organization, for their revival. Stepwells at Adikmet, University of Education block, and Mechanical Engineering block will be restored as part of the partnership. Apart from restoration of architectural features, rejuvenation of the stepwells will be taken up.



# Playing to the gallery can be injurious to rail safety

Believe it or not, adhering to the rules can sometimes invite disciplinary action. A few weeks ago, in one of the zonal railways, disciplinary action was sought to be taken against the pilot of a “light engine”, i.e., a locomotive without a trailing load of coaches or wagons, who was tasked with clearing a train stranded in midsection as the locomotive had failed. The case was that the pilot had not spoken to his supervisor over the phone, but it was actually for not having run at a higher speed than 15 km that was permitted in the written authorisation given to him by the station master under the rules for operation in a section that is blocked by another train. Why was he asked to do this? It was to minimise the delay to passenger trains held up due to the disruption. Apparently, punctuality took priority over safety. Fortunately, with the incident gaining media attention, the proposed disciplinary action was withdrawn. Of late, loco pilots and assistant pilots of the Indian Railways (earlier called drivers and assistant drivers), seem to be at the receiving end of an attitude of the management that can best be described as “playing to the gallery”. Let me explain with two more examples. The runaway train

On February 25, 2024, a train formation, consisting of two diesel locomotives, both unmanned, and 53 wagons, that were loaded with stone ballast, with no brake van, rolled out of Kathua station of the Northern Railway unmanned. Because of the continuous falling gradient of the terrain, the “pilotless train” in both locomotives continued its journey for over 70 kilometres before it could be finally stopped. Fortunately, by routing the runaway train through unoccupied lines along the way a major disaster was averted.

Since access to a copy of the inquiry report in this case has been denied under a restrictive clause of the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005, this writer has had to go by the version put out in the media by one of the staff organisations. According to this version, the pilots, who were beyond their normal hours of duty, had requested to be relieved. But, instead of allowing them to proceed to their base station which was nearer, orders were issued to them to stable (park) the train and proceed by a passenger train (which had already arrived at the station) to another station further away from their base station. The insufficient time available to the pilots to ensure proper securing of the stabled load on a station with a gradient seems to have been a critical factor that led to the train rolling away. Yet, the most stringent provision of the discipline and appeal rules of the Railways was invoked in this case to summarily remove the pilots along with the station master and a pointsman from service. The third case is a serious accident, a tragedy wrapped in a mystery. On October 29, 2023, at about 7 p.m., the Visakhapatnam-Rayagada Passenger collided with the rear of the Visakhapatnam-Palasa Passenger, also travelling on the same line, between Kantakapalle and Almunda stations on the



## A heavy-handed approach in dealing with Indian Railway locomotive pilots can be counter productive

Howrah-Chennai line. The collision led to the death of 14 passengers, apart from the pilot and assistant pilot of the rear train and the guard (train manager) of the train in front. Fifty passengers were injured. There was a statutory inquiry after the accident, conducted by the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS), South Central Circle who functions under the Ministry of Civil Aviation. The Preliminary Report of the CRS/SC Circle, which was submitted in November 2023, a little over two weeks after the accident, had concluded that the accident was caused by “errors in train working” — essentially meaning that the station staff and the crew of the train in the rear had not followed the rules of operation on a section with automatic signalling in which some signals were also defective.

Over four months after the accident, in early March 2024 and before the publication of the Final Report of the CRS, the Minister for Railways announced to the media (Eureka!) that an inquiry conducted by the Railway officials a day after the accident had revealed that the attention of the crew of one of the trains involved in the accident was distracted as they were watching a cricket match on a mobile phone. Based on this finding, the Minister added, for good measure, that the Indian Railways would now be installing systems which would be able to detect any distractions and ensure that the pilots and assistant pilots are focused on train working. The Preliminary Report of the CRS, accessed by this writer through the RTI route, nowhere

mentions that the attention of the crew was diverted due to their watching a cricket match on a mobile phone. On the contrary, the CRS has commented that during the 10 minutes preceding the collision, the loco pilot of the rear train had performed nine different operations testifying to his alertness. The Final Report of the CRS, which was released recently, essentially reiterates the conclusion of the Preliminary Report. And now, according to a report published in this daily on May 3, 2024, we are informed that “with no evidence forthcoming later in the mobile data usage to substantiate the allegation that the loco pilots were watching cricket” on mobile phone at the time of the collision, the Railways have recalled the safety circulars issued in this context. This sordid episode — which seems to be a classic case of first formulating a theory and then later looking for evidence to support it — raises a few questions. Troubling questions

If, as it turns out now, no evidence was forthcoming from the mobile call records to substantiate the allegation that the pilots were watching a cricket match, on what basis was an announcement made four months after the CRS submitted his Preliminary Report, by the Union Minister for Railways to that effect? Was there an attempt at the lower levels to plant a red herring? After all, watching a cricket match on a mobile phone can be blamed on a reckless crew, whereas the flouting of rules of train operation in automatic signalling territory by the station staff and the loco crew partially reflects on the administration for

improper training of the staff or ineffective monitoring of train working under abnormal conditions. The episode, unfortunately, also exposes a surprising lack of professionalism in the Railways at various levels in dealing with the investigation of a serious accident. And, what is even worse, it also shows a deplorable lack of sensitivity in handling a matter involving two deceased railway employees. Each case recounted above is vastly different from the other. Yet, there are some common threads running through all of them. All involved loco pilots. Each case was linked to rail safety. Each case showcased an overweening eagerness at various levels of the hierarchy to punish or blame, almost expecting approbation from “the gallery” for a tough, no-nonsense approach. The gallery varies in each case: the immediate superior, the bosses in the Ministry, or the media and the public at large. The cases also call for some serious introspection. With nearly 10% vacancies in the cadre of loco pilots and also ever increasing volumes of freight traffic handled each year, it is a no-brainer that such record-breaking performances are made possible only by the regular breach of the rules governing the duty hours of the running staff to a significant extent. There are also other issues such as continuous night working and inadequate rest at home stations, all of which point to the need for putting in place a mechanism to give focused attention to the major issues concerning loco pilots. Meanwhile, playing to the gallery can adversely impact rail safety.



## OPPO F25 Pro Sees 46.2% Sales Increase Over F23 Pro During Launch Month

OPPO India announced that its F25 Pro—launched on February 29, 2024—recorded a 46.2% increase\* in sales compared to its predecessor, the F23 Pro, during its debut month to make it a front-runner in the sub-INR 25K smartphone market. The OPPO F Series, known for its camera technology and innovative design based on proprietary technologies, has consistently earned consumer appreciation – and now, the success of the F25 Pro has propelled the series past the 10 million user milestone.

OPPO India also launched a digital campaign – #BornToFlaunt – to support the launch of the F25 Pro 5G with actress Shraddha Kapoor, cricketer Shreyas Iyer, and dance troupe Quick Style. The social media film achieved over 150 million views across digital platforms to outperform previous generation F Series campaigns in view rates and ad recall metrics. According to the YouTube Brand Lift Study\*\*, the video demonstrated exceptional reach and engagement with a 11.49% increase in Ad Recall from February 22 to March 15, 2024.

Since its inception, the OPPO F Series has consistently set industry standards: The OPPO F1 Plus in 2016 boasted the world's first 16MP selfie camera, the F3 Plus in 2017 introduced dual front snappers, the F7 in 2018 featured a 25MP AI-powered selfie shooter, the F11 Pro in 2019 showcased a unique triple-colour design, while in 2021, the F19 introduced OPPO's proprietary glow design in a striking gold color. The F21 Pro and F21s Pro, launched in 2022, showcased a fibreglass leather design and a micro-lens camera. The OPPO F25 Pro continues this tradition of innovation with its segment-first AI Smart Image Matting, 4K video recording on both front and rear cameras, ultra-slim 7.54mm profile, OPPO's proprietary glow design, advanced 64MP triple-camera system, and IP65 rating. The device is available at mainline retail outlets, Amazon, Flipkart, and the OPPO e-store at INR 23,999.

\* According to OPPO internal data

\*\* Brand Lift Study is a tool used to measure the effectiveness of digital marketing campaigns by evaluating changes in consumer perception and behaviour.



## \*Bharatiya Janata Party Narsapur Assembly Leader Valdass Arvind Goud\*



\* Medak Assembly Convener Santosh Goud and Yuva Morcha Sangareddy district president Praveen, who participated in the BJP dharna event at Indira Park at

Indira Park\*\*\*\*Telangana Rashtra BJP leaders Arvind Waldas\* "Medak district youth Morcha leaders Pothuraju Anil, Uday Goud

Garu Bundi Venu Goud, Kiran Garu, Nagaraj Goud, and young Morcha activists participated.

## Elaborate arrangements to be taken up for smooth conduct of Bakrid: Hyderabad CP

Hyderabad: Elaborate arrangements for the smooth conduct of the upcoming Bakrid festival in June will be taken-up in Hyderabad, Police Commissioner, K Sreenivasa Reddy on Friday said. In a co-ordination meeting with various departments including GHMC, Animal Husbandry, RTA and Cyberabad and Rachakonda Police Commissionerates on Friday, the Commissioner said that checkpoints will be established in and around Hyderabad City Commissionerate to prevent illegal carriage of cattle (without Veterinary Doctor Certificate to transport the Cattle and fit for slaughter). Vehicles illegally carrying cattle should be seized and immediately sent to the cattle holding points or Goshala prescribed by GHMC. The public should not take the law into their hands regarding stopping and checking vehicles carrying cattle, he said. He further requested Animal Husbandry department and GHMC to ensure availability of veterinarians at checkpoints round the clock and depute dog catching squads to move in localities and catch stray dogs before Bakrid. The Commissioner also highlighted the need to supply covers to households for disposal of carcass, special teams for garbage and carcass collection on the day of Bakrid etc.



# In a Resounding Display of Intellectual Prowess, DPS Nacharam Celebrates the Stupendous Success of its IGCSE and A-Level Candidates



In a triumphant symphony of erudition, Delhi Public School, Nacharam, is elated to exalt the preeminent victors of the 3rd Batch of IGCSE where Master Shivank secured 7A Stars at IGCSE, and Pankhuri secured 6 A Stars, emerging as the School Toppers. The institution is proud to announce the Stupendous Results of the IGCSE March 2024 Series, which boasts a Centum Pass Rate of 100%. A Total of 40 students appeared for this March 2024 IGCSE Series, offering 17 subjects with different combinations. The highlights include:

- 20 students were eligible for the ICE Award

- 13 Students received the ICE Award with Distinction

- 4 Students received the ICE Award with Merit

- 3 Students received the ICE Award with Pass

The subject toppers at IGCSE include Pankhuri Rai (English, Math, Global Perspectives, Computer Science), Shivank Tiwari (Math, ICT, Economics, Hindi), Dhriti and Abhitesh (Physics), Abhitesh (Chemistry), Sai Yashasree Pula (Biology, Spanish), and Om Koduru (EVM). In the A-Level examinations, the institution is delighted to celebrate the exceptional achievements

of its first batch, with Bhavana Y securing 5 A Stars and Madhulika securing 4 A Stars across the major core subjects. The management of Delhi Public School, Nacharam, headed by the cognizant Chairman, Malka Komaraiah, and the visionary CEO and Director, Yashasvi Malka, along with the National Awardee Sr. Prin-

icipal, Sunitha Rao, and the esteemed Jr. Principal, M.F. Shanti Anthony, have all played a pivotal role in nurturing an environment conducive to intellectual flourishing. The institution extends its profound gratitude to the Academic Coordinators and erudite teachers, whose indefatigable commitment to fostering aca-

ademic excellence has been instrumental in the students' triumphant success. As we herald the triumph of these erudite luminaries, their ascent to the zenith of academic accomplishment serves as an inspiration to all aspirants, igniting the flames of ambition and fortitude in the crucible of scholarly pursuit.

## RBI shifts 100 tonnes of gold from vaults in UK to India

New Delhi: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has shifted around 100 tonnes of its gold kept in bank vaults in the UK to its own vaults in India in a move aimed at saving storage costs, according to media reports. This is the first time since 1991 that India has undertaken such a large-scale overseas transfer of gold reserves. Economist Sanjeev Sanyal, a member of the PM's Economic Advisory Council, said, "While no one was watching, RBI has shifted 100 tonnes of its gold reserves back to India from the UK." "Most countries keep their gold in the vaults of

the Bank of England or some such location (and pay a fee for the privilege). India will now hold most of its gold in its own vaults. We have come a long way since we had to ship out gold overnight in 1991 in the midst of a crisis," he added.

"For those of my generation, the shipping out of gold in 1990-91 was a moment of failure that we will never forget. This is why this shipping back of gold has a special meaning," he pointed out. In 1991, when the country was in the grip of a severe foreign crisis with no money to pay for essential imports, the Chandra Shekhar govern-

ment pledged gold to raise funds. The RBI then pledged 46.91 tonnes of gold with the Bank of England and the Bank of Japan, to secure \$400 million. More than half of the RBI's gold reserves are held overseas in secure custody with the Bank of England and the Bank of International Settlements, while approximately a third is stored in the RBI's vaults in Nagpur and Mumbai. The central bank held 822.10 tonnes of gold as part of its foreign exchange reserves as of March 31, 2024, an increase from the 794.63 tonnes held at the same time last year, according to the annual data released by the RBI.



# What is Jagannath Temple's Ratna Bhandar 'missing keys' controversy?

The story so far: Eager to stop Naveen Patnaik from winning a historic sixth term in Odisha, the BJP has launched sharp attack with the State's most prominent religious controversy — the missing keys of Jagannath temple's 'Ratna Bhandar.' Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP has accused Patnaik's government of 'sending the keys to Tamil Nadu' — an indirect dig at Patnaik's close aide V.K. Pandian. Addressing a public meeting in Cuttack on May 20, Mr. Modi said, "Even Jagannath Mandir is not safe under BJD rule. For the past six years, the keys of Shri Jagannatha's 'Ratna Bhandar' has been missing. Leaders of BJD are involved in this conspiracy." Taking a dig at Mr. Pandian, a Tamil Nadu-born former bureaucrat, he claimed that "there were discussions as to how the keys had gone to Tamil Nadu," vowing to probe this if the BJP is voted to power. The 'missing keys' issue has also been raised by other BJP leaders like Union Ministers Amit Shah, Smriti Irani and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, echoing Mr. Modi's accusation against Mr. Pandian. Odisha is currently polling in four phases simultaneously for 147 Assembly seats and 21 Lok Sabha seats. Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Jagannath temple during a roadshow supporting BJP candidate from the Puri constituency, Sambit Patra, for the Lok Sabha polls, in Puri on May 20, 2024,

Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Jagannath temple during a roadshow supporting BJP candidate from the Puri constituency, Sambit Patra, for the Lok Sabha polls, in Puri on May 20, 2024. | Photo Credit: ANI. Mr. Pandian retorted in a statement to PTI on May 21. "The prime minister should find out where the keys have gone if he has so much knowledge. He has so many authorities under him, he would be having some knowledge. He can enlighten the people of Odisha." Here's a look at the six-year controversy and why the BJP is raking it up again.

What is the 'Ratna Bhandar'?

The gold and jewels offered by devotees to the deities at the Puri Jagannath temple — Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra — is stored in the Ratna Bhandar, located adjacent to the Jagamohan (prayer hall) at the north side of the temple. As per the Orissa Review, published by the State government, the Jagannath Temple Act, 1952 was passed to allow the State government to have a bigger say in the management, administration and governance of the temple. Under this law, a list of the ornaments and gold offered to the deities was prepared and preserved in the Record Room of the Puri collectorate. The Ratna Bhandar has two chambers: the 'Bhitar Bhandar' (Inner Treasury) and 'Bahar Bhandar' (Outer Treasury). As per the last inventory in 1978, the Bahar Bhandar stores 87 pieces of gold ornaments, some with precious stones, and 62 pieces of silver items. The Bhitar Bhandar has 367 gold items including ornaments studded with precious stones, plates of gold, pearls, diamonds, corals and other precious stones and 231 items of silver articles. The safety



of the Ratna Bhandar vests with the Temple's Managing Committee, which is headed by titular 'King of Puri' Dibyasingha Deb (Chairman), the Chief Administrator (sn IAS-level officer) and other members appointed or nominated by the State government.

The items in the Bhitar Bhandar are never used and are stored under a double lock, sealed by the Managing Committee, and the keys are generally deposited by the temple administration in the Government treasury. The locks may be opened only if ordered by the State government. However, items used for special occasions are stored under double lock in the Bahar Bhandar, which may be opened in the presence of temple officials and the Chief administrator from time to time. Items used daily are locked and under the protection of the Bhandar Mekap. The last two types of ornaments stored in the outer treasury are compared and verified periodically — at least once every six months. Initially, the Puri royal family, the temple committee and the Puri collectorate had copies of the keys to the Ratna Bhandar. In 1963, after losing a case challenging the State's ownership of the temple, the royal family surrendered its copy to the State treasury. However, the other two copies remained with the temple committee and the Puri collectorate.

When was the Bhitar Bhandar last opened?

The last time the Bhitar Bhandar was opened for taking stock of the inventory was in 1978, Law Minister Pratap Jena said during the 2018 Budget session of the Odisha Assembly. As per the inventory, gold items weighing 4364 bhari (50 kilograms) and 14,878 bhari (173 kilograms) of silver were stored in the inner treasury, apart from a sizeable amount of gold ornaments used regularly in temple rituals. It was once again opened in 1985 for main-

tenance work, but no inventory was conducted. Since then, the temple administration has tried to open the inner treasury twice but stopped short, fearing that the sentiments of devotees may be hurt.

The last such attempt was made on April 4, 2018, when the temple administration wanted to open the inner treasury for inspection, but was unable to do so as the keys to the room could not be found. The 16-member team, which included three members of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), were forced to inspect the inner chamber from outside using search lights through a grill gate. The inspection was done as per the orders of the Orissa High Court, which was monitoring temple repairs undertaken by the ASI since 2016, and a report was submitted to the High Court in a sealed cover.

What happened after the 'missing keys' row broke out?

The news first broke on June 1, 2018, when the Puri District Collector Arvind Agarwal, who was in-charge of the keys to the inner chamber, revealed at the temple managing committee meeting that there was no information confirming the availability of the keys. Amid an uproar from citizens, devotees and the Opposition (BJP and Congress), the Naveen Patnaik administration ordered a judicial inquiry into the issue on June 5, 2018. The inquiry commission, headed by retired High Court judge Justice Raghuraj Das, submitted its 324-page report to the State government in November that year. As pressure mounted on the State government, the temple's chief administrator P.K. Jena was shunted out. Within ten days of investigation, on June 13, the Puri district administration stumbled upon a brown sealed envelope allegedly containing the duplicate keys to the Bhitar Bhandar inside a locker in the district record room. These keys were deposited with the district treasury by Mr.

Agarwal prior to his transfer in August that year.

However, the Opposition and even the Puri Shankaracharya Swami Nischalananda Saraswati remained critical of the BJD government, blaming it for laxity, and demanded strict action against the guilty officials. Senior BJP leader Biswabhusan Harichandan (now the Governor of Chhattisgarh) claimed that there had been no record of the existence of duplicate keys to the inner chambers, demanding a definite answer from the Chief Minister in the Assembly, as reported by The Sunday Guardian on September 1, 2018. Raising concerns about the contents of the Bhitar Bhandar, Mr. Harichandan said, "Opening the treasury and preparing a fresh inventory should be the top priority of the State government." Odisha Congress veteran Niranjan Patnaik too voiced the same demand.

What is current status of the missing keys probe?

In April 2023, Dilip Kumar Baral, a Puri resident, filed a PIL in the Orissa High Court seeking the tabling of the judicial committee's report on the missing keys probe in the State Assembly. According to Mr. Baral, the State government has reportedly spent around ₹23 lakh for the Commission of Inquiry, but had kept the findings secret from the public. The report which was submitted to the State government in 2018 is yet to be revealed. Later that year, the Jagannath Temple Managing Committee adopted a resolution to open the Ratna Bhandar on August 4, allowing an ASI team to survey the chamber's contents. However, the State government, which has the final say in opening the Bhitar Bhandar, is yet to take a call. The Odisha High Court has also adjourned the hearing in the case, allowing the State government additional time to file an update on the status on the probe.



# The controversy over eucalyptus planting in Kerala | Explained

The story so far: The Kerala government issued an order allowing the Kerala Forest Development Corporation (KFDC) to plant eucalyptus trees for its financial sustenance in 2024-2025. Environmentalists soon protested the decision saying the move would adversely affect forests and heighten human-animal conflicts in future. Subsequently, the head of the Forest Force submitted a report to the State Forest Minister saying it hadn't permitted the planting of eucalyptus trees inside forests. On May 20, the government amended its order to limit permission to only cut exotic tree species from lands in the KFDC's control.

What are KFDC and its plantations?

The KFDC was established on January 24, 1975, as part of a dynamic production forestry enterprise. According to the KFDC website, the corporation has around 7,000 hectares (ha) of plantations. The plantation working circle includes the following species: *Eucalyptus grandis*, *Acacia auriculiformis*, *Acacia mangium*, *Acacia crassiparva*, *Acacia pycnantha* (also known as wattle), *Alnus nepalensis*, *Casuarina equisetifolia*, and *Pinus patula*. Eucalyptus plantations have a rotation age of nine years; *Acacia auriculiformis* trees, 18 years; and *Acacia mangium*, seven years. At the end of each cycle, plantations approved by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate change are felled. Clear-felled plantations are planted with species listed in a management plan. Before planting, experts check for soil quality and consult with the Kerala Forest Research Institute. As of this month, the KFDC website also said plantations of exotic species, including eucalyptus, would be converted to those of indigenous species once exotic flora has been felled "so as to be more ecologically and environmentally friendly".

What was the issue with the order?

In 2021, the State government had published an eco-restoration policy. Among other things, it sought to address what it called the "proliferation of invasive species that are not suitable for our environment" and the resulting "depletion of natural forests". Such depletion, according to the policy, was in turn forcing wild animals to move to human-occupied land in search of food and thus increasing the prevalence of human-wildlife conflict. For example, a recent study by the Kerala State Forest Protective Staff Organisation — an association of frontline forest officers — found replacing exotic plants in forested areas with the corresponding natural species could help ensure food for wild elephants at Chinnakkal in Munnar. The Chinnakkal landscape is prime elephant habitat in the Munnar forest division, and is filled with eucalyptus trees. The policy also acknowledged that invasive species of plants as well as animals had rendered "serious damage to natural habitats and ecosystems" and that "eradicating such invasive species ... is of high priority." Environmental activists alleged following the State's order — permitting the KFDC to plant eucalyptus trees — contravened the

policy's aspirations and undermined efforts to beat back invasive species and mitigate human-animal conflicts.

What is eco-restoration?

Kerala has around 27,000 ha under industrial plantations. Against the backdrop of climate change and the promise researchers have said trees offer to mitigate against its worsening, the Kerala government had decided to phase out plantations of eucalyptus, acacia, wattle, and pine by 2024 and replace them with natural forests. This process is called eco-restoration. Many of these areas are currently overwhelmed with invasive species. For example, in 2019, in the Marayoor Sandal Division in Idukki, the forest department initiated a project supported by the UNDP, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority. Some 108 hectares of ex-



otic species were removed to allow natural grasses to flourish. The result: active

water streams in the area were restored after a 30-year gap.

## Rising 'heat stress' in six metros as humidity up, nights warmer: Study

India's megacities of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Hyderabad are experiencing worsening "heat stress" due to a trend of rising relative humidity over the past two decades, according to a study by Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment. Besides rising relative humidity, these cities are also experiencing warmer nights as land surface temperatures are not falling at the same rate as a decade ago, said the analysis, blaming this on the "urban heat island" effect. "Urban heat island" effect refers to the trapping of heat due to an increase in built-up area, declining green cover, congestion, heat absorption by urban structures, and heat generated by human activities. This causes the heart of megacities to be much warmer, especially at night, than its outskirts and neighbouring towns. "Hot nights are as dangerous as mid-day peak temperatures. People get little chance to recover from day-time heat if temperatures remain high overnight," said Avikal Somvanshi, senior programme manager, Urban Lab, CSE. Heat index, heatwave, heat stress, high heat, delhi heat stroke, delhi humidity, humidity protection, sun-stroke, IMD, Delhi roads, Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, hyderabad, indian express news Heat index is a measure of discomfort felt due to high heat and humidity. The combination of rising air and land surface temperatures and high relative humidity is increasing the heat index and heat stress in these cities, the study said. Heat index is a measure of discomfort felt due to high heat and humidity.

The CSE study comes at a time when the country is seeing prolonged heatwaves this summer. Odisha recorded 18 heatwave days, while West Bengal recorded 16 in



April. A long heatwave is currently prevailing over Rajasthan and parts of Haryana and Delhi. The India Meteorological Department has forecast no respite for at least three more days. With the exception of Bengaluru, all the other metros have seen a 5-10 per cent rise in average relative humidity during summer, the study noted. According to data, in the last decade, summers in Hyderabad were 10 per cent more humid on an average — the highest among all metros. In Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai, humidity increased by 8 per cent, 7 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively. "The combination of high heat and humidity can compromise the human body's main cool-

ing mechanism: sweating. The evaporation of sweat from skin cools our bodies, but higher humidity levels limit this natural cooling," the study said. The combination of these two factors makes people sick and, in some cases, can also prove fatal, even at lower ambient temperatures, it added. The analysis stated that in Delhi, there was a direct correlation between increase in built-up area and increase in urban heat stress. "Increase in green cover shows impact on daytime temperatures but has no impact on nighttime temperature and increasing heat index in the city," the analysis said. Delhi's built-up area increased from 31.4 per cent in 2003 to 38.2 per cent in 2022,



# Farm loan waivers and elections: How do they affect farmers and governments?

As the Lok Sabha seats in India's largest farming belt — Haryana and Uttar Pradesh — go to the polls, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi has once again promised to waive off farmer debts if the Congress-led coalition is voted to power. The last pan-India farm loan waiver was done by the UPA government in 2008 in the form of a ₹60,000 crore economic package. Incidentally, the waiver came a year ahead of the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, in which the UPA was re-elected with a bigger majority. Addressing an election rally in Haryana's Charkhi Dadri on May 22, Mr. Gandhi promised to waive farmers' debts and guarantee them Minimum Support Price (MSP) for their crops. Claiming that Prime Minister Narendra Modi felt farm loan waivers would "spoil the farmers," he vowed, "We are going to 'spoil the farmers' when we return to power and waive their debts, not just once but again and again.... We will form a commission and every time farmers need a debt waiver, the panel would let us know and we will do that." The Congress has released five sets of 'guarantees' in which it promises farmers a Standing Loan Waiver Commission to systematically evaluate and recommend debt waivers, apart from the immediate loan waiver which Mr. Gandhi has promised. Farmers, who have been protesting in various States (especially at Delhi's borders) since February, have been asking for an immediate farm loan waiver and legal guarantee for MSP for all crops procured by the Centre. As of 2022, outstanding agricultural debt stood at ₹18.5 lakh crores.

How do farm loan waivers work?

Scheduled banks offer loans to individual farmers or group of farmers for agricultural or allied activities such as dairy, fishery, animal husbandry, poultry, bee-keeping and sericulture. Short-term (up to 18 months) loans are offered for raising crops during two seasons — Kharif and Rabi, while medium (more than 18 months up to 5 years) and long-term (beyond 5 years) loans are offered for purchasing agricultural machinery, irrigation and other developmental activities. Loans are also available for pre-harvest and post-harvest activities such as weeding, harvesting, sorting, and transporting farm produce. Most loans have a repayment period in installments up to five years, and interest rates vary depending on the nature of loans and the issuing banks. A good harvest bodes well for both the farmers and the banks as installments get paid on time. However, in case of a poor monsoon or natural calamities, farmers may be unable to repay loans on time. As seasons go by, the loans get compounded, adding to the distress of farmers, coupled with strain from crop loss and other damages. In such situations, the Centre or State government steps in, offering a waiver of penal interest or loan interest, rescheduling loans or a full waiver of outstanding farm loans. The liability of repayment to the banks is transferred to the government. Loan waivers are usually selective, explains Businessline. It depends on loan types (small, medium or long-term), the categories of farmers or loan sources. The waivers are introduced via a new scheme by the government, making a bud-

getary allowance for absorbing the debts.

Why do farmers need a waiver now?

"Farmers are indebted hence they are asking for waivers. We have seen protests due to it and it is during elections when everyone makes their claims," says Dr. Dipa Sinha, Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Studies at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi. Speaking to The Hindu about farmer distress at large, she adds, "Farm distress is due to many reasons and farmers have made other demands too, like the legal guarantee for MSP." Image for representation Farmers are plagued by larger issues like disputed land holdings, low ground-water reserves, bad soil quality, rising costs of farming inputs (seeds, fertilizers, water, fuel, electricity) and low crop productivity. Due to a lack of assured remuneration for harvest, farmers are forced to borrow funds to tide through expenses, Businessline explains. The lenders are not always banks, as several small farmers do not have access to credit, leading to a dependence on private lenders (land owners or rich farmers), who levy exorbitant interest rates on such loans. This is why these indebted farmers depend on such loan waivers. "Waiver is not the long-term solution to indebtedness. It is about the larger reforms in agriculture so that farmers don't end up in a situation where they need a waiver. If you don't do that (reform) and farmers end up in such a situation, then you are forced to bail them out," explains Dr. Sinha. Terming such waivers as inevitable, Dr. Sinha draws a parallel, "If you have a fever, you have to give paracetamol (medicine). You cannot avoid it. However, you should take necessary steps, so that you don't get the fever again."

When were farm loans last waived?

Despite repeated demands from farmers for a pan-India loan waiver, the Modi government has refused to budge, often passing the buck to State governments. According to a study by State Bank of India (SBI), Andhra Pradesh and Telangana implemented a loan waiver in 2014, followed by Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra in 2017, Karnataka, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 2018 and lastly, Jharkhand and Maharashtra again in 2020. The total amount of debt waived off over these ten instances is ₹2.52 lakh crores. Apart from these, one of the largest loan waivers in Tamil Nadu was announced by the AIADMK government in February 2021. Announcing a ₹12,110 crore-scheme ahead of the State elections in April that year, CM E. Palaniswami said outstanding short-term crop loans of all farmers will be waived off. While the AIADMK was trounced in the state elections, its successor - the DMK government led by M.K. Stalin implemented it. The first pan-India loan waiver was done in the 1990-91 Budget when the V.P. Singh-led National Front Government was in power. Introducing the Agricultural and Rural Debt Relief Scheme (ARDRS), then-Finance Minister Madhu Dandavate stated that the National Front government would provide relief to farmers for up to ₹10,000 on select loans. As on October 2, 1989, the loans availed by farmers from cooperative banks and re-



gional rural banks were eligible for relief under the ARDRS scheme, which was allotted ₹1000 crores. The scheme came to a close on March 31, 1991 and was not renewed. File photo: Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh along with UPA Chairperson and Congress President, Sonia Gandhi being greeted by the farmers from Punjab who met them to thank the UPA Government for waiving off their loans, watched by Punjab Congress Chief, Rajinder Kaur Bhattal (ext L) in New Delhi on February 25, 2008. File photo: Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh along with UPA Chairperson and Congress President, Sonia Gandhi being greeted by the farmers from Punjab who met them to thank the UPA Government for waiving off their loans, watched by Punjab Congress Chief, Rajinder Kaur Bhattal (ext L) in New Delhi on February 25, 2008 | Photo Credit: S. Subramaniam. The second such instance of a pan-India loan waiver was announced by then-Finance Minister P Chidambaram during his 2008-09 Budget Speech. Under the Agricultural Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme (ADWDRS), 2008, short-term and investment loans disbursed to marginal, small and other farmers by scheduled commercial banks, regional rural banks, cooperative credit institutions and local area banks up to March 31, 2007 and overdue as on December 31, 2007, and remaining unpaid until February 29, 2008 were eligible for relief or waiver. With an allocation of ₹60,000 crores, the entire 'eligible amount' was waived off for marginal and small farmers (< 2 hectares of land). In case of 'other farmers' (> 2 hectares of land), a one-time settlement (OTS) of 25% of the eligible amount was offered as a rebate, if the farmer pays the remaining 75% of the balance. The rebate would be 25% of the loan amount or ₹25,000, whichever was higher, subject to the balance payment condition. The OTS relief was estimated to cost ₹10,000 crore for the Centre, while the debt waiver was pegged at ₹52,000 crores.

What are effects of such waivers?

According to a NABARD report, the 1990 ARDR scheme cost the Central government ₹7825 crores. States were forced

to take additional loans from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to cover their share of the loan waivers and 3.2 crore farmers (53% of the borrowers) were beneficiaries of the scheme. This totalled to one-third of the outstanding farm loans, which were wiped off. Similarly, the 2008 ADWDR scheme cost the government ₹52,000 crores and over 2.9 crore farmers benefited from the scheme. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report concluded that the scheme had favoured several ineligible farmers and a large number of deserving small and marginal farmers were left out during its implementation. The CAG report found that no records were maintained of farmers' applications accepted or rejected by lending institutions, or how many fresh loans were issued due to debt waiver/relief. A NABARD study on the impact of farm loan waivers from 1987 to 2020, found that farm loan waivers were announced without any development agendas or ideologies (be it a right-wing or left-wing government), and there was no link between waivers and drought intensities. Till 2016, waivers were found to be announced by State governments who could fiscally afford it. After 2016, high fiscal debt did not deter such announcements, while the timings of such announcements were found to be crucial. Any such announcements closer to elections reaped greater gains for the party in power. Of the 21 State governments which announced waivers soon before State polls, only four lost. One of best examples is the 2016 loan waiver announced by the AIADMK government. After being re-elected for a consecutive term, it wrote off loans for around 12.02 lakh small and marginal farmers, owning land up to 5 acres, to the tune of about ₹5,320 crores. However, an RBI study conducted on loans disbursed between 2015 and 2017 revealed that banks were favoured to give loans to non-beneficiaries (farmers owning over 5 acres) as they were more likely to make timely repayments. Loans sought by the farmers availing the waivers also went up in the next year, noted the study, indicating at less liabilities on the farmers and increased borrowing ability. A more recent SBI study (2022) found t



# Why did the Supreme Court set aside the first EVM-based election in India? | Explained

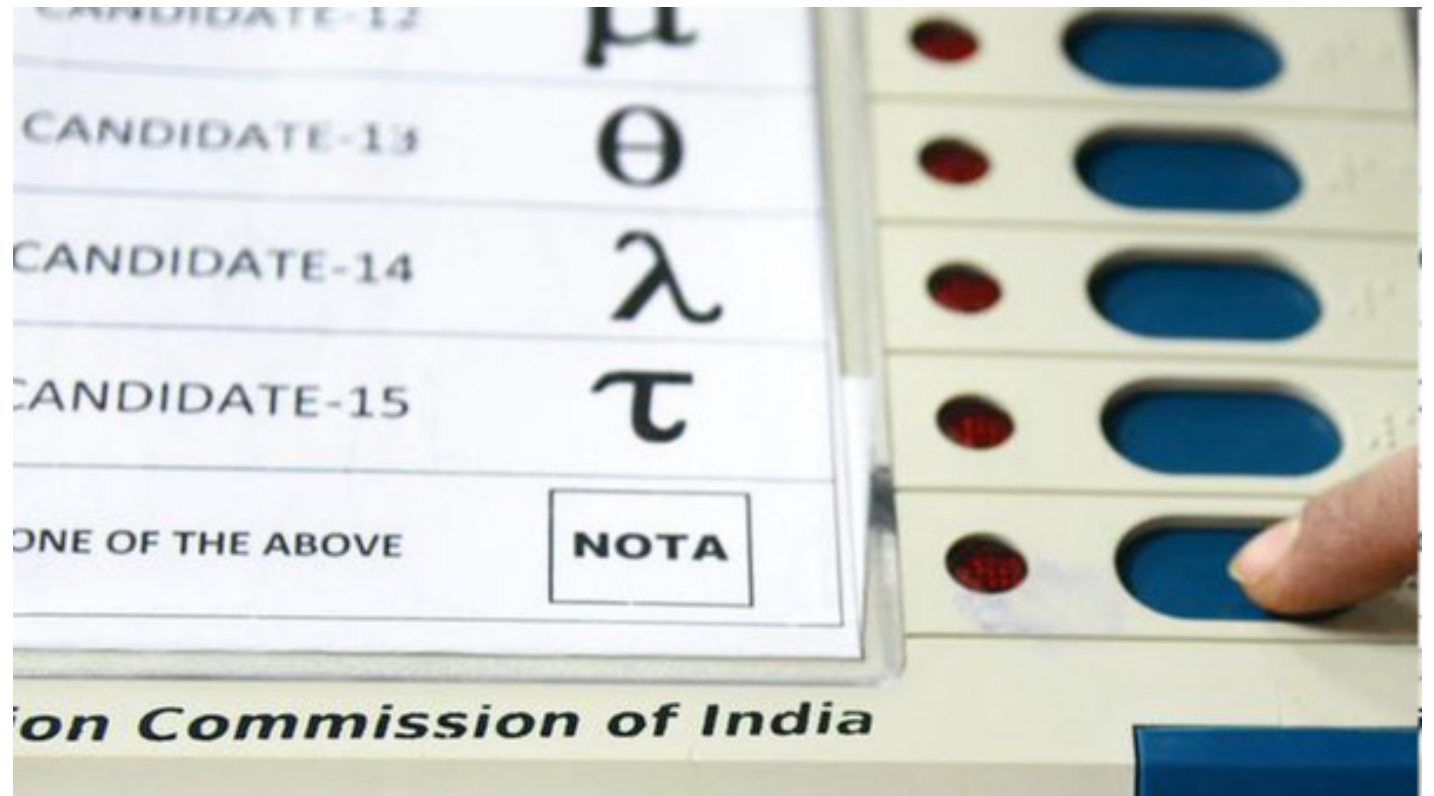
The story so far: On May 19, 1982, the Election Commission of India (ECI) introduced Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in the Paravur Assembly constituency in Kerala. The machines were used in 50 out of 84 polling stations in the constituency. Though six contenders were in the fray, the principal competition was between A.C. Jose of Congress and N. Sivan Pillai of the Communist Party of India. The results were announced on May 20, 1982, when Pillai was declared elected by securing 30,450 votes (of which 11,268 were cast manually and 19,182 were cast using machines) as against 30,327 votes secured by Jose. Since the margin of victory was just 123 votes, Jose filed an election petition in the Kerala High Court questioning the use of the EVMs. The High Court upheld the ECI's decision to use EVMs and refused to interfere with the results. However, when the matter was taken on appeal to the Supreme Court, a three-judge Bench comprising Justices Syed Murtaza Fazal Ali, A. Varadarajan and Ranganath Misra declared the use of EVMs as unauthorised and ordered re-polling in the 50 polling stations through ballot paper.

Why did the Supreme Court do so?

The Supreme Court did so because the Representation of the People Act, 1951, as it stood then, did not contain a provision empowering the ECI to use EVMs. Further, the Centre too had specifically refused to grant sanction for the use of the machines to cast votes. Yet, the ECI had gone ahead and published a notification in the Kerala Gazette on May 13, 1982, for the use of the machines. Such a notification was issued in purported exercise of the powers conferred on the ECI under Article 324 of the Constitution. Appearing on behalf of Pillai, Senior Counsel Ram Jethmalani had argued before the Supreme Court that Article 324 of the Constitution gives full powers to the ECI in matters of conduct of elections to the Parliament and State legislatures. He had contended that the plenary powers, flowing directly from the Constitution, would prevail over any Act passed by the Parliament or statutory rules made thereunder. Therefore, the ECI was fully empowered to decide upon the manner of voting, he asserted. However, authoring the judgement for the Bench, Justice Ali wrote: "This is a very attractive argument, but on a closer scrutiny and deeper deliberation on this aspect of the matter, it is not possible to read into Article 324 such a wide and uncanalised power which is entrusted to the Commission as Mr. Jethmalani would have us believe."

'ECI cannot take up legislative activity'

The Bench held that Article 324 must be read in harmony with, and not in isolation of, Articles 325 to 329 of the Constitution. "The Commission in the garb of passing orders for regulating the conduct of elections cannot take upon itself a purely legislative activity which has been reserved under the scheme of the Constitution only to the Parliament and the State legislatures. By no standards can it be said that the Commission is a third chamber in the leg-



islative process within the scheme of the Constitution. Merely being a creature of the Constitution will not give it plenary and absolute power to legislate as it likes without reference to the law enacted by the legislatures," the Bench said. Taking a cue from Justice Krishna Iyer's words in *Mohinder Singh Gill versus Chief Election Commissioner* (1978), the three-judge Bench concluded that Article 324 would operate only in areas left unoccupied by legislation even if the widest possible connotation was given to the language employed in the Article.

'An Election Commissioner wedded to a particular ideology can cause political havoc'

The Bench went on to write: "Indeed if we were to accept the contention of the respondent, it would convert the Commission into an absolute despot in the field of election so as to give directions regarding the mode and manner of elections by-passing the provisions of the Act and the Rules purporting to exercise powers under cover of Article 324. If the Commission is armed with such unlimited and arbitrary powers and if it ever happens that the person manning the Commission shares or is wedded to a particular ideology, he could by giving odd directions cause political havoc or bring about a constitutional crisis, setting at naught the integrity and independence of the electoral process, so important and indispensable to the democratic system."

It concluded that the Kerala High Court had fallen into a fallacy by accepting the argument that the ECI's decision to use EVMs in the 50 polling stations was intended to operate in an uncovered field. Stating that the 1951 Act as well as the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 clearly prescribe ballot paper alone as the method

of voting, the apex court said: "When the Act and the Rules prescribe a particular method of voting, the Commission could not innovate a new method and contend that use of the mechanical process was not covered by the existing law and therefore did not come in conflict with the law in the field."

Will the term 'ballot' include EVMs?

Also examining whether the term 'ballot' would include EVMs too, the Supreme Court said: "It may be mentioned here that word 'ballot' has been derived from the word 'ballota' which existed at a time when there was no question of any system of a voting machine. Even in 1951 when the Act was passed or the Rules made, the system of voting by machine was not in vogue in this country. In these circumstances, we are constrained to hold that the word 'ballot' in its strict sense would not include voting by the use of voting machines." Watch | Decoding the EVM debate: the verdict delivered on March 5, 1984, the court had also expressed its displeasure over the Centre

having taken a neutral stand before the judicial forum despite having refused sanction for the use of EVMs in 1982. "It is rather unfortunate that the Union of India which is a party to this case has taken a very neutral stand by neither supporting nor opposing the direction given by the Commission," the Bench wrote. Though Mr. Jethmalani had also listed out the benefits of EVMs before the Bench, the latter pointed out that Senior Counsel K.K. Venugopal, representing the appellant Jose, had highlighted equal number of defects in the use of machines for polling. The judges refrained from making any comments either on the advantages or disadvantages of EVMs and left it to the legislature to give a legal sanction to the use of the machines for polling. It was pursuant to this judgement that the 1951 Act was amended permitting the use of EVMs. In the meantime, the repolling held in the 50 polling stations in Paravur Assembly constituency in Kerala on May 21, 1984, led to a reversal of fortunes with the appellant Jose winning the election.

## Giant dumbbell shaped testis tumor removed from man at AINU

Hyderabad: Surgeons at Asian Institute of Nephrology and Urology (AINU), Banjara Hills, on Tuesday announced successful removal of a rare, giant dumbbell-shaped testis tumor measuring over 40 cm from a 39-year-old patient from Kadapa. The complex surgery was challenging as the patient had undergone kidney transplantation about a year ago and was on high-dose of immunosuppressants and powerful steroids. Recently, he noticed swelling in his left testis, which he initially dismissed as a simple hydrocele. However, the swelling rapidly grew. Tests revealed a large tumor that extended from the left testis into the abdomen, surpassing the belly button. Abnormally high levels of Beta HCG, a testis tumor marker, elevated to more than 20 times the normal value, were also found. However, a PET scan showed no signs of tumor spread to other parts of the body.