

UGC unveils draft guidelines for integrating informal, non-formal learning into formal education system

Hyderabad: In a move that has potential to bring transformative changes in the country's blue-collar workforce, the University Grants Commission (UGC) on Tuesday rolled out draft guidelines introducing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in higher education, allowing individuals acquire a formal qualification that matches individual competencies, subject to assessment. The RPL, as per the guidelines, is defined as a formal mechanism used to evaluate a person's existing knowledge, skills, and experience gained through formal (educational institutions), non-formal (learning outside formal setting), or informal learning (self-directed and unplanned learning).

The new initiative is aimed at integrating informal and non-formal learning into the formal education system subject to assessment. It offers individuals the opportunity to formalize their competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) and earn credits through a well-defined framework. It can help individuals acquire a formal qualification that matches individual competencies, improv-

ing their employability, mobility, and lifelong learning. The UGC, in the Commission meeting conducted on November 14, approved the draft guidelines for implementing RPL by specifying several mechanisms. This system is already existing in several countries, including Australia, South Africa, Malaysia, South Africa and New Zealand.

According to the draft guidelines, the RPL allows learners to gain credit towards a qualification based on their previous learning experiences gained through different ways, including, on-the-job training, internships and apprenticeships, volunteer work, hobbies and personal projects, mentorship/ 'Guru-Shishya Parampara'. The prior learning or experience is a must to the program or qualification for which RPL is sought. In addition, candidates need to demonstrate how their prior learning corresponds to the learning outcomes, competencies, or requirements of the program. "We must address the challenges faced by India's large informal workforce, which requires formal education and career progression



opportunities. The RPL, which is integral to the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, allows individuals to gain formal recognition for skills and competencies acquired through informal, non-formal, or

experiential learning. Through RPL, such individuals can access higher education, earn formal qualifications, and improve their employability," said Prof. M Jagadesh Kumar, Chairman UGC.

The right time to buy EVs in Telangana, say many with eye on incentives



Hyderabad: The State has witnessed a surge in sales of Electric Vehicles (EVs) with the sale witnessing a 24.52 percent growth in the last one month. This is after the government announced tax exemptions recently. About 3,372 electric vehicles were registered in various parts of the State between November 18 and December 3, whereas it was 2,708 during the entire November last year. Most of these are believed to be electric two-wheelers. According to Transport department officials, 78,262 new electric vehicles have been sold and registered during the year, whereas it was 51,994 during the same period last year. However, the sale of EV cars has not picked up so far,

which is worrying the car dealers and manufacturers. Telangana's new electric vehicle policy provides significant tax exemptions, encouraging EV ownership and aiming to increase sales. Telangana's new electric vehicle policy provides tax exemptions ranging between Rs.1.4 lakh and Rs.45 lakh on new electric vehicles, with premium cars receiving the maximum benefits. The Regional Transport Authority (RTA) levies a life tax between 13-18 percent on vehicles priced above Rs.5 lakh, with the tax component varying based on the vehicle cost. However, the new EV policy offers 100 percent exemption from life tax and registration fee on purchase of new vehicles up to Dec 31,

2026. The BRS government had introduced the Telangana Electric Vehicle & Energy Storage Policy 2020-2030, which propelled the faster adoption of EVs in the State as it offered 100 per cent exemption of road tax and registration fees for the first 2 lakh electric two-wheelers and 5,000 electric cars purchased and registered within the State. This made electric vehicles an attractive option for consumers looking to reduce their overall ownership costs. However, the Electric car sales saw a substantial drop af-

ter the State government withdrew the lifetime road tax and registration fee exemption enjoyed by electric passenger cars in July last year. The EV car dealers were forced to deduct the road tax amount from the total price of the vehicle to attract customers. They suffered huge losses due to this. However, now they feel that the exemptions provided by the government would boost the sale of EV cars. At present, there are 1.7 lakh EVs, which includes 1.3 lakh bikes and 12,765 cars in the State.

Hyderabad couple caught stealing footwear

Hyderabad: A man, who allegedly stole branded footwear from residential colonies and then sold them in open weekly markets, was caught red-handed by the local residents in Vasavi Nagar in Uppal. In a video that went viral on social media on Thursday, a couple can be seen stocking up several pairs of branded shoes and slippers in their house. The residents alleged that the couple was stealing the footwear in residential colonies during the night and selling them in the weekly market in Borabanda. They were allegedly involved in stealing footwear in Vasavi Nagar, Sri Nagar Colony, Ramanthapur, Bharat Nagar in Uppal and surroundings.

The theft reportedly came to light when locals raided the suspects' house over sus-



In a video that went viral on social media on Thursday, a couple can be seen stocking up several pairs of branded shoes and slippers in their house.

picion but the couple denied any wrong. No police complaint was lodged.

What is the delay in forming a government in Austria? | Explained

The story so far: The Austrian chancellor Karl Nehammer's ruling People's Party (OVP) has inched closer to heading Vienna's next coalition government. The party was the runner-up in the September 29 elections and its vote slump, compared with the 2019 polls, was the biggest loss any ruling party has sustained. The OVP's prospective coalition partner, the Social Democrats (SPO) put up their worst ever electoral showing since World War II. Conversely, the far-right, xenophobic, Eurosceptic, anti-Muslim and pro-Russian Freedom Party (FPO), emerged the largest entity, albeit without a majority.

Why is the FPO being shunned?

All of Austria's mainstream parties have refused to form a government with the FPO. The only ground the ultra-right party has gained since the polls is the election of one of its members as the parliament's speaker. Among the reasons for parties' antipathy towards the FPO are the latter's backing for Russia in its full-scale aggression against Ukraine. The FPO has veered further to the extreme right under its current leader Herbert Kickl, who styles himself as the 'people's chancellor,' in a not so oblique reference to Adolf Hitler, and regards Hungary's autocratic President Viktor Orban as his role model. As interior minister in the short-lived 2017-2019 OVP-FPO coalition government, Mr. Kickl shut down mosques in a crackdown against the "Islamisation" of Austria.

His infamous raids on the nation's intelligence services severely compromised collaboration with international agencies. He continues to advocate for the re-migration of citizens of foreign origin as part of the mission to create a homogenous Austrian society.

Why is FPO not forming the government?

Departing from convention, the Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen opted not to invite the FPO to form a government, even though it had emerged the largest party in the parliament's lower house. President Van der Bellen has previously stressed that the practice hitherto followed by the head of the state was a tradition, not a requirement under the Austrian constitution. As such, on October 9, he gathered the three largest parties in the new legislature in an effort to facilitate consultations on the prospects for a new government. With no signs of a resolution, he tasked chancellor Nehammer with the responsibility. The President has indicated definite red lines that ought not to be crossed under his watch by any government. Most notable of these is Vienna's European Union (EU) membership, which the FPO has steadfastly opposed.

What explains the FPO's appeal?

The FPO has participated in three federal governments since the 1980s. There was a minor ripple across Europe at the turn



of the century, when the FPO's Jorg Haider joined a ruling alliance with the OVP, as EU capitals threatened bilateral boycotts on the country. However, in a measure of the far-right's greater acceptability in Austria and across the EU, the reaction to the party's cohabitation in a coalition with the OVP between 2017-2019 was markedly muted. The FPO's growing appeal has much to do with popular disenchantment with decades of centrist coalitions, a Europe-wide phenomenon, which in the aftermath of the Holocaust, was seen as a bulwark against political ex-

tremism. In reality however, the OVP and SPO coalitions have over the years been tainted with divvying up key positions in government and business between themselves.

The prospective coalition among the OVP, SPO and the liberal NEOS will undoubtedly have its share of ideological differences to contend with. The longer they take to strike a deal, the greater the potential within the FPO to pressure its leader Mr. Kickl to step aside to allow the party to join a coalition with the OVP.

What's the row over tungsten mining in Madurai?

The story so far: The Ministry of Mines recently announced it had granted tungsten mining rights to Hindustan Zinc Limited, a subsidiary of Vedanta Limited, through an auction on November 7. One of the areas chosen was a band in Melur in Madurai district. Following protests, the State government of Tamil Nadu said that it would soon pass a resolution to reject it.

What does the Ministry say about mining?

The Union government, through a statement on November 7, stated that the Ministry of Mines had successfully concluded the auction of eight critical mineral blocks, launched under Tranche IV of the auction of critical and strategic mineral blocks. It attributed the success of the auction to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, which leveraged the Union government's authority to grant mineral concessions for key minerals listed in Part D of the First Schedule. Following the issuance of the Notice Inviting Tender (NIT) on June 24 for 21 mineral blocks, 10 mineral blocks advanced to the second round of e-auction. They contained deposits of strategic minerals such as phosphorite, graphite and vanadium, essential for high-tech and green energy applications. As the Nayakkarpatti tungsten block is one among eight blocks se-

lected for mining, the Mineral Exploration and Consultancy Ltd. of the Ministry of Mines in its report noted that the 2,015.51 hectares earmarked for tungsten mining was found to be rich in scheelite — an important ore of tungsten. The water source for mining in the area was listed as the Periyar canal.

Why is there opposition?

The public, environmental activists and politicians have staunchly opposed the move to start tungsten mining in the biodiversity-rich heritage area at Melur. Though the Ministry claimed that it had taken inputs from the Tamil Nadu government, which reportedly showed no opposition before the auction, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to cancel the mining rights awarded to the private firm before announcing that the State government would pass a resolution to cancel mining rights. The earmarked area for mining comprises Melur, Terkutteru, Muthuvelpatti, Kulanipatti, Kidaripatti, Etimagamalam, Arittapatti, Vallalappatti, Sillippyapatti, Chettiyarpatti, and Nayakkarpatti. Locals and environmental activists fear that mining would destroy its rich flora and fauna in addition to distorting its cultural significance. The major argument raised by opposing voices is the location's significance as a biodiversity heritage site, declared by the Tamil Nadu government



through a notification in November 2022, to protect the site comprising 139.63 hectares in Arittapatti village (Melur block) and 53.8 hectares in Meenakshipuram village (Madurai East taluk) from quarrying and other developmental activities. Though the Ministry had explained that out of the total area of 20.16 sq.km, only 1.93 sq.km within Arittapatti and Meenakshipuram villages had been notified as a biodiversity heritage site, activists are sceptical about the impact of mining on the environment and cultural sites

like temples and Jain beds located around the area. R.S. Mugilan, an environmental activist known for his protest against projects like Sterlite, Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, hydrocarbon Project in Neduvasal, and Neutrino project, said, "Vedanta — the company that won the auction for tungsten mining, is known for pollution practices at its copper smelting unit in Thoothukudi." Highlighting issues from the climate change perspective, Poovulagin Nanbargal, an environmental organisation based in Tamil Nadu.

Strong growth in international student enrolments in New Zealand

Hyderabad :New Zealand's international education sector is rebounding strongly, up 24 per cent year-on-year and 6 per cent above 2023 totals, Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Penny Simmonds says. Hon Penny Simmonds | Tertiary Education and Skills "With 73,535 enrolments between January to August 2024, more enrolments have been achieved in just two terms this year than we saw in all of last year," Ms Simmonds says "This strong growth in international student enrolments is a testament to New Zealand's global reputation for high-quality education. These students not only enrich our campuses but also significantly boost our economy, contributing to jobs, local businesses, and communities nationwide. With historical trends pointing to further enrolment increases before year-end, these are really positive results for our education providers. International education is not just about numbers - it's about building lasting global connections, fostering innovation, and positioning New Zealand as a leader in education and research. "The enrolments show national recovery as well as significant regional gains from 2023. Gisborne has experienced remarkable growth with an increase of 126 per cent, Marlborough has had an increase of 45 per cent, Hawke's Bay has increased of 28 per cent, and Waikato is up 26 per cent. Universities and schools are driving growth, with universities enrolling 31,345 international students, a 14 per cent increase, and schools rising by 33 per cent to 16,815 students, including 69 per cent surge in primary school enrolments. Funded private training establishments also grew by 80 per cent on last year. Diversity in source markets strengthens our education sector. While China and India lead, enrolments have grown from the US, Thailand, Germany, Sri Lanka,



and the Philippines, each now contribute 3 per cent of international students. "Every funded part of the sector has seen growth this year, with universities now just 7 per cent below pre-pandemic levels, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of New Zealand's education providers," Ms Simmonds says. Notes to Editors: About Education New Zealand (ENZ) <https://www.enz.govt.nz/Education> New Zealand Manapou ki te Ao (ENZ)

is the government agency dedicated to helping Aotearoa New Zealand realise the social, cultural, and economic benefits of international education. Our role is to promote New Zealand as a high-quality education destination offering excellent education and students experiences and to encourage New Zealand students to study overseas. With approximately 110 staff in 16 locations around the world, ENZ works closely with New

Zealand's diverse education sector which includes schools, English language providers, Private Training Establishments, Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (Te Pukenga), and universities. Internationally, we work with a range of education stakeholders, including government agencies and education providers to identify and encourage sustainable growth opportunities for New Zealand's education sector.

NxtWave Joins the Ranks of India's Fastest-Growing Tech Companies in Deloitte Technology Fast 50 India 2024

Hyderabad :NxtWave, a pioneer in upskilling India's youth in emerging technologies, has been recognized among the Top 50 Fastest-Growing Technology Companies in the prestigious Deloitte Technology Fast 50 India 2024 Awards. This accolade, previously awarded to industry leaders like Razorpay, Zomato, Cashify, Darwinbox, and Zepto, celebrates NxtWave's remarkable growth and its groundbreaking use of technology to disrupt the EdTech industry. The Deloitte Technology Fast 50 has, over the years, become one of the most aspirational and coveted recognitions for tech entrepreneurs in the nation. The list comprises some of the most highly competitive, new-age, agile businesses that are not only focusing on revenue and growth but are also addressing numerous societal challenges, including issues related to sustainability, financial inclusion, medical technology, and more. Peeyush Vaish, Partner and TMT Industry Leader, Deloitte India, remarked "The Indian technology sector is at a transformative crossroads. With innovation-focused policies, increasing digital inclusivity, and global recognition, India's tech ecosystem is setting new benchmarks. The Deloitte

TechFast50 winners exemplify agility, scalability, and impactful innovation. This year's cohort of winners highlights the resilience and ingenuity driving India's tech evolution. At Deloitte, we are proud to support this journey of building better futures together. We extend our congratulations to NxtWave on being recognized as one of the 50 fastest-growing technology companies in India. "NxtWave's recognition highlights its relentless pursuit of redefining tech education and its innovative integration of AI-driven solutions for learning and business efficiency.

Rahul Attuluri, Co-founder and CEO of NxtWave said, "We are honored to receive the Deloitte Technology Fast 50 India 2024 Award. This recognition is a testament to the incredible strides we've made as a team. At NxtWave, we've consistently pushed boundaries to integrate technology and create unmatched value for our students. From AI-driven solutions like NxtMock, AI Tutors, and Metaversity to AI-powered systems optimizing our business operations, we're reimagining what's possible in EdTech. We're only 10-20% into realizing the full potential of technology, and with the rocket speed we're



moving forward, the possibilities are endless. "NxtWave's success is driven by its innovative solutions, including NxtMock, an AI-powered platform for mock interviews that prepares students for placements. AI Tutors and Mentors provide personalized, AI-driven learning and query resolution. Metaversity offers immersive virtual learning experiences, and the Advanced Learning Portal features online IDEs and a robust learning

platform. In addition to student-facing innovations, NxtWave leverages AI for operational efficiency with Call Audit & Intelligence across Sales, Pre-Sales, and Student Success. AI-Powered Content Creation enhances branding and social media, and Interview Analysis & Intelligence optimizes placement outcomes. This recognition underscores NxtWave's vision of becoming a technology-driven company that revolutionizes learning both online and offline.

ITC Nimyle Introduces Clean Equal Mission to foster a mindset of Equality

Hyderabad: ITC Nimyle, India's trusted home hygiene brand made with neem, takes a conscious step towards a more responsible tomorrow with the launch of its Clean Equal Mission. In many households, women are expected to take the primary responsibility of household chores especially cleaning. The initiative is designed to foster equality in cleaning by raising awareness and inspiring action among the next gen. The Clean Equal Mission includes a first-of-kind educative module for children, to instil cleaning as a shared responsibility. Our endeavour is to inculcate a change in society which will enable children of today to grow up with a deep sense of independence and equality along with the basics of cleanliness and hygiene. Cleaning is the first chore that children are usually tasked with at home. Studies have shown that doing chores from a young age lays the groundwork for a more fulfilling and successful life in the future. Participating in these chores also helps them develop a stronger sense of self-worth while fostering empathy and teamwork skills. Most importantly, it encourages independence, which is crucial for their future.

Joining the launch at Hyderabad, was former World No. 1 in Women's Doubles (Tennis), Ms. Sania Mirza. The launch event included an interactive panel discussion with Ms. Sania Mirza, Mr. Sanjay Srinivas, Vice President – Marketing, Personal Care Products Business, ITC Limited, along with Ms. Madhavi Chandra, Principal of Gitanjali Devshala and Director in the Gitanjali Group of schools, and Ms. Kiranmai Choudary, an accomplished educator and parenting mentor trained under Glenn Doman at The Institutes for Achievement of Human Potential, Philadelphia, USA. Ms. Choudary further engaged invitee parents in an interactive workshop on Clean Equal.

Through engaging, age-appropriate educational content, the program inspires kids to embrace responsibility in a positive, fun and relatable way. This initiative is a col-



laborative programme with schools and parents to help children internalise the idea of Clean Equal enabling them to grow into responsible individuals who value equality. Sania Mirza, endorsing the initiative, added, "I am honoured to be a part of ITC Nimyle's Clean Equal Mission. This initiative deeply resonates with my values and the need for responsible parenting. It's more than just cleaning; it's about fostering a sense of shared responsibility and nurturing the mindset of equality from an impressionably young age. I must compliment the ITC Nimyle team for broaching this conversation which will encourage parents like us, schools

and children to collectively work together for a more equal and responsible tomorrow!" Sameer Satpathy, Divisional Chief Executive, Personal Care Products Business, ITC Limited commented, "ITC Nimyle's Clean Equal Mission reflects our dedication to drive positive change by fostering values of equality from a young age. Cleaning is one of the first household chores that drives a sense of ownership, pride and self-worth. We believe that this program will help children nurture the values of teamwork, independence, and a sense of empowerment, encouraging them to become more responsible adults in the future." Nimyle

Clean Equal Mission is built on a simple yet powerful idea: household chores, including cleaning, are more than tasks; they are opportunities to teach life skills, build self-worth, and foster cleanliness, hygiene and equality. The programme seeks to engage through schools and help parents integrate these practices into their children's lives through engaging, age-appropriate activities. Nimyle Clean Equal Mission marks its beginning in Hyderabad with an outreach to more than 1 lakh students in its first phase in Hyderabad. Over the next few months, the initiative will scale its outreach to engage more than 8 Lakh students in India.

Kavitha demands Congress to pressurise Centre to establish Bayyaram Steel Plant

Hyderabad: BRS MLC K Kavitha on Thursday demanded the Congress government in Telangana to pressurise the Centre to establish the steel plant at Bayyaram. She stated that if the BJP was sincere towards development of the State which gave eight MPs, it must deliver the plant as promised in the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act. "The Bayyaram Steel Plant is not merely a promise; it is a constitutional commitment made during the formation of Telangana. The BJP's blatant refusal to fulfill this commitment exposes their neglect of the backward and tribal communities in Khammam," she said. The Centre had on Wednesday declared in the Parliament that there was no feasibility and that it had no plan for setting up the steel plant at Bayyaram.

Speaking to media, Kavitha said that in 2013, BRS chief K Chandrashekhara Rao had written a letter to former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh requesting him to set up

the Bayyaram steel plant since it could generate employment for local youth and had also made arrangements to get around 100 million tonnes of iron ore from the neighbouring Chhattisgarh. She reminded that Bayyaram area itself had over 300 million tonnes of iron ore reserves across 1.41 lakh acres. "Bayyaram ukku, Telangana hakku (Bayyaram steel plant is Telangana's right)," she asserted. The BRS MLC said as per the provisions of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, whichever party was in the power at the Centre was mandated to establish the steel plant. She suggested that the BJP-led union government should stop making excuses and deliver on its commitment made to the people of Telangana. "It is a shame that none of the eight BJP MPs including union Minister G Kishan Reddy raise issues regarding Telangana's development in the Parliament," she said. Kavitha wanted the Congress government in the State to



prioritise the interests of Telangana's tribal and backward regions. She took a dig at Revenue Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy stat-

ing that the Minister who raised the Bayyaram steel plant issue in the Parliament as an MP was now silent.

New Report Reveals Alarming Rise in Missing Persons in Telangana

Hyderabad: The plight of missing persons in Telangana has reached a critical level, causing profound anguish among families and communities. A groundbreaking report released by renowned NGO, Youth for Anti-Corruption (YAC), based on information obtained from the Telangana DGP Office under the Right to Information Act, reveals that between 2020 and 2024, a staggering 103,496 individuals have been reported missing, with 96,614 cases still unresolved. The emotional toll of a loved one going missing is indescribable. Every day, families are left in the dark, grappling with uncertainty about the whereabouts and well-being of their missing children, parents, siblings, and friends. The report highlights the heart-wrenching reality that many families are left waiting, wondering if they will ever see their loved ones again. *Report Findings: Key Statistics on Missing Persons in Telangana (2020 - 2024)*

- *Total Missing Persons*: 103,496
- *Boys under 18*: 5,750
- Found: 5,455
- Untraced: 295
- *Girls under 18*: 8,359
- Found: 7,970
- Untraced: 389
- *Women*: 54,744
- Found: 52,312
- Untraced: 2,432
- *Men*: 34,643
- Found: 31,291
- Untraced: 3,352

The data collected includes a district-wise analysis, revealing that Mulugu district alone has 33 individuals currently untraced, leaving their families in a state of perpetual



distress and uncertainty. Rajendra Palnati, Founder of Youth for Anti-Corruption, emphasizes the urgent need for collective action: "Every day, many people go missing in Telangana state. While some missing persons are traced by the police, others remain untraced. The pain that families endure for

those who are missing is beyond description. The Telangana DGP office has provided critical information, yet we cannot solely rely on authorities. Citizens must also take responsibility—if you encounter unidentified individuals in your area, please gather their details and reach out to their families." The

organization calls upon the government and law enforcement agencies to enhance their efforts in locating missing persons and providing support to affected families. Effective communication and collaboration between local communities and authorities are crucial to raising awareness and ensuring timely action in these distressing cases.

Lagacherla Farmer Handcuffed After Heart Stroke In Telangana Jail Sparks Outrage

Sangareddy: Rupla Naik, the father of farmer Heerya Naik, who was handcuffed by the police while being taken to hospital, said they would stage a protest at the residences of Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy and his brother Tirupathi Reddy if anything happened to his son. Rupla Naik along with relatives visited the Sangareddy Hospital after coming to know that Heerya Naik was rushed to the hospital following chest pain. He demanded the Chief Minister to release the farmers from jail immediately. Ramachandra Rao, the advocate for the Lagacherla farmers, said two more farmers who were in Sangareddy jail, were also facing health issues. While one of the farmers was suffering from fever, another farmer had also suffered a heart attack, he said, adding that the jail authorities were not disclosing anything to their relatives besides denying treatment to them. The advocate said the police did not even allow Heerya Naik's family members to speak with him at the Sangareddy Hospital on Thursday. He said they would move to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) seeking justice for the farmers.



Under Trump 2.0, the world and the India outlook

Confirming the adage that the victor takes all, the stunning victory achieved by Donald Trump in the 2024 United States presidential election has transformed perceptions of him across the globe. There is many a reference to him being the most consequential American President since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and of defining a new political era for America and the world. Similar hyperbolic statements have been made to the effect that following his latest victory, 'the world lies at Trump's feet'. President-elect Trump is an enigma, and may remain so even after he takes office. Whether he would fit the description of being an iconoclast remains to be seen, but he is known to challenge 'cherished beliefs or venerated institutions on grounds that they are erroneous or pernicious'. Having also taken control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate, the incoming President seems unstoppable. With few restraints remaining, speculation is rife about what he may do, including whether he could strike a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin, over Ukraine, impose still greater burdens on Iran to bring down the temperature in West Asia, and find ways and means to rein in Israel.

What the foreign policy outlook might belt appears almost certain that Mr. Trump's foreign policy priorities would be Europe, West Asia and China. Mr. Trump has been openly critical of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and even more so of Europe's pusillanimous attitude to defence issues, but this does not mean that he will be ready to sacrifice Ukraine to ensure peace in Europe. His approach is also unlikely to be transactional in nature and, hence, giving up on Ukraine for ensuring peace in Europe appears highly unlikely. Mr. Trump would, however, expect Europe to contribute far more towards its defence, but is again unlikely to raise the stakes still higher, to avoid Ukraine turning into a conflict that implicitly takes on the character of a third world war. The incoming President's approach to the West Asia crisis is likely to be still more circumspect, notwithstanding speculation to the contrary. While both Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have sought to ingratiate themselves with him, Mr. Trump is unlikely to be taken in by such manoeuvres. Anyone who is familiar with Mr. Trump's thinking and his family business dealings, would know what his priorities are likely to be and where they lie. On what specific terms Mr. Trump would agree to a modus vivendi in West Asia is still in the realm of speculation, but prolongation of the conflict on Israel's terms appears highly unlikely. There is much greater certainty in what Mr. Trump's approach and attitude towards China would be. China heads the list of Mr. Trump's 'enemies', followed by North Korea and Iran, with Russia bringing up the rear. It is certain that as President, Mr. Trump would raise the stakes as far as China is concerned on economic and trade issues, including tighter export controls, and raising tariffs on Chinese exports to unprecedented heights. He is, however, likely to avoid any rash actions, conscious of the fact that China's Peoples' Liberation Army has been steadily preparing to confront the

U.S. for quite some time and cannot be easily trifled with. The U.S. is also aware that China is known to possess the world's largest hypersonic arsenal, having missiles that can fly and manoeuvre at more than five times the speed of sound. China may be Mr. Trump's enemy number one, but this is no reason to think that he would resort to any rash moves, that may well lead to a wider conflagration. Taiwan would remain a potential flash point. Nevertheless, like Sumo wrestlers, the U.S. under Mr. Trump and China under President Xi Jinping are more likely to test the ground reality, before embarking on a conflict that will not stop with Taiwan, the Pacific region or East Asia. Existing U.S. alliances with nations in Asia and Australasia are certain to be strengthened, and already established links with Australia, Japan and South Korea would be further intensified. Yet, as President, Mr. Trump is unlikely to act as a guarantor of peace across the region, and one to be paid for by the U.S. exchequer. Notwithstanding the impatience that he displays at present, there will be certain limits as far as his actions as President are concerned.

Ties with New Delhi Among the more important countries across the world, there is every reason to believe that Mr. Trump would be inclined to view India more favourably than others. There are several reasons for this. The personality of Mr. Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, are in many ways not dissimilar; both demonstrate a 'no nonsense' approach to issues and problems and also appear to see them through a common prism. Both are powerful leaders who do not allow their political aides and others to change or alter the trajectory of their beliefs under any circumstances. Their dislike for China is visceral, and people in India are not likely to forget that in the wake of the Galwan incident in June 2020 (in which India lost 20 soldiers), Mr. Trump as U.S. President at the time appeared to support India.

Capping the relationship between Mr. Trump, then President, and Mr. Modi was the 'Namaste Trump' event (in February 2020) in Ahmedabad. The event which attracted over a lakh of people was, perhaps, the largest gathering for a foreign leader visiting India. On this occasion, Mr. Modi had hailed Mr. Trump as a 'true friend of India' and a leader who was reshaping geopolitics. During Mr. Trump's previous tenure, both he and Mr. Modi seemed to arrive at a common understanding on issues and concerns affecting the Asia-Pacific region. Little has changed since. If anything, the emphasis on cooperation between the two countries in defence, trade and counter-terrorism has only increased. On his previous visit to India as President, Mr. Trump had made a specific mention of the \$3 billion military deal that existed between the two countries. As incoming President, Mr. Trump is certain to be gratified that one of his first acts would be to sign a \$1.17 billion deal for equipping MH-60R helicopters. He would also be happy that India has firmed up its relationship with the Quad (comprising Australia, Japan, the U.S. and India), which is perceived as an anti-China alliance, even



though India does not per se share the view that it is a security alliance. Mr. Trump, has also endeared himself to many Indians and the Indian establishment by making common cause with India over the plight of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh, who are facing a great deal of hostility from sectarian Islamic entities in that country, and who had forced former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee the country. This has further helped build an atmosphere of cordiality and friendship which will stand the two countries in good stead.

The role of technology On the economic plane, India enjoys a slight advantage in

terms of balance of payments, but this is nothing compared with what exists today between China and the U.S. In the case of U.S.-India relations, technology is certain to be a cementing rather than a divisive factor. Silicon Valley, which has a sizeable contingent of Indian tech entrepreneurs, could well serve as a vanguard to cement the relationship, quite contrary to the case of China. If innovation and dynamism is expected to be the hallmark of the new Trump Administration — with Elon Musk and others driving it — then the U.S.-India technological relationship is well set to approach the take-off point. India-U.S. relations will follow suit.

New insights into how Long COVID affects the brain

Long COVID is a condition marked by multiple persistent symptoms that sometimes occur even after mild infections. Among these, memory loss, brain fog and sleep disturbances indicate brain involvement. MRI scans done before and after COVID-19 show shrinkage in certain brain regions, pointing to tissue loss. This raises crucial questions: how does a respiratory virus go on to affect the brain? And what drives brain inflammation in these patients? Two recent papers provide insights into how the virus might indirectly affect the brain. A study published in Cell Host & Microbe concludes that continued presence of the virus spike protein could be triggering inflammation and neurodegenerative changes in the brain. The spike also activates inflammatory pathways. When researchers injected spike protein into the skulls of mice, they observed brain inflammation along with behavioural changes.

The authors found that spike protein-based vaccines do not have similar effects. They found that vaccinated mice infected with the virus had lower spike protein levels. Moreover, Long COVID symptoms are rarely linked to vaccination. This suggests that it is the immune response to the virus, not vaccination, that is responsible for the widespread presence of spike protein in the body. In human studies, the researchers identified spike protein within the skulls of

people who died of causes other than COVID. This indicates that spike protein stays in the body long after the initial infection, which may have occurred several months earlier. Long COVID patients with persistent spike protein also had elevated levels of biomarkers such as tau protein in their cerebrospinal fluid. These biomarkers are released when brain cells are damaged.

What is so special about spike protein being found within the skull? The hollow core of the skull houses a unique type of bone marrow which is different from that found inside other bones. Connected directly to the coverings of the brain through blood vessels, the skull bone marrow plays a role in brain health and disease. Immune activity within the skull's bone marrow can influence both progression and recovery of various brain disorders. The next question is how exactly these immune alterations lead to brain damage. A paper published in Brain, Behavior, and Immunity – Health examines the interaction between the virus and microglia, the brain's resident immune cells. These cells function similarly to macrophages found in the rest of the body, clearing debris, eliminating viruses, and coordinating immune responses. Like a gardener trimming a hedge to maintain its shape, microglia also prune unwanted connections between brain cells, a process essential for early brain development and neuroplasticity.

Top court issues guidelines on processing of mercy petitions

The Supreme Court on Monday laid down a comprehensive set of guidelines to ensure the swift and efficient processing of mercy petitions by death-row convicts, marking a significant development in the legal framework surrounding capital punishment and underlining the adverse effects of delays on both the convicts and societal confidence in justice. In its landmark judgment, a bench comprising justices Abhay S Oka, Ahsanuddin Amanullah and AG Masih emphasised that delays in executing death sentences, particularly those arising from administrative inefficiencies, violate the fundamental rights of convicts under Article 21 of the Constitution.

The ruling came while the court upheld a Bombay high court decision to commute the death sentences of two convicts in the 2007 Pune BPO rape and murder case to 35 years of imprisonment. The convicts, including the driver of the office cab, brutally assaulted and murdered a young woman after abducting her. They were initially sentenced to death by the trial court – a decision that was affirmed by the high court and also by the Supreme Court in 2015. However, their execution was delayed by over three years due to administrative lapses, prompting the high court to reduce their punishment. The Supreme Court, concurring with this decision, observed that such inordinate delays inflicted unnecessary psychological and physical suffering on the convicts, rendering the death penalty inhumane and unconstitutional for violating Article 21 of the Constitution guaranteeing the right to life and dignity. Acknowledging a “casual and negligent” approach by executive authorities in handling mercy petitions, the bench mandated the establishment of dedicated cells within the home or prison departments of all state governments and Union territories to ensure swift processing.

The bench reinforced that prolonged delays in processing mercy petitions or issuing execution warrants infringe on a convict’s fundamental rights under Article 21, stating that “the sword of Damocles could not be kept hanging over convicts indefinitely because the resulting mental and physical anguish amounted to cruel and degrading treatment. “An inordinate and unexplained delay caused by circumstances beyond the prisoners’ control mandates the commutation of a death sentence,” held the court, emphasising that the right to life and dignity under Article 21 does not end with the pronouncement of the death sentence but extends until its execution. At the same time, the court acknowledged the victims’ right to justice, asserting that the law must be enforced rigorously. However, it clarified that victims do not have the right to insist on capital punishment, underscoring the need for a balanced approach that respects the rights of all stakeholders. The judgment highlighted that the right to life extends until the execution of the sentence, and courts must assess delays on a case-by-case basis, considering the psychological impact on convicts awaiting execution. To address the systemic issues leading to delays, the court issued detailed directions to state governments, Union territories, and judicial authorities. Key among these is the establishment of dedicated cells within the home or prison depart-

ments to handle mercy petitions. These cells will act as the nodal agencies responsible for ensuring the prompt processing of petitions, from collecting necessary information about the convict to forwarding petitions to constitutional authorities. Each cell will be headed by a designated officer who will oversee communications and coordinate with other departments. To expedite the process, the court mandated that all documents, including judgments, evidence, and prison reports, be translated into English if required and shared electronically unless confidentiality is involved.

Additionally, prison authorities must immediately forward mercy petitions to the dedicated cell upon receipt, along with detailed records such as the convict’s criminal antecedents, family background, economic status and prison conduct. The police and investigating agencies are required to cooperate fully, furnishing all requested information without delay. The court also directed state governments to frame office orders or executive guidelines outlining the standard operating procedures for dealing with mercy petitions. These orders must be implemented within three months, with compliance reports to be submitted to the Supreme Court. The court also placed responsibilities on sessions courts, which play a critical role in issuing execution warrants after a death sentence is upheld. The sessions courts have been directed to proactively track the status of appeals, review petitions and mercy petitions to avoid unnecessary delays. Once all legal remedies are exhausted, the sessions court must issue a warrant for execution promptly. However, the court must provide



the convict with at least 15 clear days between the issuance of the warrant and the execution date, ensuring they have adequate time to seek any remaining legal recourse or prepare mentally and emotionally, according to the judgment. Moreover, the sessions courts have been instructed to engage with prison authorities to ensure that convicts are informed of the implications of the warrant and provided with legal aid if required. The bench also stressed the importance of adhering to humane procedures, reflecting a commitment to upholding constitutional values even in the most serious cases. While reaffirming the constitutionality of the death penalty as a punishment, the top court stressed that its implementation must align with the principles of fairness and humanity. It pointed out that procedural lapses not only undermine the rights of convicts but also

erode public confidence in the justice system. The judgment has wide-ranging implications for how mercy petitions and executions are handled in India. By mandating time-bound procedures and holding authorities accountable, the court aims to eliminate the systemic delays that have plagued the death penalty process for decades. The guidelines serve as a reminder that even the most serious punishments must be carried out in a manner that respects the constitutional rights of individuals. The ruling also highlights the judiciary’s evolving approach to capital punishment, focussing on fairness, transparency and the minimisation of suffering. As the nation debates the morality and efficacy of the death penalty, the Supreme Court’s directives represent a crucial step toward a more humane and just legal system.

ISRO gearing up for space docking mission by December end: Somanath

Sriharikota: ISRO is gearing up for a mission to demonstrate a space docking experiment called SPADEX, onboard its trusted workhorse polar satellite launch vehicle, its chairman S Somanath said here on Thursday. The rocket is getting ready and scientists at the Bengaluru-headquartered space agency are expecting a launch later this month, he said. Thanking officials of NewSpace India Ltd, the European Space Agency (ESA) for the successful launch of PSLV-C59/Probas-3 mission earlier in the day, Somanath, secretary of the Department of Space, said a similar mission (to PSLV-C59-PROBAS-3 mission) was coming up as with the launch of PSLV-C60 in December itself. “It (The PSLV-C60 mission) is going to demonstrate the space docking experiment called SPADEX. The rocket is just ready now and we are getting ready for the final stage of activities leading to the launch, possibly in December itself,” he said. On the Proba-3 mission, he said, Thursday’s mission is about Heliophysics (the study of Sun, its planets) and there has been a strong ‘science group’ in India who have a working collaboration with the scientists of the European Space Agency. In a dedicated commercial mission.



ISRO is gearing up for a mission to demonstrate a space docking experiment called SPADEX, onboard its trusted workhorse polar satellite launch vehicle, its chairman S Somanath said

Why Chennai teens are taking to a new dance with HIIT routine for heart health

It's 8.30 pm and 15-year-old Sarah Michelle has just returned home after her math tutorials, humming the Tamil hit "Leo Das is a badass" inside her head. Cramming her life between school tests and preparatory tutorials for her class X board exams, this Chennai teen has no mobile phone, given up singing and has no time for even a walk in the park. It's just long hours of sitting at the desk or in front of the TV, her only shot at relaxation. "But it's the daily 15-minute dance break in school that keeps me going, refreshes my mind and helps me improve my studies," she says. That dance class is an experimental form called THANDAV (Taking High-Intensity Interval Training [HIIT] And Dance to Adolescents for Victory over Non-communicable Diseases [NCDs]). This routine was devised as part of a study by Dr Ranjith Anjana Mohan of the Madras Diabetes Research Foundation and tested among 23 girls, aged between 10 and 17, to see if it could neutralise sedentary behaviour among school-going adolescents and improve their metabolism. It did as young girls and women sign up for live sessions at MDRF or for online classes. "Given the high burden of non-communicable diseases in India, we realised that we needed to reduce sedentary behaviour in the early years. One in four teens is obese. They are so bogged down by studies and the pressure to race past competitive exams that any physical activity seems negotiable. Yet these early years are all about habit-forming and laying a foundation for good health. So we decided to choose a routine that would not take too much time, could easily fit into the school schedule or even at home and yet keep them fit, trim and active," she says.

WHAT IS THANDAV?

Dr Mohan's team mixed HIIT (High-Intensity Interval Training) routines — which involve short bursts of intense activity followed by cooldown time — with dance moves set to popular songs from Bollywood, Mollywood and Tollywood. "Doing this thrice a week for even 10 minutes gives you all the metabolic benefits of running 60 minutes a day every day of the week. When fitness becomes entertainment, you can sustain the drill as a physical activity without them looking like an imposition," she says. HIIT regimens have been proven to significantly reduce body fat mass, weight and improve cardiovascular fitness in both adults and adolescents. The study showed that the girls achieved almost 80 per cent heart rate during a THANDAV session. "A faster heart rate during exercise helps your body move oxygen and blood to your muscles more efficiently, which can help you burn more calories, lower cholesterol and improve your cardiovascular fitness," says Dr Mohan. The 10-minute HIIT routine consists of four loops to be done on four hit tracks, including a two-minute high energy (80-90 per cent heart rate) to 30-second low cooldown (50-60 per cent heart rate) moves. The movements are choreographed in a simple and repetitive manner so that they can be done in a loop without much stress. As the randomised control trial is awaiting publication, Dr Mohan is happy with the results to go for larger trials. She says all adolescent girls, despite their sedentary hours for school work, reported weight loss, stamina and agility in just two to

three months. HIIT routine "Adolescents should not have more than three hours of sedentary time. But 10 hours of sitting, as per the study, is worrisome news because the body is virtually immobile for almost half a day!.." says Dr Mohan. Sarah's mother Sheeba Rosario, who was worried about her daughter's "zero activity" levels and her weight gain, noticed a big difference in her physical appearance and her concentration levels. "There was a time when Sarah became sluggish. She couldn't make it to her school's 7 am basketball class and sleep late. Balancing school and NEET practice classes thrice a week, she was just pushing herself. She would mostly be sitting on a chair at her desk or on the couch in front of the TV. I got really worried when she once missed her periods, probably because of stress. The new dance routine has helped her relax and focus better," she recalls.

WHY SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR IS A PROBLEM FOR INDIAN TEENS Dr Mohan did this small study as a follow-up to her larger study that mapped sedentary behaviour in teens, between 11 and 19. This was part of the larger eight-month report of the International Physical Activity and Environment Network (IPEN) and tracked 6,000 teens across the globe. It showed how teenagers in India were spending eight to ten hours a day performing sedentary activities, such as watching television and playing video games, an excess of which is linked to obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, bone, mental and reproductive health issues in their adult years. However, in India, students had a lower device use — an average of 1.2 electronic devices in the bedroom and 0.5 personal electronic devices — compared to Western nations. "Adolescents should not have more than three hours of sedentary time. But 10 hours of sitting, as per the study, is worrisome news because the body is virtually immobile for almost half a day! I hear many parents tell me that their child is studying 10 hours a day. Their recreation hour is also about sitting, gaming, chatting, which are passive activities," says Dr Mohan.

WHY YOUNG INDIANS AREN'T EXERCISING?

It wasn't just obsession with screen time that drove sedentary and largely indoor behaviour. "It was partly because of a lack of walkable neighbourhoods and parks that discouraged them from outdoor activities. The other issues were safety (particularly for girls), traffic congestion around public spaces and crime," says Dr Mohan. As per the study, girls living in neighbourhoods that had safe spaces closer home were less likely to be performing sitting activities. "The other big problem is that our parks are designed to be used by adults for their walks and runs or by children. They are not designed for teen group activities or ball games. The teen years are an impressionable period of one's life and group activities are largely peer-led decisions. That's why we must have open spaces or courts for cricket, basketball, badminton and football," suggests Dr Mohan. The study showed that adolescents from more accommodating and walkable neighbourhoods had lesser screen time. That's why Dr Mohan designed a fitness module that could easily be co-opted into



school routines. "Ideally, there should be an hour of physical training classes. But that's the class that tends to get dropped in classes IX and X to accommodate an extra class or two. But squeezing in THANDAV for 15 to 20 minutes is doable. We saw students having a lot of fun doing the exercise-dance routine with their friends. Study participants said that after doing the 10-minute routine, they would cool down easily (indicating an improvement in fitness) and their body felt very light and relaxed," she says. After three-

month THANDAV sessions, participants reported that they exercised more often and ate clean. It improved their flexibility and gave them a break from their monotonous routine. It taught them to push beyond their limits and do more and gave them confidence. "Recommendations included adding latest songs, teaching new loops, reaching out to a large number of people and inviting them to a combined performance. One of the girls told us that she had taught THANDAV to at least 10 kids and told everyone in her apartment how it was a fun way to keep fit," says Dr Mohan.

Elon Musk's xAI raises \$6 billion to expand AI capabilities

New Delhi: Elon Musk's AI company called xAI has raised \$6 billion, as it plans to expand its supercomputer to house at least one million graphics processing units (GPUs). According to a filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), investors gave a minimum of \$77,593 per the filing. A Wall Street Journal report mentioned that Valor Equity Partners, Sequoia Capital, and Andreessen Horowitz were likely to contribute to the round, along with Qatar Investment Authority, Qatar's sovereign wealth fund. The new cash brings xAI's total raised to \$12 billion, adding to the \$6 billion tranche xAI raised earlier this year. In May this year, the AI company behind Grok raised \$6 billion to accelerate the research and development of future technologies. The company said the funds from the Series B funding round will be used to take xAI's first products to market and build advanced infrastructure. "xAI is primarily focused on the development of advanced AI systems that are truthful, competent, and maximally beneficial for all of humanity. The company's mission is to understand the true nature of the universe," the company said in a blog post. Earlier this year, xAI raised \$500 million in commitments from investors toward a \$1 billion goal. Founded in 2023, xAI unveiled its first AI product in November last year and recently announced the Grok-1.5



model with long context capability, as well as Grok-1.5V with image understanding. Meanwhile, the tech billionaire has filed for a preliminary injunction against Sam Altman-run OpenAI for alleged anti-competitive behaviour. The motion for an injunction accuses OpenAI, its CEO Sam Altman, President Greg Brockman, Microsoft, LinkedIn co-founder and former OpenAI board member Reid Hoffman, and former OpenAI board member and Microsoft VP Dee Templeton of 'various illicit activities and seeks to halt them,' according to reports. The allegations also include converting OpenAI's governance structure to a for-profit and 'transferring any material assets, including intellectual property owned, held, or controlled by OpenAI, Inc., its subsidiaries, or affiliates.' OpenAI said in a statement that "Elon's fourth attempt, which again recycles the same baseless complaints, continues to be utterly without merit."•