

# Telangana witnesses 7383 fire mishaps in 2024

Hyderabad: The Telangana Fire Services and Disaster Response Force attended 7383 fire and rescue calls during the year 2024 across the State. Of the total fire calls 7093 were of small fire mishaps and 180 medium while 87 were serious fires and 24 major fire mishaps, Director General, Fire Services Department, Y Nagi Reddy said there is an increase of 5.9 per cent in medium fire calls in 2024 compared to previous year while the overall fire calls are nearly the same as last year. "Ninety nine per cent of the fires are in non-high rise buildings. Fire breaks out due to various reasons. It is always suggested to adopt preventive or precautionary steps if you want to avoid fire mishaps," said Y Nagi Reddy.

He said the fire department is regularly organizing fire safety awareness programs and in 2024 a total of 8433 programs were held across the State. "Similarly, we are also conducting inspections of buildings to check for fire safety measures," said the official. The DG said that in 2024, the department had

participated in several rescue missions during the floods in different parts of the Telangana. "We reached out to people stranded in flood water during the night also and brought them out to safer places. The department is training its personnel in fire fighting as well as rescue operations," said Nagi Reddy. The department is taking up prosecution of the building owners where major fire mishaps have reported, he said. "The criminal investigation the police are doing and filing charge sheet while the fire department is following the civil prosecution," said Nagi Reddy. The GHMC is issuing notices to residential buildings from where commercial activity is allowed. "It will take some time to shift the commercial activities from residential buildings. But it will done to avoid fire accidents," the official pointed out. The fire mishap at the Satava building at Madhapur was due to gas leakage. DG Fire Services, Y Nagi Reddy on Monday said that the fire on the fifth floor of Satava building at Madhapur was because of gas leakage in



the restaurant. "There was a gas leakage in the building. Due to power fluctuation there was short circuit and it sparked off the fire,"

said the official. He said the fire was contained well in time by intervention of safety officers of the building and fire department personnel.

## Electric Vehicle owners in Hyderabad struggling with limited charging stations, call for improved infrastructure

Hyderabad: The Electric Vehicle (EV) market in Telangana, still in a nascent stage, is facing challenges that affect owner satisfaction and the overall user experience, especially the accessibility of charging stations. EV car owners are voicing their frustration over the non-visibility and accessibility of EV charging stations in Hyderabad city. They emphasized that finding a safe and functional charging station remains a considerable challenge, even as most drivers restrict their inter city journeys to less than 50 kilometres. A majority of EV four wheeler users express the need to build a robust and smart EV charging infrastructure embedded in our current vehicular ecosystem so that they do not face problems in locating them.

Currently, the electric vehicle charging infrastructure in Hyderabad is in its nascent stage. Most charging stations are situated inside conventional fuel pumps, mall parking, hotel premises, or corporate parks. There are about 190 EV charging stations in Hyderabad to charge electric cars. "There is an urgent need for a vast network of charging stations in the same way as fuel pumps are now a common sight on our road networks. In fact, electric vehicle charging stations need to be more common and accessible than a regular parking space," a EV car owner suggested.

Electric vehicle users can charge their vehicles by paying Rs 12.06 per kWh as service charges at public charging stations, which is the ceiling service cost for charging

electric vehicles installed under the State or central subsidy. Those charging at home are paying domestic charges, although there are many who have installed a separate meter for charging EVs. It is estimated that if a two wheeler is charged at home an additional Rs. 300 to 400 will add to the domestic monthly bill. Similarly, a four wheeler owner may have to shell out additional Rs. 2,500 to 3,000 per month for charging the vehicle. How to locate EV charging stations: The easiest way is to use the car's built-in navigation system. Most of the advanced infotainment systems in EVs are now smart enough to not only provide you with the distance to the charging station but also give you an estimate of the remaining charge when you reach there. For those who don't have an in-built navigation system in their EV, Google Maps is a good alternative to get directions for the nearest charging stations. Apart from this, all operators these days have a dedicated mobile application which can be used to find their nearest EV charging station. How to charge EVs? Unlike a fuel station where a person dispenses petrol and diesel into your car, all EV stations are designed to be self-service networks. At the EV stations, you use the online application to make online payments and complete your charging procedure. When visiting a charging station to recharge your EV, the first thing you need to consider is the compatibility of your EV charger. One must know the capacity of your vehicle and its charger port type to check its compatibil-



ity with the charging station. Passenger vehicles in India use Type 2 AC charging plugs while EVs with DC fast charging support have slightly advanced CCS Type 2 charging plugs. Almost all charging stations are unmanned. You have to carry out the charging process yourself and it's all online through your smartphone. So ensure your phone is sufficiently charged, has a service network, and is capable of making online transactions or payments. Once there, you might find a QR code to download the proprietor's mobile app. Some OEMs also provide RFID cards which can be used to tap-and-start EV charging. Simply follow the instructions on

the charging station for using the provided app to start the charging session. Some stations may also have a display screen with prompts to guide you through the process.

How long does it take to charge an electric car? The time necessary to charge an EV at home ranges between 30 minutes and 12 hours. Majorly, the charging duration comes down to the speed of your charging point and the battery size of your vehicle. A typical battery of 60 kWh in an EV takes about 8 hours for a 0 to 100 per cent charge using a charging point of 7 kW. Using a 50 kW fast charger, you can top up the EV range by 160 km in about 35 minutes of charging.

# Pocketing the queen, and other carrom connections

In Old Delhi's labyrinthine streets of Sadar Bazar, where spices and silver jewellery are sold in wholesale markets, noise is a default setting. The best way to get there is by travelling on the Delhi Metro, and then in a (back-breaking) autorickshaw ride over potholes. The "multitudes" that Walt Whitman speaks about can also be used to describe Delhi's Mughal quarter: traffic and cows dodge each other, people grab a bite on the roadside, thick electricity cables hang low, and there are loud negotiations for money and space. Off Idgah Road, where it is best to walk because the lane narrows to single-scooter width, a backstreet leads to a ramshackle building. Within its 16x16-square-foot hall, there is an unexpected quiet. Behind the closed doors of the Mohammed Naeem Ansari Hero Boys Carrom Club-cum-Naeem Coaching Academy, three dozen men pore over carrom boards illuminated by bulbs hanging over them. Wooden coins — in ivory and black — that dart across the boards make the only sound as players focus on their next move.

There are about 30 carrom clubs in the city, registered with the Delhi Carrom Association, mostly across the Walled City near the Jama Masjid, Ballimaran, Chawri Bazaar, Lal Kuan, and Paharganj; besides a few in Wazirabad in west Delhi and Seelampur in east Delhi. Most of them, though not the Ansari boys' club, are 40-50 years old, and operate out of crammed low-ceiling rooms. To play competitively, clubs must be registered. "Over the last three years, the number of clubs has doubled and the membership multiplied manifold," says Mohd. Naeem Ansari, who runs three carrom clubs in Sadar Bazar. "Until the early 1990s, there were about 60 clubs in the city; by the 2000s, hardly a dozen were left," he says. The nature of entertainment had changed, with multiplexes and mall-crawl culture thriving. The low patronage of the informally played game copied itself out in towns and cities across India until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

With historical roots in India, carrom is today played in living rooms, public spaces, clubs, cafes, game halls of school and colleges, and recreation rooms of hotels and offices across 75 countries. "It is an enthralling game with no age bar and provides both entertainment and quality time with family and friends. There is an element of competition too," says Rashmi Kumari, three-time world champion and winner of 11 national titles. Kumari, who works with the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, a public sector company, says people do not realise that there are those who play it at a highly competitive level. As per export data from the Commerce and Industry Ministry, ₹39 crore worth of Indian carrom boards were exported between April 2022 and January 2024. There was a 6% growth between just February and August 2024. Crafting carrom boards Ansari's observation about the revival of interest in carrom is reflected 80 km away in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, where kaarigars (craftspeople) make carrom boards. "Our boards are for everyone who plays carrom for fun and bonding," says Aman Grover, who runs his grandfather's 55-year-old Swati Sports in Bansipura, which is dotted with shops selling sports equipment. In 2022,

Grover says, his annual turnover of ₹4 crore was three times more than the previous year's. Then, making carrom boards was seasonal, doing good business six months a year and peaking during the summer, vacations, and festivals like Ramzan. "Now, the spike in demand keeps us busy even during the challenging monsoon and winter months," he says.

Meerut was one of the places where families that fled Sialkot during the Partition settled. Now, people who manufacture carrom boards — a skill they brought back from Sialkot — live in Surajkund Colony, Sports Colony, and Gandhi Nagar. Nearly 78 years ago, they had set up small enterprises in their backyards, manufacturing all kinds of sports goods. "Initially, there were hundreds of us here; now only 50 families are left that make carrom boards," says Madan Bhatia, whose family business was set up by his grandfather in Sialkot in 1926. His workshop in Surajkund Colony buzzes with the skills of daily wage workers who make 250-300 carrom boards a day. The corridor to Bhatia's office is stacked, Jenga-like, with towers of 16x16-inch plyboards that come from Kolkata, and kikar (babul wood) frames from Rajasthan. From here, the sky is just a ribbon. In the mini factory, carrom boards are being assembled manually. Four pieces of kikar wood are cut to make a square frame, then glued, and clasped with iron fasteners.

"Earlier, we used nails, but now use corrugated fasteners as they join the corners better," says Deepak Kumar, who has been working in the factory for 15 years. The frame is then layered with marammat (a mixture of chalk powder and a wood adhesive) and smoothed before it is painted black, varnished, and left to dry. In the next section, the ply, already coated with a sealer and dried to make it waterproof, is smoothed with sandpaper and fitted into the frame. Roshan Singh focuses on the rotating cutter to drill holes for the four corner pockets in less than a minute. He has done this for 20 years. Bhatia says until a decade ago, skilled artisans held an important position in the carrom-making team as the black-and-red marking on the playing surface was hand-painted on each board. "It was time-consuming. Stencilling has made the process quicker," he explains.

The next step is to paste the back support or the chaakdi, which is sourced from the wood market in Hapur, Uttar Pradesh, on to each prepared board. Bharat Kumar then attaches the crochet pockets made by women at home in Uttar Pradesh's Tejgarhi, 4 km away. His sister-in-law, Rajeshwari, earns ₹5 for each pocket she crochets. Depending on her domestic chores, she does 20 dozen or so in a week. Now, he fears her small earnings may go away because factory owners have started importing nylon pocket nets from China for ₹3 a dozen. "Handmade crochet pockets are better and it is easy to hammer bulletin board pins on them around the four holes," he says. Board intelligence Carrom board-making is a lengthy process; at each stage of its making it has to be sun-dried well so that the frame and the board do not warp, bloat, or bubble over time. It takes at least five persons to make one carrom board, and inside Meerut's small factories, daily wage workers put in shifts of



eight hours each. They are paid between ₹32 and ₹100 per piece depending on the type of work they do and the size of the board. "It takes two months for a carrom board to get to the market for sale," says Bhatia, supervising the day's consignment of 100 boards, each packaged with carrom coins procured from Rajkot and Vadodara in Gujarat, and carrom powder that is produced locally. His boards will be delivered to Reliance stores in a neighbouring district.

"The most-bought size for playing at home is 16x16 inches," says Deepak Aggarwal, who owns a shop in the market. Selling at ₹180 each five years ago, they now cost ₹250 given the rising cost of raw materials. Boards smaller than this usually have a two-year life. Depending on the order, carrom manufacturers in Meerut make the boards in sizes from 16x16 inches to 42x42 inches. "After COVID, there has been year-round demand. We would sell 300 to 350 pieces a month in the hectic six-month period, which would drop to 125 pieces a month for the rest of the year," says Abhishek Jalan, Aggarwal's business partner. "The abundance of orders is good money, but it also means working long hours in difficult weather conditions. The wood has to be always well protected from water and dampness," says Manohar Lal, a skilled solo manufacturer, who makes his own boards, roughly two dozen a week, and sells them only in the local market. Taking it abroad In 1947, thousands of skilled craftsmen had migrated across the border and established sports goods manufacturing units predominantly in Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Meerut, Moradabad, and Mumbai. While Punjab and Maharashtra grew as the hub for carrom boards used in competitions the world over, Meerut's small manufacturers remained inundated with opportunities for handmade, indoor games. Arjun Kohli, 28, is the CEO of Stag, which was founded by his great-grandfather Arjun Das Kohli in 1922 in Sialkot to make sports equipment for schools. Though the company today is a trusted brand in table tennis, the demand for carrom boards in domestic markets and overseas, including the U.S., the U.K., and Europe, where the Indian diaspora lives in large numbers, has made Arjun stick with it. In 1947, thousands of skilled craftsmen who made carrom boards had migrated from Pakistan's Sialkot across the border and established sports goods manufacturing units predominantly in Jalandhar,

Ludhiana, Meerut, Moradabad, and Mumbai.

In 1947, thousands of skilled craftsmen who made carrom boards had migrated from Pakistan's Sialkot across the border and established sports goods manufacturing units predominantly in Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Meerut, Moradabad, and Mumbai. | Photo Credit: SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP He is a regular supplier of high-quality, medium-density fibreboard carrom boards to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE; and within India to Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and the northeastern States. On an average, 3,000 boards move out of his factory once every three weeks, he says. Arjun makes them on white boards, laminated particle boards, and high-density plywood that cost between ₹2,500 and ₹12,000. "The price depends on the thickness of the plain surface, thickness and width of the border, the finishing touches, and the quality of screen printing and polishing," he says. With carrom becoming a part of many Indian celebrations in recent years, Arjun began innovating. Last Deepavali, he launched a convertible carrom board, a folding model that also turns into a mini table tennis set and comes on wheels for easy mobility. For Ramzan, he made boards with extra pockets on the frames to hold teacups, and adjustable stands for playing comfort and posture. This Deepavali, he created a black board with neon coins for Australian and U.S. markets. Grover caters to weekly orders of 50 pieces of 32x32-inch boards, and 80 pieces of 16x16-inch boards from Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Afghanistan, and Iran. Bhatia sends 100 pieces a month to Nepal and also receives bulk orders from Yemen, Malaysia, and Qatar. Vivek Narayan, former secretary general of the All India Carrom Federation, says despite India being among the top playing carrom nations in the world, and a quality exporter of carrom boards, the game has not been elevated the way chess has. However, he says because players can apply for government jobs and university scholarships using carrom wins under the sports quota, it holds value. "Multiple carrom competitions at district and State levels, the national league tournaments, and world championships have catapulted carrom to a recognised tabletop sport. The live-streaming of carrom tournaments on YouTube is slowly making a difference," he adds. Going clubbing Back inside Delhi's carrom clubs, the games typically begin at 7 p.m. and go on until the crack of dawn.

# AAP And Congress Grinding Their Own Axe In The Name Of Farmers: Haryana CM

Chandigarh (JAG MOHAN THAKEN), January 1 – Chandigarh, January 1 – Accusing Congress and Aam Aadmi Party of grinding their own axe in the name of farmers rather than ensuring their welfare, Haryana Chief Minister, Nayab Singh Saini pointed out that many political parties have exploited the issue of farmers for political gain without making any real decisions in their favour. He specifically mentioned the Aam Aadmi Party and Congress Party governments in states like Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka, accusing them of grinding their own axe in the name of farmers rather than ensuring their welfare. Saini said that the BJP government is working diligently under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, accompanied by his wife Smt. Suman Saini, Wednesday offered prayers at the Mata Mansa Devi Temple in Panchkula on the occasion of the New Year. He also interacted with the devotees present at the temple. Speaking to media persons on this occasion, the Chief Minister extended New Year greetings to the people of the state, expressing his hope that the year would bring economic and social prosperity to all citizens. He said that prosperity would touch every individual's life, and wished for the fulfilment of this aspiration. Addressing the issue of farmers, Nayab Singh Saini informed that the Supreme Court has set up a committee to engage with the farmers, and this committee is in constant communication with them. He assured that the Haryana government is purchasing all crops from the state's farmers at the Minimum Support Price (MSP). A resolution has been passed in the Vidhan Sabha to ensure the procurement of all crops at MSP. Regarding the recent rains and hailstorms, the Chief Minister said that it has been decided to get the farmers registered on the 'kshatipurti' portal immediately so that proper compensation for the loss suffered by the farmers can be given on time. He added that over the past decade, the government has directly deposited Rs 13500 crores in farmers' accounts as compensation for various losses. The Chief Minister said that the current government always stands by the farmers. He also shared plans to introduce new schemes aimed at promoting crop diversification. These initiatives will help farmers benefit more from natural farming practices, at a lower cost. Moreover, the government is working on providing incentives for the cultivation of crops other than paddy to alleviate water pressure and promote sustainable agriculture.

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini has welcomed the farmer-friendly decisions made in the first Union Cabinet meeting of 2025, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Expressing his gratitude to the Prime Minister, he said that the thoughtful manner in which these decisions have been made for the welfare of farmers will directly benefit lakhs of farmers in Haryana.

Referring to the Union Cabinet's decisions as a New Year gift to the farmers from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister said that these decisions will ensure the availability of DAP to farmers at affordable and subsidized rates. In addition, a budget allocation has been made to promote the

Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana and enhance technology, which will have a direct positive impact on farmers. It may be mentioned here that during the Union Cabinet meeting chaired by the Prime Minister on Wednesday, the proposal from the Department of Fertilizers to increase the one-time special package on DAP beyond the NBS subsidy by Rs 3,500 per metric ton was approved. This package, effective from January 1, 2025, until further orders, aims to ensure the continued availability of DAP to farmers at affordable rates. This decision will guarantee that farmers receive DAP at a subsidized, reasonable, and affordable price. Besides this, the continuation of the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana and the Restructured Weather-Based Crop Insurance Scheme were approved to continue till 2025-26, with a total outlay of Rs 69,515.71 crore from 2021-22 to 2025-26. This move will provide farmers across the country with coverage for crop risks caused by unavoidable natural disasters until 2025-26. Along with these measures, several other decisions aimed at the welfare of farmers were also taken by the Union Cabinet today. The Chief Minister further stated that in 2025, Haryana will reach new heights of development. Reflecting on the progress made in 2024, he mentioned that significant work has been done to advance the state in various sectors. In line with the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Developed India-2047, he assured that work will proceed rapidly in the coming year to make India a developed nation. Following this vision, development efforts in Haryana will also accelerate, with the goal of making the state fully developed. The government is committed to this objective.



Referring to the election manifesto, Saini said that promises of the Sankalp Patra are being fulfilled continuously. The Chief Minister said that the BJP government has made several commitments in its Sankalp Patra during the elections, and work is being done gradually to fulfil them. He added that significant progress has already been made in implementing many of these promises, and the remaining ones will also be com-

pleted soon. Chief Minister Saini mentioned that upon forming the government, the first step was to provide jobs to 24,000 youth without 'Kharchi-Parchi'. In addition, the government has introduced free dialysis facilities in all civil hospitals and medical colleges, benefiting lakhs of kidney patients across the state. He also highlighted the government's initiative in granting ownership rights to tenant farmers in Haryana.

## JSW MG Motor India to showcase 'Drive.Future' at the Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025

Set to showcase the future of mobility, futuristic design, advanced technology & innovation and elevated customer experience

Hyderabad: JSW MG Motor India has announced participation in the Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025, accelerating into 'Drive.Future' as the theme. After making strides in the electric vehicle market, the brand is set to bolster its foothold with new-age products that offer new-age mobility solutions. With innovation in its DNA, MG is all set to showcase the future of mobility through an immersive line-up of product experiences, design language, technology & innovation and will also unveil the next level of immersive customer experience. Unveiled earlier this year, Drive.Future is the brand's vision of an innovative, sustainability-led future, driven by its intuitive technology. On the product front, JSW MG Motor India will be showcasing three all-new models across three all-new categories, each one catering to a completely different set of customers. The MG Cyberster, the world's fastest MG Roadster, will headline India's newly launched luxury brand channel, MG Select. Drive.Future is the brand's vision to build a new ecosystem for mobility altogether and pans across product experiences, technology use-cases and a new customer-centric

approach/offering of 'accessible luxury' to engage with the new-age customer. The theme and set-up of the pavilion echo the Expo's theme of 'Beyond Boundaries: Co-creating Future Automotive Value Chain'. Visitors will also be able to spot showstoppers from MG's global portfolio, along with flagship Indian models that have been redefining the industry with their best-in-segment features. The pavilion will also house a host of unique experience zones that will demonstrate its holistic EV ecosystem along with infrastructure, and multiple use-cases of battery technology and second life. Visit the JSW MG Motor India pavilion from January 17-22, 2024: Hall 10, Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi About JSW MG Motor India

SAIC Motor, a global Fortune 500 company with a presence in over 100 countries and JSW Group (India's leading conglomerate with interests across B2B and B2C sectors) formed a joint venture - JSW MG Motor India Pvt. Ltd. in 2023. The joint venture aims to build a smart and sustainable automotive ecosystem while staying focused on developing a diverse portfolio of vehicles to give car buyers better access to advanced

technologies and futuristic products with attractive value propositions. JSW MG Motor India Pvt. Ltd. is committed to introducing world-class technology, strengthening the manufacturing landscape, bringing the best of innovation across its business operations, and generating significant employment opportunities through extensive localisation.

## Engineering student dies after being hit by unidentified vehicle in Hyd

Hyderabad: An engineering student died in a hit and run case at Abdullapurmet in city suburbs on Tuesday night. The victim, E Rishith Kumar (19), who stayed in a hostel, parted along with his friends Mahender and Bhanu Prakash until 12.30 am. The trio who had planned to eat something, started on their bike towards Hyderabad.

# Will small EV-sweepers keep Bengaluru's narrow market lanes cleaner?

In November 2024, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) announced that the civic body will buy 86 small battery-operated mechanical sweepers to clean narrow streets in the city's densely populated market areas and commercial streets to reduce dust. While a few citizens were skeptical about the use of these sweepers, solid waste management experts, shopkeepers at market areas and shoppers have appreciated the move. These new mini-sweepers are expected to be more manoeuvrable and efficient in cleaning confined spaces like footpaths and sidewalks, thereby contributing to a cleaner and healthier urban environment. These new mini-sweepers are expected to be more manoeuvrable and efficient in cleaning confined spaces like footpaths and sidewalks, thereby contributing to a cleaner and healthier urban environment. | Photo Credit: HANDOUT E MAILExisting truck-sized sweepers

The BBMP currently uses 25 large truck-sized mechanical sweepers for cleaning arterial roads during nighttime. Currently, large, mechanized cleaning machines are used only on arterial and sub-arterial roads. However, these machines are unable to navigate the narrow lanes of commercial areas such as the Old Pete area, Shivajinagar, and other market hubs in the city, where mechanical sweeping has been a longstanding demand to reduce dust accumulation. Dust accumulation along median strips due to heavy vehicular traffic has also not been adequately addressed. To address this limitation, the State government has approved funds under the 15th Finance Commission Grants for the procurement of battery-operated electric mechanical sweeping machines with a capacity of less than two cubic meters. The BBMP has issued tenders for 86 of these compact electric sweepers and tenders have been called for twice. These new mini-sweepers are expected to be more manoeuvrable and efficient in cleaning confined spaces like footpaths and sidewalks, thereby contributing to a cleaner and healthier urban environment. The BBMP is in the process of finalising the specifications for these machines and has floated tenders for their procurement. The civic body is hopeful that this initiative will improve air quality and also enhance the overall cleanliness of the city. More than seven crores

Speaking to The Hindu, Basavaraj Kabade, chief engineer of BBMP's Solid Waste Management (SWM) section said that the machines will help manage cleanliness in densely populated and busy areas. "Around 77.5 crores has been allocated under the 15th Finance Commission Grants and we have called for tenders. The EV-sweepers are being procured to mostly be used in the commercial areas that are very crowded and have smaller lanes like Commercial Street, Church Street, K.R. Market, Gandhi Bazaar and other such areas. The machines will be used during the nighttime just like truck-sized sweepers, as the market areas are less crowded during the night and will look cleaner throughout the day," he said. "The existing truck sweepers are around 10 cubic meters and can hold larger amounts of dust but can not be navigated on smaller roads. However, the EV-



sweepers are as big as an auto or a small hatchback car, they can be driven around easily. The EV-sweepers will hold no more than 0.5-1 cubic meters of dust," Kabade explained. "Most Pourakarmikas are in their 40s and 50s, and over a period of time, with the city growing, we will not have enough labourers to do the job," says Sarfaraz Khan, an SWM expert. "Most Pourakarmikas are in their 40s and 50s, and over a period of time, with the city growing, we will not have enough labourers to do the job," says Sarfaraz Khan, an SWM expert. | Photo Credit: MURALI KUMAR KReducing manpowerSarfaraz Khan, an SWM expert, director of a cooperative audit in the Department of Cooperation and the former joint commissioner for BBMP's SWM Department, said the move by the BBMP is a good one.

"It will play a huge role in reducing the city's dust and pollution levels. Back when I was in the BBMP, I had suggested the city have a minimum of 100 sweepers. Most Pourakarmikas are in their 40s and 50s, and over a period of time, with the city growing, we will not have enough labourers to do the job. What one mechanical sweeper sweeps in a day will require a lot of manpower if done by Pourakarmikas. Back then when we had estimated the cost it was close to 77.5 lakhs for a truck-sized sweeper, but the salaries for Pourakarmikas would go up to 730 lakhs per month," he said. "More importantly, the roads are not safe. Especially during the nighttime and early mornings, with speeding vehicles and trucks it is not safe to let Pourakarmikas do the job and risk their lives," Khan added. Monitoring is key. He pointed out that when BBMP brought in the truck-sized sweepers initially, the authorities made sure a camera was added to the truck, so they could have before and after pictures of the roads that were cleaned, with the time stamp. "It does not make sense for the BBMP to just buy the sweepers and hand them over to a contractor. You need to have a GPS system, mapping system, and software that shows how much sweeping has been done by the machine on that day, how much dust

was generated, where it was deposited and other information, all of which should be shared on a public portal or domain," Khan explained.

Dinseh Reddy, who runs a fancy store in Gandhi Bazaar, said while the move is appreciated, the BBMP will have to plan it well.

## India Continues to Hold Steady Despite Global Uncertainties: CareEdge Ratings

CareEdge Ratings said that it expects the Indian government to continue on the path of fiscal consolidation and projects India's GDP growth to moderate but remain healthy at 6.5% in FY25 and 6.7% in FY26, in a webinar held on Economic & Sector Outlook for 2025. Despite global uncertainties, CareEdge Ratings says India will continue to hold steady in 2025. Sachin Gupta, Chief Rating Officer & ED, CareEdge Ratings, "The first half of FY25 paints a picture of cautious optimism within India's corporate sector, where stability and resilience meet global challenges head-on. Amid the uncertain global environment, there is a lingering hesitancy among businesses to commit to long-term investments, as the anticipated boost in private capital expenditure is yet to materialise. However, we expect to see improvement in private investment in 2025, supported by anticipated monetary policy easing."

Rajani Sinha, Chief Economist, CareEdge Ratings said, "Contraction in public capex, prolonged monsoon and weakening urban demand impacted growth momentum in H1 FY25. But we can expect the economic growth in H2 FY25 to rebound, supported by the recovery in consumption and a pick-up in government capex. Healthy agriculture production and robust services sector performance will be supportive of a rebound in GDP". According to CareEdge Ratings, CPI inflation is expected to moderate in the coming quarters. It expects food inflation to moderate, driven by a strong kharif harvest and favourable conditions for rabi

sowing. CareEdge Ratings highlighted that CPI inflation excluding vegetable inflation has been below 4% in the last few months. The average CPI inflation is projected at 4.8% in FY25 and 4.5% in FY26. Core inflation is expected to remain benign, averaging ~3.5% in FY25 and 4.3% in FY26. And WPI inflation is anticipated to average 2.5% in FY25 and 3% in FY26. As far as government finances are concerned, net revenue collection will be aligned with the budgeted target.

The weak corporate tax collection will be compensated by healthy income tax collection for the year. On the expenditure side, the Centre's capex is likely to fall short of target by Rs 1.5 trillion. Nominal GDP growth is projected to be lower at 9.9% as against budgeted growth of 10.5% for FY25. With lower capex, CareEdge Ratings project the fiscal deficit for FY25 at 4.8% of GDP, marginally lower than the budgeted 4.9%. On the external front, CareEdge Ratings projects merchandise exports to rise by 2.5%, while, services exports are projected to record a strong growth of 13% in FY25. Further, encouraging performances in remittances is expected to continue. Overall, CareEdge Ratings expects India's current account deficit (CAD) to remain manageable at 0.9% of GDP in FY25.

CareEdge Ratings believes that the manageable CAD and high forex reserves should support rupee. However, a strong dollar and weak yuan are likely to put some weakening pressure. CareEdge Ratings expects Rupee to trade around 84 by end of FY25 and between 84-86 by end of FY26.

# The View From India newsletter: Three global developments to watch out for in 2025

The year 2024 was a tumultuous one for the world. The war in Ukraine continued with Russian territorial advances. China continued to flex its muscles in East Asia even as its economy was struggling. In West Asia, Israel has been behaving like a rogue state carrying out large-scale attacks in its neighbourhood and killing tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians. Regimes fell in Bangladesh and Syria. In Georgia, a disputed election triggered a political crisis, which is reminiscent of the 2014 Ukraine political crisis. The U.S. has been there in the forefront of the pro-Ukraine supply group. But in West Asia, the U.S. continues to support Israel despite concerns that Israel is carrying out genocide in Gaza against Palestinians. And then Donald Trump won the presidential election. The year 2025 is unlikely to be different. With Mr. Trump at the helm in the U.S. and the existing conflicts set to continue, the world is expected to see further disruption. Three geopolitical developments need to be closely watched, which could shape international politics in the coming months.

Ukraine warRussia made major territorial gains in 2024 in eastern Ukraine. Russian troops are now closing in on the eastern city of Pokrovsk, major logistical hub for the Ukrainian troops. But Ukraine, which is struggling on the battlefield, has taken the war to the Russian mainland with western-supplied weapons. In November, after Mr. Trump, who had promised to bring the Ukraine war to an end, won the presidential election, outgoing President Joe Biden gave permission to Ukraine to fire U.S.-supplied long-range missiles at Russia. Ukraine is also carrying out drone attacks regularly in Russia. But what worries Ukraine is the return of Mr. Trump to the White House. If financial and military assistance from the U.S. dries up, Ukraine would be in deep trouble. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President who had earlier ruled out any compromise on territories in return for peace, is now open to freezing the conflict along the line of contact if Kyiv is allowed to join NATO. European countries are also considering sending peacekeeping forces or trainers to Ukraine as part of a peace deal. Russian leader Vladimir Putin has said that he is ready to discuss Ukraine with Mr. Trump but he has demanded Ukraine's 'neutrality' as part of any deal and opposed foreign troops' presence in Ukraine. The future direction of the war would mainly depend on two factors—Russia's ability to continue to make gains on the battlefield and the position Mr. Trump takes once he assumes power. Crisis in West AsiaThe story of West Asia was bloodier than that of Ukraine. Israel, which started attacking Gaza in October 2023 after Hamas's cross border raid, continued its bombardment of the Palestinian enclave in 2024 with no restraint. More than 44,000 Palestinians have so far been killed in Israeli attacks in Gaza. In the second half of the year, Israel escalated the conflict by invading Lebanon. It killed the top leadership of Hezbollah, which started firing rockets into Israel in October 2023. Israel also attacked the Iranian embassy in Damascus, which triggered a direct Iranian strike on Israel. Later, Israel and Hezbollah accepted a ceasefire, but the twists and turns in the region did not end there.

In later November, Syria's Islamist militants, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly



al-Qaeda) launched an offensive against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. In 12 days, the HTS, commanded by former al-Qaeda leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani and backed by Turkey, captured Damascus, forcing Mr. Assad to flee. Israel wasted no time in grabbing more Syrian land in the Golan Heights. It also launched massive attacks in Syria aimed at demilitarising the country so that the new Islamist regime could not pose any conventional military threat to the Jewish state. The fall of the Assad regime was a setback for both Iran and Russia. For Iran, Mr. Assad's Syria was a critical conduit for supplies for Hezbollah. For Russia, Syria hosted an air base and a naval base. In 2025, what is to be seen is where the conflict in Gaza is headed to and how Iran is going to respond to the setbacks it suffered. Israel, despite the international isolation it faces, would be hoping that the return of Mr. Trump to the White House would strengthen its hands in the region. It is also likely to bring parts of Gaza under its direct military occupation.

U.S.-China rivalryWhile Ukraine and West Asia are the hot conflicts of the time, the cold war that's being played out is between the U.S. and China, the world's most powerful countries. China, the rising superpower, wants to continue to spread its influence, while the U.S., the reigning power, wants to check China's influence. Mr. Trump has already threatened to impose more tariffs on Chinese goods, which would flare up global trade tensions. Both countries are already competing in the field of technology. Two geopolitical areas to be watched are Taiwan and the South China Sea. China has upped the game around Taiwan in recent years with back-to-back live drills, and has repeatedly warned against altering the status quo. In the South China Sea, tensions between China and the Philippines, an American ally, have risen dramatically in recent months over contested reefs. China faces economic challenges at home. But President Xi Jinping is unlikely to let those

challenges affect the country's grand foreign policy ambitions. With the U.S. under Trump expected to take a more hawkish line towards Beijing, the cold war of the 21 century is likely to heat up further. The Top Five

1. The Sheikh Hasina extradition demand, India's optionsBangladesh must understand that Sheikh Hasina must have a fair trial while India needs to make room for Bangladesh state agencies to conduct this, write Aklavya Anand and Shailesh Kumar.

2. Justin Trudeau: The autumn of a liberalThe Canadian Prime Minister, once a liberal darling, endures a chilly winter with popularity ratings tanking, senior colleagues withdrawing support to him and new foreign policy challenges emerging from across the border after Donald Trump's victory, writes Srinivasan Ramani.

3. Why will India's foreign policy be a

tightrope walk?: ExplainedWhy did Bangladesh events come as a shock to the government? What about relations with China, the U.S., countries in the neighbourhood and West Asia? writes Suhasini Haidar.

4. Three consequential foreign policy decisions of Jimmy CarterThe 39th President of the United States completed the diplomatic normalisation process with China, launched the policy of supporting the Afghan Mujahideen against the community government in Kabul and its Soviet backers and brokered the Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel, writes Stanly Johnny.5. Panama Canal: Troubled watersThe 82-km-long strategic waterway that connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans is in the spotlight after U.S. President-elect Donald Trump threatened to retake its control, writes Adithya Narayan.

## Now make UPI payments through WhatsApp!

Hyderabad: In a significant development, the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) has announced that it has lifted the limit from on-boarding UPI users for the third-party app provider WhatsApp Pay with immediate effect.

"National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) has removed the UPI user onboarding limit for WhatsApp Pay with immediate effect," said NPCI in a press release.

Earlier, the popular messaging app was only allowed to extend its Unified Payments Interface (UPI) services to its user base in a phased manner, before which it was allowed to onboard a small number of user base to avail the services. The limit was gradually raised after monitoring its performance and their compliance with the existing UPI guidelines.

In 2020, WhatsApp was allowed to onboard nearly 100 million users, followed by the NPCI lifting the cap in 2025. Owing to this significant development, the messaging app, with over 500 million users in India, can now leverage its vast user base to avail the 'WhatsApp Pay' services and establish itself in the growing digital payment landscape.

How to use WhatsApp Pay?

The WhatsApp Pay option is only available on the latest version of the app, therefore make sure that you have installed or updated the app. You can find the 'payments' option on the settings menu of the app.

To avail the WhatsApp pay service, you can click on the 'payment' option and enroll your bank account. Make sure that the phone number linked to your WhatsApp matches the one associated with your bank account.

# Conviction countdown: from trial to triumph in Telangana

The discovery was chilling — the lifeless body of a 55-year-old woman lay crumpled in a dark corner of the cellar of an old building, her head bearing multiple wounds. A blood-stained boulder sat ominously nearby, and a strand of hair clenched tightly in her fist hinted at a desperate struggle. Her dishevelled clothes raised suspicions of sexual assault. It was June 14, 2023, when Pochampally police teams of Rachakonda commissionerate arrived at the abandoned building in Pillaipally village, about 40 kilometres from Hyderabad. Among the scattered clues, an emptied 180-ml liquor bottle seemed like just another piece of trash. Little did they know, this unassuming glass bottle would unravel the chilling identity of the murderer.

Acting on a tip-off, police apprehended Mohammed Anwar, a labourer in his mid-30s from Bihar, working at an under-construction building in the village. Under intense interrogation, Anwar confessed to the crime — violating the woman in intoxicated condition after spotting her alone in the cellar, and then silencing her with a fatal blow from a boulder. While the confession offered investigators instant relief, solving the case within 48 hours, their ordeal was far from over. Securing a conviction posed a far greater challenge, as confessions to police are inadmissible in court. Determined to build an iron-clad case, the team meticulously examined every shred of evidence collected from the crime scene. Much headway could not be made. The first breakthrough came in the form of fingerprints lifted from the seemingly inconsequential liquor bottle found near the body. Of the two chance prints recovered, one was unusable. But the other turned out to be a perfect match with Anwar's fingerprints, collected during his arrest.

The evidence confirmed Anwar's presence at the crime scene but fell short of conclusively proving he committed the murder, despite his confession and willingness to lead the police to the spot. Even his admission of sexually assaulting the victim wasn't enough to eliminate doubt. The forensic doctor in his autopsy report also noted 'recent vaginal penetration', but this left room for Anwar to claim that while he may have violated the woman, someone else could have committed the murder, implicating him in the process. Investigators were tantalisingly close to solving the case, yet critical gaps remained. The breakthrough came from the victim's vaginal and cervical swabs, collected during the autopsy. Forensic experts, in their analysis, conclusively linked Anwar to the crime, as the swabs matched his DNA profile, turning suspicion into certainty.

Forensic experts employed Autosomal STR analysis — a DNA profiling technique using Short Tandem Repeat markers on autosomal chromosomes to identify individuals — to match the DNA profile of the accused with samples collected from the crime scene. This technical evidence left no room for doubt, conclusively establishing the arrested man's involvement in the rape and murder. In the courtroom, the First Additional District and Sessions Judge of Bhongir held that the "prosecution proved and established the guilt of the accused under Sections 376 and 302 of IPC beyond all reasonable doubt". The judge awarded 20 years of rigorous im-

prisonment for rape, and life imprisonment for murder, with both sentences to run concurrently. "This case is a classic example of how the concerted efforts of investigators, forensic experts and prosecutors ensure no criminal goes scot-free," says Rachakonda Police Commissioner G. Sudheer Babu. He is proud of not just conviction in this case, but also securing life sentences to 49 persons in 30 cases this year alone.

Teamwork, tech and tenacity Hailing it as a 'remarkable feat' in the backdrop of typically 'low conviction rates', the Rachakonda Police Commissioner credited the success to teamwork and consistent monitoring. A dedicated Court Monitoring Cell (CMC), led by Deputy Superintendent of Police-rank officers overseeing the trial of important cases, was constituted. Such specialised wings are now common across all police units. Once the investigation is completed and a charge sheet is filed, the CMC scrutinises every detail of the judicial process. When the schedule of the trial is announced, the cell ensures the presence of panch and eye-witnesses, deposition of forensic doctors, and technical experts, leaving no aspect to chance. Each case is closely tracked by two officers: a Court Duty Officer from the local police station and a Court Monitoring Officer from the CMC. This approach has led to convictions in 30 life imprisonment cases — 12 murders, two dowry deaths, one murder for gain, and a murder-cum-POCSO Act case. The remaining 14 cases of life convictions were secured in which POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) Act was invoked. Some prosecutors feel that ensuring punishment in POCSO cases is comparatively easier due to the stringent provisions of the special law. Unlike other crimes, POCSO shifts the burden of proof onto the accused, presuming guilt unless proven otherwise — an advantage for law enforcement in securing justice.

In the Pochampally murder case, it was up to the police and prosecution to prove Anwar's guilt. "Even POCSO cases throw up peculiar challenges. The victims and their parents sometimes refuse to testify when the case comes up for trial as they often reach marriageable age by then," says Commissionerate Crime Records Bureau officer Jupally Ramesh. In some instances, parents refuse court appearances, fearing the stigma of sexual assault might tarnish their children's future. They privately tell the police that they don't want to attract more attention by attending court and sharing evidence. In one such POCSO case registered in 2020 and investigated by Balapur police, the CMC noted that the trial schedule was disrupted multiple times. The trial, involving an eight-year-old victim, was repeatedly delayed as her parents stopped appearing in court four years later, worried that the case would cast a shadow on her future. While respecting the parents' emotions, the Commissioner was resolute in pursuing justice. A team of female officers of various ranks met with the family, reminding them that it was the headmaster of the girl's school who had violated her. "The accused, Philip Joseph, who was eventually removed from his position, should be punished to set a precedent and ensure no other child suffers at the hands of such a preda-



tor," they told the parents. After several counselling sessions and persistent efforts by the officers, the parents and the young girl agreed to attend court. The assault had taken place in the afternoon of January 28, 2020, when the eight-year-old went to the school office to get drinking water. The accused headmaster lured her into his office, where he assaulted her. He even threatened to kill her if she told anyone about it. The following day, the girl's mother noticed injuries on her while putting on her school uniform. The kid, apparently scared to reveal the assault, did not reveal anything when asked. It was only after a medical examination confirmed the assault that the mother approached the police. "Such cases require more than prosecution and policing; they demand compassion and sensitivity," says Sudheer Babu, reflecting on the case that led to a life sentence for the accused this year. Vigilance at every step In April this year, the murder of a sexagenarian, T. Ravinder, by his own son in Adibhatla, on the outskirts of Hyderabad, is another example of how the CMC played a pivotal role in helping investigators. The charge sheet was filed, evidence presented, and final arguments were under way when the CMC officer discovered a key omission by Adibhatla police, at the last minute. Ravinder was at home when he was attacked by his 25-year-old son, T. Anurag. In the charge sheet, police mentioned that the youth, addicted to Ganja, had been harassing his parents. On April 4, he poured petrol on his father and set him afire. His mother was in the washroom and he locked the door from outside, ensuring she could not intervene. Ravinder, engulfed in flames, ran outside screaming for help, before collapsing from his injuries.

According to police records, Anurag then chased his father and struck him on the head with a boulder, killing him instantly. He walked into the Vanashtalipuram police station around 10 p.m. and surrendered before the Station House Officer (SHO). However, when preparing for trial, the investigators had overlooked one critical detail: they failed to present the SHO's statement, in which Anurag had confessed. By then, the trial had reached its final stages, with all evidence and documents presented in court. Since there was a possibility of the defense counsel

pointing out the lacunae, the CMC advised the investigators to submit the SHO's statement under Section 311 of the Criminal Procedure Code. The judge accepted this after informing the defense counsel, closing the gap in the prosecution's case. This case stands out as the only one to secure a conviction in the same year it was reported. The murder took place on April 4, and the judge delivered a life sentence on December 13. Setting sight on delivering justice In contrast, most other cases had been reported several years prior. The oldest of these cases involves the kidnapping and murder of car driver, Mohammed Ilyas Ahmed, a man in his early 50s, from Nizamabad. The crime, committed by a gang of four — G. Srinivas, R. Mahesh, R. Gouraiah, and G. Sridhar — was reported to Bommalaramaram police station (Yadadri Bhuvanagiri district) in December 2014. The quartet, hailing from Karimnagar district, hired Ahmed's car under the pretense of visiting the Vemulawada and Kondagattu temples. After reaching a deserted place on the outskirts of Kondagattu, they strangled Ahmed to death. The gang then drove for nearly 180 kilometres and dumped the body in a secluded spot in Maryala village under Bommalaramaram police station limits, and set it ablaze. Since the body was burned beyond recognition, the victim's identity could not be ascertained initially. An autopsy was conducted. The femur bone and viscera were sent to forensic experts for analysis. Through internal communication, police discovered that a man of similar age had gone missing from Nizamabad district. After examining the charred remains, Ahmed's family identified the body, confirming it as their missing relative. Nearly a month later, investigators intercepted a car and detained four persons who were unable to provide valid vehicle documents or answer basic questions. During interrogation, the quartet confessed to kidnapping and murdering Ahmed before stealing his car. Following proper procedure, all scientific evidence was collected, and the charge sheet was filed. The accused were later granted conditional bail and released from prison. After several court adjournments, the gang was excused from attending hearings, with assurances they would appear when the trial began.

# Belgaum Congress session: Gandhiji refused to stay in 'expensive' hut

Months of hard work by several hundred workers and volunteers went into the successful organisation of the Belgaum Congress session in 1924, which was chaired by Mahatma Gandhi. The centenary celebrations of this event at Belagavi (as Belgaum is now called), was inaugurated on December 26. The event concludes on December 27. A photograph of the 1924 Belgaum Congress session chaired by Mahatma Gandhi on display in the Veera Soudha in Belagavi. A photograph of the 1924 Belgaum Congress session chaired by Mahatma Gandhi on display in the Veera Soudha in Belagavi. A photograph of the 1924 Belgaum Congress session, shows Mahatma Gandhi arriving at the venue. A photograph of the 1924 Belgaum Congress session, shows Mahatma Gandhi arriving at the venue.

Congress workers had back then created Vijaya Nagara, a new township on around 100 acres of land between the Military Camp and the Vaccine Depot Ground at Tilakwadi, for the plenary session. Role of Gangadhar Rao Deshpande. Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, Congress leader and Khadi activist, was among Gandhiji's close associates. Deshpande was the chairman of the reception committee for the 1924 session. A memorial hall in his name was inaugurated as part of the ongoing centenary celebrations.

Deshpande served as AICC general secretary along with other leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Saifuddin Kitchlew. At the 38th Congress session in Kakinada, Deshpande and his followers placed a demand for conducting the next session in Belagavi. They prevailed upon the senior leadership and outbid attempts by leaders from Mangaluru, Dharwad and Mysuru to hold the session in their cities. He and his team worked for nearly 10 months to prepare for the two-day session. They dug out a huge well and named it 'Pampa Sarovara' to provide water for the delegates. This water body, now known as the Congress Well, continues to yield sweet water to this day. However, tragedy struck during digging of the well. A nine-year-old boy, Babu Harapanahalli, fell into it accidentally and died. Some workers thought it was a bad omen. But Deshpande asked them to continue the work, saying there was no place for blind belief in such honest and good work. Veteran Gandhians N.S. Hardikar and Kaka Karakhanis formed a team of volunteers that took up all kinds of work, including sanitation in the dry latrines. Gandhiji appreciated this with a special mention in the Young India later. Workers and volunteers set up tents for the meetings and for accommodating the delegates. They set up a series of tents for the office-bearers including the president. They lobbied with the Imperial Railways to set up a temporary flag station near the venue. A huge gateway was built near the venue. The session remains historic because it is the only one chaired by Mahatma Gandhi. The leader, who arrived from South Africa became a Congress members in 1915, and became president of the all-India session after nine years. However, his association with the party was short-lived. He dissociated himself from the Congress party in 1935 saying he refused to be 'a four anna member of the Congress', referring to its



annual membership fee.

Gandhiji visited Belagavi four times, between 1916 and 1943. He spent three days in 1916, nine days in 1924, and 14 days in 1942, making two visits that year. In 1942, Gandhiji visited Belagavi to spend time at the khadi and village industries unit set up by Deshpande in his native village of Hudali near Belagavi. The unit has diversified its activities over the years, and now produces soap, pickles and incense sticks. For the Congress plenary, Gandhiji arrived in Belagavi on December 20, 1924, evening. He left for Mumbai on December 29. Moulana Mohammed Ali,

who had chaired the Kakinada session, passed the baton to Gandhiji during a simple ceremony. The president was taken around in a padayatra (procession) around the venue. The nation's tallest leaders were among the 800 delegates and invitees. They included Motilal Nehru and Jawaharlal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, C. Rajagopalachari, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu, Chittaranjan Das, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Saifuddin Kichalu, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Rajendra Prasad, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Moulana Shoukat Ali. A few of the colourised photographs of the 1924 Belgaum Congress session chaired by Mahatma

Gandhi on display in the Veera Soudha in Belagavi. A few of the colourised photographs of the 1924 Belgaum Congress session chaired by Mahatma Gandhi on display in the Veera Soudha in Belagavi. Keep costs low. Khimajirao Godse, a Belagavi-based handicraftsman, had built a hut using bamboo and other material for the Mahatma near Vaccine Depot. It cost around ₹350. But Gandhiji refused to stay in it as he felt it was expensive. He chose to stay in another tent erected for a delegate. In an article in Young India later, he commented that it was a 'presidential palace' and not a hut, and advised future organisers to keep costs low.

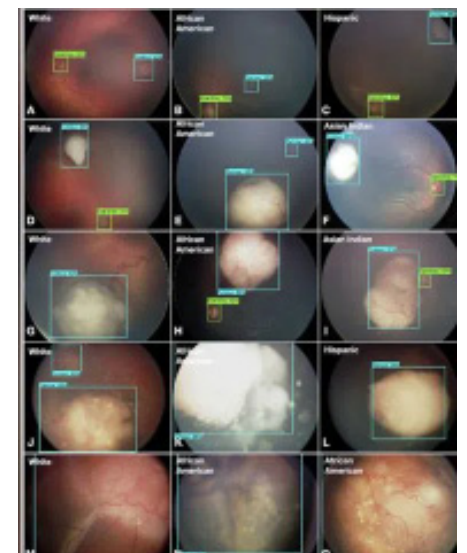
## Hyderabad researchers develop AI to detect eye cancer

Hyderabad: For the first time in India, Hyderabad-based researchers have developed an Artificial Intelligence (AI) based model to detect eye cancers, also known as Retinoblastoma (RB). Eye researches from Hyderabad-based L V Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI), Dr. Vijitha S. Vempuluru, Dr Swathi Kaliki, ocular specialist from US-based Wills Eye Hospital, Dr Carol L. Shields, IIIT-Hyderabad, and TechSophy Inc collaborated to develop the first AI model dubbed as Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Ocular Oncology, Retinoblastoma (ArMOR), to diagnose eye cancers for peoples of all ethnicities with pinpoint accuracy. In the new study that was published in the journal Cancers (October, 2024), the researchers said that they have improved ArMOR and tested its ability to detect retinoblastoma in a multi-racial patient group or cohort.

The ArMOR technology was refined with the help of researchers from International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT-

Hyderabad), and Bourmtec Solutions Pvt Ltd. The researchers used deep learning and geometric calculations to extract various features of retinal tumors, such as tumor seeds, blood vessels, hemorrhage, etc., that an AI can identify.

"The AI model displayed an accuracy of 97 percent for detecting retinoblastoma, and 98 percent, 93 percent, more than 99 percent, 94 percent and 93 percent for grouping tumors into the International Classification of Retinoblastoma groups A to E, respectively," the researchers in the study published in Cancers said. Since AI/ML have been increasingly explored in the field of intraocular tumors and early detection of retinoblastoma (RB) is crucial for optimizing treatment outcomes. "Hence, we aimed to employ AI/ML to develop a potential screening tool for RB and established the feasibility of training an AI model to detect and classify RB from fundus images in an Asian Indian cohort previously. Taking this work ahead, we explored the model's ability to detect and



classify RB in a multiracial cohort. Despite unequal frequency distribution between the races.

# Pandemic preparedness: Learning from COVID-19 and Nipah to build a resilient future

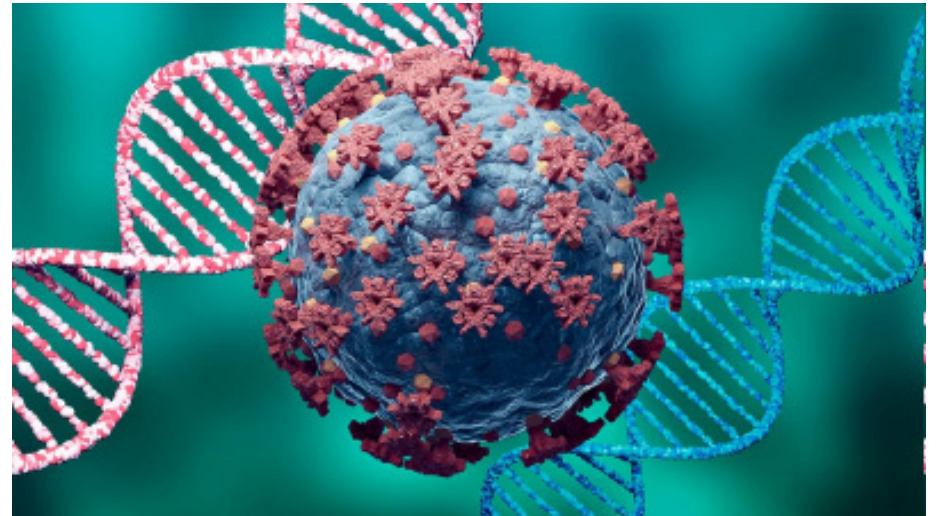
As we observe International Epidemic Preparedness Day on December 27, India stands at a crucial juncture in its journey towards building robust health security systems. The COVID-19 pandemic and recurring Nipah outbreaks in Kerala have provided valuable insights that can shape our approach to future health emergencies. The Kerala model Kerala's successful management of Nipah outbreaks since 2018 offers a compelling blueprint for handling emerging infectious diseases. The State's response demonstrates how local healthcare systems can effectively contain potential pandemic threats through rapid detection, systematic contact tracing, and coordinated public health measures. The Kerala model emphasises three critical elements: early detection through surveillance, swift response via established protocols, and proactive community engagement. The State's experience with the Nipah virus underscores that successful containment requires a multi-pronged approach. This includes strengthening healthcare infrastructure, establishing clear communication channels, and maintaining robust surveillance systems. Importantly, Kerala's ability to detect and contain single-case spillovers demonstrates the necessity of vigilance, even during non-outbreak periods. Engaging with communities

The Nipah virus outbreaks in Kerala have highlighted the critical importance of engaging with communities, particularly those living in close proximity to animals, in health surveillance and preventive measures. One key lesson is the necessity of proactive education about zoonotic diseases. Communities must be informed not only about the risks associated with animal-to-human transmission but also about practical steps they can take to reduce these risks. This involves teaching them about the signs of illnesses in animals, the importance of proper sanitation, and safe practices related to handling animals and their products. Open lines of communication ensure that community members feel empowered and motivated to participate in health initiatives, thus fostering a collaborative approach to outbreak prevention. Another vital lesson is the importance of building trust through consistent engagement and involvement. Establishing strong relationships with community leaders and local organisations can bridge gaps between health authorities and the public. These trusted figures can act as conduits to disseminate information and mobilise community action during health crises. Additionally, incorporating local knowledge, such as cultural practices and environmental connections to wildlife, can enhance disease prevention strategies. When communities feel their voices are heard and their input is valued, they are more likely to adhere to public health recommendations and cooperate with health authorities during outbreak responses, ultimately leading to more effective containment measures. The emergence of zoonotic diseases like Nipah and COVID-19 highlights the critical importance of the 'One Health' approach. This framework recognizes the interconnectedness of human health, animal health, and environmental factors. Kerala's establishment of the One Health Centre for Nipah Research and Resilience (KOHCCR) represents a significant step toward implementing this approach. For India to mitigate future

pandemics effectively, it must expand this model nationally, creating a network of One Health centres dedicated to monitoring potential disease outbreaks, studying environmental factors, and tracking animal-human disease transmission patterns. This approach is particularly relevant in light of India's diverse ecology and high population density, which create numerous opportunities for disease spillover events. A key lesson from both COVID-19 and Nipah outbreaks is the importance of early detection through comprehensive surveillance systems. To enhance preparedness, India needs to strengthen its Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) in the following ways: establishing more diagnostic facilities with advanced testing capabilities; implementing real-time data-sharing systems across states; training healthcare workers in early detection of unusual disease patterns; creating networks of sentinel surveillance sites in high-risk areas and integrating human and animal health surveillance systems.

The pandemic exposed gaps in our healthcare infrastructure. Moving forward, India should focus on several key areas, critical among them: creating dedicated isolation facilities in major hospitals; establishing clear protocols for managing highly infectious diseases; maintaining stockpiles of essential medical supplies and protective equipment; training healthcare workers in infection control practices and developing surge capacity plans for emergency situations.

India's experience with COVID-19 vaccine development demonstrates our capability to respond to health emergencies; however, we need sustained investment in research on emerging infectious diseases and development of diagnostic tools and therapeutics. In addition to paying attention to vaccine research and manufacturing capabilities and genomic surveillance infrastructure, collaborative research networks with international partners are absolutely essential. Future preparedness plans should include a number of communication strategies that will help influence health-seeking behavior. This includes laying out clear communication strategies for health emergencies, in addition to continuing, steadily, all regular public health education programmes, besides engaging with community leaders and local organisations. More importantly, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic we must put in place robust systems for countering misinformation, and additionally, exhibit cultural sensitivity while implementing control measures. Given India's geographical position and population mobility, cross-border disease surveillance and coordination are crucial. We need very strong international collaboration mechanisms and standardised protocols for information sharing. Joint response exercises with neighboring countries, on the lines of what happens with bilateral military exercises, and collaboration with regional disease surveillance networks are vital. Such sharing will be possible, we must remember, only if we have harmonised quarantine and testing procedures. The pandemic, as we know, accelerated digital health adoption. Thanks to this, we now know that future preparedness should include robust telemedicine systems, digital disease surveillance platforms and



electronic health records. While AI-powered disease prediction systems are gaining ground, the value of mobile health applications were once again apparent during the pandemic. The economic impact of COVID-19 that we have already witnessed demonstrates the need for financial preparedness. This means ensuring dedicated funding mechanisms for emergency responses, readying insurance systems for pandemic-related healthcare and providing economic support systems for affected communities. If we are able to plan for supply chain resilience and public-private partnership frameworks, we are reasonably prepared for the future and we might be able to avert some of the economic fall-outs of a health crisis. India needs a comprehensive pandemic preparedness policy framework that includes clear command and control structures, and standard operating procedures for different scenarios. Unless existing health systems keep up with regular mock drills and simulations, it is likely they will be out of touch at the time of a crisis. It is necessary to update public health laws and also ensure that inter-state coordination mechanisms work well.

As we face an increasingly intercon-

nected world with growing pandemic risks, India must build on these lessons to create a comprehensive preparedness system. This requires sustained investments in public health infrastructure, research capabilities, and human resources. The recurring Nipah outbreaks in Kerala serve as constant reminders that the next pandemic threat could emerge anywhere, anytime. Our preparedness systems must be agile enough to respond to known threats while being robust enough to handle unknown ones. Success in pandemic preparedness requires a whole-of-society approach, bringing together government agencies, healthcare providers, research institutions, and communities. Only through such coordinated efforts can we build a resilient health system capable of protecting our population from future health emergencies. The time to prepare is now. As we mark International Epidemic Preparedness Day, let it serve as a reminder that investing in preparedness today is far less costly than responding to pandemics tomorrow. India's experience with COVID-19 and Nipah provides a valuable lesson: it's crucial that we learn from them to build a safer, more prepared future.

## Climate change affecting plant nutrition

Hyderabad: More than one-third of Earth's animals, ranging from insects to large mammals, rely on plants as their primary food source. However, plants are low in calories, making it challenging for these herbivores to consume enough energy to sustain themselves. Climate change is compounding this issue by decreasing the nutritional quality of plant-based foods. Human activities have increased atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) levels and global temperatures, accelerating plant growth worldwide. While this phenomenon, known as the "greening of the Earth," can store more carbon and potentially offset some greenhouse gas emissions, it comes at a cost. Faster-growing plants often contain fewer nutrients, a trend known as nutrient dilution.

This decline in plant nutrition could significantly affect herbivores, from insects to giant pandas, by forcing them to spend more time foraging, thereby increasing their vul-

nerability to predators and environmental stressors. It can also reduce their growth, reproduction, and survival rates.

Research has already shown that climate change is diminishing the nutritional value of human food crops, with declines in vital micronutrients like iron, zinc, and magnesium. Similarly, livestock face challenges as protein levels in grasses are decreasing, impacting weight gain and profitability for ranchers. Wild species, such as giant pandas, are also affected. Rising temperatures are reducing the nutritional content of bamboo, their primary food source. Insects, vital for pollination and food webs, are also impacted. Leaf-chewing insects, such as caterpillars and grasshoppers, experience reduced reproduction and body size due to nutrient-poor plants. Conversely, some insects like locusts may benefit from carbon-rich vegetation. The effects of nutrient dilution are most pronounced in nutrient-poor areas like the Amazon and Congo basins.