

## More Congress promises broken as State government shelves Rythu Bandhu, Rythu Bharosa

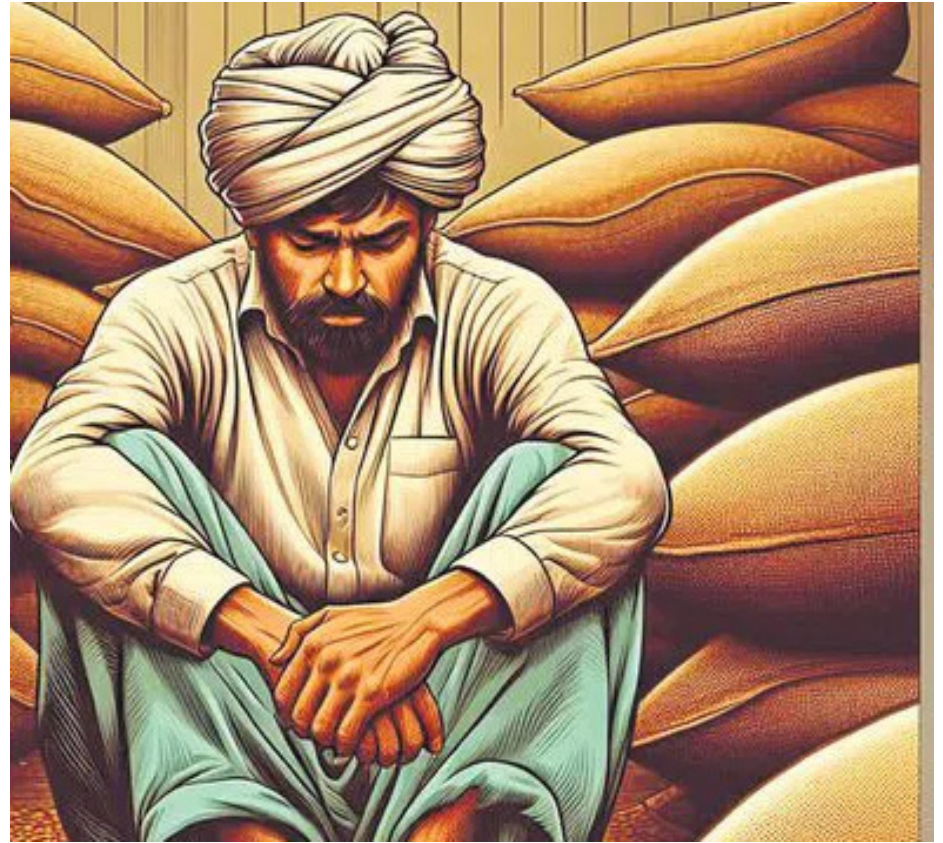
Hyderabad: The State government has announced that the Rythu Bandhu scheme, which has been a crucial support system for farmers, will not be implemented for the current Kharif season. The Rythu Bharosa programme has already been put on hold. This decision comes as a significant blow to over 70 lakh farmers who have been eagerly checking their bank accounts daily, expecting the remittance of the Rythu Bandhu assistance for the Vanakalam (Kharif season).

Agriculture Minister Tummala Nageswara Rao made the announcement on Saturday, stating that the cabinet sub-committee report on the implementation of the Rythu Bandhu scheme was yet to be received. "Once the report is tabled, the government will consider its implementation from the next Rabi season," he told reporters.

The Rythu Bandhu scheme has been a lifeline for farmers, providing much-needed financial assistance for their agricultural investments. The delay in its implementation has left many farmers in a state of uncertainty and financial strain. This development has sparked concerns among the farming community, who are now left to meet their credit needs for the Kharif sea-

son without the expected support from the government.

Former Minister and senior BRS MLA T Harish Rao came down heavily on the Congress government for repeatedly breaking promises made to farmers, stating that the Agriculture Minister had very calmly and without remorse gave a rude shock to farmers by announcing that there would be no financial input assistance for farmers this Kharif season. Criticising Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy's misplaced priorities, he questioned how the Chief Minister was going ahead with the Rs. 1.5 lakh crore Musi project without any qualms over denying farmers a mere Rs. 15,000 per acre, which he himself had promised during the elections. The government had faltered in implementing the crop loan waiver and also had not implemented the Rs. 500 bonus per quintal of paddy apart from forgetting the Rs. 12,000 promised to farm workers, thus breaking all promises made to farmers, he said, urging the public to question the Congress government at every turn. "We are calling on everyone to hold the Congress government accountable wherever possible," he said, adding that Revanth Reddy had betrayed farmers, for which he should be bowing his head in shame.



## Role of Letters of Recommendation in U.S. University admissions



Hyderabad: We continue our series on essential components of the graduate-level applications to U.S. universities. Last week, we discussed the importance and the framework of the personal statement in highlighting each applicant's unique story. This week we continue our discussion on another component of the graduate application packet – letters of recom-

mendation.

Letters of recommendation (LORs), also known as reference letters in the Indian context, provide a fresh, independent evaluation of the applicant from someone who has observed the student in academic and/or professional contexts. Through LORs, admissions committees seek to gauge an applicant's "fit-ment" for their

educational institution and programs of study through the eyes of the referees (recommender). Therefore, it is crucial for applicants to request LORs from individuals who know them well and can effectively articulate both their academic and scholarly abilities, as well as their personal qualities.

While the requirements for reference letters may vary by department and/or institution, generally universities request two to three letters of reference as part of the master's application. Students may take the letter either from an academic contact (such as their college teacher/professor) or a professional contact (such as their supervisor/project leader/client) if they have some work experience. Some institutions may require two out of the three letters to be taken from academic contacts. If applying to the master's program right after their bachelor's studies, students may choose one or two lecturers/professors of relevant courses along with the school counsellor or adviser of their project/internship as their referees.

However, if the applicant is working or has worked in the past, depending on the requirements of the university, they

may take one professional and two academic recommendations from lecturers/professors from the bachelor's program who have taught them relevant courses. It is important that students carefully read the instructions related to reference letters provided on the website of the shortlisted universities before they request their letters from referees. LORs are not just the responsibility of the referees. Students should inform the referees about their latest achievements, including any projects, internships, or work experience, as well as their intention to apply for a master's program at the chosen university. The student's resume and a draft of their personal statement also provide a summary of the student's overall profile as well as their specific academic goals and reasons to choose a university and recommenders can review these documents before they draft their LORs. Students should also provide ample time to the referees so that they are able to craft strong letters of recommendation.

Usually, the submission process for LORs to U.S. institutions is digital and students are asked to provide the name and email address of their referees in the reference letter section of their application.

# In UP's Bahraich, Ghazi Miyan and Suhel Deo duel over narratives

What's in a name? For Bahraich, it embodies traces of its origin, the conquests over its lush and fertile landscape, and the spread of non-Brahmanical, and often non-Hindu, cults such as that of Ghazi Miyan — the towering mythical figure who dominates Bahraich's history, at least since the last nearly 1,000 years. The name is a "corruption of Brahmaich, or the assembly of Brahma, the story being that Brahma settled here some Rishis or priest," said HR Nevill, a British officer posted at Bahraich records in the 1901 Gazetteer. He adds, "Another and perhaps more probable origin of the name, however, lies in the fact that the whole country in former days was held by the Bhars." Bhars are considered one of the indigenous tribes of Uttar Pradesh and since coming under the influence of the reformist Arya Samaj movement they have revised their history linking it to Rajbhars

Yet another origin story credits the name to a non-Brahmanical, non-Vedic cult that worshipped the sun and had built a water tank in the jungles of Bahraich for sun worship. This is according to Mirat-i-Masudi, a 17th-century hagiography of Syed Salar Masud or Ghazi Miyan, a mythical warrior-saint who is revered by Hindus and Muslims alike in Bahraich and large parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh. "The sun tank and the stone-engraved image of the sun (bala rich)- are in a jungle, and it is 'this idol that had lent its name to the habitation Bahraich'. "The name Bala rich/rich appears to be a compound of Bala=sun, and rich= rish, from 'rish', as in, the place-name 'Satrikh' (sapt-rikh = 'abode of seven rishis')", writes historian Shahid Amin in his phenomenal work, *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan*. "The place has long been an object of pilgrimage, and a large fair takes place there, yearly in Jeth (summer months), attended by about 100,000 persons, many of whom are Hindus. The offerings are of several kinds. The first is known as 'Palang Perhi, or marriage offering, given by pilgrims from Rudauli, Benares, Jaunpur, and Mirzapur...a very picturesque feature of the fair are the flags brought by pilgrims. The dargah is now financially well off and supports a school and a dispensary", observed the 1901 District Gazetteer, Bahraich.

Myth-making Intriguingly, Hindus, who seek boons and blessings at his grave in Bahraich, seem to remain unbothered by the myth: Syed Salar Masud has been memorialised as a bhanja or maternal nephew of Mahmud of Ghazni, that great despoiler of temples and a much-hated figure in the educated Hindu's mind. The Ghazi Miyan story includes his tragic defeat and death at the hands of another mythical figure, king Suhel Deo or Suhel Dev in the forested terai region of Bahraich.

Nevill writes, "Suhel Deo was presumably a Bhar, he is also described as a Tharu, a Kalhans, a Bais or even a Jain; probably because all of these at one time or other held sway in different parts of the Gonda district (contiguous with Bahraich)". The present shrine of Ghazi Miyan is built over the grave that was dug at the same spot where he died from an

arrow wound. Nevill writes, "Masud defeated them time after time until the arrival of Suhel Deo turned the tide of victory. Masud was overthrown and slain with all his followers on the 18th day of Rajab-ul-Murajab in 424 Hijri or 1034 A.D. He was buried by his servants in the spot which he had chosen for his resting place."

War of narratives With the explosion in Hindu majoritarianism over the last few decades, a conquest of narratives centred on these legendary figures has emerged. In 2002, the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party was launched in UP to galvanise the Rajbhar community, based on their demand for the Scheduled Caste (SC) status. This was opposed by Rajputs — who claim Suheldev as one of their ancestors — and by the Pasis, a Dalit community. On a much wider scale, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has successfully portrayed Suhel Dev as a legendary Hindu king who pushed back the Muslim invader, Salar Masud. Amish Tripathi, author of a fictional biography of Suhel Dev, has claimed, "I think he's the most consequential hero in Indian history that we haven't had before. He defeated the invading Turkic army, who were the world's military superpowers from the 11th to the 17th century. He inflicted such a devastating defeat on the Ghaznavid Turks that no Turkic army came back to India for nearly 150-160 years." Such imagined accounts are not new. Since the early 20th century Ghazi Miyan's cult has been targeted by the Hindu nationalist press. "The Hindi pamphlets end the story of the Masud-Suhel encounter with the Ghazi's death. There is practically nothing here on the fate of Suhel Deo after his victory on the battlefield. In the Mirat, Masud appears in the dream of his lieutenant left behind at the base camp, with the instruction to first bury him along with the asp mada-i-khing (or his faithful mare Lilli and Sikandar Diwana — a bodyguard who accompanied Masud in all his battles and who was killed while holding Masud's slain body), and then to slay Sohul Deo. The next day's events turn out as prophesied: both Sohul Deo and Syed Ibrahim perish in mortal combat. The Hindi pamphlets skip this bit of the story, as if Sohul's life ends with the death of Masud and stopping the first Islamic invasion of Awadh", observes Amin. Since the 14th century, when Firoz Shah Tughlaq visited the grave and sponsored the material growth of the shrine, there are enough historical records that track the development of the cult of Ghazi Miyan or Bale Miyan as he is also known among his adherents.

"All manner of people carrying golden banners (alam: pennons/lances) come from distant lands to Bahraich—a mart for trade with the produce of the hills—for pilgrimage, whereupon they hold lavish festivities and leave copious offerings in tribute", according to Suraj Rai Bhandari's 17th-century Persian chronicle *Khulasatut-Tawarikh*, that was completed during emperor Aurangzeb's reign. The various censuses held during the British period (1891, 1911) attest to the multi-religious and within Hindus, multi-caste congregation of the warrior saint. The 1891 Census



Report of the United Provinces recorded over 1.5 million "special worshippers of Panchon Pir", or Panchpiriya, here referring to Ghazi Miyan and his four comrades. The Census commissioner said, "Even the Brahman makes his daily offerings of food and water to the spirits of the great [Ghazi] Pir and his associates, and for the low caste man the household worship of the five Pirs is in many districts his sole religious trust".

"The 1911 Census put the 'total population of the Hindu castes who worship[ed] these five saints' at 13.5 million, laying stress on the fact that 'of the 53 castes devoted to the Panchpiriyas in the province, 44 were 'wholly or partly Hindus', writes Amin. As anthropologist Jack Planalp, however, notes during his fieldwork in Senapur (Jaunpur district-Varanasi division), within

the first decade of independence the cult of Ghazi Miyan had suffered a decline with thakur landlords having successfully imposed a ban on the display of Miyan's flag and relegated processions to only be taken out in the segregated 'untouchable' quarters. Despite this, some groups continued their close association with the legendary figure. Today's India is seized by the self-destructive and fissiparous spirit that is leading to daily episodes of communal violence such as the one in Bahraich. From a liberal and complex past, we are facing the real prospect of being straitjacketed into our narrow identities. Bahraich's Ghazi Miyan's memorialisation as a warrior-saint and his one thousand-year-old multi-religious cult show us both the conflicts of the past and ways to co-exist in the present.

## 70pc of Indians view gold as safe asset that boosts savings, survey finds

New Delhi: Seven out of 10 (70 per cent) Indians consider gold as a safe asset that positively influences their savings habits, a survey report said.

According to the Moneyview survey, "over 85 per cent of the 3,000 respondents consider gold a valuable asset for wealth preservation, with its intrinsic value and historical performance continuing to drive consumer confidence". The survey further said that investors particularly in the age group of 25-40 years, invest in gold via both the physical and digital way, as part of their regular financial strategy to build wealth for retirement and other long-term goals.

"70 per cent of respondents reported that their perception of gold as a safe asset positively influences their savings habits," the survey said. In the digital era, the appeal for gold is increasingly driving investors towards digital tech platforms that offer easier access to gold. The survey further said: "Assured purity, insured storage, affordable investment due to availability of Systematic Investment Plan (SIP) options, and safety among others are some of the key drivers for digital gold investments



across India." According to the survey data, "over 75 per cent of respondents under the age of 35 prefer digital gold to physical gold, citing its liquidity and convenience as major factors". More than 50 per cent of the respondents believe that the ability to purchase gold in fractional amounts through digital platforms is one of the most lucrative features driving them towards changing their investment habits. Nearly 65 per cent of millennials surveyed expressed a preference for digital gold due to its ease of access and convenience. Sushma Abburi, Chief Business Officer at Moneyview, said: "Digital gold is revolutionising the way people invest in this timeless asset."

# Here are four reasons why students want Group 1 recruitment exam postponed in Telangana

Hyderabad: Why is there so much opposition to the conduct of the TGPSC Group – 1 recruitment examination from the job aspirants? While the Public Service Commission is going ahead with conduct of the exam on Monday, the job aspirants are sparing no efforts by organising demonstrations and not budging from their demand to postpone the examination. Their demand is despite the Telangana High Court giving a green signal for the exam. Here are the four main reasons why students say they want exam to be postponed.

**1. Sudden invalidity of study material:** Just 10 days before the proposed examination, the Telangana State Public Service Commission declared that the widely-used Telugu Academy books are no longer valid. Job aspirants for any competitive examination relied upon these books for years to study Telangana history, geography etc. This decision which came close to the exam date threw the students into a chaos. "How could one prepare for the exam, if the very foundation of the study materials is declared invalid at the last moment?" is the big question that is left unanswered by the authorities.

**2. Legal uncertainty:** The sudden implementation of GO 29 has altered reservation norms in recruitment. The GO disqualifies aspirants who were earlier eligible under the earlier rules. This drastic shift has caused a sense of betrayal and fear as the candidates now face the possibility of being excluded due to mid-recruitment changes. The Telangana High Court has already said that the outcome of the Group 1 exam is subject to its judgement on November 20, 2024. Conducting the exam under this cloud of legal uncertainty



will only lead to prolonged litigation and risks repeating the 2011 fiasco, where aspirants waited years for justice. Why rush an exam when its validity is under judicial scrutiny?

**3. Violation of fair reservation rights:** GO 29 fundamentally undermines the right guaranteed under Articles 15 and 16 of the constitution, denying aspirants their rightful reservations. The arbitrary change of

rules is a violation of candidates trust and constitutional protections. Many students from SC, ST, BC and EWS categories who qualified under the earlier norms of GO 55 are now being disqualified. This is nothing short of a violation of fundamental rights.

**4. Mental trauma and police atrocities on peaceful protesters:** Job aspirants are facing brutal police crackdowns during peaceful protests. Study halls are forc-

ibly shut, students being arrested unnecessarily and essential services like power supply, food supply have been cut off. Several students were physically assaulted with some suffering severe injuries on their hands. Such developments left the students in a state of emotional and mental distress. It is utterly unfair to expect the students in such a disturbed state to sit for a life-changing examination.

## How Elif Shafak helps to see the world differently

In the three weeks I have been away, the weather has changed. Getting off the bus on the road by the river Beas, I feel a chill in the air, suddenly thankful that in the heat and dust of Delhi, I remembered to put my jacket into my backpack. All night, I have been intermittently reading and watching the mountains go by. Many times, I am shaken out of my pleasantly drowsy state, as we drive through a tunnel, moving from the soothing darkness of the mountain landscape to the harsh white neon of the tunnel tube lights. The journey from Delhi to Manali is now four-fifths of what it used to be, yet every time I drive through such a time-saving tunnel I feel the guilt of colluding in gouging out the mountainsides. I look at the pine trees by the winding road and wonder what they would say to this if they could talk. Talking trees have been in my head these last few days. They began with a book club discussion on *There Are Rivers in the Sky* by Elif Shafak, a book with a drop of water sutradhar that connects its interweaving narratives.

Who would you use a sutradhar in your story I wonder aloud? A tree, if trees

could talk, they would have so much to tell us, says my friend Natasha.

In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, it is water that tells the story. A single drop of water moves from the world of Yazidis in Mesopotamia, who are displaced from their land by a giant bulldozer that is building a dam on the river Tigris, to Arthur, a young David Copperfield-like hero in Dickensian England. Arthur, unlike Copperfield, has no unknown benefactor. With hard work and a love for history, the boy lands himself a job at the British Museum, where he investigates ancient scripts and artefacts plundered by the British. The story vaults across time to follow Zuleika, a rebellious young water scientist based in London. The novel does a great job of connecting these narratives, building to a dramatic ISIS kidnapping and rescue. In our book discussion, we collectively marvel at the genius of Shafak, this Turkish British writer, who addresses serious and scary issues through interesting characters, each of whom has their feel-good moments. Shafak seems universally loved, judging by her reader reviews on the reader community Goodreads. Yet I remember feeling

underwhelmed when I first read her. Her storytelling felt prettified and trite, her characters vehicles for an activist agenda, her plots force-fitted around a profusion of worthy themes. Lately, I have changed my opinion. I am more forgiving of her unsubtleties and more appreciative of her simple storytelling, her consummate abilities to craft stories around art and literature and her blend of eastern and western storytelling styles. I like that she situates her characters in a world where the East is the accomplished norm and not the exotic other.

The *Architect's Apprentice* begins with the tale of a baby elephant who has been gifted by the Mughal Emperor Humayun to Sultan Suleiman of Turkey. On board the ship that is taking the elephant to Istanbul is a young stowaway called Jahan, who grows to love the elephant dearly. When the ship reaches Istanbul, Jahan is designated the elephant's mahout. He is also a talented designer and soon enough, he catches the eye of the chief architect. Jahan becomes the architect's apprentice, helping him design and build mosques, contending with the egos of succeeding Sultans, each of whom

wants the dome of their mosque to be the highest. The book builds a vivid world of the Ottoman Empire, its palaces and politics, its bazaars and its craftsmen and the rude Europeans constantly knocking on its doors and shores. In Samarkand, as I listen to the stories of emperors who commissioned these great mosques, I wonder about the architects and craftsmen who built them. I pay special attention to the story of Timur bringing in craftsmen from India and also to the gossipy legend about the love affair between the architect and Bibi Khanum, the chief wife of Timur. And now, I am thousands of miles away, returning to our family home. The passengers around me are asleep in the darkened bus that travels through the valleys of the Himalayas. Looking out of the window, I see moonlight reflecting off the foamy eddies of the Beas. I imagine the journey of a single drop of water in this river fed by Himalayan glaciers, rather like the raindrop in the Tigris in the novel I have just read. Shafak's storytelling has connected worlds for me — a drop of water in the Tigris and Thames rivers, linking with the Beas river and the pine tree by the wayside. It's helped me see the invisible faces behind centuries-old buildings.

# Why good design is invisible according to design guru Don Norman

On numerous advisory boards including schools in India like the BITS Design School, Mumbai, Norman has visited the country multiple times and closely observed people and society. On numerous advisory boards including schools in India like the BITS Design School, Mumbai, Norman has visited the country multiple times and closely observed people and society. US-based Donald Norman lives many lives as educator, industry strategist, consultant, speaker – all of which point towards a central theme: design. One who believes that “good design is actually harder to notice because it fits our needs and is invisible”, Norman, 88, can be called the conscience keeper of designers across the world as they measure their products against his yardstick of functionality and commonsense. So much so, in design shorthand, a “Norman door” is any door that is confusing to use – should you push, pull, glide, or simply wait to open. On numerous advisory boards including schools in India like the BITS Design School, Mumbai, Norman has visited the country multiple times and closely observed people and society. While his most-popular book *The Design of Everyday Things* (DOET, 1988) is about good, usable products, his recent *Designed for a Better World* (2023) talks about humanity-centred design. The Don Norman Design Award organisation is a platform to encourage early practitioners and educational institutions to showcase socially-relevant projects. In this interview, he talks about the need for integrated learning in schools, measuring the quality of life and the problem with electric vehicles. Excerpts:

Your book, DOET, is a popular primer for those interested in understanding the basic design of things around them. What are your impressions of India?

During my recent visit to Bangalore, I met Sanjay Purohit, whose Centre for Exponential Change is doing small things, but in a way that impacts millions of people. I am going to partner with him on expanding the work because education is actually the best way. India is leading the world in education, not the government schools as much, but private schools that are giving their students liberal education. Often students don't know why they are learning something, but you put them together in a cohesive team, and do a project that is interesting. They have to know finance, technology, art and history, and work with different people with different skills, and that, I think, is the proper way for education.

You've often spoken about how no matter what you create, human behaviour will almost always be antithetical to it. For instance, on Indian streets, no matter how high the street barriers, you still find people leaping over it.

If people are trying to do it, I would step back and not say, how do I prevent it? I would ask why are they doing it? Are they in a rush or is it because it's shorter? Maybe what we need to do is not put up barriers, but make it easier and safer for people. Congregational spaces are shrinking in India. Suddenly, food seems to be

the only urban thing that we do together. What has happened is that we let the diktats of business take over our lives. And we've forgotten about the quality of life. We measure the value of a country by how much it spends, the gross domestic product, that's absolutely the wrong measure. I think we have lost our sense of value. It has to be about the quality of people's lives before cars and stores and businesses.

Can you talk about circular economies? Do companies really care?

Well, I can't talk about companies such as Apple, Microsoft or Google, because they don't have a circular economy. In fact, Google had made all sorts of promises to reduce its energy consumption, but AI came along. And guess what, AI takes enormous amounts of energy. And where does the energy come from? In India, it's mostly coal burning, in the Philippines it is mostly gas, and in the United States, we are transitioning, but we're still mostly burning coal. And they can use up more energy in trading one system than a town uses for a whole year. The real problem is the economic system we live in. It's not capitalism, because I think capitalism can be a very positive force. But it's capitalism as is practised, where it's all about profits. But there are companies that are changing. There's a movement called the B Corp, where they are actually trying to change the rules of the game and help companies understand their social and environmental footprint.

In India, there's a big push towards EV vehicles. Do you think that is the way forward?

It's no magic bullet. The nice thing about electric vehicles, in general, is it



doesn't have toxic fumes and doesn't pollute. But first of all, you have to manufacture it. What kind of harm are you doing during the manufacture? Second, as an automobile that's run on batteries its engine is much heavier. When you're driving, little micro particles of rubber are in the air. They are so small that nobody even notices them, but it's really bad for your lungs. The other problem is, where does the electricity come from? Also, we don't have enough charging stations. I do think EVs are one of the paths to a cleaner solution, but it doesn't make sense until we solve these problems.

Could you talk about the projects that the Don Norman Award is involved in?

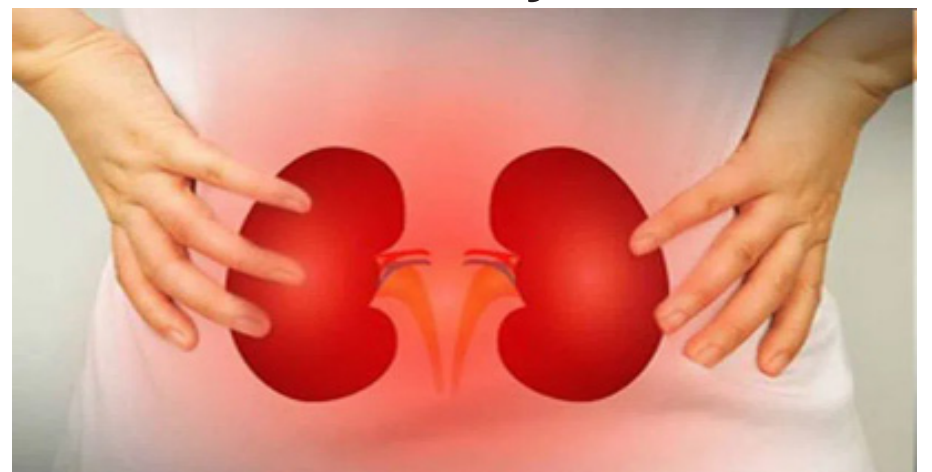
Well, what we have is people doing

lots of small things. In Maharashtra, for instance, in the tribal district of Nandurbar, people are getting palliative health care, especially those with mental health issues. There was this one man who could not even move his hands. The villagers discovered he used to be a musician, so they bought one of these very inexpensive keyboards for him. It took a long time before he was able to move a finger and boom, that energised him. He managed to actually play music again. There are many such issues. There are lots of projects in the world trying to make a difference. It's a small difference, but many, many small differences add up to a big difference. We want to show that everyday citizens can do wonderful things to help.

## Study explains how PFAS exposure worsens kidney function

New Delhi: People with increased exposure to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS — found in water, food, and people through products such as Teflon pans, waterproof clothing, stain-resistant carpets and fabrics, and food packaging — were found to have a worse kidney function, according to a study on Thursday. PFAS are often called “forever chemicals” because once they accumulate in the environment or the human body, they take a very long time to break down.

The researchers from the University of Southern California examined 78 participants, aged 17 to 22, and showed that PFAS causes changes in the gut microbiome which then damages kidney function. Their results, published in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*, showed that changes to the gut microbiome and related metabolites due to PFAS are responsible for up to 50 per cent of the decrease in kidney function four years later. “Our findings are an important piece



of the puzzle about the many different health risks of PFAS, which can provide policymakers with information that helps them develop policies to protect the public from exposure to these chemicals,” said Jesse A. Goodrich, Assistant Professor of population and public health sciences at

USC's Keck School of Medicine. The analysis also revealed two separate groups of bacteria and metabolites whose function to lower inflammation in the body was hindered because of high PFAS exposure. They were responsible for 38 per cent of the change in kidney function, and 50 per cent of the change respectively.

# Why Sardar Singh calls his game-sake Rajinder from Sirsa, the 'complete package'

Rajinder Singh shares a video of his mentor Sardar Singh, he's been obsessively watching for the last decade or so. Of a skill so mind-blowing that if, say, a Messi performed it, that would be trending all over, be the news peg of countless hagiographies and turn the victims into memes. But hockey isn't football and Sardar Singh isn't Messi. And so, the six-second clip from India's match against the Netherlands, which the rest of the hockey world including Sardar himself must have forgotten, lives on in the phone — and heart — of a young Sirsa boy. "He beats a couple of onrushing players while receiving the ball," Rajinder narrates what he sees. "Then, look how in the same motion he dodges the ball at high speed and taps it through another player to drive forward." Rajinder shares a video of his mentor Sardar, he's been obsessively watching for the last decade or so. Of a skill so mind-blowing that if, say, a Messi performed it, that would be trending all over. [pic.twitter.com/3yAVM5hCr](https://pic.twitter.com/3yAVM5hCr)

There's more that connects the prodigious 21-year-old Rajinder and one of hockey's modern-day greats. Siddharth Pandey, the general manager and team director of Hockey India League franchise Hyderabad Toofans, makes a bold declaration. "Rajinder is Sardar's clone," says Pandey, whose team signed the midfielder. The coincidences are plenty. Both Rajinder and Sardar are from the same village — Sant Nagar in Haryana's Sirsa. Pandey takes over: "He is a Namdhari, just like Sardar is. Great on the ball, just like Sardar was. Physically really strong, built like a tank. Really low body fat percentage. He can run all day. He can eliminate players with individual actions. He can drive forward with the ball." Even the man himself has no doubt. "He is a complete player," says Sardar, without hesitation. "We see sometimes that there are players who have speed and skill but height... or one element is missing. Rajinder is a complete package." Then, he throws in a word of caution saying, "Chalo, he is only 21 years old. Potentially, he can be a very good player who can serve the national team for the next 8-10 years."

Rajinder's career-defining week — being picked in the HIL and knocking on the doors of the national team — started with a mistake. When he was submitting his entry for the Hockey India League (HIL) auctions, Rajinder erroneously chose Rs 2 lakh as the base price instead of Rs 5 lakh. "I wrote them an email but it was too late by then," he says. By the time the players with a base price of Rs 5 lakh were picked, Rajinder — who was at the national camp in Bengaluru — feared he'd go unpicked. "I was checking the composition of other teams, just to see how many slots were open for midfielders. Moreover, there were so many players in the 2 lakh bracket that I was concerned that my name would come too late." His friends and family started calling him. So, Rajinder switched off his phone. He looked at it again directly in the evening, while working out in the gym.

Rajinder's career-defining week — being picked in the HIL and knocking on the doors of the national team — started with a mistake. Rajinder's career-defining

week — being picked in the HIL and knocking on the doors of the national team — started with a mistake. "Then, my name came up. And the bidding began — started with 2 lakh, increased to 5, 8, 10 lakh... I was with Vishnu (Vishnukant Singh, another young India international) and he too got excited," Rajinder says. It was one of those typical auction moments.

Until that moment, Rajinder was Indian hockey's best-kept secret. A playmaker who flew under the radar despite being in the junior squad for the last three years and even playing in the 2023 Under-21 World Cup. In the tightly-knit hockey circles, however, they whispered about Rajinder's meteoric rise, especially in the last 10-12 months. When the time came, there was a scramble to sign him.

By the time the bidding war ended, Rajinder had commanded a sum more than 10 times his base price. The Rs 23 lakh Hyderabad spent on him might be loose change compared to what prodigious talents earn in the Indian Premier League. It might not even be a life-changing amount for the son of a land-owning farmer, whose two siblings live in Australia and Canada. But it was a bid that reaffirmed his rising status. "You can build a team around him in the years to come," says Pandey, also a pundit who is dubbed as the voice of Indian hockey. "At 21, he is at that level where Sardar was (at that age)."

When Hyderabad celebrated Rajinder's signing as if they'd scored a goal, Sardar, the mentor of the Soorma Hockey Club, sat across the table with some regret. The quirks of player auctions meant the former India captain couldn't go for him. Without Sardar, however, Rajinder might not have even been here.

Sardar influenced Rajinder's hockey dreams much before he even picked up a hockey stick and in ways he didn't even know. Before the former world player of the year mentored his prodigy, Sardar laid the foundations by developing a ground where young players from Sirsa would learn the craft. "In 2010, after we won the bronze medals at the Commonwealth and Asian Games, the Hooda government gave us prize money of Rs 52 lakh," Sardar says. "I utilised a lot of that amount to develop the ground in our village and restarted the academy there." Around four years later, Rajinder joined the Namdhari Academy, where Sardar too had begun his journey. He did so only because he was lured by the prospect of getting a brand-new hockey stick and a ball. "But on the first day, Gurmej coach Saab, who also trained Sardar paaji, just made me run laps of the ground," Rajinder says. "One lap, two, three... It continued like this for 3-4 days. Maine socha hockey toh de nahi rahe yeh... so I stopped going."

One evening, Gurmej — who lived closely by Rajinder and also coached Sardar — stopped over on his way back to check on his newest recruit. Sardar influenced Rajinder's hockey dreams much before he even picked up a hockey stick and in ways he didn't even



know. "He asked why I stopped coming to the ground and I replied curtly, 'Because you aren't giving me a stick'," Rajinder laughs. "I got one the next day and I haven't stopped playing since." Two months later, Rajinder had his first brush with his hero. Sardar, during a visit home, went to the ground to distribute playing kits to the best performers. Rajinder wasn't on that list. "But meeting him, listening to his words stoked my interest." His father tended to the family's farm and his siblings flew abroad. Rajinder, however, chose to emulate his newfound hero and picked a career in hockey. At first, he played 'everywhere'.

One day, he'd be a defender. But that meant being on the bench because there was a 'better player in that position' in the Namdhari team. Another time, he was played as a striker. And then, his coach at Namdhari, Harwinder Singh, slotted him in the centre of the midfield; a critical position from where a player can dictate the pace, flow and direction of the game. Sardar, around this time, was at his peak and played at a level that he could walk into the playing 11 of any team in the world. Rajinder, the impressionable teenager, would binge on his videos; more so because he had begun playing in the same position as Sardar. Watching Sardar, he learnt how to receive the ball under pressure. "I began simulating such situations by asking three players to charge at me when receiving the ball. Under pressure, you have to decide the next move after stopping — whether to pass the ball or dodge the players." Over the years, he started bookmarking clips of another player — Kevin de Bruyne. The young Indian would watch and learn how the Belgium and Manchester City footballer telegraphed passes to his teammates. "In hockey, we play overhead passes quite frequently now. And De Bruyne places them perfectly — they are so well calculated, the defenders can't get there but it still gets close to the strikers!" He'd then try to replicate that on the ground. "I imagine the areas on the field

where strikers can be fed balls during a game. So, I place the practice cones there and play passes in that direction. At the academy, I would have 100 or so repetitions daily," Rajinder says. Rajinder continued making incremental progress in his formative years. It picked pace during the pandemic. And Sardar, who else, had an outsized role. Rajinder flew under the radar despite being in the junior squad for the last three years and even playing in the 2023 Under-21 World Cup. Rajinder flew under the radar despite being in the junior squad for the last three years and even playing in the 2023 Under-21 World Cup. As the rest of the world retreated indoors and socially distanced themselves, Rajinder's relationship with his idol got closer than ever. Sardar — who returned to his village — would take lessons nearly every evening, passing on all the knowledge he'd acquired during his illustrious career.

And Rajinder lapped it all up. "Everything — receiving the ball, one-on-one dodges... He broke down complex hockey moves, like using the gap between the legs of an opponent to play a pass, or the backhand... Paaji's backhand was perfect; he taught me how to position the lower body, what part of the stick should connect with the ball... I grew a lot during those years!" On the other side of the pandemic, Rajinder emerged as a player ready to wear the India shirt. He got picked for the junior side but it wasn't until recently that he stormed into the consciousness of the national team coaches. Of all places, Pandey noticed Rajinder's potential, in Bangladesh this year in March and April, when he was playing in the country's national league for Mariners Hockey Club. "He was playing against the club I coached, Abahani," says Pandey, "and he single-handedly dictated the game. We kept in touch after Bangladesh and I tracked him since then. He has grown by leaps and bounds. The reports coming out of the national camp point out that consistently, he is one of the best performers on the pitch."

# New finance goal should be \$1 trillion annually, says top climate expert

The NCQG (new collective quantified goal on climate finance) is meant to replace the earlier target of providing and mobilising \$100 billion per year collectively by developed countries by 2020. This earlier target had been formalised at COP16 in 2010 and the 2020 timeline was subsequently extended to 2025 at COP21 in 2015. This goal was reportedly achieved two years after the target date, but there remain question marks regarding the accuracy and methodological robustness of the reported figures. Two UNFCCC-related reports/submissions outline both the desired quantum and attributes of the NCQG.<sup>(i)</sup> In November 2022, a report by the Independent High-Level Expert Group (IHLEG) constituted by the COP26 and COP27 presidencies together with the UN Climate Change High-Level Champions, found that developing countries (excluding China) will require investments totalling \$2.4 trillion per year by 2030, including \$1 trillion per year from external sources, to achieve Paris Agreement goals.

(ii) India's submission on the NCQG to the UNFCCC highlighted some key aspects of India's position on the subject. Per this submission: (a) Developed countries should proactively fulfil their commitments (b) At least \$1 trillion annually, mainly via grants and concessional finance from developed to developing countries (c) NCQG to be accessible, affordable, new, and additional. Thus, both analytically and per India's position, the NCQG should be in the region of USD 1 trillion per year. At the same time, this should be composed primarily of grants and concessional finance and be new and additional. Can India have a mechanism to compensate for the loss and damage caused by these events? By 2030, the projected cost of loss and damage is estimated to be between \$290 and \$580 billion for developing countries alone. Looking at India, CEEW's research suggests that 80% of the Indian population is residing in districts highly vulnerable to extreme climate events, India alone is estimated to have suffered damages of over \$56 billion between 2019 and 2023. This accounts for a fourth of the economic damages due to weather-related disasters in the Asia-Pacific region.

That said, India's disaster response is founded on the National Disaster Management Policy (2009) which provides relief via the National Disaster Response Fund and State Disaster Response Fund. Notwithstanding, loss and damage compensation due to climate-related disasters, follows a different approach. Loss and Damage (L&D) refers to the adverse effects of extreme and slow-onset events – effects that occur despite mitigation and adaptation measures. Over the past several years, it has become clear that countries that have contributed the least are paying for and bearing the brunt. Relief for L&D, in this understanding, should harness resources based on principles of equity and historical responsibility and advocate for an effort that is led by the developed countries on account of their historical emissions, unfulfilled pledges, and capacity to pay. Supporting developing countries for

immediate relief and long-term recovery is critical due to their low resources, economic realities and adaptive capacity to bear the costs of past, present, and foreseeable losses. For instance, it is reported that over 50% of the debt increase in many climate-vulnerable countries relates to funding the recoveries post-disaster.

Globally, India has also already shouldered several leadership initiatives related to loss and damage, such as the launching of the Coalition of Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), a multi-stakeholder global partnership to build resilience into infrastructure systems. India is also a founding member of the Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS), hosted at CDRI in India, which seeks to promote resilient, sustainable, and inclusive infrastructure development in SIDS. If we look back, COP28 was a step in the right direction, but it hasn't sufficiently raised climate ambition, held historical polluters accountable, or established effective mechanisms to finance climate resilience and a just low-carbon transition for the Global South. The lack of mandatory (hard) obligation for developed countries to provide support and no mention of the target or the scale of the contribution in the decision text exonerates developed countries from all responsibility.

Currently, the amount mobilised under the fund stands at a mere \$661 million. Together with \$131 million for funding arrangements, pledges amounted to the equivalent of \$792 million against the ask of billions of dollars. So, if we look at developing a compensation mechanism internally in India, there is a need to consider the capacity of the developing world to pay and competing development priorities. What we need is an arrangement wherein the developed nations are the primary contributors, delivery of finance through non-debt-inducing instruments (grants) accounting for the economic realities, and guided by the core principles of equity, historical responsibility and ability to pay. Domestically, India can better focus on incorporating global measures in national policy and practice to support national institutions and make a global call for the development of a Global South-led research consortium dedicated to scientific exploration of "event attribution" to enrich climate science, build research capacity in developing countries, and strengthen the L&D framework to address climate-related risks. Why do you think we are seeing a spike in extreme weather events this year?

The spike in extreme weather events this year can be attributed to a combination of global climate dynamics and localised factors. One of the primary reasons is the increasing impact of climate change, which has altered weather patterns worldwide. Global average air temperatures began exceeding 1.5C of warming on an almost daily basis in the second half of 2023 when El Niño began kicking in, and this has continued into 2024. Rising global temperatures are intensifying the water cycle, leading to more frequent and severe events like floods, droughts, and cyclones. In India, this has been particularly



evident, as 2024 has been a year of extremes—from record-breaking heatwaves that scorched many parts of the country to devastating floods that disrupted lives and livelihoods coupled with unusual patterns in the monsoon and more intense cyclones along the coasts.

Our analysis at CEEW, where we studied 40 years of monsoon data, shows a significant shift and erratic patterns, especially in the last decade. The study found that 55% of tehsils witnessed an increase and 11% witnessed a decrease in southwest monsoon rainfall in the past decade. However, the same tehsils also saw an increase in the frequency of heavy rainfall days, indicating the uneven distribution of the increase in total rainfall due to extreme events. Climate change risk is determined by three factors: the likelihood of dangerous events (hazards), the number of people and assets in harm's way (exposure), and how susceptible these people and assets are to damage (vulnerability). With rising instances of extreme weather events, as more people begin to live in coastal areas (increase in exposure) and as more infrastructure is built in hilly regions (increase in vulnerability) that are more sensitive to landslides, the risk and impact of climate change is set to increase. CEEW's district-level Climate Vulnerability Index highlights India's vulnerability to hydro-meteorological disasters and identifies that more than 75% of districts in India, home to over 80% of India's population, are vulnerable to extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and cyclones.

Additionally, urbanisation and environmental degradation in India have exacerbated the effects of these extreme events. Rapid, unplanned urban expansion has led to the loss of natural buffers like wetlands and forests, which traditionally absorbed the impact of heavy rains and storms. In regions like the Himalayas, deforestation and infrastructure projects without adequate environmental safeguards have increased vulnerability to landslides and flash floods. The combination of these global and local factors is leading to more frequent and severe weather events in India. What's crucial to understand is that this isn't just a one-off event; we're witnessing a trend where each year brings more severe and widespread climate impacts. This

underscores the urgent need for India to strengthen its adaptive capacities and build resilience against a future where extreme weather events become the norm.

We are seeing floods in Delhi, Gurugram, Chandigarh and landslides in Kerala. How much has this got to do with mindless infrastructure planning and lack of foresight? India is urbanising rapidly, with cities like Delhi, Gurugram, and Bengaluru expanding to meet the needs of growing populations and economic activities. However, this rapid development is taking place alongside significant shifts in weather patterns as well, making these urban areas increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events. An analysis by CEEW found that 23 per cent of districts, including New Delhi, Bengaluru, and Indore, have experienced both deficient and excessive rainfall in the last 40 years. In the last decade, the patterns have shifted towards more wetter conditions and extreme rainfall. This means that these areas are seeing more unpredictable and extreme weather, with dry spells followed by intense rain, leading to a higher risk of both droughts and floods. Urban flooding, which is significantly different from rural flooding, is becoming a major issue due to this combination of rapid urbanisation and changing monsoon patterns. Urban areas, with their developed catchments and impermeable surfaces, see flood peaks—meaning the highest point of water flow during a flood—up to eight times higher than in rural areas (NDMA). Faster flow times in cities—where water rushes through streets and drains much more quickly than in natural landscapes—lead to rapid flooding, giving little time for response and causing significant damage to infrastructure and property. This is particularly concerning in states with high GDPs, such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Karnataka, where 64 per cent of tehsils or sub-districts have seen an increase in heavy rainfall days over the past decade, putting not just lives but also costly infrastructure at risk. The need for better urban planning that accounts for climate risks is more urgent than ever. Comprehensive land-use planning, strict zoning regulations, and robust stormwater drainage systems are critical to reducing the risk of extreme weather events in cities.

# Agencies look for pattern in bomb threats to airlines

The Union government planned to increase deployment of air marshals on flights, investigation agencies examined if they could establish a "pattern", and the Delhi Police registered multiple FIRs over hoax calls amid a spate of bomb threats, people aware of the matter said on Wednesday. The bomb scares continued on Wednesday as seven flights — IndiGo's 6E 74 (Riyadh to Mumbai), 6E 1011 (Mumbai to Singapore), 6E 515 (Chennai to Lucknow), 6E 651 (Delhi to Mumbai); Akasa Air's QP 1335 (Delhi to Bengaluru); SpiceJet's SG 124 (Leh to Delhi), SG 116 (Darbhanga to Mumbai) — were warned of explosives on board through social media posts. This took the total number of such threats to at least 17 in three days. All the threats turned out to be hoax.

"I am deeply concerned over the recent disruptive acts targeting Indian airlines, affecting the domestic and international operations. Such mischievous and unlawful actions are a matter of grave concern, and I strongly condemn any attempts to compromise the safety, security, and operational integrity of our aviation sector," civil aviation minister K Rammohan Naidu said in a statement. According to people aware of the matter, airport operators, officials from the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS), Airports Authority of India (AAI), ministry of home affairs (MHA), Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), Intelligence Bureau and police held a series of meetings in the past 24 hours to discuss the threats, which have disrupted air travel this week.

"There is a pattern behind the messages. A threat is given using social media or through a phone call, and then suddenly similar threats start to appear within a short span of time. VPNs have been used to post the messages to avoid being traced. We are analysing the pattern, and investigation agencies are coordinating to locate the source (s) of threats," said an aviation security officer, who was part of the discussions. He added that the intention behind the threats was to "definitely disturb the aviation sector, create panic, and keep the agencies on their toes". Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior intelligence officer said the bomb threats appeared to be a part of a ploy to increase the burden on security agencies. "There has been chatter in anti-India circles to issue bomb threats to unsettle the aviation sector to a level that security forces are overstretched," the official said, requesting anonymity. On Monday, seven flights, including an Air India plane headed to Chicago that was forced to land at a remote Canadian airport and an Air India Express service to Singapore that was escorted by two F-15 fighters away from populated areas, were diverted, delayed, or subjected to a search after posts on social media said they had bombs on board. On Monday, three similar threats for airlines (and an-



other for a train) were made. In all of these cases, the threats came from one X account, @schizobomber777, which was suspended during the day. The account, with no other identifier, was created earlier this month. Naidu said the government was keeping a close watch on the situation, with a focus on passenger security. "We are committed to maintaining the highest security standards and passenger safety remains our topmost priority," he said. According to protocol, an assessment committee comprising airport operators and security agencies such as the Intelligence Bureau is constituted in case of a bomb threat to assess the gravity of the warning and act accordingly. This committee decides if the threat is "specific" (indicating a possible breach of security) or "non-specific" (indicating a possible hoax). "If the committee decides the threat is specific, all the passengers are off-loaded along with their cabin and check-in baggage. The cargo and catering items are also removed. It is followed by re-screening of the passengers and their baggage, and the empty aircraft is thoroughly screened by airline, engineering and security staff," said a BCAS officer, who asked not to be named. In case of non-specific threats, agencies don't carry out any drill.

The aviation security officer cited earlier in the story said "all security protocols are being reviewed comprehensively to see if any changes are required to deal with bomb threats". The officer added that they were considering increasing bomb detection and disposal squads (BDDS), dog squads, surveillance manpower and coordinating with international agencies. A third officer said the Centre has decided to increase the number of air marshals on flights in the backdrop of the repeated bomb

threats. "Currently, a total of 35 air marshals are deployed in flights across certain sensitive sectors. The number of such marshals will be increased to 100. The decision to increase the number was taken after the joint meeting of different agencies with the ministry of civil aviation," the officer said, requesting anonymity. The officer added that the marshals consist of National Security Guards (NSG) commandos and are trained in anti-hijacking operations. They travel as civilians on "certain sensitive routes" in order to ensure the safety of passengers in case of an untoward incident. Security officials refused to reveal the "sensitive routes" on which air marshals are deployed, citing security concerns. Police officers have also been asked to take stern action against those found guilty of making the hoax calls, people aware of the matter said. The IGI Airport police said that they registered multiple cases on Wednesday over separate bomb threats received by the airport in the last month. "A detailed investigation is currently underway. Additionally, after coordination with the concerned social media platform, all accounts responsible for spreading these false threats have been suspended to prevent further misuse and ensure public safety, Commissioner of Police (DCP), IGI Airport Usha Rangnani said. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, consists of stringent punishments to deter hoax calls, focusing on maintaining public order and discouraging the spread of fear. The Act's Section 353, which addresses "statements conducing to public mischief", lists punishment for those who deliberately spread false information that can lead to public alarm or unrest. A hoax call that falsely warns of a bomb threat falls under this category. The section outlines

that anyone who makes, circulates or publishes such statements with the intent to cause fear or alarm can face up to three years in prison, a fine, or both.

Another key provision, Section 351, deals with criminal intimidation, which encompasses a range of threats designed to instil fear. In cases where these threats include death, grievous injury or arson, the punishment can extend up to seven years. When someone makes a hoax call that incites fear or panic, they could also be charged under Section 66F of the Information Technology Act, which addresses cyber terrorism. As part of the crackdown against hoax calls, the Mumbai police detained a minor and a man from Chhattisgarh on Tuesday over the bomb threat to three flights from Mumbai on Monday. Officers said their investigation revealed that the 17-year-old created a fake account in the name of his neighbour and posted the threats. Meanwhile, on Wednesday IndiGo received bomb threats for three flights, including the Riyadh-Mumbai flight 6E 74 that was diverted to Muscat. "The aircraft has been isolated, and all passengers have been safely disembarked," an airline spokesperson said in a statement. An Akasa Air flight enroute to Bengaluru returned to Delhi on Wednesday afternoon following a bomb threat. "Akasa Air flight QP 1335, flying from Delhi to Bengaluru on October 16, 2024, and carrying 174 passengers, 3 infants and 7 crew members on board, received a security alert," an airline spokesperson said in a statement. A SpiceJet spokesperson said the airline's X handle received a direct message indicating a bomb threat concerning two flights -- one was Leh-Delhi and the other was Darbhanga-Mumbai. "Passengers on both aircraft disembarked safely.

# Cong's key challenges in poll-bound Maha

The Congress won 13 of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra this summer. With the Shiv Sena (UBT), which won 9 and the NCP (SP), which won 8, the INDIA bloc of opposition parties won 30 seats in all. But as its recent Haryana experience has demonstrated to the party, relative success in the Lok Sabha election is no guarantee of performance in the assembly election. A direct breakdown of the Congress' performance in parliamentary constituencies in Maharashtra into assembly constituencies would mean that the party could win 78 of the 288 assembly seats in the state. For the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the NCP (SP), these numbers are 54 and 48, respectively.

Experts attribute the Congress's strong showing in the Lok Sabha elections to its ability to build a strong vote base comprising Dalits, Muslims, Kunbis (an other backward class), and Marathas. Political analyst Anant Bagaitkar said: "The BJP and Shinde's Sena are primarily looking at the OBC votes to win the elections. The Congress depends on a fruitful combination of Dalits and Maratha votes. But this time, no one knows how the Maratha agitation for an OBC status will swing votes." It needs to get the caste arithmetic right again this time, perhaps one reason why it has appointed 13 senior leaders, including former CMs Ashok Gehlot, Bhupesh Baghel and Charanjit Singh Channi, two former deputy CMs, Sachin Pilot and TS Singhdeo as observers for Maharashtra's five

divisions. Two things could derail the Congress, experts said. One, the BJP's aggressive wooing of backward class Mali, Dhangar and Vanjari (Madhav) voters.

And two, the ongoing Maratha agitation led by activist Manoj Jarange-Patil. "Manoj is leading the demand for OBC status for Marathas which the Kunbis enjoy. There are indications that his Shivba Sanghatana might also field candidates. We feel that our Maratha support base might face a strong test particularly in the Marathwada region," said a Mumbai-based Congress leader. Jarange-Patil has kept everyone guessing and met AIMIM leader Imtiaz Jaleel on Tuesday, signalling a possible coalition. "When people's welfare is involved anything can take place. Important cards would be played at the right time," Jarange said. The Maratha vote is key to the Maha Vikas Agadi, the INDIA bloc's name in the state. In the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP failed to win a single seat in the Marathwada region. Of the eight seats, the Congress and Sena (UBT) had won three each and the NCP (SP) won one. Aurangabad was the only seat that was won by NCP, a Mahayuti (the BJP-led NDA's name in the state) ally.

For the Congress, retaining the support of both Marathas and the SC is possibly the biggest challenge. "That's why it is very important for us to decide the right candidates for each seat. We want to fight in at least 110 of the 288 seats but cur-



rently, our discussions are narrowed down to each seat and which party should contest from it," said a second Congress leader. The alliance arithmetic itself could pose a third challenge to the Congress, said experts, pointing out that the Mahayuti appears to have finalised their seat-sharing formula while the MVA is yet to do so.

They add that the delay seems to be largely on account of the Congress and the Shiv Sena (UBT) not being able to arrive at a consensus on some seats. A third

Congress leader offered the example of a Muslim-dominated seat in Central Mumbai that both parties want to contest.

The way the Muslims votes wholeheartedly for the MVA in the Lok Sabha elections, it is important for the Congress and the two allies to find the right candidate for the right seat. But Muslim consolidation alone won't be enough for the Congress.

They need to woo the OBCs and the Marathas," Bagaitkar said.

# Rights of persons with disabilities a landmark Supreme Court verdict

The bench, comprising justices Bhushan R Gavai, Aravind Kumar and KV Viswanathan, also clarified that benchmarks alone should not automatically exclude individuals from eligibility in educational programmes. The ruling directed that disability assessment boards must go beyond a mere percentage threshold of disability and assess the extent to which a specific disability may impact an individual's ability to pursue a course or career. This approach ensures a more nuanced and individualised evaluation, which aligns with the goals of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016. This judgment has far-reaching implications for educational and regulatory frameworks, encouraging a progressive shift and ensuring that institutions assess candidates based on their potential rather than their limitations. The ruling not only highlighted the principle of reasonable accommodation but also elucidated the importance of equality and inclusive education in achieving an accessible society. Understanding reasonable accommodation:

The 2016 RPwD Act, which aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, aims to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms for PwD. The Act is comprehensive, covering areas such as healthcare, education,

employment, and accessibility to public spaces, with a particular focus on reasonable accommodation. In the context of disability rights, reasonable accommodation refers to the necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments, made without undue burden, to ensure that PwD can participate fully and equally in society. The 2016 Act defines reasonable accommodation under Section 2(y), requiring modifications that enable PwD to exercise their rights alongside non-disabled peers.

The Supreme Court's recent judgment drew from the Vikash Kumar Vs UPSC (2021) case, which held that reasonable accommodation captures the State's duty to provide additional support to PwD. The court underscored that reasonable accommodation should not be limited to physical aids or tangible support; rather, it should include structural adjustments that enable PwD to engage meaningfully in social, educational, and professional contexts.

In the ruling, the Supreme Court also referenced Lord Denning's statement that laws should be interpreted in a way that supports their intended purpose. For reasonable accommodation, this means a flexible approach that respects the inherent dignity of PwD. This holistic understanding of reasonable accommodation stressed the importance of individualized assessment and support, moving beyond a "one-

size-fits-all" approach.

The ruling built on several pivotal Supreme Court cases, notably State of Gujarat Vs Ambica Mills (1974), which addressed over-inclusive classifications, and Ravinder Kumar Dhariwal (2023), which critiqued a one-size-fits-all approach to disability. These precedents align with the apex court's current stance on the need for contextual and individualised assessments of disabilities, rather than a monolithic approach. It highlighted that reasonable accommodation should not be understood narrowly to mean only the provision of assisting devices and other tangible substances which will aid persons with disabilities. "If the mandate of the law is to ensure a full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in the society and if the whole idea was to exclude conditions that prevent their full and effective participation as equal members of society, a broad interpretation of the concept of reasonable accommodation which will further the objective of the RPwD Act and Article 41 of the Directive Principles of State Policy is mandated," it underscored.

The principle of equality and its relevance to disability rights: Central to the Court's judgment is the principle of equality, particularly as enshrined in Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law. Equality for PwD, the bench held, is not just about pre-

venting discrimination, but about ensuring positive action and support that allows for full participation in all aspects of life.

It relied on the top court's previous judgment in Jeeja Ghosh & Anr Vs Union of India & Ors (2016) which articulated that equality implies more than non-discrimination. It involves actively removing societal barriers and creating conditions that enable PwD to enjoy opportunities on an equal footing. "Equality not only implies preventing discrimination (example, the protection of individuals against unfavourable treatment by introducing anti-discrimination laws), but goes beyond in remedying discrimination against groups suffering systematic discrimination in society. In concrete terms, it means embracing the notion of positive rights, affirmative action and reasonable accommodation," the judgment held.

Rejecting "facial equality" in matters involving PwD, the top court asserted that courts are obliged to probe as to whether beneath the veneer of equality there is any invidious breach of Article 14. It cited Khandige Sham Bhat and Anr vs. Agricultural Income-tax Officer, Kasaragod, and Anr (1963) to note: "Though a law ex facie appears to treat all that fall within a class alike, if in effect it operates unevenly on persons or property similarly situated, it may be said that the law offends the equality clause."