

## Sitarama Project tenders spark major controversy

Hyderabad: Tenders called without administrative approvals for the implementation of the distributary system works costing over Rs.1000 crore on the Sitarama Lift Irrigation Project have snowballed into a major controversy. It sparked a heated exchange between the Engineer-in-Chief (ENC) General and the Project Chief Engineer in the presence of Irrigation Minister N. Uttam Kumar Reddy during a recent review meeting on the project's implementation. The dispute, which saw both senior officials engaging in a fierce argument, prompted the issuance of show-cause notices to the ENC General and the Project Chief Engineer.

The review meeting was attended by Agriculture Minister Thummala Nageshwar Rao and senior engineers of the Irrigation Department as well. All the three Ministers from Khammam district, including Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka and Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy, apart from Nageshwar Rao, have been pressing for the speedy completion

of the project's distributary network and the project. Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy also held a separate meeting with district ministers and department officials, assuring financial support for the project's completion last month.

The Project Chief Engineer, Srinivas Reddy, defended his decision to call for tenders, citing a previous meeting with ministers and senior officials, including Irrigation Advisor Adityanath Das, as the basis for his actions. However, Engineer-in-Chief General Anil Kumar strongly opposed the Chief Engineer's decision to proceed without his approval.

Srinivas Reddy explained that the tenders were a revised version of a component of the earlier Rs.13,057 crore tenders called for the project. Revanth Reddy had insisted on completing the project works by August 15. Taking the matter seriously, the Irrigation Minister directed Irrigation Secretary Rahul Bojja to issue show-cause notices to the officials involved in the



dispute. The Chief Engineer concerned has reportedly given his explanation. The Irrigation Minister is said to have faulted the

stand of both the engineers in the issue. Fresh tenders are likely to be called for, according to the officials.

## Bibi-Ka-Chashma, a hidden marvel in Hyd



Hyderabad: Perched atop a hill over 2,000 feet above sea level, the magnificent Taj Falaknuma Palace in Hyderabad captures the majesty of its era, offering a breathtaking panorama of the city below. This former residence of the Nizams, now renovated and preserved as a luxury hotel by the charitable TATA Group, stands as a beacon of opulence, with stunning architecture and a regal aura. Looking down from Falaknuma's elevated vantage point, Hyderabad's vibrant urban landscape appears serene. By day, the city's 400-year-old history unfolds gracefully across the palace's sprawling hilltop courtyards. By night, Hyderabad sparkles like a million stars scattered over the ground, casting a

dreamy glow upon the bustling metropolis.

Beneath the grandeur and heritage of this palace lies a hidden marvel — a quiet, natural freshwater stream winding its way through the depths of the hill. Emerging at the northwestern foothills, this stream flows toward Bibi-ka-Chashma, a modest yet sacred shrine steeped in local history. Once a green, tranquil locality, Bibi-ka-Chashma has now crowded with shacks and shops, but it retains whispers of its former beauty, with old banyan trees standing stoic, their roots entwined with the legacy of centuries past. "Falaknuma" in Urdu translates to "mirror of the sky", reflecting its majestic positioning as a

"heaven-like" structure. Its architectural sibling, Jahan Numa (now defunct), meaning "world-like", was named in contrast when Hyderabad came into existence. The Falaknuma hill, with its distinguished past, once housed a serene retreat for the Qutb Shahi rulers, lost during Hyderabad's fall to the Mughals. Sir Viqar-ul-Umra, an illustrious noble, later built the scorpion shaped Falaknuma palace that now stands as a nineteenth-century architectural marvel.

Nestled at the base of this hill, the Bibi-ka-Chashma Shrine even today exudes a quiet charm, its simplicity a gentle contrast to the grandeur of Falaknuma Palace. Encircled by a modest courtyard, the shrine's small archways lead into a tranquil space. Highlighting the entrance is a venerable and magnificent Mousari tree, estimated

to be over a century old. Traditionally planted outside places of worship — whether temple, mosque, or church — these trees symbolise resilience, with their seeds often used as prayer beads (rosaries) to signify strength and endurance. The shrine, slightly sunken from ground level to protect the sacred natural spring within, has been a revered sanctuary for over 400 years. Inside the shrine the spring waters can be seen through a natural rock crevice shaped as a human eye. Covered by an iron grill and protected with carpets, the spring waters are believed to have curative powers, granting boons to many childless couples. Its spiritual significance, entwined with nature, offers a peaceful refuge amid the city's urban sprawl, preserving a timeless portion of Hyderabad's diverse heritage.

## TGSRTC launches home delivery services in GHMC limits

Hyderabad: The Telangana State Road Transportation Corporation (TGSRTC) has introduced its home delivery services under the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) limits. As a pilot project, the services have initially been launched in Hyderabad from 31 areas with plans to soon expand it to other districts of the state. Some of the places where the services were launched include MGBS, JBS, CBS, Dilsukhnagar, KPHB, Uppal,

Kushaiguda, Ranigunj, Jeedimetla, Santoshnagar, Auto Nagar, Cherlapalli, Medipally and SR Nagar.

TGSRTC officials said the parcels and parcel covers will be collected from delivery points (TGSRTC logistics centres) by the agents and delivered to the customers at their doorsteps/ addresses anywhere in the city. They urged the people to make use of the home delivery services so that the logistics wing of TGSRTC could be further strengthened.



# When AI changes the way we do science, will we understand the results?

As one of the laureates put it, AI's potential for accelerating scientific discovery makes it "one of the most transformative technologies in human history". But what will this transformation really mean for science? AI promises to help scientists do more, faster, with less money. But it brings a host of new concerns, too – and if scientists rush ahead with AI adoption they risk transforming science into something that escapes public understanding and trust, and fails to meet the needs of society. The illusions of understanding Experts have already identified at least three illusions that can ensnare researchers using AI.

The first is the "illusion of explanatory depth". Just because an AI model excels at predicting a phenomenon — like AlphaFold, which won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for its predictions of protein structures — that doesn't mean it can accurately explain it. Research in neuroscience has already shown that AI models designed for optimised prediction can lead to misleading conclusions about the underlying neurobiological mechanisms.

Second is the "illusion of exploratory breadth". Scientists might think they are investigating all testable hypotheses in their exploratory research, when in fact they are only looking at a limited set of hypotheses that can be tested using AI. Finally, the "illusion of objectivity". Scientists may believe AI models are free from bias, or that they can account for all possible human biases. In reality, however, all AI models inevitably reflect the biases present in their training data and the intentions of their developers. Cheaper and faster science One of the main reasons for AI's increasing appeal in science is its potential to produce more results, faster, and at a much lower cost. An extreme example of this push is the "AI Scientist" machine recently developed by Sakana AI Labs. The company's vision is to develop a "fully AI-driven system for automated scientific discovery", where each idea can be turned into a full research paper for just US\$15 – though critics said the system produced "endless scientific slop". Do we really want a future where research papers can be produced with just a few clicks, simply to "accelerate" the production of science? This risks inundating the scientific ecosystem with papers with no meaning and value, further straining an already overburdened peer-review system. We might find ourselves in a world where science, as we once knew it, is buried under the noise of AI-generated content. The rise of AI in science comes at a time when public trust in science and scientists is still fairly high, but we can't take it for granted. Trust is complex and fragile. As we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, calls to "trust the science" can fall short because scientific evidence and computational models are often contested, incomplete, or open to various interpretations.

However, the world faces any number of problems, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality, that require public policies crafted with expert judgement. This judgement must also be sensitive to specific situations, gathering



input from various disciplines and lived experiences that must be interpreted through the lens of local culture and values. As an International Science Council report published last year argued, science must recognise nuance and context to rebuild public trust. Letting AI shape the future of science may undermine hard-won progress in this area. If we allow AI to take the lead in scientific inquiry, we risk creating a monoculture of knowledge that prioritises the kinds of questions, methods, perspectives and experts best suited for AI. This can move us away from the transdisciplinary approach essential for responsible AI, as well as the nuanced public reasoning and dialogue needed to tackle our social and environmental challenges.

A new social contract for science As the 21st century began, some argued scientists had a renewed social contract in which scientists focus their talents on the most pressing issues of our time in exchange for public funding. The goal is to help society move toward a more sustainable biosphere – one that is ecologically sound, economically viable and socially just. The rise of AI presents scientists with an opportunity not just to fulfil their responsibilities but to revitalise the contract itself. However, scientific communities will need to address some important questions about the use of AI first. For example, is using AI in science a kind of "outsourcing" that could compromise the integrity of publicly funded work? How should this be handled? What about the growing environmental footprint of AI? And how can researchers remain aligned with society's expectations while integrating AI into the research pipeline? The idea of transforming science with AI without first establishing this social contract risks putting the cart before the horse. Letting AI shape our research priorities without input from diverse voices and disciplines can lead to a mismatch with

what society actually needs and result in poorly allocated resources. Science should benefit society as a whole. Scientists need to engage in real conversations about the future of AI within their community of practice and with research stakeholders. These discussions should address the dimensions of this renewed social contract, reflecting shared goals and values. It's time

to actively explore the various futures that AI for science enables or blocks – and establish the necessary standards and guidelines to harness its potential responsibly. Ehsan Nabavi is senior lecturer in technology and society, Responsible Innovation Lab, Australian National University. This article is republished from The Conversation.

## WhatsApp bans over 8.5 million accounts in India for policy violations

New Delhi: Meta-owned WhatsApp banned more than 85 lakh "bad" accounts in India in the month of September for violating its policies. Between September 1-September 30, the company banned 8,584,000 accounts and 1,658,000 of these accounts were proactively banned, before any reports from users, according to the social media platform's monthly compliance report under the new IT Rules 2021.

The popular mobile messaging platform, which has more than 600 million users in India, received 8,161 grievances from the country, and the records "actioned" were 97. The account "Actioned" means complaints where WhatsApp took remedial action. WhatsApp also received two orders from the Grievance Appellate Committee in the country and complied with both, according to its monthly compliance report.

"We will continue with transparency to our work and include information about our efforts in future reports," said the company. It employs a team of engineers, data scientists, analysts, researchers, and experts in law enforcement, online safety, and technology developments to oversee these efforts. "We enable users to block contacts and to report problematic content and con-



tacts to us from inside the app. We pay close attention to user feedback and engage with specialists in stemming misinformation, promoting cybersecurity, and preserving election integrity," said WhatsApp. The abuse detection operates at three stages of an account's lifecycle: at registration, during messaging, and in response to negative feedback, which we receive in the form of user reports and blocks. A team of analysts then augments these systems to evaluate edge cases and help improve our effectiveness over time. Between August 1, 2024 and August 31, 2024, 8,458,000 WhatsApp accounts were banned, 1,661,000 of these accounts were proactively banned,

# OPPO's Find X8 Series Pushes Smartphone Photography Innovation with Dual Periscope Camera, GenAI Telescope Zoom

OPPO is gearing up to push the boundaries of smartphone photography with OPPO's Find X8 Series, which promises to set a new standard for customers who want a flagship phone and camera experience. The Find X8 Series is the first in the world to feature a revolutionary dual periscope camera system with a unique Triple Prism Fold Reflection System. The Find X8 Series has a revolutionary quad-camera system with innovative GenAI features such as AI-backed Telescope Zoom, a new and advanced HyperTone Image Engine, Dolby Vision video recording, and 4-mic Spatial Audio. It also comes with the iconic Hasselblad Portrait, Master Mode for granular control over camera settings and Lightning Snap, which can capture 100 photos in 30 seconds thus offering a complete camera experience for everyone—from photography enthusiasts to creators to power users. First in World: Dual Periscope camera system The OPPO Find X8 series pioneers the world's first dual peri-

scope camera system. The dual periscope system for the 3x and 6x camera optical lens systems has enabled OPPO to create the thinnest and lightest flagship camera system while ensuring that everyday moments out of reach are captured effortlessly. The 50MP LYT-600 sensor and 3x telephoto lens deliver crystal-clear shots in any lighting conditions, day or night. To house the large 1/1.95" sensor, OPPO engineered an all-new and innovative Triple Prism Folded Lens that reduces weight by 30% and size by 24% compared to previous models. By positioning the lens parallel to the phone's body, OPPO has minimised lens protrusion to just 3.09mm, ensuring a sleek, modern design. The 50MP IMX858-equipped 6x periscope camera extends your reach from travel photography to capturing your favourite performer on stage. Optical Image Stabilization (OIS) and the full 50MP resolution promise sharply focused shots even in low light, preserving every detail.



The primary 50MP camera, equipped with Sony's LYT-808 sensor, offers unmatched clarity in challenging lighting thanks to its advanced two-layer transistor pixel structure. By stacking the photodiode

and the pixel transistor on separate layers, this sensor significantly enhances dynamic range, reduces noise, and maximises light capture. The result is clearer, vivid images with superb contrast, even in low-light scenarios.

## Looking for a Telugu Rom-Com? 4 Reasons why you cannot miss 'Thelavarihte Guruvaram' on Tata Play South Talkies

Dive into a whirlwind of romance and laughter with Thelavarihte Guruvaram, airing on Tata Play South Talkies on 8th November 2024 at 7 PM in Telugu! Starring the charismatic trio Sri Simha Koduri, Chitra Shukla, and Misha Narang, this film serves a perfect blend of love, humour, and unexpected twists. The story follows a groom grappling with cold feet on his wedding night, triggering a chain of chaotic, hilarious events that will keep you hooked. With its quirky plot, vibrant cinematography, and an infectious soundtrack, Thelavarihte Guruvaram promises non-stop entertainment. This movie is also dubbed in Hindi and is titled Iss Raat Ki Subah Nahin. So, grab your popcorn and tune in to service number 350 (only on Tata Play) to experience this modern-day rom-com from the Telugu film industry.

### Slice-of-life Story

A captivating blend of comedy, romance, and drama, Thelavarihte Guruvaram weaves an unforgettable tale centered around Veeru, a groom who makes the bold decision to flee on his wedding night. What begins as a simple case of cold feet quickly unravels into a whirlwind of chaos, humor, and surprising discoveries. As Veeru navigates encounters with eccentric characters and faces a series of comedic and tense scenarios, the true motivations behind his abrupt escape gradually come to light. The film skillfully balances light-hearted humor with emotional depth, drawing audiences in with its exploration of love, relationships, and the weight of commitment.

### Star-Studded Cast

The talented trio of Sri Simha Koduri, Chitra Shukla, and Misha Narang breathe life into their characters. Sri Simha Koduri excels as Veeru, the conflicted groom who bolts from his wedding, seamlessly blending humor and emotional nuance as he navigates a night of chaos. Chitra Shukla shines as Madhu, the bride-to-be, portraying her frustration and vulnerability with authenticity and depth, making her an integral part of the story. Misha Narang brings a standout performance as Krishnaveni, whose bond with Veeru adds an extra layer of complexity to his predicament. The natural chemistry among the three actors enriches both the comedic and emotional beats, making the story compelling and heartfelt.

### Visuals and Direction

The vibrant cinematography by Suresh Ragutu and the skillful direction by debutant Manikanth Gelli infuse Thelavarihte Guruvaram with a fresh and visually striking style. Ragutu's work captures the film's colourful settings and lively atmosphere, employing dynamic shots and creative angles that perfectly reflect the quirky spirit of the story. Gelli's direction is notable for its ability to maintain a light-hearted tone while managing the film's pacing effectively. The fast-paced narrative ensures that the story remains engaging, blending humor and romance seamlessly. Together, these elements create a captivating film that is as enjoyable to watch as it is to listen to.





# Deputy CM Bhatti Vikramarka Inaugurates New Branch of Rao's Academy in Hyd

New Incentives for UPSC Aspirants Announced

Mr. Bhatti Vikramarka Mallu, Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister of Telangana, inaugurated the new branch of Rao's Academy at RTC X Roads, Hyderabad. The inauguration ceremony took place on 7th November, 2024 in the presence of Dr. Mohan Rao, IAS, Chairman of Rao's Academy, and Aruna Mohan Rao, IPS. In his address during the opening ceremony, Deputy Chief Minister Vikramarka emphasized the significance of Rao's Academy, stating, "In a significant step towards empowering the youth of Telangana, we open the doors to Rao's Academy, a pioneering Civil Service Coaching Center. This inauguration not only represents another educational facility but also our shared aspirations for a brighter future and our collective pursuit of excellence in public service."

He extended heartfelt congratulations to the founders of Rao's Academy, Mohan Rao and Aruna, for their steadfast commitment to enhancing educational opportunities in the region. "Your dedication, even while serving in the UP cadre, reflects a profound sense of pride and responsibility towards our community, and it inspires future generations," he remarked. Highlighting the Telangana government's unwavering support for aspiring civil servants, Vikramarka announced an incentive initiative: "Our government will provide an incentive of one lakh rupees to each student from Telangana selected for the UPSC Mains examination. This initiative aims to alleviate the financial burdens that many talented individuals encounter during their preparation, enabling them to focus entirely on their studies." The Deputy Chief Minister also touched upon the critical need to fill "two lakh vacant jobs" in the state, reaffirming the government's commitment made prior to the elections. To date, he



noted with pride that "50,000 jobs have already been filled", underlining the transparent and efficient recruitment process that distinguishes Telangana.

Emphasizing the importance of local representation in civil service, Vikramarka stated, "Every civil servant emerges from our communities and carries with them the hopes and aspirations of our people. The more individuals we have in administra-

tion from Telangana, the more effectively we can implement welfare schemes and ensure that regional interests are represented in governance." Addressing the challenges faced by aspiring civil servants who compete against well-established coaching academies in other regions, he expressed confidence in the capabilities of Rao's Academy. "Guided by the expertise of Mohan Rao and Aruna, this academy will serve as a beacon of hope for as-

piring civil servants. By focusing on critical subjects and effective examination techniques, this institution aims to level the playing field for our students." In closing, Bhatti Vikramarka urged the youth of Telangana to embrace the opportunities available: "Let us transform our beloved state into one that not only dreams but also achieves. Together, we can build a cadre of exceptional civil servants who exemplify our values, integrity, and aspirations."

## The Mental Wellbeing Paradox: 'Feel Good With Fiama' Mental Wellbeing Survey 2024

With mental health conversations gaining traction, ITC's 'Feel Good With Fiama Mental Wellbeing Survey 2024' marks its 4th year by exploring the perceptions and realities of mental health in India. Commissioned with NielsenIQ, the survey unveils the awareness, attitude and behavioural landscape for mental wellbeing in India. It reflects progressiveness in acknowledging the need for mental wellbeing while also indicating the persistent barriers in accessing professional support.

Despite growing awareness, many individuals still struggle in silence, hesitant to openly discuss their emotional well-being or seek professional help. There is a tendency to downplay struggles, or a belief that seeking help is only for those experiencing severe mental illness. This often leads to delaying professional support. This disconnect between awareness and action raises a crucial question: Why, in

an age of information and acceptance, are so many still hesitant to embrace therapy as a path to genuine well-being? The survey delves into this question further and reveals the paradox. While 83% of the survey participants believe mental health issues are nothing to be ashamed of, 81% feel ashamed of telling others that they are taking therapy. While we are becoming more accepting of mental health issues in general, the act of seeking help still carries a heavy weight of perceived societal judgement. This inherent fear of judgement prevents individuals from having open conversations about their mental well-being hindering access to support. This year's survey also reveals 80% of the participating Gen Z believe their parents would support them in therapy. There is a growing acceptance among close social circles and is a step towards normalizing mental health conversations.

Key findings of the survey:

### Mental Wellbeing

Cost is a barrier to therapy, with 77% of surveyed individuals finding therapy expensive. In addition to this, 74% do not go for therapy as health insurance does not cover mental health services.

55% believe therapy is for the weak, highlighting the enduring stigma surrounding mental health support.

83% respondents believe that youth report experiencing more anxiety and fear of change than older generations, emphasizing the unique pressures faced by younger demographics.

82% of the surveyed individuals believe that it takes a lot of effort to find the right therapist. 82% of the participating Gen Z believe people miss out on spotting the symptoms of mental health concerns, indicating a need for greater awareness and education.

69% of the surveyed individuals feel



issues with mental wellbeing negatively impacts their health condition.

65% of the surveyed individuals feel issues with mental wellbeing negatively impacts their sleep.



# Sonalika Celebrates Record Festive Season with Highest-Ever Monthly Overall Sales of 20,056 Tractors in October'24

Ensuring maximum delight for farmers all throughout during the recently concluded biggest festive season, India's No. 1 tractor export brand Sonalika Tractors has reached a new pinnacle of its highest ever monthly overall sales record of 20,056 tractors in Oct '24. The biggest monthly performance in the history of Sonalika Tractors is line with its mission to make it simpler for farmers to own a customised tractor and embrace sustainable farm prosperity.

Sonalika Tractors continues to be trusted brand that is driving transformational growth among farmers as well as uplifting the agriculture domain with the most powerful heavy-duty tractors. During the biggest festive season, the company's annual 'Heavy Duty Dhamaka' offer assured advanced tech powered tractors at reasonable prices for farmers and be an important support mechanism for farmers to surge ahead in life. With its widest deal-

ership network in the country, the company ensured to seed correct product placement customised as per regional farmer requirements and deliver on its commitment to quality with every tractor to offer exceptional performance. Sharing his thoughts on this unprecedented achievement, Mr. Raman Mittal, Joint Managing Director of International Tractors Limited, expressed, 'We are thrilled to have surpassed all previous monthly records with an outstanding 20,056 tractor sales, marking a proud moment shared with our farming community. Our greatest motivation lies in ensuring that every farmer has access to the right tractor—one that is reliable, customized, and uniquely suited to their needs—supporting their journey toward sustainable prosperity. As we celebrate this milestone performance of the year, this accomplishment renews our commitment to advancing the next generation of intelligent, heavy-duty tractors tailored to empower farmers at every step.'



## SRM AP Joins OPPO India's 'Generation Green' Campaign to combat E-Waste



SRM University-AP in collaboration with OPPO India and the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), is partnering to support the "Generation Green"—a national-level initiative aimed at empowering youth to become advocates of sustainability through green skills and actionable commitments. With this, the college becomes an 'Eco-Conscious Champion Institute' under the programme. The first phase of the campaign saw AICTE and OPPO India partner with 1M1B to promote sustainable practices among youth by offering green internships to students across India. Launched on July 08, 2024, by AICTE Chairperson Prof. T G Sitharam, in the presence of Dr Buddha Chandrasekhar, CCO, AICTE, over 9,000 students from over 1,400 institutions applied to join the noble venture. The second phase of the 'Generation Green' campaign witnessed SRM AP's partnership with OPPO and AICTE for educating youngsters about the need for responsible electronic waste management. In alignment with this initiative the varsity conducted E-Waste

Quest 2024, wherein it enlightened the students on the issue of waste management of discarded electronic items such as mobile phones, chargers, batteries, and wires. The campaign targets one million youth engagements by the end of 2024 to create a lasting impact on e-waste management and environmental preservation. "It is commendable initiative taken by both SRM University and OPPO India to spread awareness about electronic waste (e-waste), highlighting its significant impact on both society and the environment. Voluntary organizations and women's groups in rural areas should also participate in addressing this issue. Their involvement can ensure that awareness campaigns reach a broader demographic, fostering a community-based approach to e-waste management," said Ms Nagalakshmi Selvarajan, District Collector, Guntur. "Finally, I assure the governmental support for the initiative in the Guntur District to pave the way for a more cohesive and impactful approach to sustainable e-waste management in the future." Mr Rakesh Bhardwaj,

Head of Public Affairs, OPPO India said, "At OPPO India, we are committed to empowering India's youth in support of the Government's Net-Zero vision. Over 6,50,000 Green Pledges have been made demonstrating a strong commitment to eco-friendly living. With interns signing up at SRM University – AP, the program aims to inspire more students to adopt green prac-

tices and impact e-waste management. Prof. Bharadhwaj Sivakumaran, Dean-Paari School of Business and the officiating Vice Chancellor emphasised, "Initiatives like OPPO India's Generation Green Campaign illustrate how small, purposeful actions can catalyse significant change toward a sustainable future."

## The Bank Crosses over 100 million MTU milestone

Airtel Payments Bank today announced its consolidated results for the second quarter ended on 30 September 2024, continuing its strong growth trajectory. The Bank's quarterly revenue grew to Rs. 674 crore, up by 58% YoY and 10% up over the last quarter. The Bank's net profits stood at Rs. 11.2 crore, up by 45% YoY. EBITDA witnessed an increase of 87% YoY to Rs 76.1 crore in Q2 FY25. In a milestone, Airtel Payments Bank's Monthly Transacting User (MTU) count grew to 102 million, up by 76% YoY. The annualised gross merchandise value (GMV) crossed USD 40 billion dollars reflecting the growing adoption of the Bank's digital savings accounts and other products. The customer balances crossed Rs. 2,950 crore, up by 43% YoY. This growth has been driven by a strong uptake of Airtel Payments Bank's digital propositions, with an increasing number of customers choosing its digital safe account for daily transactions. The Bank emerged as the leading player in urban transit and maintained its leadership position in rural India. Anubrata Biswas, MD and CEO of Airtel Payments Bank said,



"These results underscore our position as a key player within the digital banking sector. The rapid adoption of our digital solutions and security features has made us India's first choice for a safe second account. This growth validates the strength of the payments bank model, demonstrating its crucial role in driving financial inclusion and meeting the evolving digital needs of India's population." Airtel Payments Bank caters to three key customer segments: Urban Digital, Underbanked, and Industries & Institutions.

It provides a wide range of digital banking solutions, alongside offerings such as insurance, lending, and investment services. The Bank processes over 8 billion transactions annually and ranks fifth among the leading mobile banking providers in India. With more than 500,000 neighbourhood banking points,



# Sustainability science for FMCGs

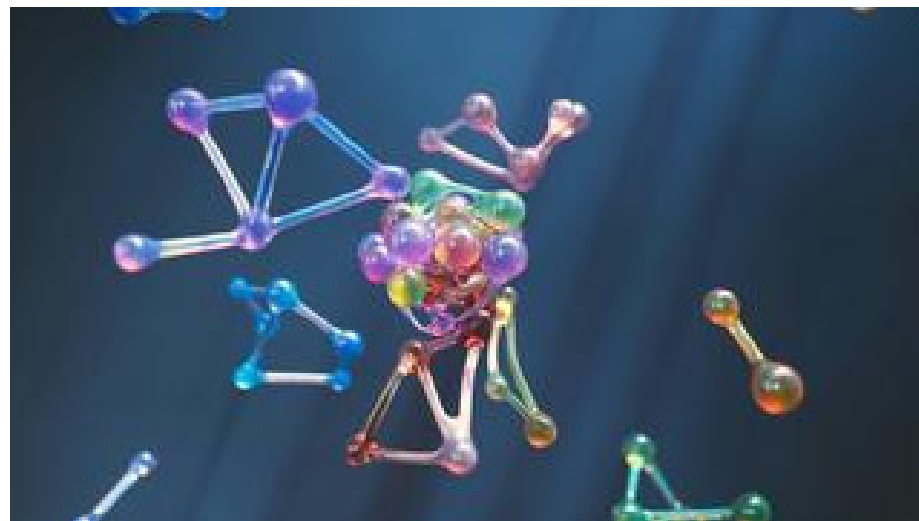
India's new PPP initiative, the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), established to promote research and development, and the recently announced BioE3 (Biotechnology for Economy, Environment and Employment) policy emphasise the need for academia-industry partnership; and the role of the bioeconomy in driving the economy while honouring India's commitment to sustainable development and climate action. Specifically, the BioE3 policy notes the need to convert chemical-based industries to sustainable bio-based industrial models. It also provides an opportunity to revisit the impact of new technologies on existing industries such as Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs). Reducing palm oil in soap

The soap industry globally, for example, is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and loss of biodiversity. The manufacturing of soap depends heavily on palm oil. About 90% of palm plantations are grown in Borneo, Sumatra, and the Malay Peninsula, where its lucrative production has led to replacing forested lands with palm oil fields. Although this deforestation has been well documented, replacing palm oil in soaps and other FMCG products has been difficult. For one, palm has relatively higher yields as compared with other vegetable oils, making it more lucrative for farmers and cheaper for consumers. Palm oil also accounts for about 40% of the global annual demand for vegetable oil. However, new emerging technologies may provide avenues to replace or at least reduce palm oil consumption in soaps. Palm oil is the primary source of fatty acids that perform two functions in a soap bar — 15-20% of the lower chain fatty acids contribute to the surfactant/cleansing function of the soap, while most of the longer chain fatty acids only provide structure to the bar. Synthetic biotechnologies may be able to create artificial fatty acid chains that can replace the functionalities of palm oil, particularly those providing structure to the bar. Alternately, the so-called 'structuring portion of the Total Fatty Matter', which provides no consumer benefit, could be replaced with other local plant or bio-based materials such as plant-based polysaccharides. Additionally, with the total amount of 'hard soap' reduced, other benefit agents like antimicrobial peptides or other biologically active molecules could be added to the soap bar to improve its germ-protection function or preferably molecules which boost the skin's immunity and provide germ protection. This will require strong support from government and civil society. It would mean the development of solutions across the soap value chain, be it bio-based or bio-synthetic materials that could replicate the brick-and-mortar structure of the soap bar or packaging innovations that can reduce/eliminate plastic use. The recent PPP initiative under ANRF, linked seamlessly with the BioE3 policy, could support such partnerships through funding and by recognising the need to reinvent legacy products in addition to introducing new ones.

Locally grown palm oil

Until bio-synthetic or bio-engineered products become a reality, every day-use products like soaps will depend on domestic and international sustainable palm oil plantations. The Government of India

launched the National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm in August 2021 with the aim of increasing the oil palm production area to 10 lakh ha. and boosting crude palm oil production to 11.20 lakh tonnes by 2025-26. It is important that such plantations not only adhere to the policy of 'No Deforestation, No Peat', but that they are also carefully selected so that they don't disrupt the surrounding biodiversity. A comprehensive ecological research programme to understand the long-term impact of these monocultures in the context of India's biodiversity is also a strong need, along with regenerative agriculture practices, working with smallholder farmers. The purchase of locally grown sustainable palm oil and investments in innovation to replace imported palm oil come at a cost, which, when borne by the company, may have to be passed onto the consumer. In a competitive market, this can mean the loss of market share. Government support through funding for research or other fiscal incentives encourage such sustainable practices and help companies innovate in this space. Finally, the move to reduce palm oil use in soaps will require regulatory support. Current toilet soap grades are decided based on the fatty material present in the soap. This creates a false equivalency in the government's and consumer's mind that the higher the fatty material in the soap,



the better the product's quality. Many publications disprove of this. Regulatory requirements for soap grades should move away from this old 'vertical' compositional standard based on a single material and embrace more horizontal and performance-based standards as those which exist in developed markets and incentivise newer technologies and methodologies linked to consumer benefit, product safety, and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, mandatory labelling of products on a sustainability scale based on their pro-

urement and production practices can also help consumers make informed decisions. The ANRF and the BioE3 policy are the right ways of moving towards a bio-based economy linked to a strong partnership between academia and industry. Products of everyday use might be a great first place to start, to make a real impact in terms of being both sustainable and self-reliant. Shambhavi Naik, Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru. Views are personal; L.S. Shashidhara, National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru. Views are personal

## China launches Shenzhou-19; new crew arrives at space station in sign of growing influence in space

A Chinese spaceship carrying a three-person crew docked with its orbiting space station Tuesday (October 29, 2024) as the country seeks to expand its exploration of outer space in competition with the United States, even as it looks for cooperation from other nations. The team of two men and one woman will replace the astronauts who have lived on the Tiangong space station for the last six months, conducting a variety of experiments and maintaining the structure. They are expected to stay until April or May of next year. The new mission commander, Cai Xuzhe, went to space in the Shenzhou-14 mission in 2022, while the other two, Song Lingdong and Ms. Wang Haoze, are first-time space travellers. Mr. Song and Ms. Wang were born in the 1990s and are graduates of the third wave of Chinese astronaut recruitment, having undergone a rigorous testing and training process taking years.

Chinese astronauts Wang Haoze, from left, Song Lingdong and Cai Xuzhe wave during the see-off ceremony for the Shenzhou-19 mission at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China, in the early hours of Wednesday (October 30, 2024). Early Wednesday (October 30, 2024) morning, China declared the launch and entry into outer space a "complete success." The Shenzhou-19 spaceship carrying the trio blasted off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China at 4:27 a.m. local time atop a Long March-2F rocket, the backbone of China's crewed space missions. "The crew condition is good and the launch has



been successful," the state broadcaster China Central Television announced. China built its own space station after being excluded from the International Space Station, mainly because of U.S. concerns over the People's Liberation Army, the Chinese Communist Party's military arm's overall control over the space program. China's moon program is part of a growing rivalry with the U.S. and others, including Japan and India.

Mr. Song was an air force pilot and Ms. Wang, an engineer with the China Aerospace Science and Technology Cor-

poration. Ms. Wang will be the crew's payload specialist and the third Chinese woman aboard a crewed mission. Besides putting a space station into orbit, the Chinese space agency has landed an explorer on Mars. It aims to put a person on the moon before 2030, which would make China the second nation after the United States to do so. It also plans to build a research station on the moon and has already transferred rock and soil samples from the moon in a first for any nation in decades, and placed a rover on the little-explored far side of the moon in a global first.



# Vijay: A mass hero now looks to the masses

Around 13 years ago, an interviewer from the NDTV Hindu asked C. Joseph Vijay, familiar by his screen name Vijay, "If politics beckons, which party would you join and when?" It was a question, commonly faced by top actors in Tamil Nadu where politics and cinema remain intertwined. Most would shy away. However, Vijay responded in a measured tone. "Right now, my interest is only cinema... I desired to be an actor. Back then I did not expect that the people would bring me on to such a big stage... Similarly, time will make me sit in a position. When that happens, I am determined that for the people of Tamil Nadu I have to do something... We can't come [to politics] just because someone writes or gives a build-up. The base for that must be strengthened. We are doing it constantly by converting the fans' association into a people's movement," he said.

Now, the actor is in the limelight after making a high-voltage political address at the first rally of his fledgling Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) in Vikravandi recently. For a debutant, his well-rehearsed speech, delivered in a cinematic fashion peppered with punch dialogues, have largely hit the right notes, in terms of its appeal to his audience. Without naming any political party, he spelt out his party's position: it shall be ideologically opposed to "sectarian" forces and politically opposed to what he described as the looting of Tamil Nadu by one family that invoked the name of Dravidian stalwarts Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and C.N. Annadurai. In short, the message is he shall maintain a distance from the BJP and take on the ruling DMK. Besides, another message that emerged from Vikravandi was that Tamil Nadu has got back a political crowd puller after the passing of leaders such as M. Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa. The milling crowd at the rally venue and the jamming of the highways by vehicles was proof of this. There is, however, no guarantee, that crowds necessarily convert into votes.

However, aside from the plank of fighting corruption, Vijay has not offered anything new to the Tamil Nadu electorate. He has preferred the status quo on the Dravidian parties' two-language formula (opposing Hindi imposition); abolition of the post of Governor; opposition to NEET-based admission to medical courses; and restoring Education as a State List subject. He has chosen to accept Periyar as one of the guiding lights of his party minus the social reformer's atheistic viewpoint. He also sees no difference between "Dravidam" and "Tamil Nationalism" and believes they are two eyes of this land, something which followers of the two ideologies would strongly reject. Vijay's coinage of his party's commitment to "secular social justice principles" is as ambiguous as the "Annaism" coined by the late M.G. Ramachandran to describe his AIADMK's ideology. His opposition to "sectarian" politics appears to be a bit superfluous considering that he made light of "fascism" by

equating it with payasam (a sweet dish).

Soft stance towards AIADMK Nonetheless, he has stirred Tamil Nadu politics by declaring he is open to sharing power with allies. Unlike other new entrants, who have projected themselves as an alternative to the two established players, the DMK and the AIADMK, Vijay has remained silent on the latter. While Vijay's offer for a share in power was made by placing the TVK in a position of strength and eyeing potential allies as junior partners, his soft approach towards the AIADMK subtly underlines that politics is pregnant with possibilities. The groundwork for Vijay's political entry was carefully laid by his father and director S.A. Chandrasekhar who launched him as a child artiste and has been instrumental in converting the fans' club into Vijay Makkal Iyakkam (People's Movement). The spade-work for Vijay's political entry was begun much earlier by his father and director, S.A. Chandrasekhar, who had launched him as a child artiste in Vetri (1984) and thereafter as a young hero in Naalaiya Theerpu (1992). When the first few films bombed, Chandrasekhar approached Vijayakant, one of the top actors of the time, to do Senthoorapandi with Vijay. It worked wonders and over the years, Vijay turned into a bankable actor, initially earning the moniker Ilaya Thalapathi (young commander). He later entered the big league and became Thalapathi, a sobriquet that has incidentally been used by supporters to address incumbent Chief Minister M.K. Stalin. Chandrasekhar carefully cultivated a fan base for Vijay early on; encouraged his son to be accessible to fans; and was instrumental in converting the fans' club into Vijay Makkal Iyakkam (People's Movement).

Vijay built on this platform. He never lost an opportunity to take a political line on regionally emotive issues. He did some of these outside the glare of cameras. For instance, in 2018, under the cover of darkness, he knocked on the doors of grieving families whose kin were killed in the police firing on anti-Sterlite protestors in Thoothukudi and consoled them. His PR machinery ensured these acts made it to the media limelight later. Occasionally, he took centre stage as well. In 2008, at the height of the civil war in Sri Lanka, he went on a day's fast in Chennai calling for ending the strife. Flanking him on the stage were his mother Shobha Chandrasekhar and Bussy N Anand, a former Congressman and MLA from Puducherry. The latter, who headed the Vijay Makkal Iyakkam, has since played a crucial role in the metamorphosis of the movement into a political party and is its general secretary.

Lack of clarity While Vijay associated himself with issues that could potentially give him political leverage, he lacked clarity on which political train to board and when. This was evident from his brief association with birds of different feathers. Initially, his father wanted him to float his party during 2009, when the towering Dravidian leaders M. Karunanidhi and



Jayalalithaa were active. Around the same time, he met Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and discussed politics, cinema, Makkal Iyakkam and his fans club. He, however, remained hesitant about an electoral plunge. In 2011, Chandrasekhar met Jayalalithaa and declared the support of the Ilaya Thalapathi Vijay Makkal Iyakkam to the AIADMK in the Assembly election. The same year, Vijay flew down to the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi to express solidarity with social activist Anna Hazare, who was on a fast seeking the establishment of a Lokpal to fight corruption. In 2014, he met the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. His meeting with Mr. Modi notwithstanding, he faced the ire of the BJP for dialogues ridiculing the Digital India

initiative and the Goods and Service Tax in the film Mersal. Senior BJP leader H. Raja shared the actor's voter ID card to stress that his full name was Joseph Vijay, a Christian. Vijay has cited the political success of M.G.R. and N.T. Rama Rao but those were achieved in a different era. There is no doubt Vijay's electoral debut comes with a minimum guarantee given his frenzied fanbase but it is unlikely to catapult him to power overnight. If Vijay goes it alone in the 2026 Assembly election, he would certainly wound one of the two principal players, depending on the strength of their respective alliances, similar to what Vijayakant did in 2006. For achieving singular success, though, he needs to be patient, plot his moves, and hit the ground to run a marathon and not a sprint.

## Google unveils seven new AI updates for enhanced search, maps features

New Delhi: From Maps to Search, Google has recently announced seven new artificial intelligence (AI) updates that offer more ways people can ask questions, search for information and get an AI overview across products. Now, you'll be able to ask Maps more complex queries, like "things to do with friends" to get answers curated with Gemini, quick answers to questions about a place — in addition to helpful review summaries when you don't have time to read through each one, according to the tech giant.

"The latest AI update in Maps means that whether you're traveling across town or around the world, you can get the most up-to-date information possible, when you need it. Make sure to also check out the new updates we're making to Waze, Google Earth and our developer products," said the company. Now, the users can also upload PDFs, Google Docs, websites, YouTube videos and more to NotebookLM to glean new insights and get deeper dives on new topics. Google Shopping has rolled out new AI to help you pick the right prod-

uct for you.

The new Google Shopping — which is available in the US to begin with — uses AI to help take the guesswork out of finding the right products. "For example, when researching a product, an AI-generated brief will give you more details about the most important things to know before buying. And, as you browse the results, you will see AI-generated briefs about what to consider before making a purchase, plus the products that may (or may not) be a good fit for your needs," explained Google. Google Search got a major AI update, expanding the types of questions people can ask. In October, the company added even more updates, including helping people to identify songs in Circle to Search, shop for what they see and search with video. All Chromebooks will now come with the Gemini app, and Chromebook Plus laptops include new Google AI productivity tools like Live Translate, Help me write, the Recorder app and Welcome Recap, which helps people pick right back up where they left off when logging into a Chromebook.

# Balancing the posture, enthusing the base: Kamala Harris's challenge in the last lap

With the result all set to go down to the wire, the focus of Democrat Kamala Harris in the last week of the presidential polls campaign is on getting sceptics within the camp to get out and vote. Her key allies in this pursuit are former President Barack Obama and independent Senator Bernie Sanders who have made repeated pleas to social groups that traditionally supported the Democrats but are unenthused about voting for Ms. Harris. More than 60 million votes — about a fourth of the total — have already been cast as of Thursday (October 31, 2024). Voting concludes on November 5. Ms. Harris and her Republican opponent Donald J. Trump are urging the rest not to miss voting, but hesitant supporters may be more a concern for the former than the latter. Ms. Harris has made an audacious attempt to stitch together a coalition of extremes — from socialists to neocons and sections of everyone in between, while maintaining a safe distance from the unpopular President Joe Biden, and seeking to redefine her own political profile in the process.

Proponents of many contradictory strands agree that a second presidency of Republican Donald Trump would be far worse for all of them than having Ms. Harris at the top. Key issues that confuse the Democratic base are the party's, and specifically the candidate's, approach towards Israel, the working class and corporate interests. Opinion polls have suggested discontent among African Americans and Latinos too — communities that Democratic strategists have traditionally taken for granted. Independent Senator Bernie Sanders specially addressed young voters, the working class, Israel critics and Palestinian supporters who are sceptical about Ms. Harris in recent days with the specific warning — "Donald Trump and his right-wing friends are worse." In stump speeches, interviews, a video message and in an OpEd, Mr. Sanders had one message to his supporters — Ms. Harris may not be the best on the question of unrestrained support for Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's expanding war in West Asia and on working-class rights vis a vis corporation, but she is better than Mr. Trump.

Mr. Sanders counted himself among the critics of Mr. Biden and Ms. Harris on Israel, and promised to press for a change in U.S. policy, when she wins. Mr. Sanders is openly criticising the Democratic Party for its inadequate appreciation of the struggles of the working class and its linkages with big corporations, and the unqualified support for Mr. Netanyahu. Mr. Sanders was a popular candidate for the Democratic nomination in 2016 which finally went to Hillary Clinton, but he continues to have his finger on the pulse of people who find Mr. Trump appealing. Democratic establishment has been largely dismissive of the Trump base and this surfaces to the party's detriment, occasionally. This week, Mr. Biden termed Trump supporters "garbage." He tried to explain it away later, and Ms. Harris strongly dissociated herself from the sentiment. By acknowledging the grievance of the party's

own base, Mr. Sanders is deviating from the official campaign tone of euphoria, to win over the the disgruntled sections back. Mr. Sanders did exactly the same thing in 2020 for Mr. Biden, and the question is whether he can repeat it, particularly in the midst of a raging war in West Asia. Mr. Obama has emerged as a central figure in the Harris campaign, which is contrary to his liking, according to some reports. In his latest message, Mr. Obama addressed Black men yet again. "As we enter the final moments of the campaign, President Obama reminds us that you are the most credible messengers," campaign group Win With Black Men posted along with a video message from the former President, on Thursday. Mr. Obama had publicly noted a lack of enthusiasm among African American men and linked that to Ms. Harris being a woman. His public comments drew backlash from several community leaders who found it patronising. With various constituents breaking away from their traditional voting positions, neither Mr.



Trump nor Ms. Harris has been able to sharply frame the contest around their most favourable question, immigration and abortion, respectively. Ms. Harris has a bevy of Republicans, particularly neocons, rooting

for her, but their impact on the electorate is unlikely to be significant. What could be more consequential will be her ability to hold the Democratic camp together and active in the last lap, in swing States.

## How is Tamil Nadu bracing for heatwaves?

The story so far: The Tamil Nadu government, last week, notified a heatwave as a State-specific disaster. This would entail providing relief to people affected by heatwaves, solatium for the family of those who have died of heat-related causes, and to launch interim measures to help manage the heat. Expenditure for this will be incurred from the State Disaster Response Fund.

Is heat a crisis now?

The World Meteorological Organization declared that 2023 was the hottest year on record. The frequency of heatwaves has increased in recent years, consistent with anthropogenic climate change, as per the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023. Closer home, in India, people are already reeling under the impact of intense heatwaves. In a paper in the journal *Environment International*, titled *Impact of heatwaves on all-cause mortality in India: A comprehensive multi-city study*, the authors Jeroen de Bont et al record India's heatwaves that have been occurring with increased frequency during the last decades. In May 1998, India experienced a severe heatwave over a two-week period considered to be the worst in the preceding 50 years. During the summer of 1999, India experienced unprecedented heat in April, with maximum temperatures of 40°C or above for more than 14 days. Another heatwave in 2003 was estimated to have caused more than 3,000 deaths in Andhra Pradesh, the paper recounts. In May 2010, a heatwave in Ahmedabad led to approximately 1,300 deaths. In 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2023 extreme heatwaves have been observed across India. In the summer of

2024, a severe and long heatwave impacted India, blistering plains and hills, causing deaths and heat strokes. May 2024 was the worst, with Churu in Rajasthan recording a maximum of 50.5°C, recorded as the highest temperature in India in eight years. As per records, there were 219 deaths, including election officials on duty in the districts; over 25,000 people suffered from heatstroke.

How is a heatwave defined?

A heatwave is defined generally as a prolonged period of unusually and excessively hot weather, which may also be accompanied by high humidity, but is primarily determined by regions for themselves. The India Meteorological Department (IMD), which determines heatwave conditions, has specified the following criteria: a heatwave need not be considered till maximum temperature of a station reaches at least 40°C for plains and at least 30°C for hilly regions. In the regional context, heatwave management has already emerged as a problem requiring focused attention. During April and May 2024, many parts of Tamil Nadu recorded temperatures above 40°C.

Eun-Soon Im et al, in a paper on *Deadly heatwaves projected in the densely populated agricultural regions of South Asia* featured in *Science Advances*, stated that the crisis is all the more significant in South Asia, a region inhabited by about one-fifth of the global human population, where there exists an unprecedented combination of severe natural hazards and acute vulnerability. "The most intense hazard from extreme future heatwaves is concentrated around densely

populated agricultural regions of the Ganges and Indus river basins," the paper forecasts.

How does heat impact health?

Extreme heat conditions have a definite deleterious impact on human health, life and productivity. In their paper, Jeroen de Bont et al say they found strong evidence of the impact of heatwaves on daily mortality. Longer and more intense heatwaves were linked to an increased mortality risk. This makes it a public health problem that governments must tend to. They further add that heat-related morbidity and mortality can be caused by the direct effects of exposure to extreme heat, including a spectrum of heat-related illnesses from heat exhaustion to heat stroke. "Equally challenging from a public health perspective are the indirect effects of extreme heat exposure, occurring when heat exposure stresses underlying physiological systems and results in other specific manifestations such as renal insufficiency, acute cerebrovascular and cardiovascular disease, and exacerbations of pulmonary disease," the paper notes.

Further, existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, lack of access to shelter and health care, unplanned cities and working out in the open, add to the burden in mid and low middle income communities. Children, senior citizens, pregnant women, those with pre-existing co morbidities, and people forced to work in the open, as in construction and agriculture industries, are more vulnerable to the impact of heat. According to the WHO, heat-related mortality for people over 65 years of age increased by approximately 85% between 2000-2004 and 2017-2021.