• WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2026 •

VOL. 138

Daily News Analysis ePaper

THE PALA CIVIL TIMES

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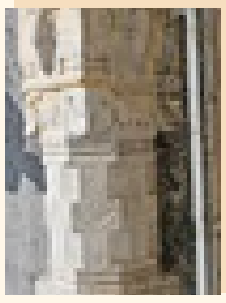

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Centre mandates label for photorealistic AI content

The Union Government has notified amendments to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2026, mandating prominent labelling of photo-realistic AI-generated content. The rules, effective February 20, significantly reduce timelines for the removal of unlawful material. Content declared illegal by a court or an appropriate government must be taken down within three hours, while sensitive material such as non-consensual nudity and deepfakes must be removed within two hours, replacing the earlier 24–36 hour window.

The amended rules define synthetically generated content as audio, visual, or audio-visual information artificially created or modified to appear real and indistinguishable from natural persons or real-world events. The final definition is narrower than the draft version released in October 2025. Platforms are required to seek user disclosures for AI-generated content; in the absence of disclosure, they must label such content prominently or remove it in cases of non-consensual deepfakes. A carve-out has been provided for routine smartphone touch-ups. Non-compliance may result in loss of safe harbour protection if intermediaries knowingly permit or fail to act against such content. Additionally, states may now designate more than one authorised officer to issue takedown orders.

US-Bangladesh deal: India may face more competition

The United States has recently concluded separate trade arrangements with India and Bangladesh, reflecting a differentiated approach towards the two South Asian economies. These agreements highlight emerging competitive dynamics in the region.

The US–Bangladesh agreement provides Dhaka with a reciprocal tariff reduction from 20% to 19%, along with zero-duty access for selected products such as textiles and apparel, subject to conditions. Bangladesh has also committed to deeper regulatory reforms, including alignment with US safety and FDA standards, freer cross-border data flows, labour and environmental safeguards, and stronger intellectual property protection. Additionally, Bangladesh has agreed to import approximately $3.5 billion worth of US agricultural products.

In contrast, under the interim US–India framework, India has agreed to reduce or eliminate tariffs on a broad range of American industrial and agricultural products, including wine and spirits. In return, the US has reduced reciprocal tariffs on Indian exports from 25% to 18% and removed an additional 25% tariff previously imposed on Indian goods. India has adopted a calibrated approach, particularly safeguarding sensitive agricultural sectors. Together, these agreements underline Washington's tailored trade strategy and indicate competitive pressures for India in sectors such as textiles and agriculture.

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State's first integrated international school

On February 10, 2026, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan declared the Munderi Government Higher Secondary School as the State's first integrated international school. The announcement was framed within Kerala's broader development vision, which seeks equitable access to quality education. The Chief Minister highlighted that universal and free education, supported historically by social reformers and strengthened through policy measures, has ensured near-total school enrollment in the State.

Since 2016, the government has implemented the Public Education Protection Mission to upgrade school infrastructure, ensure timely distribution of textbooks from June 1 each academic year, and enhance academic standards. The Munderi school's transformation from a conventional high school into a model institution was presented as a result of sustained public support and policy intervention.

Infrastructure of international standards has been developed alongside curriculum and timetable reforms, with equal emphasis on arts and sports. A cluster model integrating the higher secondary school with 14 primary schools under the 'Mudra' scheme has facilitated coordinated development. The campus now includes modern laboratories, a robotics lab, smart classrooms, and bio-gardens. The initiative reflects Kerala's continued emphasis on strengthening its public education system.

Visually challenged woman to become a judge in Kerala

Lawyer Thanya Nathan C. has emerged as a significant figure in Kerala's judicial history after securing first rank among persons with benchmark disabilities in the recent judicial service examination for the post of Civil Judge (Junior Division) in the Kerala Judicial Service. Ms. Nathan, who is totally blind, is expected to become the first visually challenged woman judge in the State. Joyson Sajan, a candidate with cerebral palsy, secured the second rank in the same category.

Her selection follows a landmark 2025 Supreme Court judgment delivered by a Bench comprising Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan. The Court held that visually impaired candidates cannot be deemed unsuitable for judicial service and are eligible to participate in the selection process for such posts. This judicial pronouncement paved the way for greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in the judiciary.The development marks an important moment in advancing inclusivity within the judicial system and reflects evolving interpretations of eligibility and equal opportunity in public service.

Travancore Devaswom Board plans major changes at Sabarimala under 'Vision Sabarimala'

The Travancore Devaswom Board has proposed comprehensive reforms at Sabarimala under a new initiative titled "Vision Sabarimala." The initiative aims to bring systematic and long-term improvements to the management and development of the temple. A key feature of the plan is the introduction of a dedicated budget for Sabarimala from next year onward. At present, financial allocations for the temple are made through various departments. The proposed dedicated budget is intended to streamline financial planning related specifically to Sabarimala.

Ancient stone pillar from T.N. traced to Vienna

An antique stone pillar, believed to have been stolen from a temple in Tamil Nadu, has been traced to Vienna, Austria. The development followed an alert from Austrian authorities, after which the Idol Wing–CID (IW-CID) of the Tamil Nadu Police initiated steps to secure its return. The pillar, estimated to date back to the 18th–19th century, weighs approximately half a tonne and features bas-relief carvings depicting a deity, possibly Lord Vishnu, along with Garuda, a saint, and a hamsa (swan).

The Federal Ministry of Interior Criminal Intelligence Service, Cultural Property Unit, Austria, shared photographs of the seized artefact with the IW-CID. According to senior police officials, it appears that the pillar was removed from a temple in Tamil Nadu. However, due to its common architectural style—typical of many temples in the State—its precise provenance has not yet been established.

Preliminary assessment suggests that the pillar is made of light bugra granite, commonly found in the Krishnagiri–Dharmapuri belt of north-western Tamil Nadu or adjoining regions such as Kolar (Karnataka) and Chittoor (Andhra Pradesh). It may have formed part of a small mandapa or a subsidiary shrine structure.

Austrian authorities have expressed readiness to initiate restitution proceedings, reflecting ongoing international cooperation in the recovery of stolen cultural property.

Villagers in Odisha boycott anganwadi over appointment of Dalit employee

An anganwadi centre in Nuagaon village, Kendrapara district, Odisha, has reportedly remained non-functional for nearly three months after residents stopped sending children following the appointment of a Dalit woman as helper-cum-cook. Sharmistha Sethy, a 20-year-old graduate appointed in November 2025, alleged that the boycott began soon after she joined and attributed it to caste prejudice. Although 20 children are enrolled, none are currently attending, according to the anganwadi worker, who stated that door-to-door outreach efforts were unsuccessful.

District authorities have deputed officials to assess the situation. The Child Development Project Officer stated that villagers have not formally cited caste as the reason for their decision. The post had been advertised twice, and Sethy was the only applicant. She receives a monthly honorarium of ₹5,000 and is responsible for meal preparation, pre-school support, and health-related assistance. The incident highlights the continued social sensitivity surrounding caste in certain rural contexts.

UPSC GS I PYQ 2020 - Has caste lost its relevance in understanding the multi-cultural Indian Society? Elaborate your answer with illustrations.

UPSC GS I PYQ 2018 - "Caste system is assuming new identities and associational forms. Hence, the caste system cannot be eradicated in India." Comment.

Why Canada can't leverage oil like China did rare earths

In the context of strained U.S.–Canada relations, recent actions by U.S. President Donald Trump have highlighted growing tensions between the two neighbours. Trump threatened to halt the opening of a new $4.6 billion bridge connecting Windsor in Canada and Detroit in the United States until Canada was "fully compensated" for what he described as longstanding imbalances. This threat followed Trump's reaction to a trade deal between Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and China in January, which lowered tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles in exchange for reduced import taxes on Canadian farm products. In response, Trump threatened high tariffs on Canadian imports, illustrating an escalation in economic coercion.

Looking at lessons from the U.S.–China tariff conflict, China leveraged its dominance in rare earth elements by imposing export controls during U.S. tariff actions. Rare earths are critical for advanced technologies, and the U.S. was heavily dependent on Chinese exports in 2024, giving China tangible bargaining power.

By contrast, Canada's potential leverage against the U.S. rests largely on its role as a major energy supplier. In 2024, about 60 percent of U.S. crude oil imports came from Canada, and 95 percent of Canadian oil exports went to the U.S. This deep integration suggests theoretical leverage. However, structural constraints — such as Canada's dependence on U.S. infrastructure to transport oil and the small scale of U.S. northern states' imports — limit practical bargaining options. In short, while Canada has significant economic ties that could be used as leverage, the extent to which these can translate into effective bargaining power in the current dispute remains constrained by infrastructure and market realities.

Takaichi's win could mean more tensions with China

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi secured a landslide victory in the snap elections she called, with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) winning 316 out of 465 seats in the House of Representatives. The two-thirds majority is widely seen as a personal mandate for her leadership, especially in contrast to the LDP's poor performance in 2024. Observers attribute the party's revival largely to her personal popularity and communication style, including her active public engagement and effective use of social media. As a protégé of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, she is expected to carry forward his strategic priorities.

Japan–China Relations: Taiwan and Security Concerns - Tensions with China intensified in November after Ms. Takaichi stated before Japanese legislators that if China were to use force against Taiwan, it would constitute a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan. Following these remarks, China imposed economic sanctions, heightening bilateral strains.

Going forward, attention will focus on whether she seeks to stabilise ties with Beijing or strengthens Japan's security posture further. Experts suggest she may increase defence spending, a move likely to be viewed cautiously by China.

Her strong electoral mandate may also revive debate on constitutional reform towards a less pacifist and more security-oriented framework. However, any amendment would require corresponding success in the Upper House, where elections are due only in 2028.

Indian exporters perturbed by U.S.-Bangladesh trade pact

The U.S.–Bangladesh Agreement on Reciprocal Trade has raised concerns among Indian textile and apparel exporters regarding its potential impact on competitiveness. Earlier, Indian exporters anticipated a marginal advantage as Bangladeshi goods faced a 19% tariff in the U.S., compared to 18% on Indian merchandise. However, the agreement introduces a provision under which certain Bangladeshi textile and apparel products may receive zero reciprocal tariff if produced using U.S. cotton or man-made fibre (MMF) yarn.

Bangladesh is a key market for Indian cotton yarn, with India exporting $1.47 billion worth in 2024–25. At the same time, both countries depend significantly on the U.S. market for garment exports. Industry representatives have expressed concern that Bangladesh may substitute Indian cotton with U.S. cotton to avail tariff benefits, potentially affecting Indian yarn exports.

However, experts note logistical and structural constraints, including transportation costs, storage issues, product compatibility, and supply chain realignment in Bangladesh. Additionally, an existing U.S. Executive Order states that ad valorem duties apply only to the non-U.S. component when at least 20% value addition occurs. Indian industry bodies have indicated that they may seek similar provisions from the Indian government to maintain export competitiveness.

SME Forum urges SC not to bar data sharing by Meta, cites harm to them

The Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Forum has approached the Supreme Court seeking intervention in a case concerning Meta's data-sharing practices across its platforms. The intervention follows oral observations by the Court warning that Meta-owned firms could face a complete prohibition on inter-platform data sharing. The Forum argued that such restrictions would adversely affect Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which rely on Meta's integrated tools for cost-effective advertising and customer outreach on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

According to the Forum, MSMEs lack the financial capacity to access expensive marketing channels and depend on data-enabled advertising tools to compete with larger firms. A prohibition on data sharing, it contended, would undermine their ability to reach targeted customers efficiently.

The matter arises from Meta's appeal against a fine and certain conditions imposed by the Competition Commission of India (CCI), which were largely upheld by the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT). The CCI has also appealed parts of the NCLAT ruling. During the hearing, the Court questioned Meta's data privacy practices and the clarity of its user opt-out mechanisms. The case highlights the intersection of competition regulation, data privacy, and digital market access in India.

PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Consider the following pairs: (2023)

Site : Well Known for

1. Besnagar : Shaivite cave shrine
2. Bhaja : Buddhist cave shrine 3. Sittanavasal : Jain cave shrine

How many of the above pairs are correctly matched?

(a) Only one
(b) Only two
(c) All three
(d) None

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2) "Souls are not only the property of animal and plant life, but also of rocks, running water, and many other natural objects not looked on as living by other religious sects."

The above statement reflects one of the core beliefs of which one of the following religious sects of ancient India? (2023)

(a) Buddhism
(b) Jainism
(c) Shaivism
(d) Vaishnavism

HERITAGE

DR. PALPU (1863 – 1950)

PDr. Palpu, born into the Ezhava community in Travancore, made history as the first medical graduate from his community. Facing deep caste discrimination, he channeled his education into fighting for Ezhava rights, becoming a pioneering social reformer in Kerala.

In 1890, he founded the Travancore Ezhava Sabha, later evolving into the powerful Ezhava Maha Sabha. These organizations united Ezhavas to demand equality, education, and temple entry. Palpu was the third signatory to the historic Malayali Memorial of 1891, a petition urging the Travancore government for administrative reforms and social justice.

A key achievement was organizing the Ezhava Memorial in 1896, presented to Maharajah Sree Moolam Thirunal, highlighting community grievances like exclusion from jobs and education. Under his leadership, a second Ezhava Memorial reached Lord Curzon in 1900, pressing for British intervention.

His life intersected with great minds: he met Swami Vivekananda in 1882, drawing inspiration for social upliftment, and Sree Narayana Guru in 1895, forging a lasting alliance. Palpu also penned the article "Treatment of Thiyyas in Travancore Thiruvithamkotte Theeyan," exposing caste atrocities. Through relentless advocacy, Dr. Palpu laid the groundwork for Ezhava empowerment, inspiring generations in Kerala's renaissance.

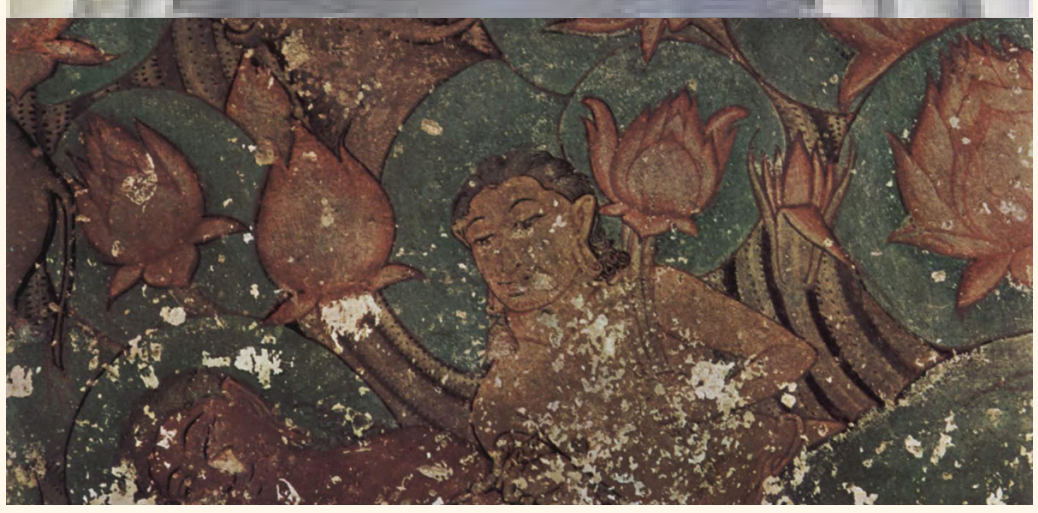
Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) Answer is option b

1. Besnagar – Shaivite cave shrine: This pair is incorrect.
Besnagar, located in modern-day Madhya Pradesh, is best known for the Heliodorus Pillar, a pillar erected by a Greek ambassador who became a devotee of Lord Vishnu. It is not associated with a Shaivite cave shrine.

2. Bhaja – Buddhist cave shrine: This pair is correct. Bhaja, located in Maharashtra, is a group of early Buddhist rock-cut caves. These caves date back to the 2nd century BCE and are notable for their chaitya (prayer hall) and viharas (monastic cells).

3. Sittanavasal – Jain cave shrine: This pair is correct. Sittanavasal, located in Tamil Nadu, is a well-known Jain cave complex. It features rock-cut caves with Jain sculptures and beautiful frescoes depicting Jain themes.



2) Answer is option b

Core Belief of Jainism: Jainism teaches that souls (jiva) are not limited to animals and plants but also exist in inanimate objects like rocks, water, air, and fire. This belief stems from the Jain doctrine of universal soul and their strict adherence to non-violence (ahimsa) towards all forms of existence, both sentient and non-sentient.

Jainism's core teachings, as preached by Mahavira, revolve around the Triratnas or three gems: right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. Right faith means unwavering belief in Mahavira's wisdom. Right knowledge accepts that no God created the eternal world, and every object—animate or inanimate—possesses a soul with varying consciousness, capable of feeling pain. Right conduct demands strict observance of five great vows: not injuring life, not lying, not stealing, not acquiring property, and not leading an immoral life. Central to these is ahimsa, binding both clergy and laypeople, viewing all beings as sacred. Mahavira rejected Vedic authority and rituals, promoting an ethical life. Even agriculture was sinful for harming earth, worms, and animals. Asceticism reached extremes through nudity, starvation, and self-torture, emphasizing renunciation.

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"Don't watch the clock; do what it does. Keep going."
Sam Levenson

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