

Beginning second year inter syllabus before first year exams takes toll on TGSWREIS students

Hyderabad: In a decision that could have serious consequences on students' mental-wellbeing, the Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TGSWREIS) commenced the second-year intermediate syllabus for the first-year students even before completion of first-year syllabus and examinations. The Society recently issued a month-long micro-schedule for the first-year students on the second-year syllabus, detailing the syllabus to be taught in 38 Centres of Excellence (CoEs) from January 1. This comes even before completion of the entire syllabus in subjects like Botany and Zoology.

The micro-schedule also mandates holding three weekend examinations and a cumulative examination on the total syllabus taught during one month on February 2. This is in deviation from customary practice of teaching the second-year syllabus after completion of the first-year examination. This directive from the Society has drawn severe criticism for teachers and parents alike, questioning the decision's impact on students' academic performance in the first year and their mental wellbeing. They termed the move worse than the corporate junior colleges, which at least wait until completion of the first-year examinations before moving on to the second-year curriculum.

Every year, the CoEs, which provide intensive coaching for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) – UG, take up revision classes followed by the model tests



for students until the actual examinations are completed. With the Telangana Board of Intermediate Education (TG BIE) scheduling the first-year examinations from March 5, the teachers fear that teaching second-year syllabus before the first-year examinations will

dent students' performance. "Generally with a gap of one week to ten days after first-year exams, the second-year classes commence. Never had we begun the second-year syllabus prior to completion of first year curriculum and examinations. Some first-

year syllabus in Botany and Zoology is not completed. This is the first time we commenced second-year syllabus before first-year as per the directive from OSD. This will certainly affect students' performance," a PGT said on condition of anonymity.

Understanding US college culture: Tips for smooth adjustment

In past articles, we shared pre-departure tips to prepare for your onward journey to the United States, important resources that will help you make a smooth transition to academic life in the United States and discussed key aspects of the U.S. classroom experience to help you maximize your time as a student. In this week's article, we share tips from EducationUSA to help you understand and embrace the U.S. college culture, both inside and outside the classroom: Understand the academic journey: The U.S. academic system values critical thinking, collaborating and actively participating in classes. Classes may include general lectures, seminars, discussions and other activities where professors encourage discussions, so don't hesitate to speak out during classes. Also, grades are usually based on a combination of class assignments, quizzes and class participation. It is, therefore, important to familiarize yourself with the GPA system and the grading scale.

Plagiarism is something that is taken very seriously at U.S. universities, so be mindful of citing sources wherever necessary and be authentic in the work that you submit. Build relationships: Building connections with your peers and professors is an integral part of the social life at U.S. campuses. From joining cultural clubs to academic societies, there are numerous ways to meet people with similar interests. Participating in orientation programs helps in understanding campus culture and getting acquainted with people belonging to different cultures. Most schools have campus resources like counseling services and international student offices that can help students to navigate smoothly on campus. Cultural adaptation: Adapting to a new culture is exciting yet difficult at the same time. The honeymoon phase of cultural adaptation is characterized by a sense of curiosity and fascination with the new culture. This is followed by the transition and adjustment phase where you gradually get accli-

matized to the new culture and accept the change. Americans also value the concepts of punctuality, personal space and being open to feedback, so be open to adapting your behaviors to these cultural norms. Be an ambassador of your country: U.S. campuses are cultural melting pots, where students from all over the world come together to share ideas, traditions, and perspectives. This is a wonderful opportunity to showcase the rich cultural heritage of your homeland—whether through conversations, cultural events, or even the food you cook and share with close friends. Embrace independence: In the United States, there is a strong emphasis on self-reliance and personal responsibility. Create a schedule to manage your time effectively while balancing your assignments and other projects. Make use of apps or planners to stay organized. Stay connected with family and friends back home: Adapting to a new culture takes time and it is normal to feel homesick in the initial phase. Be patient



with yourself and celebrate every milestone in your journey with your friends on campus but also family back home. Schedule times during the week to connect with your loved ones to ensure that you take them along on this journey, so that they can also support you in the right way if and when the need arises. Transitioning to a new country and culture can be extremely rewarding if you're flexible enough to navigate through unfamiliar social norms and have an inclusive perspective on other peoples' experiences.

Silent guardians of a pilgrim trail to Sabarimala

Sitting at his makeshift stall set up inside the Erumely forest division, a gateway to the hill temple of Sabarimala, the 63-year-old Abdul Rehman carefully scoops salted mangoes and gooseberries into glass jars displayed at eye level to catch the attention of passers-by. This is one of the 32 stalls that have come up on the forest route to Sabarimala from Erumely this season. The kiosks, run by the Koyikkakavu Vana Samrakshana Samiti, a forest protection council of fringe-dwelling families and Forest department staff, offer sustenance to pilgrims navigating an eight-km stretch till the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR). Hundreds of shops line the streets of the temple town here, hawking everything from steel vessels to black cords and an array of wood and paper trinkets, turning the town into a paradise of tacky religious kitsch. The air reverberates with frenzied drumbeats as groups of pilgrims, clad in black robes, dance through bursts of vibrant vermilion powder. On the outskirts, a seemingly endless line of vehicles, brimming with black-clad devotees bound for the temple, crawl at a snail's pace as frustrated police officers battle to untangle the gridlocks. Yet, this season had started at a slow pace. "The weather in Tamil Nadu held them back initially," Rehman muses, his gaze drifting to the empty trail. For now, his colourful jars wait in quiet anticipation. When the season ends on January 14, he will return to his daily grind of painting houses and buildings on a daily wage.

Last year, over 4.3 lakh devotees traversed the forest trail from Erumely, creating a lifeline for the local economy. On the other end of the Erumely forest division, both banks of the Azhutha river have become a beehive of activity. Makeshift tents, transformed into eateries and shelters, have risen under the watchful eyes of Forest department officials. The point, which marks a brief break on the forest stretch, leads to a crucial segment of the trail. Some 50 metres uphill from the sparkling, crystal-clear waters of the stream, a narrow arch reading 'Welcome to the Periyar Tiger Reserve' opens to a lush green expanse. At the Azhutha forest station, forest watcher P.S. Joshimon carefully logs pilgrim entries. "Sorry, Swami," he tells a group of black-robed devotees as dusk settles. "We can't let anyone in after 2.30 p.m. You won't make the next stop before dark. It's for your safety," he politely informs the devotees. Devotees trekking through the forest route to Sabarimala through Koyikkakavu, near Erumely. Devotees trekking through the forest route to Sabarimala through Koyikkakavu, near Erumely. | Photo Credit: VISHNU PRATHAP

After a brief huddle over steaming black coffee from a nearby stall, the pilgrims resign themselves to an overnight stay by the river. Bathing in the stream and collecting pebbles from its rocky streambed, they settle into the rhythm of the forest night.

Inside the PTR, 50-year-old Reji Das and his team have made all arrangements for weary devotees trekking the forest trail. As the chairman of the Swami Ayyappa Poonkavana Punarudharana Eco Development Committee (SAP EDC), Das swaps his regular job as a pick-up van driver every year



to spearhead the mission during the pilgrim season. Scattered across the rugged 22-km-long route, 310 eco-shops have sprung to life at eight stopovers, including at Azhuthakadavu, Vallithodu, and Karimala. Since their inception in 1998, eco-development committees (EDCs) have been playing a crucial role in providing refreshment and temporary shelter to pilgrims on their arduous barefoot journey through the hilly terrains of the PTR. From running service centres to guarding against invading wild animals, these groups exemplify participatory forest management. "This model has been a huge success," says P.P. Pramod, Field Director of the PTR. "It ensures safety, keeps the forest free of plastic, and sustains livelihoods for roughly 2,000 people on the fringes," he adds. The committees' efforts, notes the official, have been instrumental in curbing tree-felling and poaching while also reducing the risk of wildfires. As for the profit from the seasonal business, 50% goes to the individual running it, 20% to the forest development agency as a purpose fund, and the rest is channelled to sustain the respective EDC. But just how much money the pilgrimage brings into the region is often glossed over by the EDC members and forest officials, who are keen to avoid casting their service efforts in a commercial light. "You have to live here to understand it," says Das, when asked what fuels their dedication. "It's not really about profit or loss. Regardless of religion, every single person in these forest hamlets sees it as a privilege to serve those journeying to meet Lord Ayyappa," his words encapsulate the spirit of a community that thrives on shared purpose. While forest officials often remain reserved, some quietly acknowledge the economic lifeline the pilgrimage offers. A few bolder voices even highlight the monetary ripple effect it creates. "The Sabarimala pilgrimage, winding through the traditional trekking paths of Erumely and Sathram, serves as a lifeline for nearly 30

hamlets skirting the forests across Idukki, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta," explains an official. "For many families, the income from this season sustains them through the year. This annual rhythm is what drives their resilience, year after year," he adds. However, the official admits that the Forest department doesn't strictly enforce accounting protocols for SAP EDCs. "We know the income from these service centres isn't fully accounted for due to the absence of electrical billing. But taking a lenient approach isn't unwarranted, considering how vital this period is for their livelihood," says the official. The EDC members, meanwhile, highlight the unique challenges of operating businesses in wildlife-rich, restricted areas. Ajin, a 31-year-old resident who manages an eco-shop atop Kallidamkundu hill, one of the steepest climbs along the forest trail, describes the lengths he goes to for survival. To protect his shop's stock from marauding wild elephants, he moves his goods atop the tall trees in the area, a daily battle against both gravity and wildlife. "Near to the shop, I've set up a pulley and rope system to hoist my stock onto the trees before heading home each evening. Almost everyone managing eco-shops here follows this practice. The damage from an elephant attack can easily exceed ₹50,000," says Ajin, who inherited the right to run the shop from his father-in-law. But their challenges do not end there. Restrictions on devotees' movement in the forest from dusk to dawn, imposed after back-to-back seasons of fatal wild elephant attacks, have dealt a severe blow to their business. Adding to the strain are the skyrocketing prices of essential commodities and steep labour costs, making it increasingly difficult for EDC members to sustain their stalls. Adding to their troubles is the increasingly erratic climate. The relentless rains brought by Cyclone Fengal forced a two-day suspension of pilgrimage through the forest trails during peak season. The stranded pilgrims were evacu-

ated from various points deploying KSRTC buses. "This disruption, coming just two weeks into the season, dealt a heavy blow to the hopes of those who have put up the shops," laments Prabhakaran, president of the Vana Samrakshana Samiti, Koyikkakavu. "The restrictions imposed on pilgrims following the inclement weather significantly hit the inflow of pilgrims from neighbouring States, particularly Tamil Nadu," he says. Forest officials, however, point to a silver lining: a growing interest among pilgrims in taking the forest trail, particularly from southern Indian States. "The number of pilgrims taking the route has increased significantly in the post-pandemic period," notes an official. "Last season, pilgrim traffic on the Sathram route surged to 1.42 lakh, up from 52,000 the previous year. Meanwhile, the Erumely path saw an astounding 4.3 lakh pilgrims, far exceeding the carrying capacity of a forest like the PTR," he points out. Yet, the future of this business looks bleak for the traders. Youngsters no longer want to wait an entire year for a season that could go either way. The chants of Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa no longer captivate them. They're more interested in migrating out of the forest hamlet or even going abroad," says Das. Forest officials also acknowledge the growing challenges. "Given the current migration trend among youngsters, this long line of eco-shops along the forest track will eventually vanish, leaving only the eight stopover points within the reserve," notes a forest official. Rehman, from Erumely, nods in agreement. "My two sons have already moved on to other professions. But I continue running this seasonal shop because, for the older generation, it's more of a calling," he says. But the question of the next generation's involvement in the Sabarimala pilgrimage goes far deeper than it first appears. This isn't just an issue on the forest fringes; it's a concern for countless families elsewhere who rely on the seasonal business of the pilgrimage for their livelihood.

BJP led Central Government is a nexus of the corporate and communalism: CPI(M)

Chandigarh (JAG MOHAN THAKEN), January 11: Communist Party of India (CPI(M)) has alleged that the BJP led Central Government is conspiring to destroy the public sector and change the Constitution of the country to benefit the rich, it is a nexus of corporate and communalism. The above statement was made by CPI (M) leaders in a public meeting held at Kaithal on the occasion of the three-day State Conference of the Party. The gathering was addressed prominently by Politburo member Niloptal Basu, Central Committee member K Hemalatha, AR Sindhu, State Secretary Surender Singh and CPI State Secretary Dariyav Singh Kashyap. The meeting was presided over by Comrade Inderjeet Singh and conducted by Prem Chand.

Polit Bureau member and former MP Niloptal Basu said that the country is going through a serious crisis. Millions of people fought for the independence of the country and were martyred. Unity in diversity has been the foundation of our country. Our Constitution is the result of the freedom movement. Dr. Ambedkar was the Chairman of the Constituent Assembly. Those who opposed the constitution, burnt effigies of Dr. Ambedkar, are in power today. The Home Minister of the country is making fun of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar in the Parliament. The country is being handed over to the Corporates. Comrade Inderjeet Singh, who presided over the meeting, shared the gist of the conference and reported the voice of the speakers, who alleged that the public sector is being looted. Even agriculture is being made available for corporate loot. A new draft policy is being circulated to end government markets and establish private markets. Unemployment is at its peak in the country and Haryana is number one in this.

Showing concern over the crimes against women in Haryana, the speakers mentioned that Haryana has today become the centre of international organized crime. Haryana tops the country in terms of violence against women. Incidents of gang rape of even minor girls are occurring. The BJP has left no stone unturned in ruining the public sector education system. In the BJP rule, which gave the slogan of 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao', 5000 government schools, most of which were for girls, have been closed in the last 5 years. The Party leaders alleged that loans of big houses to the tune of Rs. 16.5 lakh crores have been waived off while the labourers and farmers are in a state of severe debt. There is no work in MNREGA and the budget is being continuously reduced. The leaders said that in the name of 'one country- one election', they are planning to alter the republican character of the country and impose dictatorship. BJP/ RSS is creating divisions among the people. Religious frenzy is being constantly created on a communal basis in the country. Nefarious designs have been employed to create caste divisions in the state also. Despite the fact that 60 percent of the voters of Haryana voted against BJP, suspiciously the BJP has come to power for the third time. There is no change in their policies. The government is not implementing the MSP despite assuring it to the farmers. Farmers have been on agitation for a long time but the government is not ready to talk to them. The minimum wage for the workers has not been revised in the



state for the last 10 years. There is no discussion regarding the new Pay Commission for employees. Instead of permanent recruitment, the State Government has made permanent arrangements for temporary jobs in the name of Haryana Kaushal Rojgar Nigam. All the leaders appealed to the people to

counter these challenges. The leaders also appealed to all opposition parties including Congress to come out on the streets against the BJP rule. The rally demanded that to reduce the burden of taxes on the poor and middle-class taxes should be imposed on the rich; policies should be made in public inter-

est, all temporary employees should be regularised, minimum wages should be revised immediately and a new pay commission should be constituted. The left parties will conduct a campaign in the country on these issues and the issues of farmers and workers.

Jayesh Ranjan Inaugurates Nirmaan NGO's 'Headquarters (HQ) and Global Impact Capability Center (GICC)'

Hyderabad, 11 January, 2025: In a celebration of two decades of service, Nirmaan Organization, a Hyderabad-based NGO, officially inaugurated 'Headquarters (HQ) and Global Impact Capability Center (GICC)' in Madhapur, Hyderabad, Telangana. The event was graced by Mr. Jayesh Ranjan, IAS, Special Chief Secretary, Information Technology, Electronics & Communication and Industries & Commerce Departments, Government of Telangana, who attended as the Chief Guest.

The inauguration was also attended by several distinguished guests, including prominent film director Shekar Kammula and government officials such as Mr. Ronald Rose, IAS, Finance Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh; Ms. Divya Devarajan, IAS, CEO, Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), Government of Telangana; and Ms. Alagu Varshini, IAS, Secretary, Telangana State Gurukul Schools, Government of Telangana, who joined as special guests. In his speech, Mr. Jayesh Ranjan,



IAS, applauded Nirmaan Organization's dedication and the crucial role of strategic partnerships in addressing India's pressing societal challenges. Mr. Mayur Patnala, Founder and Global CEO of Nirmaan Organization, expressed deep gratitude on behalf

of the organization and thanked everyone who has been part of the organization's journey. As the NGO steps into its next phase, he reaffirmed Nirmaan's commitment to uplifting more underprivileged communities and contributing to the nation's development.

SpinSci Health Tech India Pvt Ltd Announces Groundbreaking News: 1,000 New AI Jobs in Telangana

Hyderabad: SpinSci Health Tech India Pvt Ltd, a global leader in digital healthcare solutions, held a press conference on 10th January, 2025 at the Somajiguda Press Club to unveil the establishment of 1,000 high-value, high-skilled Artificial Intelligence (AI) jobs in Telangana. This significant expansion underscores the company's unwavering commitment to transforming patient engagement, enhancing clinical collaboration, and innovating patient financial services through advanced technology. The conference featured addresses from key leadership team members, including: *Mr. Andy Asava*, CEO; *Mr. Rajit Kumar*, Founder and Chief Information Officer; and *Mr. Kiran Potaraju*, Director of SpinSci Health Tech India Pvt Ltd. And *Mr. JA Choudhary*, Former IT Chief Secretary of Andhra Pradesh as the chief guest. Serving over 40 million patients annually across the United States, SpinSci Technologies is at the forefront of digital healthcare innovation. The latest expansion in Telangana emphasizes the company's vision to leverage technology for delivering advancements in healthcare solutions on a global scale.

Telangana has been selected for this major AI initiative due to its exceptional talent pool and reputation as a global technology hub. The creation of these 1,000 high-skilled positions will focus on advanced AI, machine learning, data analytics, and digital health platforms. This transformative initiative aims to provide local professionals with opportunities to foster innovation at both regional and global levels. To strengthen its



commitment to technological innovation and talent development, SpinSci Technologies will collaborate with TiE Global, leading AI universities, and research institutions. These partnerships are designed to cultivate an ecosystem of creativity that connects industry leaders, academia, and local talent, aimed at pushing the boundaries of digital healthcare solutions.

As part of the Aldrich Capital Partners portfolio, SpinSci Technologies benefits from a strong foundation of strategic investment. Aldrich Capital's notable presence in Telangana through its portfolio companies reinforces the collaboration between SpinSci and the region, establishing Telangana as a hub of technological excellence. SpinSci Technologies is excited to engage with the

local technology community by hosting an AI Hackathon at T-Hub on January 16th. Innovators and technology enthusiasts are encouraged to register and showcase their skills for a chance to win a grand prize of 1 lakh INR, among other exciting giveaways. For registration details, visit: spinsci.com/ai_hackathon_india.

Los Angeles against the flames

THE FIVE fires that on January 9th were still blazing in and around Los Angeles were already among the most destructive in California's history. The scale is staggering, even for a state accustomed to natural disasters. Roughly 130,000 people were told to leave their homes; 2,000 buildings have been destroyed. Because wildfires have come to seem more like a certainty than a risk here, a lot will not be insured. State Farm, an insurer, decided not to renew 70% of its policies in Pacific Palisades, one of the worst-hit areas. ABC Los Angeles reckons this has left 1,600 homes there uninsured. Fire crews faced an uneven fight: in the small hours of the morning the neighbourhood fire hydrants ran dry.

People abandoned their cars and fled on foot as the flames approached. Firefighters then bulldozed their vehicles to reach the blaze. Workers evacuated patients in wheelchairs from a nursing home. The sky above the Pacific Coast Highway turned orange and thickened with smoke. Palm fronds smouldered. Extreme winds sparked several firestorms across Los Angeles beginning on January 7th. Nine months without measurable rainfall had primed the city to burn. By January 9th, two large fires were burning at opposite ends of LA County, home to 10m people. One razed the Pacific Palisades, a wealthy neighbourhood on the coast, and swept into Malibu. Another was burning in the foothills above Pasadena, north-east of LA. Ash fell like snowflakes over the city's downtown. Flames glowed

crimson on the peaks when they were not obscured by black smoke, southern California's own Mount Doom.

Los Angeles is particularly vulnerable to fire. Its rich neighbourhoods and exurbs are where cities meet nature, stretching into the region's rambling mountain ranges: the Santa Monicas, the Verdugos, the San Gabriels. Climate change is causing more extreme and more frequent fires, but ever more people are moving into these areas to find cheaper housing or, for LA's well-heeled, that perfect mountain view. Until recently, January wouldn't have been considered part of fire season. But planet-warming greenhouse-gas emissions have also increased the number of days each year with fire-starter weather conditions. On this occasion, north-east winds with gusts reaching almost 100mph (160kph) in some places swept over the mountains that cradle the city. These are the Santa Anas, also known as the "devil winds". In cooler months they blow warm, dry air from the vast desert of the Great Basin towards the coast. The winds can dry out plants already parched by the drought that has set in after two unusually wet years. But they can also carry embers great distances, breeding new fires as they blow.

It did not take long for a natural disaster to become a political one. Donald Trump blamed California's Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, arguing that he diverted water from Californians to protect an endangered fish, a reference to a new plan to manage water in the Colorado Delta, which has



no bearing on firefighting in LA. "One of the best and most beautiful parts of the United States of America [is] ashes", he wrote on Truth Social, "and Gavin Newsom should resign." It is a reminder of Mr Trump's version of leadership and an ugly prelude to what will be a strained relationship between him and the governor at a time when the state will need federal assistance. The ordeal reminds Angelenos of their vulnerability. At any given time Los Angeles is at risk of fire, flood, extreme heat, mudslides and earthquakes. "Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse" wrote Joan Didion in 1969, in an essay about the Santa Anas. The violent winds "affect the entire quality of

life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are". For more coverage of climate change, sign up for the Climate Issue, our fortnightly subscriber-only newsletter, or visit our climate-change hub. Stay on top of American politics with The US in brief, our daily newsletter with fast analysis of the most important political news, and Checks and Balance, a weekly note from our Lexington columnist that examines the state of American democracy and the issues that matter to voters. Recommended TopicsFor evolved readers seeking more than just newsSubscribe now to unlock this article and access exclusive content to stay ahead

Exploring the many Mahabharatas

“Human beings are born for peace; they like to grow up in peace... Then, why are we always preparing for war?” asks theatre director and performer Anurupa Roy. She had turned to the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas in 2017 and created an award-winning play, Mahabharata, which “explores the inner dilemma and backstories of 15 characters, each an archetype whose unquestioning loyalty to a belief leads to the inevitable conflict”. Theatre directors have, over generations, revisited the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The former gives us dutiful and divine protagonists; the latter flawed heroes caught in an internecine struggle.

Dharamvir Bharti captured the crisis in a drama in blank verse from 1953, Andha Yug. It is a story about the end and set on the last day of the battle when the palace learns of the crushing defeat suffered by the Kauravas. Satyadev Dubey first staged the play in 1960 and Ebrahim Alkazi presented it in the ruins of Ferozeshah Kotla in Delhi in

1963, following the India-China war. In 2017, Joy Maisnam from conflict-ridden Manipur, turned to Andha Yug to show grief in a new light.

Bhasa, the earliest known Sanskrit playwright, retold episodes from the Mahabharata in Panch Ratra, Madhyamavyayoga, Dutavakya Dutaghatokaca, Karnabhara and Urubhangam. These inspired theatre directors across the country, with the late KN Panikkar from Kerala and Manipur’s Ratan Thiyam presenting iconic productions of Urubhangam, a tragedy that ends with a dying Duryodhana saying, “Death has sent an aerial car, the wain of heroes, drawn by a thousand horses, to fetch me.” In Draupadi (1978), Mahasweta Devi tells the story of a rebel tribal woman in police custody. To theatre-goers, the story is owned by Heisnam Sabitri Devi, the Manipuri performer, who gave the play a shocking last scene. Few plays in India have depicted gender oppres-



sion so powerfully. Rabindranath Tagore wrote about another woman’s struggle to accept her identity in Chitrangada, a dance drama from 1892 about a warrior princess who falls in love with Arjuna. Girish Karnad gave us the myth in his first play, Yayati (1960), about a king cursed with old age and his youngest son, Puru, who gives him his own youth. Karnad wrote Yayati as a 22-year-

old student of Oxford University. Another play, Agni Mattu Malé, or The Fire and the Rain, is based on the Yavakrita myth of the Mahabharata. The late KS Rajendran, who had directed the play, called it “a complex story with several threads of the plot working at various levels of consciousness and bringing about transformation in the minds of audiences”.

The Maha Kumbh of faith is also a logistical marvel

The Kumbh Mela symbolises faith, unity, and humanity’s timeless connection to the divine. It commemorates the spilling of the nectar of immortality (amrit) at four sacred sites — Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik — during a cosmic struggle, with its timing dictated by celestial alignments. Over time, Kumbh Mela has evolved, blending ancient traditions with modern innovations. On February 4, 2019, Kumbh Mela witnessed the largest peaceful gathering of humanity ever recorded. This extraordinary event is a celebration of faith, community, and commerce. With fairs, educational events, religious discourses by saints, mass gatherings of monks and diverse entertainment, the Kumbh exemplifies the vibrant ethos of Indian society.

The 2019 edition in Prayagraj was particularly remarkable, hosting an estimated 240 million visitors over 50 days, with 30 million attending on February 4 alone. Held at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the fabled Saraswati rivers, preparations included a sprawling tent city across 3,200 hectares with 440 km of temporary roads, 22 pontoon bridges, nearly 50,000 LED streetlights, and extensive sanitation infrastructure. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the Kumbh Mela in 2019 was a gesture of gratitude to the organisers and workers who made the event a global success. The 2019 Kumbh set new benchmarks for cleanliness and public sanitation. Compared to just 5,000 community toilets in 2013, the 2019 event saw 122,500 toilets, complemented by 20,000 dustbins and 160 waste transport vehicles. Innovative measures, such as water jet spray machines for cleaning, significantly reduced water wastage and eased sanitation work.

Toilets were strategically placed for accessibility and included gender-specific and disability-friendly designs. Pink toilets for women, serviced by female workers, encouraged adoption, while elderly-friendly toilets addressed inclusivity. The introduction of impervious sewage tanks eliminated the risk

of river contamination.

One of the standout innovations was an odour-dispelling solution, first tested during the 2018 Magh Mela and scaled up for Kumbh 2019. Produced on-site by student researchers, nearly 65,000 litres of this solution were manufactured daily. Additionally, swachhagrahis (cleanliness volunteers) played a pivotal role in maintaining sanitation and promoting toilet usage. Equipped with IoT-enabled mobile apps, these volunteers monitored 60,000 toilets across the sprawling grounds, ensuring real-time issue resolution. This initiative not only enhanced operational efficiency but also empowered the volunteers, many of whom were youth and women. In 2017, UNESCO inscribed the Kumbh Mela on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The 2019 edition lived up to this honour, showcasing India’s capacity for organising events of unparalleled scale and significance. With the 2025 Mahakumbh Mela in Prayagraj expected to host over 300 million pilgrims from across the globe, the scale and ambition of the preparations are unprecedented under the leadership of Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath. Guided by the successes of the transformative 2019 Mela, the upcoming edition promises a seamless blend of devotion, technology, and sustainability, setting new global benchmarks.

One key focus is on expanding the venue and accessibility. The number of ghats will be significantly increased to enable safe and orderly bathing, even during peak days, supported by advanced crowd management techniques to avoid congestion. Transport infrastructure is being enhanced, with special trains and improved railway networks connecting Prayagraj to major cities. Multi-lane highways, upgraded intersections, and expanded parking areas are being developed to manage heavy vehicular traffic. Additionally, Prayagraj Airport is undergoing an expansion to handle increased passenger capacity, with chartered flights introduced for international pilgrims. To cater to the millions



of pilgrims, public amenities are being upgraded on an unprecedented scale. Over 50,000 eco-friendly toilets and portable sanitation units will ensure hygiene and convenience. Clean drinking water facilities, solar-powered lighting, and expansive shelters are being developed, reflecting a commitment to pilgrims’ comfort and well-being. Technology will play a pivotal role in transforming the Mahakumbh 2025 experience. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered crowd control systems, supported by drones, will monitor real-time crowd density to prevent overcrowding. Pilgrims will have access to dedicated mobile apps offering real-time information on routes, ghat timings, weather updates, and emergency services. Moreover, a cashless economy will be promoted through digital payment systems.

Sustainability is a cornerstone of the 2025 Mela, building on the green initiatives introduced in 2019. A zero-waste policy will guide operations, with extensive recycling systems and composting facilities in place.

Plastic use will be strictly regulated, and biodegradable alternatives will be promoted for packaging and utilities. Advanced water treatment plants and real-time quality monitoring systems will ensure the sanctity of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, while massive afforestation drives around the riverbanks aim to mitigate soil erosion and improve water retention. Renewable energy sources like solar panels and bio-energy systems will power large sections of the Mela, significantly reducing its carbon footprint. Safety and security are paramount for an event of this scale. Over 10,000 CCTV cameras with AI-enhanced facial recognition technology will monitor the premises, while thousands of personnel, including paramedics, fire services, and disaster response teams, will remain on standby. Temporary hospitals and clinics, equipped with advanced medical facilities and supported by telemedicine services, will ensure timely health care for attendees. The Mahakumbh Mela 2025 will also be a cultural and spiritual showcase.

A quest for harmony with nature

A recent survey confirmed the disturbing trend of diminishing bird species and numbers in Kerala. I have noticed this phenomenon in Thiruvananthapuram, where I grew up in the 1960s. The ancestral house was in a compound with many trees and I had seen paradise flycatchers with trailing tails and golden yellow orioles. Once a purple sunbird had built its pendulous nest at the front entrance, unaffected by our frequent movements. Over the past five decades, the compound changed to accommodate more houses with less greenery. A white-breasted kingfisher and a magpie robin became occasional visitors at dusk. During the COVID pandemic, I spent a lot of time looking at birds from the balcony of my fourth-floor apartment in Jamshedpur. A jamun tree at eye level was a favourite with many starlings, copper-smith barbets, bank mynahs and yellow-footed green pigeons along with the familiar purple sunbirds, golden orioles and magpie robins. The most exciting discovery was a pair of barn owls that would come out from their hideout beneath my balcony. Once it was holding a recently caught rat and another time it perched a few feet away from me. Winter spotting. In winter, I spotted small migratory birds, greenish warbler the size of a jamun leaf and a Taiga flycatcher. Last year, I sensed trouble as some men walked around inspecting the old building under the jamun tree. They bought the land, demolished the building and pruned the trees.

Over the next few months, a hotel was built and all that I could see from my balcony was an expansive bright blue metal roof and a few branches of the jamun tree. The hotel exterior was lit up in the evenings and flashed bright colours. The modification led to the disappearance of birds without any protest except a pair of rose-ringed parakeets. Inept and sad, I missed the barn owls the most. I sought birds in the peripheries of the city and included birdwatching in all my travels. Though I spotted many species, the serene comfort of bird watching from the balcony was lost. Recently I got an opportunity to visit Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on a medical mission and looked forward to seeing some African birds. Citing safety concerns, the hosts forbade us from venturing anywhere beyond the hospital and the hotel. The hotel downtown was amid many high-rise buildings and we were surprised to find weaver birds among the creepers at the entrance and long-tailed speckled mouse birds on a tree nearby. As I reached my room, a Marabou stork flew past the window and I could see a bulky Hadada ibis on a field across the road, its wings glistening in sunlight. The next day, we went to the hospital. Established in 1922, most of the buildings in the sprawling complex were old, single-storeyed with stone or bare brick exterior and sloping roofs in earthy colours. The abundance of native trees and the typical tall African cacti gave the feeling



of a resort. Almost every tree had nests of weaver birds. In between the built structures, there were large patches of mixed indigenous plants. We spotted more than 40 species of birds on the premises of the 500-bed hospital with a daily 1,500 outpatients. African paradise flycatchers flew around the new emergency building, mynah-like Abyssinian thrushes hopped on the green patches between the wards and cute little birds, red fire finch and turquoise blue-colored red-cheeked cordon-bleu, were busy pecking at crumbs in the waiting areas. Tacazze sun-

birds circled around the flowering trees flashing iridescent blue black metallic colours as the afternoon sunlight fell on them. I had a double bill of a successful medical mission and delightful birdwatching. The abundance of birds and coexistence with humans could be attributed to the nurturing of native flora and unobtrusive merging of buildings within the ecosystem. Building practices that conserve local biodiversity is the need of the hour and birds will indicate to us clearly if our actions are promoting harmonious coexistence or otherwise. We have to listen.

Birth pangs of an academic reform in Kerala

"How can exams be held as per this schedule when the portions are far from over? This will mess up things," said Reena Thomas* in a lively chat in a WhatsApp group of college teachers in early October. The discussion was triggered by the announcement of the first-semester examination schedule of the newly launched Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUGP) in the first week of November. "Yes, this could prove premature. The students are only getting to know how the new system works. Foisting an exam [on them] now will only add to their confusion," pointed out her colleague Manu Rajan*. Two weeks later, on October 21, an announcement by the Kerala Minister for Higher Education R. Bindu postponing the first semester exams helped address their anxieties a little. An official release had attributed the landslides in Wayanad and the extended admission window period as the key reasons for the change in the exam schedule. As per the revised schedule, the first semester exams began on November 25.

But the initial hiccups raised questions about the challenges ahead and the way forward in the implementation of the academic reform that was rolled out in the institutions of higher education in Kerala and its affiliated colleges on July 1, 2024. The framework of the programme was formulated with "a student-centric approach, providing maximum flexibility in terms of choice of disciplines of study". It also allowed students to move from one discipline of study to another and from one institution to another. Nearly five months after FYUGP was launched, academic experts say there are questions on how the ambitious objective of "enabling students to acquire competence in using digital technologies and other skills essential to participate

in the knowledge economy" will be met amidst the gaps in the academic and infra requirements demanded by the new system. "The postponement of the first semester exam of the newly introduced four-year undergraduate programmes in Kerala highlighted the structural issues involved within the system. The curriculum is too ambitious, which makes it extensive and demanding. The successful implementation of the curriculum depends on a meticulously planned academic calendar and the will to follow it strictly. This has been a serious flaw in the case of Kerala," says Amruth G. Kumar, Professor and Dean, School of Education at the Central University of Kerala. "The rescheduling of the first semester examination showed either the weakness of the academic calendar or poor respect given to it while implementing. A realistically planned academic calendar and its implementation shall be part of the system. The government should have advanced with the project, with State-level master trainers and regional level trainers under them so that at least 60% of the teachers would have been trained before the implementation. This would have benefited a good number of teachers as peer/colleague trainers at the college level," he says. Fears over a possible spike in financial burden for the universities and its affiliated colleges following the introduction of new and diverse programmes in tune with the new curriculum structure and pedagogical changes remain unanswered.

"The question of who will bear the increase in financial burden is crucial as new faculty members may have to be recruited to match the increase in the number of courses. The burden is likely to shift to the universities and the affiliated colleges concerned as the government may not agree to

shoulder it," says Premachandran Keezhoth, general secretary, Kerala Private College Teachers' Association, and Assistant Professor, Department of English at Payyannur College. "Except for some cosmetic differences, there are no considerable changes as of now from the earlier main-subsidiary pattern of academic programmes offered. The inter-disciplinary alterations may be only around 10-15%, though they seem incomplete and peripheral. The lack of proper awareness creation among parents and teachers about the pedagogical changes need to be addressed effectively. There are also apprehension among the teaching community on whether the fourth year of study under the new system will help achieve the intended outcome of improving the skills and employability credentials of the aspirants," he says. The decision of Calicut and Kerala universities to increase the exam fee after the rollout of the new programme has come in for criticism from various quarters. "The hike in the fee structure clearly showed that the universities will use the FYUGP to increase their internal revenue under the guise of stepping up infrastructure facilities. Students will be forced to bear the burden of this increase," says M. Shajarkhan, vice-president of the Save University Campaign Committee. Faculty members in colleges express concern over whether the students in colleges located in rural areas may receive internship and skill-based training options compared to the increased opportunities available for learners in urban areas. The chances of regional disparities may arise in such a situation as the colleges in rural areas lack the required facilities/options to offer internship to the students, they say. The new system has evoked mixed reactions among students. Mohammed Shameer*,



who joined for a programme in Botany in a government college in Ernakulam, opted for a minor programme in Economics. "The decision was taken under the influence of my friends, who told me that Economics may offer a variety of job options. But I was proved wrong after the classes began as I was not able to grasp the nuances of the subject," he says. A teacher in the Department of Botany in the college admit that several students opted for minor and multi-disciplinary programmes without giving a serious thought on whether they will be able to pursue it in the long run. "We need a mechanism to check whether they have the skills and capability to undertake an entirely different subject," he says.

In Madurai, mining for tungsten and trouble

On the hot afternoon of December 29, more than 300 women at Kesampatti village in Melur taluk in Madurai district, stand in a circle. Most of them are daily wage labourers or farm workers and are of different ages. Clad in colourful sarees, the women clap their hands, sing, and dance in a synchronised fashion. This is kummi, a folk dance that is performed in parts of Tamil Nadu. However, this is not a festival or religious event, when kummi is generally performed; it is a protest site at the entrance of the village. Through performance, the women are agitating against the Union government's proposed extraction of tungsten, a rare element found in this region, which is critical for automobile and defence industries and green energy technologies. "Enga mala sami kavalkarana irunthu makkalayum nilathayum kappan (Our hill god being a protector will protect both our people and land)," goes their kummi song. A. Kalpana, who has never participated in a protest, says, "Our art, religion, food, culture, and tradition are interlinked with this landscape. Without our land, we will become nothing."

The kummi protest is part of the weekly agitations that have been organised by activists and the residents of panchayats in Melur taluk since November 7, 2024. The Ministry of Mines announced that it had granted tungsten mining rights in eight blocks, spanning 5,000 acres, through an auction, to Hindustan Zinc Limited, a subsidiary of Vedanta Limited, a listed company. The Melur region, proposed for mining, includes the villages of Arittapatti and Nayakkarpatti, which are rich in scheelite, a key source of tungsten, and are also home to several heritage sites. On November 23, more than 20 panchayats of four panchayat unions in Madurai passed resolutions against the project. A few days later, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin urged the Modi government to cancel the award of tungsten mining rights in Madurai district and said that he would not allow it as the people were opposed to it. The Ministry, in turn, issued a statement saying "inputs were taken from the Government of Tamil Nadu before the block was put up for auction."

C. Jeeva, a resident of Kesampatti and an organiser of the protest, says, "Though we have organised similar protests and rallies against granite quarrying in the Melur region in the past, we know that the struggle this time is against the Union Ministry and one of the biggest conglomerates in the world. It is going to be a tiring and prolonged battle, but we will persist." Anger in Arittapatti K. Selvaraj, 44, an environmental activist based in Kambur village near Melur taluk, is critical of the Ministry's decision of naming the project after a hamlet of about 20 houses. "By naming it after Nayakkarpatti, they made sure that it did not get immediate attention from the public. If it had been named Melur or Madurai tungsten block, the opposition to this would have been instant and more intense," he says. Selvaraj has been part of protests earlier. Last year, hundreds of residents from over 15 villages in Melur taluk staged a sit-in protest at Sekkipatti village condemning the district administration for inviting tenders for the operation of granite quarries in the taluk. This time, he was among the first few to oppose the project through petitions and Gram Sabha resolutions. "I went around telling people about the problems that the project will cause, and organised meetings to discuss protests and

legal remedies," he says. Watch: Why is Tamil Nadu opposing tungsten mining? | Focus Tamil Nadu

Selvaraj says no panchayat president opposed the resolutions. "Since, this is a government project, some of the presidents were hesitant to record our resolutions, but eventually they agreed," he says. The protests and resolutions, Selvaraj says, were necessary, since Nayakkarpatti block comprises 11 villages, including Arittapatti, a biodiversity heritage site. A. Durka Devi, 26, the only postgraduate degree holder from Nayakkarpatti village, says the seven rocky granite hills that include areas of the Koolampatti, Arittapatti, Nayakkarpatti, and Meenakshipuram villages have historical significance. "These hills contain evidence dating back to the 16th century Pandya kingdom. They also feature several megalithic structures, rock-cut temples, Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, and Jain beds. If not for these historical records, this place would have been turned into stone, dust, and sand long ago," she says.

Noting the importance of the Melur region, a group of archaeologists, including C. Santhalingam, released a statement supporting the people's protest against the mining project. In it, they wrote that two Brahmi stone inscriptions dating back 2,300 years could be found in the Kazhinja malai, one of the seven hills. They also said that the Laguleesar sculpture in a 7th-8th century rock cut temple in the area was rare and should never be disturbed. Devi says Arittapatti was notified as Tamil Nadu's first biodiversity heritage site in 2022. The site covers the Arittapatti and Meenakshipuram villages in Madurai district. "It houses around 250 species of birds, including three raptors — the Laggar falcon, the Shaheen falcon, and Bonelli's eagle; 200 natural spring ponds; and three check dams," she says, the information at her fingertips. The region is also home to wildlife, including the Indian pangolin and slender loris. The rocky hills stand tall and are surrounded by green patches of farmland. The farms, which are mostly fed by the Mullaperiyar dam, use the ponds as their water source, say residents. Given the massive opposition to the project, especially in Arittapatti, on December 24 the government asked the Geological Survey of India to re-define the boundaries of the Nayakkarpatti block by excluding the biodiversity heritage site from it. It also asked the Tamil Nadu government to keep the process of issuing the Letter of Intent to the preferred bidder, Hindustan Zinc, on hold for the time being. But the resurvey order caused more fear. The residents say they had thought the project was coming to a halt altogether as the Tamil Nadu government had passed a resolution in the State Assembly on December 9 saying it would not allow the mining project. Selvaraj sits on one of the hillocks near Arittapatti along with villagers to discuss the next steps. They decide that they will embark on a 25-kilometre-long protest march from Narasingampatti in Melur taluk to Tallakulam in Madurai city on January 7.

Turning away from the villagers, Selvaraj says the entire population of Melur taluk depends on land for their livelihood, as their primary income is through farming and livestock management. But more importantly, the people consider the hills sacred, he says. "Humans who did some sort of sacrifice for the village or to the people became gods. And they now reside in these hills, so



we celebrate them and worship them," says K. Revathi, 25, an agricultural worker from Nayakkarpatti. Devi says she does not understand the Union government's plan. "What is the point of saying they will leave out Arittapatti alone when they want to destroy the rest?" she asks.

The State government's position and motives. I. Selvam, 42, a farmer in Arittapatti, says while the State government had initially said it was against the mining project, Ministers have been trying to prevent villagers from passing resolutions at Gram Sabha meetings. "Knowing that the Gram Sabha decisions will have an effect on the implementation of the project, Commercial Taxes and Registration Minister P. Moorthy (representing Madurai East) influenced the villagers and told them not to pass resolutions during meetings," Selvam alleges. "The people know that the State government had no say in projects like these. But our hope is that the government will at least stand by our side." In an order dated October 21, 2024, the Ministry of Mines had said that it had been empowered to auction blocks for the grant of an exploration license under Section 20A of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957.

Citing the amendment, R.S. Mugilan, an environmental activist known for his agitation against the Sterlite copper plant in Thoothukudi and the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tirunelveli, says the State government's authority over resources has always been limited in matters of national interest, such as nuclear power. "This was evident yet again when MP R. Sudha representing Mayiladathurai constituency asked in the Lok Sabha whether the Union government would ban oil and gas exploration activities in the delta districts, which have been declared as special agricultural zones by the State government," says Mugilan. "The Union Minister of State, Kirti Vardhan Singh, replied that certain areas were notified as eco-sensitive zones or areas based on proposals from States, but said that there was no such proposal from the Tamil Nadu government." Mugilan says all political parties want to play the blame game. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam has opposed the project through protests and rallies and has also held the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government responsible for auctioning the mine. The BJP has slammed the two Dravidian parties for "mis-

leading" the people. Bharatiya Janata Party State President K. Annamalai, who finds himself in a tricky spot, has said he has appealed to the Minister for Mines, G. Kishan Reddy, to keep the project on hold. Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader Vaiko has accused the Centre of awarding the tungsten mining contract to Hindustan Zinc without consulting the State government. "In the midst of this, political parties fail to understand the toll that so-called developmental projects take on the lives of the people," he says. He explains the potential effects of the tungsten project: "Studies in China show that communities near tungsten mining sites have experienced elevated levels of tungsten in soil and water, leading to increased health risks. What assurance do the people of Madurai have that their health and lives will be fine?" Mugilan cites the Bhopal gas tragedy as an instance of government apathy. "It took 40 years for the government to remove hundreds of tonnes of toxic waste from Bhopal from the chemical factory. This shows India's backwardness in dealing with such tragedies," he adds. After submitting a petition to G. Kishan Reddy during the last Parliament session, Madurai MP Su. Venkatesan organised a protest along with fellow cadres of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Melur to inform people about the importance of their role in opposing the project. "Though the resolution passed by the Tamil Nadu government in the Assembly may have political value, it has no legal value owing to the amendment passed in 2023 [to strengthen the extraction and exploration of critical minerals]," Venkatesan explains. As the Union government has turned a deaf ear to the people's demands, the people must keep protesting, he says. The need for critical minerals M. Vetrivelan, an advocate and a member of Poovulagin Nanbargal, an environmental organisation based in Tamil Nadu, says, "Critical minerals, which were included in the Act in 2023, have geopolitical value. Following the U.S. government's 2018 policy to secure critical minerals to shift the country's dependence from fossil fuels to renewable energy, the international market for critical minerals such as tungsten has been opened. That is why the Indian government has chalked out ways to secure critical minerals located in various places in the country." Vetrivelan says if the State government truly objects to the project, it will have to pass a law to protect the natural resources of Melur taluk, similar to what it did to safeguard the delta region.

Karnataka's 15% bus fare hike: What it means for commuters, how the government justifies it and why Opposition is protesting

Story so far: Starting January 5, commuters in Karnataka are paying an additional 15% for tickets in all bus services operated by the State's four Road Transport Corporations (RTCs). The move has come as a shock to people, who were just beginning the new year, 2025. The Congress government, headed by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, made the decision to increase fares aiming to generate an additional ₹74.85 crore in monthly revenue for the RTCs to make up for escalating operating costs. However, opposition parties BJP and JD(S) have criticised the move, arguing that the fare hike is a result of losses incurred by the RTCs owing to Karnataka's Shakti scheme, which offers free bus travel for women on State-run buses.

Why was the fare hike implemented now?

The decision to raise fares follows sustained demands from the RTCs, which have been grappling with rising operational costs. The primary factors driving this increase include escalating diesel prices, higher staffing costs, and increased maintenance expenses, according to Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister H.K. Patil, who explained the reasons after a Cabinet meeting. Patil stated that diesel, a key cost component, has seen a significant price surge over the years. For instance, in 2015, the cost per litre was ₹60.98. Daily diesel expenses for RTCs have increased from ₹9.16 crore to ₹13.21 crore. Similarly, daily expenses for staff salaries have risen from ₹12.85 crore to ₹18.36 crore, reflecting growing wage commitments. The upkeep of the fleet, which includes repairs and servicing, has also become more expensive over the years. The primary factors driving the increase in fare hike include escalating diesel prices, higher staffing costs, and increased maintenance expenses, according to Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister H.K. Patil. File photo. The primary factors driving the increase in fare hike include escalating diesel prices, higher staffing costs, and increased maintenance expenses, according to Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister H.K. Patil. Despite these mounting costs, RTCs had not revised fares for many years. The Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTCC) last increased fares a decade ago in 2014, while the other three corporations — Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC), North Western Karnataka Road Transport Corporation (NWKRTC), and Kalyana Karnataka Road Transport Corporation (KKRTC) — implemented their last hike five years ago.

What is the impact on commuters? The fare hike has triggered widespread dissatisfaction among commuters, particularly those who rely on public transport daily. Many see it as an additional financial burden amid rising costs of essential commodities. Manoj Kumar, a daily BMTCC bus user, shared his concerns and said, "For commuters like me, this increase means allocating a substantial portion of our income to travel. With rising costs everywhere, this is an added strain. The airport bus I take daily was already expensive; now it's even worse." While the fare increase has impacted all passengers, male commuters have faced additional challenges with cash transactions. Many expressed frustration over the difficulty of providing ex-

act change to conductors after the fare revision. Since women benefit from the Shakti scheme, conductors mainly rely on male passengers for cash payments.

"I usually carry exact change for my daily commute from Majestic to Nandini Layout, which used to cost ₹25. Now, I have to pay ₹28, an extra ₹3," said Ramakrishna R., a resident of Nandini Layout. "If I pay ₹30, conductors often don't have ₹2 change. With the revised fares, it is very difficult, and I'm constantly searching for small denominations." Daily ridership on State-run buses has surged significantly since the introduction of the Shakti scheme, which allows women to travel free of charge. According to Transport Department data, daily ridership increased from 93.46 lakh to 116.63 lakh passengers, adding 23.17 lakh daily commuters. While this highlights the scheme's popularity, it has also placed additional pressure on the existing transport infrastructure.

What is Shakti scheme's impact on RTC finances?

Between June 2023 and March 2024, the four corporations spent a total of ₹4,380.36 crore on the implementation of Shakti scheme. The government has been releasing ₹417 crore monthly to RTCs as reimbursement for the scheme, and the 2024-25 Budget allocated ₹5,015 crore for its continuation. According to Transport Department data, daily ridership increased from 93.46 lakh to 116.63 lakh passengers, adding 23.17 lakh daily commuters, since the introduction of the Shakti scheme by the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government. File Photo According to Transport Department data, daily ridership increased from 93.46 lakh to 116.63 lakh passengers, adding 23.17 lakh daily commuters, since the introduction of the Shakti scheme by the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government. Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy defended the fare hike, attributing it to inherited liabilities from the previous BJP government, including a debt of ₹5,900 crore. He explained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, bus operations were halted, exacerbating financial difficulties. Although grants were provided for net salaries, gaps between gross and net salaries created an accumulated burden. Additionally, the government has decided to guarantee RTCs a ₹2,000-crore loan to clear provident fund and diesel purchase dues. The government will bear both the principal and interest on this loan.

Are Karnataka's fares still competitive?

Despite the hike, Mr. Reddy claimed that Karnataka's bus fares remain lower than those in other neighboring states. "We decided to increase the fares by 15%. If you compare, the fares on buses run by RTCs in Karnataka are lower than those in Maharashtra, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh," he said. Meanwhile, the revision of fares for premium AC buses, however, will be determined independently by the corporations, with a cap of 15%. GST is applied exclusively to AC buses. BJP workers wearing masks of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar, distribute roses and "apologise" to KSRTC bus passengers, during an agitation against the Karnataka government's decision to increase bus fares by 15%, at the



Story so far: Starting January 5, commuters in Karnataka are paying an additional 15% for tickets in all bus services operated by the State's four Road Transport Corporations (RTCs)

Kempegowda Bus Stand in Bengaluru on January 3, 2025. BJP workers wearing masks of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar, distribute roses and "apologise" to KSRTC bus passengers, during an agitation against the Karnataka government's decision to increase bus fares by 15%, at the Kempegowda Bus Stand in Bengaluru on January 3, 2025. | Photo Credit: MURALI KUMAR K

How is the government addressing rising demand for buses?

To address growing public transport needs, the Transport Department has inducted 4,304 new buses for 2023-24 and 2024-25. Mr. Reddy said of these, BMTCC received the largest share with 1,510 buses, followed by KSRTC (1,118), KKRTC (1,014), and NWKRTC (662). Plans are also underway to introduce an additional 1,346 buses across the four corporations, according to Mr. Reddy.

What has been the political reaction?

The fare hike has drawn sharp criticism from opposition parties. BJP State President B.Y. Vijayendra accused the Congress government of burdening the public under the pretext of its guarantee schemes. He likened the Shakti initiative to a "Buy-One-Get-One-Free" gimmick. Leader of the Opposition R. Ashok posted on X (formerly Twitter), questioning, "How many more taxes and fees must Kannadigas pay to satisfy your government's insatiable greed?" On January 3, Ashok staged a protest at Bengaluru's Kempegowda Bus Station by offering roses to male passengers and apologising "on behalf of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah." He criticised the government for "making bus travel free for women while doubling fares for men." Similar protests against the bus fare hike were organised by Opposition parties across Karnataka. R Ashok, Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly, distribute roses to KSRTC bus passengers, during an agitation against the 15% bus fare

hike, at the Kempegowda Bus Stand in Bengaluru on January 3, 2025. However, Mr. Reddy countered these criticisms by highlighting fare hikes during previous BJP administrations. "Most recent hikes occurred under BJP rule," he noted, citing a 12% increase in 2020 under then Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa and a cumulative 47.8% hike implemented by Mr. Ashok during his tenure as Transport Minister between 2008 and 2012.

What do experts and bus user groups say?

The Bengaluru Bus Prayanikara Vedike (BBPV) has called for the immediate withdrawal of the Karnataka government's bus fare hike, terming it "unfair and unjust." BBPV member Vinay Sreenivasa condemned the decision, arguing that it disproportionately affects the working class, who depend on buses for their daily commute. "This fare hike discourages the use of public transport at a time when we need more buses and free public transport to address Bengaluru's traffic issues. Penalising public transport users is a step in the wrong direction," he said. The Bengaluru Bus Prayanikara Vedike (BBPV) has condemned the bus fare hike, arguing that it disproportionately affects the working class, who depend on buses for their daily commute. In a press release, the BBPV suggested alternative revenue-generating measures, such as introducing parking and congestion fees for private vehicle owners, especially during peak hours, and implementing a traffic cess for private companies based on their employees' use of private transport. The BBPV also urged the government to redirect funds allocated for large infrastructure projects, like tunnel roads and flyovers, to enhance Bengaluru's bus system. "These projects have not been effective in alleviating traffic congestion. Instead, priority should be given to creating bus lanes and expanding bus services," the BBPV stated, also proposing the introduction of a congestion tax to make car travel more expensive.