



Anil K Antony @anilkantony
Deeply saddened to hear of the passing away of Shri Gopal Krishna Maharajji. It was a blessed and serene experience to meet him on Janmashanti last year. I offer my heartfelt condolences to all members of the ISKCON movement. @iskconin @iskcon

COCOA PRICE CROSSES ₹1K-MARK, FARMERS WAIT & WATCH

While price of dry cocoa beans rose by more than 200% from ₹325/kg in January to ₹1,020/kg last week, price of wet beans rose from ₹85/kg to nearly ₹400/kg



Ajit T T (right) and business partner Arun Kamal

RAJESH ABRAHAM @Kochi

M C SAJU, a small farmer who grows cocoa on a four-acre plot at Koothattukulam in Ernakulam district, has spread nets on the ground beneath each cocoa tree to ensure not a single bean is lost after the squirrels spit them.

"The squirrels only suck out the sweet flesh. One bean fetches ₹1 at the current price," he says.

According to him, 1,000 cocoa beans would come to nearly 1,100 grams. "That's ₹1,000 plus."

While the price of dry cocoa beans rose by more than 200% from ₹325/kg in January to ₹1,020/kg last week, the price of wet beans increased from ₹85/kg to nearly ₹400/kg, a whopping rise of 375% in four months. The sharp increase in international cocoa prices is attributed to a collapse in production in west African countries, like Ivory Coast and Ghana, which account for 60% of global production.

For Ajit T T, the chief marketing officer of Caramin Ex-

tracts, a small cocoa-processing unit based in Chelachuvadu near Cheruthoni in Idukki district, the situation is entirely different. The company procures cocoa from a group of 200 farmers spread across the panchayats of Murickassery, Kanjikuzhy and Vathikudy.

"Every Monday we go to their homes, collect the fresh beans and give them the most premium price. We dry the beans, process them and turn them into chocolate ingredients before selling them to chocolate manufacturers. With the sharp rise in cocoa prices, there is a possibility of lower demand from chocolate companies," reckons Ajit.

If the situation persists, he believes chocolate makers will have to either increase prices or slow down cocoa purchases. "But the good thing now is that there is enough demand within the country that I don't see any slowdown in cocoa procurement," he adds.

His company has the capacity to process 5,000 kg of cocoa beans a month.

"After the increase in prices, we have seen farmers taking



M C Saju at his cocoa plantation. Nets are seen placed around the crops to collect each bean discarded by squirrels

good care of cocoa trees by pruning the leaves, protecting the fruits and watering the plants. This could result in at least a 40% increase in production," Ajit says.

K J Varghese, president of the Cocoa Producers' Cooperative Society in Manimala, Kottayam, says he sold five tonnes to Mumbai-based Morde Food Products when the price touched ₹700/kg. He sold another tonne at ₹1,000 per kg.

"Yes, the going has been good this year," says Varghese.

Cocoa farmers like Saju have never had it so good since the price boom of the early 1980s, when farmers in Kerala, mostly in Idukki, jumped into cocoa cultivation in large numbers buoyed by the sharp increase in prices. But it turned out to be a bitter experience for them as the prices collapsed soon, forcing many to destroy the crop and return to rubber. This time, Saju does not foresee a similar scenario, at least not in the immediate future even as most farmers are just watching from the sidelines. They are like "once bitten, twice shy", he says.

"When the prices touched ₹300/kg, the small farmers sold their stocks. Then the prices went past ₹500/kg and now it's

gone past ₹1,000/kg. I'm now selling cocoa on a daily basis. You don't know how long the party lasts," he says.

Indian chocolate makers like Morde Foods, Jindal Cocoa and Ambriona are the biggest buyers of the cocoa and its substitutes. Industry officials reckon there won't be any slowdown in demand in the near future as the supplies from Ghana and Ivory Coast will take time to return to normal. Ajit's Caramin Extracts supplies beans, roasted shell, cocoa liquor, cocoa butter and cocoa powder to chocolate makers.

According to the first advance estimate of Kochi-based Directorate of Cashewnut and Cocoa Development, the cocoa production by Kerala grew marginally to 10,535 tonnes in 2023-24 from 10,533 in the preceding year.

During the same period, the area of cocoa production increased from 18,233 hectares to 18,458 hectares. Though the increase in production may seem marginal (just 2 tonnes a year), the picture is different on a three-year perspective when the prices slowly started to climb. In 2020-21, the cocoa production in Kerala stood at 9,647 tonnes, meaning it grew by 888 tonnes or nearly 10% in three years.

KERALA COCOA CULTIVATION AND PRODUCTION

Year	Area (ha)	Production (MT)	Productivity (kg/ha)
2020-21	17,366	9,647	850
2021-22	17,770	10,130	850
2022-23	18,233	10,533	1,100
2023-24*	18,458	10,535	1,100

*1st advance estimate

When the prices touched ₹300/kg, the small farmers sold their stocks. Then the prices went past ₹500/kg and now it's gone past ₹1,000/kg — M C Saju, cocoa farmer

MCH sexual assault: Probe report refutes allegations against doc



'WILL SEEK RE-PROBE'

- The complainant expressed her dissatisfaction with the police report and questioned the addition of the name and statement of another junior doctor — a 2nd year PG student — in the report
- No junior doctor came along with Dr Preethi when she examined me, she says
- Survivor says she will demand a re-probe into the matter

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @Kozhikode

POLICE HAVE submitted an investigation report refuting the allegations against Dr K V Preethi, a gynaecologist at Kozhikode Medical College Hospital, in the complaint filed by the medical college ICU sexual assault survivor.

Dr Preethi had recorded the victim's statement in the sexual assault case. A year ago, the survivor approached the city police commissioner, alleging that Preethi tried to protect the accused by not recording her statements fully.

Last month, the woman launched a strike in front of the commissioner's office in Kozhikode in protest against the delay in the probe. Following this, the IG North Zone assured her of police action, acting on the instructions of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan.

The Medical College police shared the investigation report with the complainant two days ago.

The report states that the investigation team could not identify any motive for Dr Preethi, a relatively junior doctor, and her accompanying doctor to help anyone in the case. "Dr Preethi has written in the case sheet the same things that the complainant said during the examination. The same things have been told to the investigating officers as well. Therefore, no negligence on the part of the doctor was found and no further action is required in the complaint," said the report.

Meanwhile, the complainant expressed her dissatisfaction with the police report and questioned the addition of the name and statement of another junior doctor in the investigation report. "The name and statement of a doctor, a second year PG student, have been included in the police report now. No junior doctor came along with Dr Preethi when she examined me. That junior doctor was not a witness in any of the chargesheets filed by the police in court. I will demand a re-investigation," said the survivor.

Dr Preethi has written in the case sheet the same things that the complainant said during the examination. The same things have been told to the police as well. Therefore, no negligence on the part of the doctor was found in the complaint

The police report

NEET-UG: 1.13L students attend exam in state

Tirupur: The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)-UG exam for admission to undergraduate medical and allied courses was held in 295 centres across the state and one centre in Lakshadweep on Sunday. A total of 1,25,954 students had registered for the test from Kerala and 187 in Lakshadweep. According to officials of National Testing Agency (NTA), 90% of the registered students (roughly 1.13 lakh) appeared for it in the state.



An official frisking a student before he takes the NEET-UG 2024 test at Saraswathi Vidyaniketan Public School at Elamakara in Kochi on Sunday | A SANESH

Court to hear driver Yedu's plea today

CONTINUED FROM P3

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @Tirupur

"THERE were about 10 people in the bus when the incident happened at Palayam. We have recorded statements of some of them," said an officer.

The police said they checking whether the driver was involved in the disappearance of the memory card containing the visuals from the CCTV cameras in the bus. They said the driver had mentioned about the CCTV cameras three days after the incident. "It is suspicious that he also gave contradictory statements on whether he had gone to the bus to check the CCTV visuals," said an officer.

Yedu also brushed aside the police charge about the memo-

ry card being missing, saying he badly wanted the visuals to prove his points and alleged that the cops were not probing the case sincerely.

Meanwhile, a Judicial First Class Magistrate court (JFMC) in Thiruvananthapuram will hear Yedu's petition seeking the registration of a case against the mayor and others for obstructing him while on duty, on Monday.

The Cantonment police on Saturday registered a case against the mayor, her husband and 3 others on a directive issued by a JFMC court while considering a petition filed by

High Court lawyer Baiju Noel Rosario. Rosario told *TNIE* that he had filed the petition on April 30 on behalf of the public. "I am not connected to Yedu. I filed a complaint with the court owing to the inconvenience caused by the accused to the public," he said.

According to him, multiple FIRs cannot be registered on a single incident. "It is to be seen whether the court will take note of the aspect that the mayor and others obstructed the driver during his duty, while considering the petition of Yedu. So, if the court gives a directive to register a case, then they could be booked for obstructing the driver," he said.

It is to be seen whether the court will take note of the aspect that the mayor and others obstructed the driver during his duty, while considering the petition of Yedu. So, if the court gives a directive to register a case, then they could be booked — Baiju Noel Rosario, High Court lawyer

PERCUSSION MAESTRO KELATH ARAVINDAKSHA MARAR PASSES AWAY

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Thrissur

RENOWNED percussionist Kelath Aravindaksha Marar passed away following age-related ailments at his residence in Ollur in Thrissur on Sunday. He was 82. Marar learned chenda under the guidance of his father, Makkoth Sankarankutty Marar. At the early age of 12, he played a key role in the percussion ensemble performances, even if not a 'pramani' (lead percussionist), as his expertise helped him control the crew.

He performed along with percussion maestro Peruvannam Kuttan Marar for Elanjithara Melam until 2021, after which his deteriorating health forced him to stay away from performances. Since his maiden performance at Edakunni temple for Navaratri celebrations, Marar remained an inevitable part of melam in major festivals of central Kerala, including Thrissur Pooram, Arattupuzha Pooram, Peruvannam Pooram and Tripunithura Utsavam.

He has also played a key



role at the annual festival of Guruvayur Sree Krishna Temple.

Sharing his grief over the demise of Aravindaksha Marar, Kuttan Marar said he was at a loss for words after learning the news. "I bow my head in gratitude. He was an artist sans ego," he shared.

Revenue Minister K Rajan, CPI leader V S Sunilkumar and actor-turned-politician Suresh Gopi expressed condolences on the death of the percussion maestro. The cremation was held with the Guard of Honour at Paramekkavu Santhighat at 4pm.

Police begin probe into mystery deaths of man, woman near Payyannur

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @Kannur

A WOMAN who went missing from her home at Mathamangalam on Saturday was found dead inside a house at Annur in Payyannur on Sunday. Twenty-two kilometres away at Iru, a youngster who was assigned to look after the house in which the woman was found dead was also found hanging at a rubber plantation.

The deceased are Mathamangalam native Anila, 36, and Sudarshan Prasad, 34, of Kuttur in Iru.

The owner of the house, Betty, and her family had been away from home for the past few days. She had asked Sudarshan to look after the house while they were away.

The police said that it is unclear how Anila reached Betty's house. Anila's relatives

and neighbours have alleged a mystery behind the incident.

"Anila's body was found by Betty's relatives when they inspected the house after coming to know of Sudarshan's death. Her relatives told us that she was in a relationship with Sudarshan," said K K Falgunan, a ward councillor.

The Payyannur police have registered a case of unnatural death and started a probe. They are investigating how Anila could have reached Betty's house. "We are checking whether there is any connection between the two deaths," said a cop.

Sources said that Anila has no connection with the house where she was found dead. "The woman's body is more than 24 hours old. The police are treating it as a murder-suicide case," the source added.



Sudarshan



Anila

Implementation of Inland Vessels rules puts SWTD staff in a fix

ABHILASH CHANDRAN @Kottayam

THE TRANSITION from the Kerala Inland Vessel Rules 2010 to the Inland Vessel (Manning) Rules 2022, established under the Inland Vessel Act 2021 of the Union Government, has left nearly 1,000 employees in the operating division of the State Water Transport Department (SWTD) in a fix.

As per a directive from the SWTD, in compliance with the IV Rules 2022, the validity of certificates of competency and certificate of service issued to operating employees such as first and second-class boat master, serangs, engineers, engine drivers, and lascars will expire on June 6, 2024. To renew these certificates, employees must at-

tend revalidation classes and basic safety courses at their own expense, and submit course certificates before the specified date. According to employees, the cost of the training programme is reportedly substantial, leaving many employees unable to afford it.

The need for revalidation and training has created uncertainty and financial strain for many employees, highlighting the need for support and solutions to address these issues. Employees have highlighted that the training fees range from ₹5,900 to ₹14,160, depending on the position. Additionally, the training will take place at the Kerala Maritime Institute at Neendakara in Kollam, lasting anywhere from four to



Financial burden

Validity of competency and service certificates issued to employees will expire on June 6, 2024. To renew them, employees must attend revalidation classes and basic safety courses at their own expense, and submit course certificates before the specified date

13 days. Employees will also be responsible for covering the costs of accommodation during the training period.

T S Suresh Babu, the general secretary of the SWTD Employees Federation (SWTDEF), expressed concerns about the financial burden being placed on employees. "When the Kerala Inland Vessel Rule replaced the Canals and Public Ferries Rules in 2010, employees did not incur any additional expenses. The new rule should be implemented without imposing financial hardships on the employees," he said.

Babu also mentioned that some employees, like lascars, hold multiple licenses and are capable of operating boats in the absence of a serang. Renew-

ing all these licenses under the new rules would result in significant expenses for these employees.

The SWTD order mandates that station masters ensure employees' licenses are renewed in compliance with the IV Rules 2022. Station masters are also instructed to facilitate employees' participation in the training program without disrupting boat services statewide.

The Federation's office bearers recently met with Transport Minister K B Ganesh Kumar to address these concerns and submitted a petition outlining the challenges faced by employees. The minister reportedly assured the Federation of a positive response from the government.