

Telangana's fiscal health under strain as spiraling borrowings raise concerns

Hyderabad: Telangana's financial health appears to be under severe strain with significant shortfalls in revenue receipts, subdued tax collections and mounting borrowings, as revealed in a comparative analysis of fiscal performance up to December 2024 against the corresponding period of the previous financial year. As per the latest report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the revenue receipts for the current financial year reached Rs 1.12 lakh crore, which is only 50.76 per cent of the Budget estimate of Rs 2.22 lakh crore, a marked decline from 57.72 per cent in the corresponding period of 2023-24. Tax revenue, the primary contributor, has also seen a dip in performance, achieving just Rs 1.02 lakh crore, which is around 62.07 per cent of the targeted Rs 1.64 lakh crore, compared to 65.37 per cent last year. GrimKey components such as Goods and Services Tax (Rs 37,664.91 crore) at 64.28 per cent of the target against 67.03 per cent last year, and Stamps and Registration (Rs 7,524.42 crore) at 41.28 per cent of Budget estimates against 57.59 per cent last year, have underperformed, reflecting slower economic activity and weak tax enforcement. While the Sales Tax revenue of Rs 24,035.11 crore

surged to 71.86 per cent against 56.33 per cent, the State Excise Duties continue to struggle at Rs 14,078.39 crore, which is 54.96 per cent of the target against 82.98 per cent achieved last fiscal.

Notably, non-tax revenue is in free fall, achieving only 15.59 per cent of the Budget estimate, a stark contrast to 89.14 per cent in the previous year. Similarly, grants-in-aid and contributions have reached only 22.05 per cent, despite a higher allocation i.e. Rs 4,771.44 crore, indicating insufficient Central transfers. Meanwhile, capital receipts paint a concerning picture, with 91.28 per cent of the budgeted borrowings and liabilities utilised by December 2024, up from 84.45 per cent last year. Borrowings alone have reached a staggering 97.81 per cent of their Budget target of Rs 49,255.41 crore. The fiscal deficit has already hit Rs 48,178.94 crore, nearing the annual target, while the revenue deficit has worsened, plunging to Rs 19,892.85 crore compared to a surplus of 6.63 per cent last year. Revenue expenditure has marginally increased to 59.83 per cent of the Budget, slightly above the previous year's 58.9 per cent. Capital expenditure, though at 75.54 per cent of the Budget, has seen a drop in efficiency from 83.68 per cent for the corre-



sponding period last fiscal, with several infrastructure projects reportedly delayed due to funding constraints. The capital expenditure accounted for Rs 25,295.76 crore against the target of Rs 33,486.5 crore for the current financial year. Economists warn that the State's over-reliance on borrowings amidst poor revenue collection indicates a

looming fiscal crisis. With a fiscal deficit nearing the brink and critical social and economic sector allocations under-utilised, immediate corrective measures are imperative. Analysts stress the need for robust tax reforms, improved non-tax revenue mechanisms, and prudent fiscal management to avert a deeper financial turmoil.

Wait over government job notifications gets longer in Telangana



Hyderabad: The unemployed youth and government job aspirants will have to wait a little longer for recruitment notifications to be rolled out by the State government. The District Selection Committee (DSC), along with other recruitment notifications in different departments, are not likely to materialise anytime soon as hiring is linked to ongoing SC sub-classification and impending elections in the State.

The State government had announced

plans to fill up 6,000 teacher vacancies via the DSC besides scheduling it in the job calendar with notification in the month of February. This created a lot of hopes among the job aspirants. However, according to sources, the DSC recruitment will only be taken up after the ongoing SC sub-classification concludes and the government comes up with a new reservation policy. In the wake of the recent Supreme Court's ruling in favor of implementing SC classification in the country, the State government constituted a one-

man commission headed by Shameem Akhtar on the sub-classification. The government had decided to implement the SC sub-classification in education and government job recruitment in the State. Presently, as for education and jobs, 15 percent is reserved for SC, 6 percent for STs, 29 percent for BCs and the remaining 50 percent is under open competition. Moreover, elections to two teacher and one graduate MLC positions and local bodies have been impending in the State. The local bodies have been running

with the special officers since last February, as the State government has not conducted elections to local bodies in March due to general elections. There is a buzz in the political circles that local bodies elections could be held in the month of February. This will be followed by two teacher and one graduate MLC elections. It is pointed out that once the election schedule is announced, the model code of conduct comes into force in the State and the recruitment notifications cannot be issued until the code is lifted.

NEET UG 2025 undergoes major changes in pattern and duration

Hyderabad: The National Testing Agency (NTA) on Saturday announced major changes to the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) UG 2025 question paper and examination duration.

It has done away with optional questions introduced temporarily during the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant there will be no Section B in the examination. With the removal of Section B, there will be no extra time. The duration of the examination will now be 180 minutes. The NEET UG 2025 will con-

sist of 180 compulsory questions with 45 questions each from physics and chemistry subjects, while 90 questions will be from biology. "All NEET UG 2025 aspirants are informed that the question paper pattern and examination duration will revert to pre-Covid format, where there will not be any Section B anymore. Hence, there will be a total of 180 compulsory questions, which will be attempted by candidates in 180 minutes, thereby removing any optional questions and extra time introduced due to the Covid,".

Decision on exam disregards NEET panel; experts evaluate feasibility of reforms

The Union Education Ministry recently announced that it will conduct the NEET UG exam in pen and paper mode based on Optical Mark Recognition in a single day and shift. This goes against the recommendations made by a seven-member expert panel on exam reforms after reviewing the National Testing Agency's (NTA) functioning in holding NEET-UG last year. The Centre had earlier told the Supreme Court that it would implement all the corrective measures in the report. Experts say it's wise to not implement these reforms last minute as NEET UG is only a few months away. Some also suggest modifications and additions to the list of recommendations made by the panel. Alakh Pandey, teacher and founder, PhysicsWallah, says it is a wise decision on the part of NTA to conduct the exam in pen and paper mode this year. He says before bringing such a complete reform in exam system, we need to have infrastructural support such as testing centres at every district level and block level. "That task is huge and it may not be possible to complete it within a few months. Introducing any last-minute changes before the exams is not conducive for the students as they are already riddled with anxiety", he said. He said that the exams are in the next few months and nearly 25 lakh students are expected to appear. It won't be possible to train all these new students in the online format. "Some of them may not have ever written a digital exam and will get nervous at the prospect of it. It is necessary to give them demonstrations and train them before they can be expected to take these exams digitally", he said.

What is the controversy?

A series of events in 2024 shook people's faith in the integrity of national-level entrance tests. The NEET UG 2024 exam was a debacle. It was conducted by NTA in Pen and Paper Testing mode for about 24 lakh candidates in a single session at 4750 Testing Centres spread over 571 cities in India and 14 cities abroad. Reports of question paper leaks and irregularities in results emerged shortly after the results were declared. Following that, the UGC-NET exam was cancelled at the eleventh hour after inputs that its integrity was compromised. The CUET-UG results were delayed and a re-test had to be conducted for 1,000 candidates amidst a row over irregularities. Students across the country were affected, which led to a massive public outcry against the NTA. The Union Ministry of Education, therefore, constituted a High-Level Committee of Experts on 22 June 2024. This Committee chaired by Dr. K. Radhakrishnan, former Chairman of ISRO, aimed to suggest reforms that ensure transparent, smooth and fair conduct of examinations through the NTA. The reforms which were released aim to make these National Common Entrance Tests adaptable, accountable, credible, error-free, student-friendly, secured, tamper-proof, transparent and socially inclusive.

Experts weigh in on the panel report One of the key recommendations of the committee was to restructure the National Testing Agency. It suggested creating ten functional verticals: Digital Infrastructure, Technology, and Products; Nation-wide Testing Centre Infrastructure Research and Development; Transparency and Communication, and more. It said that the NTA needs to be

managed with internal domain-specific human resources and a leadership team with domain expertise, proven experience and skill sets who can take charge of the testing process in the future. Harish Butle, Founder, Deeper, an NGO that conducts mock tests for competitive exams, says that the committee has pointed out that the over-reliance on contractual employees in the NTA is a major risk. "Until the central government sets up its complete system, there is no option but to give work on a contractual basis. And this is where the real problem of the matter lies", he says. Mr. Butle says that the NTA needs to be better equipped to handle the complexities and high stress of the national entrance examinations by selecting more stable, dedicated staff. He says that getting such staff is a difficult matter. "Those we rely on will find ways to get money in each process. It would be wrong to think that there will be no malpractices in such a situation. But with everyone's attention on NEET, the number of malpractices will certainly reduce", he said.

The committee has recommended a hybrid process of Computer-assisted Secure pen and paper tests. It says that the encrypted question papers are delivered to the confidential servers of the testing centres and subsequently the printing of question paper will be done at the testing centre. As an alternative, it suggested a variant of this where delivery of question paper can be done through CBT model to each candidate, and OMR sheet can be used for answer collection. Mr. Butle recommends changes in the format of the OMR sheet. He says a small table should be provided at the end of the OMR sheet to mention the number of attempted and unattempted questions. The student should write and confirm it after which the invigilator should sign it. "This will help tackle the corruption which happens at some centres where teachers assist select students in solving their paper", he said. The committee also recommended three policy interventions: multi-session testing for exams that register more than two lakh participants, multi-stage testing, and rationalising subject clusters for CUET. The committee recommended the use of data analytics to detect strange or suspicious patterns of choices of Testing Centres and ensure the candidates got a centre in their own district.

Another key recommendation was the introduction of a Digi-exam system like the Digi Yatra to ensure that only the candidate writing the exam joins the intended programme, especially with multi-stage testing. It sketched out details from the first step to the last to tackle potential malpractices. The suggestions revolved around pre-exam tasks like setting question papers and their transportation. It provided guidelines on selection of testing centres and seat allotment as well. The committee also spoke about tasks after the conduct of the exam like back transportation of OMR sheets. It said to be wary during the selection of test conducting third-party service provider and should ensure sanitisation of computer systems at the testing centres, and more. Mr. Butle says that all the work of the Centre up to sealing the OMR sheet and sending the material to the city coordinator should be done under video surveillance and the records should be sent to the NTA or the concerned authori-



ties.

The Committee also recommended to limit the number of attempts allowed for NEET. Butle says an unlimited number of attempts can lead to bottlenecks for students attempting the exam for the first time. He says if this proposal of limiting attempts is not taken by the NTA, then after each attempt, at least three to a maximum of five per cent marks should be reduced every year, to make it a level-playing field in some sense. "Students who take the exam multiple times have an edge over those who take it for the first time. It is unfair", he said. The Committee said that almost every district in the country should have at least one secured Standardised Testing Centre (STC). NTA may target developing at least 1,000 secure Standard Testing Centres in the country, in a phased manner, in reputed Government institutions. This process may require a 'war-footing' approach. The committee recommended Mobile Testing Centres (MTCs) to facilitate the aspirational candidates from rural, remote, relatively inaccessible areas and thinly populated areas.

The committee says that collaboration with Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalyayas and similar K12 schools along with their committed teachers-community as CBT centres nationwide, might be a welcome option in future. Another viable option that it recommended is Central Universities, State Universities, other Central or State funded Research institutes, and credible Private universities to establish infrastructure where NTA can set up computer-nodes, server-rooms and other digital infrastructure enabled Testing Centres. Mr. Butle says it is relatively

difficult to comprehensively monitor private examination centers so the exams should be conducted mainly in government institutions. He says if exams are conducted in government institutions, the fear of action against the employees may be more. "They will think a hundred times before committing any malpractice", he said. Lastly, Mr. Butle says that the syllabus should not be changed in an ad-hoc manner. The syllabus should preferably be finalised while the candidate is in Class 11. If there are any changes, the candidates should be informed at least a year in advance at the beginning of the academic year of Class 12 in June or July. He says it should be a uniform syllabus for any board across the country, at least for classes IX to XII.

"The difference in the curriculum will not be felt anywhere", he said. Mr. Pandey, PhysicsWallah, appealed to the authorities to take stringent measures to avoid paper leaks and manipulation of marks at exam centres and treat any such incidents with the strictest punishment. "For the coming year, infrastructural changes that allow us to bring in exam reforms should be taken up on priority and as stakeholders in this ecosystem, we are willing to support and collaborate to achieve this end", he said. Mr. Butle says the recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Committee are not just reforms but a potential lifeline for the future of students appearing for the NEET exam. "If these changes are implemented, they can not only ensure the security of the examination process but also reduce the stress and uncertainty faced by lakhs of aspirants every year to a great extent", he said.

9th Graduation Day Celebrations 25th January, 2025



The 9th Graduation Ceremony was ceremoniously held at Loyola Academy on 25th January 2025. More than 1,167 students who graduated in the academic year 2023-24 attended the event. A total of 987 Undergraduate and 180 Postgraduate students were awarded their degrees.

The Chief Guest, Prof. V. Balakista Reddy, Chairman of the Telangana State Council of Higher Education, commended the students for their discipline, ethics, and moral principles. He emphasized the core aspects of technical education and the future impact of digitalization. Prof. Reddy encouraged the students to seize the vast op-

portunities available to them in today's dynamic world.

The Guest of Honour, Prof. K. Shashikanth, Controller of Examinations, Osmania University, highlighted the transformation of teaching pedagogy in the post-COVID era, which has enhanced learning experiences. He urged the graduates to utilize the extensive resources available to hone their latent skills. Additionally, he underscored the urgent need for entrepreneurs who can bridge the gap between job providers and job seekers.

Rev. Fr. Dr. A. Francis Xavier, Correspondent of Loyola Academy, congratulated the graduates and attributed their success

to innovation, teamwork, and consistency. He also emphasized the infinite possibilities awaiting the students in their future endeavors. Rev. Fr. Dr. N. B. Babu, Principal of Loyola Academy, warmly welcomed the distinguished gathering and emphasized that the world needs young intellectuals with integrity and humanity. He encouraged the students to leave the institution not merely with a certificate but with confidence, resilience, and a pragmatic approach to future challenges.

The dignitaries present at the ceremony included Prof. V. Balakista Reddy, Prof. K. Shashikanth, Rev. Fr. Dr. A. Francis Xavier, Rev. Fr. Dr. L. M. Thomas (Controller of Ex-

aminations), Rev. Fr. Dr. A. M. Joseph Kumar, Rev. Fr. M. Arul Jothi, Rev. Fr. Prabhu Anthony (Vice-Principals), Mr. P. Sudhakar (Assistant Controller of Examinations), along with the Lay Vice-Principals and Deans Dr. K. Srinivas, Dr. P. Hima Bindu, Dr. K. E. Ch. Vidyasagar, and Prof. B. Sakram (Additional Controller of Examinations).

Certificates were distributed to all the 33 gold medalists and other graduates by the esteemed dignitaries. The event marked a significant milestone in the lives of the graduates as they embarked on their journey toward achieving greater heights in their careers and personal growth.

HLF 2025: A celebration of art, literature, and young voices

Hyderabad: Sattva Knowledge City in Hyderabad has become a vibrant hub of creativity this weekend, drawing a diverse crowd of art enthusiasts, literature lovers, and young voices eager to engage with thought-provoking sessions and cultural performances. On Friday, the Hyderabad Literary Festival 2025 had started with a series of inspiring discussions, setting the stage for what would be a dynamic weekend. The second day of the festival began with a powerful plenary session titled "The Personal is Political: An Activist's Memoir", where renowned social activist Aruna Roy engaged in a compelling conversation with C Rammanohar Reddy. Their discussion on the intersection of personal narra-

tives and political movements resonated deeply with the audience, highlighting the importance of activism in today's world. In addition to the plenary, the festival offered a variety of exciting sessions. "Nanha Nukkad - A Child Spy", by Savie Kernel, presented a captivating performance blending storytelling and creative expression, while Shobha Tharoor Srinivasa's poetry and writing workshop offered participants an opportunity to sharpen their skills. For those interested in the intersection of science and society, the Science and the City panel explored the promising future of gene therapies in medical treatment, with Arkasubhra Ghosh and Indumathi Mariappan leading the discussion. The Author Spotlight sessions

brought authors like Rishav Ray, whose book *A Game of Two Halves* examines life and sports, and Abhijit Sengupta, whose works address contemporary issues, engaging in fascinating conversations with festival-goers. Earlier on Friday, the festival was officially inaugurated by the Governor of Telangana, Sri Jishnu Dev Varma. The opening plenary, "A Life in Cinema", featuring Shabana Azmi and festival director Amita Desai, sparked a lively conversation about the powerful connection between literature and cinema. This conversation set the tone for the inspiring sessions and performances that followed throughout the day. Huma Qureshi's conversation about her debut book *Zeba: An Accidental Superhero* also gar-

nered significant attention, as she shared her personal journey and the social issues her book addresses. As the festival continues into Sunday, the final day promises to be just as exciting. Youngistan Nukkad—Open Mic will provide young talents with a platform to express themselves through various art forms, while "The Real Talk: Women Written by Women" will feature Priya Malik discussing the evolving role of women in literature. A plenary session, "Cinema and Social Change", will see actor Siddharth engage in a discussion with Vidya Rao on the transformative power of cinema in driving societal change. The day will also feature a performance by Priya Malik, a multifaceted artist known for her storytelling, poetry.

VBN Jade Chapter Hosts Inspiring Women's Mega Conclave to Foster Entrepreneurial ??????????

Hyderabad: The Vysya Business Network(VBN) Jade Chapter's Organizing Committee successfully hosted a Women's Mega Conclave on January 25, 2025, at the prestigious Park Hyatt in Banjara Hills, Hyderabad. The event brought together influential leaders, aspiring entrepreneurs, and over 100 women from diverse professional backgrounds to celebrate and empower women's contributions in the business sphere.

The Conclave welcomed dynamic Chief Guest Ms. Nerella Sharada, Chairman of the Mahila Commission for the Telangana Government, alongside Special Guest Ms. Jyothsna Tirunagari, TDP National Spokesperson, and Keynote Speaker Ms. Vinita Surana, Entrepreneur and Executive Director of Surana Gold. These distinguished figures underscored the importance of women in leadership and business.

In her address, Ms. Nerella Sharada expressed her admiration for VBN's motto "Grow and Let Grow," and emphasized the essential role of the Women's Commission in supporting female entrepreneurs. "I am happy to be part of this Women Mega Conclave and to interact with countless women entrepreneurs. I urge all women to visit the Women's Commission office whenever they need support," she stated. Mr. Emmadi Shiva Kumar, Founder of VBN, highlighted the organization's commitment to creating a business referral networking platform exclusively for the Vysya community, though



welcoming visitors from all backgrounds. "VBN started 10 years ago and now oper-

ates five chapters in Hyderabad and one in Nizamabad, facilitating over 8,500 crore in

business through member referrals," he noted.

The Eventors" Kick-start First-of-its-Kind "Society Cricket Championship" (SCC)



Hyderabad :Bringing communities together for a fun-filled, action-packed experience, The Eventors, a start-up event company, has launched the Society Cricket Championship (SCC), a Leather Ball T-20 Cricket Tournament modelled on the lines of IPL. Hosted at the scenic Sadasiva Cricket Club in Amdapur, Moinnabad, the event will run from January 25 to March 16, 2025. This inaugural tournament features 12 teams representing prominent societies such as Rajapushpa Regalia, My Home Avatar, and Prestige High Fields. The grand launch

took place today 25th January at 9:00 AM, marked by vibrant enthusiasm from participants, families, and cricket enthusiasts alike.

The Society Cricket Championship, SCC aims to promote a healthy lifestyle by encouraging physical activity through cricket, India's favourite sport. Beyond the game, the event fosters a sense of togetherness by creating an opportunity for families and friends to bond over weekends while enjoying spirited competition and entertainment. The Eventors envision the championship as a platform for networking, fun, and strength-

ening community ties. "The Society Cricket Championship is not just about cricket; it's about celebrating the spirit of community, health, and togetherness. We're thrilled to bring societies together and provide an engaging platform for people to connect through sport," said Mr. Kumar Kanduri, co-Founder of "The Eventors".

To ensure the safety and well-being of all participants, The Eventors have arranged for an ambulance with a paramedic (Red Health) to be available on-site throughout the tournament. This thoughtful addition underscores their commitment to making SCC not only a fun event but also a safe one.

The Eventors extend their heartfelt gratitude to Title Sponsor: Radhey Group, and Associate Partners: Healthy Farms, Chetana Samprati - Integrated Wellbeing, Better Food Factory, Red Health, Decathlon, CrickStore, Shubham Hotel, and Istthree - Press, Clean & Care, for their invaluable support in making this unique initiative a reality. Their contribution has played a pivotal role in bringing this concept to life, setting the stage for an unforgettable experience for all involved. Join us in cheering for your favourite teams and celebrating the spirit of cricket and community. Together, let's make the Society Cricket Championship a grand success!

Not even Rs 20 lakh in cash found, says Dil Raju on IT raids

Hyderabad: The Income tax officials found not even Rs 20 lakh from my place, said film producer Dil Raju slamming the media. Raju said that the officials found Rs 5 lakh in cash from him, Rs 4.5 lakh from his partner Sirish, Rs 6.5 lakh from his daughter's house and RS 2.5 lakh from his office. "We showed documents as proof of all that cash. We haven't invested or bought any properties in the last five years. We explained all the financial details to the officials. Our documents were right and we were de-

clared clean," he said at a press meet on Saturday. The Income Tax Department had conducted raids on Dil Raju's properties, including his office and homes, in Hyderabad on January 21.

According to sources, the raids were carried out at eight different locations, including the residences of his relatives. Dil Raju, whose real name is Velamkucha Venkata Ramana Reddy, is a prominent Telugu film distributor and producer.

No PMAY houses for Telangana if they are branded Indiramma Indlu, says Bandi Sanjay

Karimnagar: Union Minister of State for Home Bandi Sanjay Kumar on Saturday said there was no question of sanctioning a single house under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana if they were branded Indiramma Indlu by the Telangana government. Contrary to his Cabinet colleague and Union Urban Development Minister Manohar Lal Khattar's assurance to sanction more houses to the State, Sanjay Kumar took this stance, shocking many. While participating in the Smart City developmental programmes along with Khattar in Karimnagar town on Friday, Revenue Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy had requested the Union Minister for more houses since Telangana got only 0.7 per cent houses as against the assured eight per cent. Responding positively to the Minister's request, Khattar assured more houses this time around. On Saturday, speaking after welcoming Karimnagar Mayor Y Sunil Rao into the BJP, Bandi Sanjay made it clear that PMAY houses would not be sanctioned to Telangana if they were to be branded

Indiramma Indlu houses here. He also found fault with the State government for the ACB inquiry against Greenko company despite taking party funds from the firm. "Can Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy take oath that the Congress has not taken funds from Greenko?" he asked, stating that all parties including the BJP took party funds from the firm.

No party will spend its own money to run the party, he said, adding that the State was getting revenue through initiatives of companies like Greenko and others. Telangana will lose income if these companies move to other States unable to tolerate the harassment by the State government, he said. Bandi Sanjay also questioned the State government not printing photographs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on ration cards though the Centre was distributing rice to people free of cost. He demanded the government to print the PM's photo along with that of the CM on the new ration cards. Otherwise, why should the Centre supply rice to



the State free of cost, he asked, stating that if necessary, the Centre would consider the idea of distributing rice to the poor directly. He also demanded a white paper on MoUs

signed in Davos and on the investments coming into the State. The State government was making false claims for publicity on the Davos investments, he said.

Sighting of endangered Black-bellied tern in Kawal Tiger Reserve brings cheers to officials



Mancherial: The black-bellied tern (*Sterna acuticauda*), classified as Endangered on the Red List in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has been recorded in Kawal Tiger Reserve (KTR) for the first time. During a routine avian survey, Venkat Angandhula, a north Telangana Coordinator of the Hyderabad Tiger Conservation Society (HYTICOS), spotted the bird near an irrigation tank near Kistapur village in Jannaram Range a few days back. Venkat said the bird was a small yet striking member of the tern family, primarily distributed across the Indian subcontinent.

Its range extends from Pakistan, Nepal, and India to Myanmar, and its population has witnessed a significant decline due to the degradation and destruction of its riverine habitats across southeastern Asia in recent times. This Zoology research scholar from Osmania University remarked this sighting holds particular ecological significance as it represents the first documented occurrence of the black-bellied tern in this region. The

record not only adds to the avian biodiversity of the KTR but also underscores the need for monitoring and updating the distribution range of this species. Historically, the black-bellied tern has been sparsely recorded in Telangana.

Prior observations include sightings at the Pocharam Wildlife Sanctuary in Sangareddy by Bharat Vyas, at an irrigation tank in Sirnapalli in Nizamabad by researchers from the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON)-Tamil Nadu, and in the Penchikalpet Range by a team of birders, including the then Deputy Range Officer S Venugopal.

About black-bellied tern According to Forest officials, this aquatic bird thrives in freshwater habitats such as large rivers, lakes, and wetlands, which are increasingly under threat due to human-induced disturbances and climate change. The black-bellied tern measures approximately 32 to 35 cm (13 to 14 inches) in length. During its breeding season, it exhibits distinct plumage

characterized by a jet-black crown and nape, pale grey upper parts, and a throat that remains pure white. The grey breast gradually

transitions into its signature black belly, which is a defining feature and the basis for its common name.

National Voter's Day Program in Mandal *Raikod:



National Voter's Day was celebrated in Raikod Mandal on Saturday. In front of the Tahsildar office in the center of the mandal, the authorities, faculty and students pledged to honestly vote a valuable vote. Later, under the guidance of the officers, the school

students held an awareness program in the main street holding playing cards in their hands and raising slogans about the right to vote. MMARV Srinivas, Deputy MMARV Vijay Kumar, MPDO Sharif, teachers, students and others participated in this program

Illegally stocked drugs worth Rs 2.2 lakh seized from clinic in Hyderabad

Hyderabad: Drugs worth Rs 2.2 lakh were seized from unlicensed premises in East Marredpally by the Drug Control Administration, Telangana, on Friday. Acting on credible information on illegal stocking and

sale of medicines, the DCA officials raided the premises at Tukaramgate and found drugs stocked at a clinic for sale without a drug licence. Unauthorised stocks of a large quantity of medicines intended for sale.

Nate Anderson: Activist short-seller

Nate Anderson, 'activist' short-seller and founder of Hindenburg Research, has decided to disband the U.S.-based investment research group known for its investigative reports on publicly listed companies. In a note shared on the Hindenburg website, he addressed the speculation on what triggered the move. "So, why disband now? There is not one specific thing — no particular threat, no health issue, and no big personal issue," it said. "The plan has been to wind up after we finished the pipeline of ideas we were working on. And as of the last Ponzi cases we just completed and are sharing with regulators, that day is today." Short-sellers are a rare breed in general, and in what has been a bullish market for the past several years, even more so. Mr. Anderson, with a small team of 11 people, built Hindenburg into a reputed research group that has caused over 100 individuals, including billionaires, to be civilly or criminally charged, and wiped out billions of dollars in companies' market values. The son of a college professor and a nurse, Mr. Anderson obtained a business degree and started off with a job providing technical and sales advice to a financial analytics company. Subsequently, he moved on to auditing and verification of potential deals for investment firms of wealthy families. But all along, he had nursed a singular passion: unearthing scams. Aware that translating it into a full-fledged career would not be easy, he set up a brokerage firm that did due diligence for hedge funds, while pursuing "forensic financial research" in his personal time.

But as his brokerage firm failed to take off, his debts mounted, and he faced eviction by his landlord, Mr. Anderson sold his brokerage licence and in 2017, plunged into his passion by setting up Hindenburg. The idea was to monetise his passion for financial investigation by exposing corporate fraud through deeply researched reports and shorting the problematic stocks. He focussed on "uncovering hard-to-find information from atypical sources", looking out, in particular, for "accounting irregularities, bad actors in management or key service provider roles, undisclosed related-party transactions, illegal/unethical business or financial reporting practices, undisclosed regulatory, product, or financial issues." First major success

Short-selling involves borrowing the shares of a given company and selling them in the expectation that its price would fall, and when its price duly fell, buying them back at the lower price, and pocketing the difference as profit. The magnitude of the losses if the shorted share prices rose instead of tanking, are potentially unlimited. Mr. Anderson's first big success came with Nikola, a maker of electric trucks. Hindenburg claimed that its management was lying about the technology status of its product. It famously exposed the fact that its truck, which in a video seemed to be cruising at good speed, was actually rolling downward on a slope in neutral gear. Nikola's shares plunged 15%, its chairman was charged with securities fraud, and Hindenburg made a killing on its short position. Many of Mr. Anderson's investigations (including the one on Nikola) were sparked by tips from company whistleblowers. But given that his was a tiny firm that was taking on corporate giants and billionaire promoters, expensive lawsuits were an occupational hazard. But the robustness of his research — one report could take

six months — saw him emerge unscathed. He famously took on the billionaire oligarch Elon Musk by announcing a short position on Twitter following Mr. Musk's deal to buy the social media firm. Mr. Anderson bet that Mr. Musk would walk away from the deal. When four days after the agreement, Mr. Musk tried to do just that, Hindenburg made money.

When the case went to court, Hindenburg covered its short and "went long", believing that "Musk's arguments for backing out" won't win. They did not, and as Mr. Musk closed the deal at the originally agreed price, Hindenburg gained yet again. Mr. Anderson made news in India for the first time in January 2023 when Hindenburg alleged that the Adani Group was using entities registered in Mauritius to perpetrate stock manipulation and accounting fraud. The Adani Group has denied the allegations. Hindenburg hit the headlines again last August when it alleged that the Securities and Exchange Bureau of India (SEBI) chief Madhabi Buch and her husband held stakes in offshore funds linked to the Adanis, indicating a nexus between the head of India's top stock market regulator and the Adanis. Ms. Buch and



the Adanis have denied these allegations. But the Adani group has lost \$150 billion from its market value since the Hindenburg report came out in 2023, and last November, Gautam Adani was indicted on securities fraud charges by U.S. regulators. Mr. Anderson has now promised to "open-source" his methods of investigations so that others can

take the Hindenburg legacy forward. Investors are typically not fond of short-sellers, given the existential danger they pose to the value of their holdings. But there is no denying the immense public interest value of Mr. Anderson's unique contributions in exposing what the state's regulatory apparatus should have prevented in the first place.

Budget as instrument for women's empowerment

As the Union Budget draws near, it would be appropriate to look at the importance of gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) to give us an idea of how much of the budget is being used for promoting women's empowerment. It was as far back as 2005-2006 that the government began bringing out the gender budget statement (GBS). Allocation for GRB has over the years remained at 4-5.5% of the Union Budget. While even this is welcome, there can be several improvements that could benefit women. Budget 2023-24, coming as it did in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, was not very supportive for women and gender minorities to rebuild their lives. Many women had to give up their jobs to become caregivers to those affected by Covid and a sizeable section was not able to reintegrate into the workforce once the pandemic got over. All the ministries/departments were asked to create a Gender Budget Cell (GBC) which facilitates GRB at the ministry/department level and a charter for the GBCs has also been developed. The GBCs are responsible for analysing the gender issues addressed by the major schemes/programmes of respective ministries/departments, conducting/commissioning performance audits of the schemes/programmes, suggesting further policy interventions and preparing literature on gender perspectives related to sector/service covered by their respective ministries.

GRB would do well to stop regarding women as one homogenous group and focus specifically on women from marginalised communities. One study shows that Muslim women are not adequately represented in GRB despite their facing disadvantages and exclusions in several aspects due to poverty, patriarchy and religious restrictions. They continue to be largely invisible in policy frameworks meant for the development of



socio-religious communities. The study highlighted the need for greater policy attention on Muslim women.

Some states, however, have done fairly well on GRB. Kerala and Karnataka have gone beyond just presenting a GBS and identified priorities for advancing equality. A few other states have also put in place various mechanisms to ensure that budgetary allocations go to the right sort of schemes aimed at empowering women. This suggests that, despite all its flaws, GRB gains momentum when and if the authorities take care to incorporate gender in the planning process. Nesar Ahmad, director, Budget Analysis and Research Centre Trust, Jaipur and one of the authors in the Gender Report brought out by the Feminist Policy Collective says: "GRB in the country has to go beyond the GBS and focus on gender-responsive planning and programmes in all sectors including the so-called gender-neutral sectors." He feels ministries should formulate a gender action plan based on the

specific needs of women. This, he says, "would help identify the gaps in development and would enable ministries to look beyond the binary of gender, address the issues/concerns of gender minorities, recognise diversity and focus on the intersectionality approach as also address the issues of discrimination and exclusion faced by marginalised groups of women such as SC/ST, DNT and minority women." The lack of gender-segregated data must be rectified especially for the marginalised sections of society. Unless there is proper data on women and their needs, it becomes impossible to allocate resources in the appropriate areas. This is important for the mainstreaming of women in the process of development. Further, there is a need to develop a robust monitoring mechanism that will help track the outcomes given the recent clustering of schemes in the budget. Ritu Dewan, founder member of the Feminist Policy Collective and former director, department of economics, University of Bombay.

Maha Kumbh: A confluence of faith and culture

Monday, January 13, marked the first day of 45-day-long Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, listed by UNESCO as the largest peaceful religious congregation of pilgrims on earth, where devotees walk miles to take a dip at 'Sangam', the convergence of the holy rivers Ganga and Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. The fair is visited by Hindu ascetics, saints, ash-smeared Naga Sadhus, skeleton-donning Aghoris and other pilgrims. It is expected to have a footfall of 450 million this year, nearly twice the population of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous State. Kumbh, derived from a Sanskrit word which means a pitcher, is rotationally held every three years at the four riverside cities of Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik. Its schedule is based on the planetary alignments, mainly of that of Sun and Jupiter. The Ardh (half) Kumbh is held every six years at Haridwar and Prayagraj while the Purna (complete) Kumbh takes place in all four cities, every 12 years. The Maha Kumbh happens after 12 Purna Kumbhs in Prayagraj, once in 144 years and is considered the most auspicious. The mythological beliefs say that drops of Amrit (essence of immortality) were spilled at these sites from an urn which came out during the Samudra Mantha (churning of the ocean) done by the gods and demons. The central ritual of the fair remains bathing in icy cold waters of the sacred rivers where millions immerse themselves with the belief that the act will cleanse them of their sins and liberate them from the cycle of birth and death and will attain spiritual liberation.

A gathering of ascetics Religious texts also link Kumbh Mela's origins to the 8th-century philosopher, Adi Shankaracharya, who established this practice of gatherings of ascetics from across the country, for discussion on religion. It was Shankaracharya who instituted the monastery system and the 13 Akharas (warrior-saint sects) — Nirvani, Atal, Niranjani, Anand, Juna, Awahan and Agni, Nirmohi, Digambar Ani and Nirvani Ani, the two Udasin Akharas (Naya and Bada) and the Nirmala Akhara. The saints from these sects, who sport weapons such as tridents, swords, and lances, are the main attraction at the Kumbh. The latest in the line of Akharas is the Kinnar (transgender) Akhara, established in 2015 by transgender rights activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. The Akhara is still competing for space between the community of religious leaders but remains one of the most visited Akharas in Kumbh.

The Akharas use the fair as an opportunity to elect their chiefs and divide powers at its council meeting called the Dharam Sansad. This year, the meeting, scheduled on January 27, may pass a proposal for the formation of a 'Sanatan Board' (a board dedicated to safeguard the Hindu religious sites), which will be sent to the government with a request for implementation. The seers have already placed wishes such as no entry for Muslims and non-Hindus at the Kumbh, which was partially supported by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath who says that those who don't believe in Sanatan Dharma should not visit the event. Mahatma Gandhi had visited the Kumbh Mela in 1918. Political parties today capitalise on this event to win over Hindus. The fair was also used by the

Vishwa Hindu Parishad to chalk out the blueprint for the Ram temple construction in Ayodhya in 1989.

With the BJP being in power at the Centre and State, this year's Kumbh is one of the most well-funded religious gatherings being held in the country. Prime Minister Narendra Modi dubbed it as "A Maha Yagya of Unity", as the Centre approved a special grant of ₹2,100 crore for it. About ₹7,500 crore was devoted to ensure proper logistics to host millions. A sprawling tent city has been carved out within the limits of Prayagraj district, spread across an approximately 4,000-hectare area and divided in 25 sectors, 12 ghats for bathing. A large group of bureaucrats were deployed at the site to ensure smooth management of the fair. The airport was expanded to accommodate more flights while the Indian Railways has announced that it will run 13,000 trains to Prayagraj to ensure maximum devotees arrive at the Kumbh putting immense pressure on the town which exceeds its carrying capacity every time the fair is organised. In the 2019 Kumbh, this gathering generated 18,000 metric tonnes of solid waste. Approximately 1,60,000 tent shelters have been constructed this time to accommodate 15-20 lakh Kalpwasis — devotees who spend around a month in the fair living a minimalistic life. Although the tents are free for the Kalpwasis, they do bear the brunt of rocketing price of groceries, travel and other needs.

Apart from the cubical-shaped hiking tents for Kalpwasis, the government has also set aside luxury cottages across the Sangam



bank to drive tourism. These cottages cost ₹50,000 to 1 lakh per night. With 1,50,000 toilets, deployment of police offices, hospitals, banks, and eateries, the State has not left any stone unturned to make the Maha Kumbh an event like never before. The fair has gigantic posters of the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister, advertising schemes and achievements of the BJP government, including the LPG schemes, Swachh Bharat, solar energy, among others. Business opportunities

The fair presents business opportunities to both local traders as well as multinationals who set up kiosks to expand businesses. From Domino's pizza to Cafe Coffee Day, from RBI to LIC and from medicines to clothes, agriculture products and gadgets, the Maha Kumbh has a stall selling every-

thing. The State has projected to generate up to ₹2 lakh crore from this 45-day long gathering, which will end on February 26. With millions gathering at the river banks, the Kumbh Melas had seen accidents such as stampedes in the past, which led to the deaths of hundreds of pilgrims. With the humongous footfall at the site, incidents of missing cases too have become synonymous with the fair. Several Bollywood movies have drawn their plots from the Kumbh where heroes get separated from families at the fair and then dramatically reunited decades later. After the end of the gathering, Sangam city will once again turn into a barren land, which will be used by the farmers to grow melons and children to play, leaving the sand banks to wait for another Kumbh to feel lively again.

Absent in the "work 90 hours a week" debate

We don't have meaningful work that requires 90 hours a week. Most work is repetitive or dependent on others. Our country is obsessed with counting hours. Everybody asks the school topper: "How many hours a day did you study?" Journalists shove their microphones into the faces of UPSC-toppers: "You must be studying 16 hours a day, no?" And now employees are being asked: "How many hours do you work in a week?" The reason is simple. At one level it's a hangover from our socialist days. The principle is "your one hour is equal to my one hour, as we both are just labouring, we are both blue-collar". Hence it becomes a standardised measure of effort. IQ is anyway an evil capitalist construct. As for new-age IT services companies that continue to count hours, that's what they export — billable hours. And it's no surprise they want to maximise this.

The L&T chairman's exhortation, to work 90 hours a week, comes in a different context. Ironically, for the last seven days, people have spent 90+ hours outraging about it trying to prove him wrong, thereby proving him right. I understand where he was coming from. Many corporate leaders like him are hard workers, usually with little or



no familial inheritance, who realised education is the only key to prosperity, who burnt the midnight oil, who used Resnick and Halliday as a pillow, cleared competitive exams, built great careers, achieved a designation which is an acronym, even as they lost some hair and empathy. As they climbed the ladder, they grew to dislike (though they didn't always show it) non-hard-working people or those who spent their time away from the assembly line. When a journalist asks them why 90 hours, they bring up India's

low per-capita-income numbers and cite how people in China follow the 9-9-6 model, where they work 9-to-9 for six days a week. They can't imagine a developing country — with a four-figure per capita income — doing anything less.

The key miss here is that they almost can't fathom the existence of non-ambitious people, those who don't want to conquer the world, who just want to reach home on time and watch episodes of Bigg Boss with their family.

Exports dipped 1% in December, trade gap eased from November's record high

India's goods exports contracted 1% year-on-year in December to a fraction over \$38 billion, while imports grew 4.9% to almost \$60 billion, but this narrowed the merchandise trade deficit to a three-month low of \$21.9 billion, reflecting a sharp moderation from November's record gap of \$31.8 billion. Gold imports which were feared to have spiked to a fresh high of \$14.9 billion in November, before the Centre corrected that tally by \$5 billion last week to \$9.9 billion citing an erroneous 'double count', more than halved sequentially in December to \$4.7 billion. However, this still marked a significant 55.4% increase over the yellow metal's December 2023 imports. Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal sought to play down concerns about the export blip, saying that shipment values have grown in every quarter through the first nine months of this financial year. This shows that they have not only been resilient during a challenging year but also more consistent, he said. Officials also stressed that December's export tally marked only the third occasion in 2024-25 that outbound shipments' value has crossed the \$38 billion mark.

Petrol prices crash Overall goods ex-

ports are now estimated to be 1.6% higher through the April to December 2024 period at \$321.7 billion, while imports have risen 5.15% to \$532.5 billion. On a year-on-year basis, December's trade deficit was 17% higher, while the total deficit through the year is up 11.1% at \$210.8 billion. Petroleum imports rose 2.2% to \$15.3 billion last month, but petroleum product exports tanked a sharp 28.6%, to just \$4.9 billion. Through April to December 2024, exports of petro products were 20.84% lower at a little over \$49 billion, while imports rose 6.4% to \$138.31 billion.

Mr. Barthwal noted that this is largely owing to a 20% decline in petroleum prices over this period, pointing out that non-petroleum exports have been rising consistently. Excluding petroleum trade, India's exports were up 5.05% in December, and 7.05% higher through the April to December 2024 period, officials pointed out. Urgent help needed in Budget' Exporters were not as sanguine, even though they attributed part of December's export dip to volatile commodity and metal prices, as well as currency fluctuations and logistical challenges affecting export flows to key markets like Europe, Africa, and the Commonwealth of Independent



States (CIS). Federation of Indian Exporters' Organisation (FIEO) president Ashwani Kumar called for "urgent" measures in the upcoming Union Budget to boost manufacturing and labour-intensive sectors, and resolve the trade finance issues that particularly dent micro, small and medium enterprises' competitiveness. A tariff war by the

incoming U.S. administration could throw up new opportunities for India, Mr. Kumar noted, mooted the need for a focused export strategy for key markets like the U.S., the continuation of measures like the Interest Equalisation Scheme, and a resolution of GST-related export challenges to ensure sustained growth.

Not all nations have the resources to care for its older citizens.

A grimace disappeared on Praful uncle's wrinkled face, which also had a tinge of complaint. "I am so happy to see you. After so many years," he continued. "I had visited my birthplace in India twice in the past three years, but I fell sick every time after returning." "I didn't know. I would have met you. I was also not in India for a few years, so I couldn't get the news," I said. He appeared to be understanding. "The health carer told me to prepare to 'go' on both occasions. She said I had no one to look after, no insurance to foot bills, and no strength to bear the pain. I told her I didn't desire to go so soon. I like to live, and I have matters to finish. On both occasions, they kept me in the hospital for a few nights and the consultant, with a smile, sent me back home," he said with a chuckle. I joined him spontaneously, appreciating his spirit to live. His mobile alarm went off. He looked at it: "4 p.m. — time for my afternoon tea. Would you care for some tea or coffee," he asked. "Let me make it. What kind of tea you drink? Red or with milk and sugar?" I offered. "Don't bother. The attendant from the social service will come now and make it. Let us talk. You have come after so many years." I kept chatting. He asked about my family and work. I wanted to know what unfinished business he still had. He replied with a smirk, "Nothing. I tell them to keep them guessing and not pressure me to go." I controlled my laughter.

He complained about the dust, traffic, and crowds in India and the massive change happening in the U.K. We talked about spirituality and enlightenment and the possibilities of explaining our civilisational way of liv-

ing to the people in the West. He was upset that the local community service would soon auction two of his paintings. He complained, "They shouldn't auction living artists' works." Praful uncle was sitting on a sofa. A walker on the side and a multipurpose table were conveniently placed before him so he could reach out for water, medicine, and any other needs. I had a look around. One of his beds was very similar to a hospital bed, raised and fitted with vital reading machines, and the other had a regular comfort mattress with a footrest so that he could reach his bed comfortably. I checked his toilet — the commode, the shower, the washbasin all have been modified to cater to his needs. "So they have provided you with all these facilities," I asked. State support "Yes. The social services and the NHS try to ensure the passing of a lonely senior citizen as painlessly as possible. But I don't want to go." He laughed after a pause. The nurse arrived late. She apologised while still panting out of brisk walking. "Today was a bad day. I was swamped and missed the bus," she told him. She then performed routine supervision and checked his medications. "Aa ha, you forgot to take your medication after lunch," she said. "How will I know? You should have ensured I took the medicine before you left," he blamed her. "I gave you a glass of water and told you to take it. You said you would take them in a bit. I trusted you," the nurse explained. I looked at the table: four different-coloured capsules in a small medicine container. "I am waiting for my afternoon tea and have a visitor. Can you give us some tea, please," he expressed his impatience.



"I am making it in a minute," the nurse replied. I felt slightly uneasy during the conversation between them. As I rose to use the washroom, she whispered, "He is a difficult old man." I didn't know how to respond. She said goodbye after she finished her work. It reminded me of Praful uncle's family members saying the same thing about his angularity when he was not very old. He came to the U.K. after his college in India in the 1960s. He studied town planning but followed his

passion to be an artist and became a painter. He drew abstract paintings with Eastern mysticism. He settled in London after working in a few other cities. He did not marry. His siblings and other family members stayed divided in different cities of the U.K. and India. He loved his village in India and ensured that he visited it regularly, almost annually. I had met him about 20 years ago when I was posted in the Indian High Commission in London.