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- 'With Gaza deal, IMEC Corridor can become reality'
- Closure of Hindenburg Research not clean chit for 'Modani': Congress
- 'Will incorporate suggestions from all sections to prepare a good budget'

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DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 17, 2025 PAGES 8 PRICE ₹ 8

## Assam cabinet approves ₹ 2,000 cr for schemes to empower women, youth

MORIGAON, Jan 16: The Assam cabinet on Thursday approved ₹ 2,000 crore for the implementation of schemes aimed at empowering women and youth.

Addressing a press conference after chairing a cabinet meet here, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said, "This is the first outstation cabinet sitting of this year. These sittings in different districts have helped in accelerated development. The next outstation cabinet meeting will be in Nagaon."

The council of ministers approved ₹ 2,000 crore for implementation of the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Udyamita Asoni (MMUA), Chief Minister's Atmanirbhar Asoni and other schemes for 2024-25, he added. "Guidelines for implementation of MMUA have also been approved and ceremonial distribution



of seed capital will begin from April," he said.

Sarma said though around 31 lakh women meet the criteria for availing MMUA, the scheme can be extended to 27 lakh beneficiaries as per budgetary allocations.

"Due to this, some specific criteria have been decided upon to bring the eligibility list to 27 lakh. The scheme will be rolled out from Behali," he added.

The cabinet also approved enhancement of state's share capital from ₹ 3,000 (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Umrangso coal mine incident: 'seepage' hits dewatering

● Ex-gratia of ₹ 10 L announced for families of victims

## State govt orders judicial, SIT probes

MORIGAON/ GUWAHATI, Jan 16: The Assam government on Thursday announced a judicial enquiry and a police Special Investigation Team (SIT) probe into the Umrangso coal mine incident, in which nine workers were trapped with bodies of four victims recovered so far.

It also declared an ex-gratia of ₹ 10 lakh each to the families of the victims, even as officials said that suspected seepage of fresh water from underground streams has slowed down the dewatering process.

A coal mine in the Umrangso area of Dima Hasao district was flooded on January six when water had gushed in suddenly, trapping nine workers inside. Four bodies have been recovered since then in the rescue operations.



Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, announcing decisions taken at a Cabinet meeting at

Morigaon, said, "We discussed in detail about the Umrangso tragedy and officials deputed at the inci-

dent site gave a presentation of the situation on ground."

He said as per the assessment of agencies like the Geological Survey of India, Coal India, OIL, NDRF, Army and Navy, engaged at the incident site, about 1,400 crore litres of water was present in the mine.

"About 400 crore litres has been pumped out so far and, if the dewatering continues at the current rate, it will take about 25 to 60 days for the process to be completed. We have told the agencies to continue with the process in the presence of the army till we reach the logical conclusion," the CM added. Sarma said the chances of survival of the remaining five miners are "slim" now and announced ₹ 10 lakh compensation to families of all the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Lok Sabha MP Dilip Saikia set to become new Assam BJP chief

GUWAHATI, Jan 16: Lok Sabha MP Dilip Saikia is set to be the next Assam BJP president as he became the only nominee for the post till Thursday, the last day for filing nominations, a party leader said.

The formal announcement for the state BJP chief will be made on Friday, he added.

Saikia is the second-time MP from the Darrang-Udalguri (previously Mangaldai) constituency. "Saikia is the only nominee for the state president's post. He filed his nomination before our central leader Gajendra Singh Shekhawat,

who is the returning officer for this election," state BJP spokesperson Dewan Dhruva Jyoti Maral told PTI.

The cut-off time for filing nominations was 7 pm on Thursday.

The MP submitted a list of 20 proposers and supporters along with his nomination, with outgoing state president Bhabesh Kalita, CM Himanta Biswa Sarma and deputy speaker in the state Assembly Numol Momin being among the signatories.

Maral said the formal announcement of the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Over 1.28 million pages of rare Assamese manuscripts, journals, books digitised

GUWAHATI, Jan 16: Over 1.28 million pages of rare manuscripts, journals, and books in Assamese have been digitised.

This marks a significant milestone in safeguarding and promoting Assamese literature, said Narayan Sharma, president of the Assam Jatiya Bidyalay (AJB) Educational and Socio-Economic Trust.

The digitisation work was done over 36 months, he said.

"This is a vital asset for researchers, students, and the global Assamese community. It ensures the timeless legacy of Assam is preserved with the aid of cutting-edge technology," Sharma said.

Among the literary works digitised are 26,000 'Xasipats', manuscripts on Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Assamese traditions.

The project is a collaborative effort between the Nanda Talukdar Foundation (NTF) and the AJB Educational and Socio-Economic Trust, with support from Assam Sahitya Sabha, Dibrugarh University, and corporates such as Oil India Limited, NRL, and ONGC.

The digitised collection features nearly all editions of Orundoi, Assam's first magazine, alongside other iconic publications like Bahi, Abahan, and Ramdhenu. Additionally, the repository includes 33,970 books and 41,071 journal issues, all of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## US removes sanctions on BARC, two other Indian companies

WASHINGTON, Jan 16:

Days ahead of passing the baton of the presidency to Donald Trump, the Biden administration has announced lifting sanctions on three Indian entities - Indian Rare Earths, Indira Gandhi Atomic Research Center (IGCAR), and Bhabha Atomic Research Center (BARC).

Imposed during the Cold War era, the removal of sanctions on these three In-

dian entities will support US foreign policy objectives by reducing barriers to advanced energy cooperation, including joint research and development and science and technology cooperation, towards shared energy security needs and goals, the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) said on Wednesday.

Simultaneously, the BIS added 11 entities to the En-

tity List, under the destination of the People's Republic of China (PRC), for activities contrary to US national security and foreign policy interests.

The US and India share a commitment to advancing peaceful nuclear cooperation and associated research and development activities, with strengthened science and technology cooperation over the past several years that (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM  
Department of School Education

# GUNOTSAV 2025

## Ensuring Quality Education



समग्र शिक्षा  
Samagra Shiksha

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase (17 - 22 January 2025)

**14**  
Districts

**Baksa, Charaideo, Chirang, Dhemaji, Dhubri, Golaghat, Hailakandi, Hojai, Jorhat, Kamrup (Metro), Sonitpur, Tamulpur, Tinsukia and West Karbi Anglong**

**Date of Self Evaluation**

**17 JANUARY 2025**

**Date of External Evaluation**

**20-22 JANUARY 2025**




**NUMBER OF SCHOOLS 15,663**

- Government/Provincialized Schools
- Adarsha Vidyalayas
- Tea Garden Model Schools
- Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas
- Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Avasiya Vidyalayas
- Tea Garden Management Schools

**NUMBER OF STUDENTS 14,14,932**

- Classes I to IX

**NO. OF EXTERNAL EVALUATORS 6,253**

- Ministers, MPs, MLAs, CEMs, EMs, IAS, IPS, IFS, ACS, APS, AFS, Class I & II Officials of State Govt. etc.



**Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma**  
Chief Minister, Assam

Let us come together to ensure the successful execution of Gunotsav 2025 and pave the way for a brighter future for our children !

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# Sensex, Nifty extend gains for 3<sup>rd</sup> day on strong global cues, lower US inflation

**MUMBAI, Jan 16:** Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rallied for the third session on the trot on Thursday, helped by a rally in global markets after lower-than-expected consumer inflation in the US ignited hopes of more rate cuts by the Federal Reserve.

Intense buying in Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank and HDFC Bank also boosted sentiments, traders said. The 30-share BSE index climbed 318.74 points or 0.42 per cent to revisit 77,000 level at 77,042.82. During the day, it jumped 595.42 points or 0.77 per cent to 77,319.50.

On the similar lines, the NSE Nifty rallied 98.60 points or 0.42 per cent to 23,311.80.

As many as 2,778 stocks advanced, while 1,188 declined and 101 remained unchanged on the BSE. Unabated foreign fund inflows, weakness in the rupee and elevated global crude prices continue to weigh on domestic equity markets, traders said.

"Benchmark indices continued to trade in the positive, albeit off highs, driven by positive investor sentiment following mild US inflation data, which raised hopes for a potential rate cut by the Federal Reserve. "Additionally, favourable developments in the Israel-Hamas ceasefire and a reduced trade deficit further boosted the market's upward movement. However, weak economic growth data from the UK



dampened some of this optimism," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Adani Ports, State Bank of India, Bajaj Finserv, Bharti Airtel, Tata Motors, IndusInd Bank, NTPC, Maruti, Reliance Industries and Axis Bank were the biggest gainers. In contrast, HCL Tech, Nestle, Infosys, Hindustan Unilever, ITC and Tata Consultancy Services were among the laggards.

IT services major Infosys on Thursday reported an 11.46 per cent year-on-year increase in consolidated net profit to ₹ 6,806 crore in the October-December quarter of FY25. Shares of Infosys slipped 1.21 per cent to settle at ₹ 1,926.20 apiece on the BSE.

Meanwhile, Adani group stocks rallied on Thursday after Hinden-

burg Research founder Nate Anderson announced that he would disband the firm, which made international waves with campaigns targeting billionaire Gautam Adani that wiped billions from the market value of his group companies.

Shares of NDTV surged 9.15 per cent, Ambuja Cements jumped 3.88 per cent, Adani Green Energy rallied 3.35 per cent, Sanghi Industries climbed 3.34 per cent and Adani Power went up by 2.45 per cent on the BSE. The stock of Adani Ports advanced 2.03 per cent, Adani Total Gas (1.78 per cent), Adani Enterprises (1.74 per cent), Adani Energy Solutions (1.54 per cent) and ACC (0.77 per cent). Shares of Adani Wilmar, however, declined 1.19 per cent.

"Nifty has regained momentum, closing at 23,312, buoyed by demand and reclaiming the 23,300

mark, as Wall Street's strong performance helped bulls take charge. Risk-on sentiments were sparked by cooler-than-expected US CPI inflation data for December, easing concerns about rising inflation and boosting expectations that the Fed might continue its rate-cutting cycle throughout the year.

"This, coupled with a weaker US dollar (now at 109) and a drop in the 10-year US bond yield to 4.65 per cent, has further strengthened investor confidence," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

The BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1.43 per cent while the midcap index climbed 0.92 per cent.

Among BSE sectoral indices, services jumped 1.93 per cent, industrials (1.73 per cent), metal (1.63 per cent), telecommunication (1.61 per cent), capital goods (1.56 per cent) and commodities (1.51 per cent). IT, Consumer durables, tech and BSE-focused IT were the laggards.

"The Nifty continued its upward momentum for the third straight session, closing 98 points higher (0.42 per cent) at 23,311, driven by positive global sentiment. Asian markets tracked Wall Street's gains, responding favourably to US core inflation data that reinforced expectations of potential Federal Reserve rate cuts in 2025," Devavshi Vakil, Head of Prime Research, HDFC Securities, said. (PTI)

## Infosys Q3 profit up 11.5 pc at ₹ 6,806 crore; company raises growth guidance

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** IT services major Infosys on Thursday reported 11.46 per cent increase in consolidated net profit at ₹ 6,806 crore for December quarter FY25 and raised its guidance on the back of growth in financial services and manufacturing.

The company had logged a profit of ₹ 6,106 crore in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal.

Revenue from operations for the quarter under review came in at Rs 41,764 crore, 7.58 per cent higher than Rs 38,821 crore in Q3 FY24.

Financial services and manufacturing contributed 27.8 per cent and 15.5 per cent, respectively to the revenue, followed by retail and energy.

In geographical terms, Infosys saw double-digit year-on-year growth in India and Europe. North America registered an annual growth of nearly 5 per cent.

"Financial services in the US continues to grow strongly in this quarter and over the past few quarters. We have seen a revival in European financial services during Q3. We are seeing an improvement in retail and consumer product industry in the US with discretionary

pressure easing," Infosys CEO and MD Salil Parekh said during the company's earnings call.

For the third consecutive quarter, Infosys raised the 2024-25 fiscal year revenue guidance. It now anticipates revenue growth of 4.5 to 5 per cent in FY25, up from 3.75-4.50 per cent it had given in the previous quarter.

Operating margin guidance remained unchanged at 20-22 per cent.

"Our strong revenue growth sequentially in a seasonally weak quarter and broad-based year-on-year growth, along with robust operating parameters and margins, is a clear reflection of the success of our differentiated digital offerings, market positioning, and key strategic initiatives. We continue to strengthen our enterprise AI capabilities, particularly focusing on generative AI, which is witnessing increasing client traction," Parekh said.

The company added 5,591 employees during the quarter, bringing the total headcount to 3,23,379.

Infosys CFO Jayesh Sanghrajka said the firm is on track to meet its hiring commitment and will hire

over 15,000 staff in the current fiscal year.

"We are expecting 20,000 plus fresher hiring for FY26," he said.

On whether a new US regime will affect the company, Sanghrajka said the company's dependence on H1B visas has reduced.

"Over the years, our dependence on H1B visas has reduced significantly. First and foremost, our on-site mix has reduced significantly--we used to be in the 30 per cent range...we are now at the 24 per cent range. Within that, our near shore has increased significantly.

"Within the US-onsite population that we have, our H1 independent folks are now at 60 plus percentage. We have now built a pretty resilient model from that perspective. We are therefore, much more confident from where we are versus where we used to be earlier," he said.

Earlier this week, HCLTech, a peer of Infosys, also stated that it has minimal dependence on the H1B visa.

Shares of Infosys settled at Rs 1,926.20 apiece on the BSE on Thursday, 1.21 per cent lower than the previous close. (PTI)

## Global shares advance after inflation data drives rally

**TOKYO, Jan 16:** Global shares mostly rose Thursday, following a rally on Wall Street driven by encouraging update on US inflation.

France's CAC 40 edged up 1.4% in early trading to 7,576.97, while Germany's DAX was down less than 0.1% at 7,576.97. Britain's FTSE 100 rose 0.7% to 8,355.34. The future for the S&P 500 was up 0.2% while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average was nearly unchanged.

In Asian trading, Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 added 0.3% to finish at 38,572.60.

Bank of Japan data showed wholesale prices in Japan rose 3.8% in December last year compared to a year earlier, adding to pressures on the central bank to raise interest rates, possibly at a monetary policy meeting next week. In China, the Hang Seng in Hong Kong gained 1.2% to 19,522.89, while the Shanghai Composite index rose nearly 0.3% to 3,236.03.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 surged 1.4% to 8,327.00. South Korea's Kospi gained 1.2% to 2,527.49. (AP)

## Blenders Pride introduces 'Blenders Pride Four Elements'

**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Jan 16:** Blenders Pride on Thursday unveils its latest innovative brew: Blenders Pride Four Elements.

It's a meticulously crafted blend that embodies the four elemental forces of nature, each lending a unique expression to the whisky. With a strategic focus on capturing the taste palates of both seasoned whisky aficionados and newcomers alike, this exceptional blend marks a significant milestone in Blenders Pride's journey of excellence and innovation, said an official statement.

This new spirit, Master Blender Kevin Balmforth uses four styles of Scotch Malts along with select Indian grain spirits.

He seeks his inspiration from the four ele-

mental forces of nature – Earth, Air, Fire, and Water – each adding its distinct essence to the whisky-making process.

Earth's finest barley & grains bring richness of the land's bounty, while the Air of Scottish Highlands breathes complex flavours through the maturation process. Toasted oak casks and infusing the whisky with depths of flavors & textures, while the purity of Water, drawn from the dual terrains of Scotland and India, brings forth the symphony of unique flavours.

Together, these four elements converge to create vibrancy of flavours in every amber drop and invite to an experience that's a delicate interplay of mellow woody sweetness and fresh, rich fruits, the statement said.

Talking about his creation, Master Blender

Kevin Balmforth added, "With Blenders Pride Four Elements, we offer a unique and differentiated experience to consumers".

He further said that, the premium whisky has been meticulously crafted with a blend of four styles of Scotch malts and Indian grain spirits, embodying the elemental forces – Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. "From the exquisite barley sourced from Scotland to the verdant fields of India, each component plays a pivotal role in crafting the whisky's character and lending it an intricate flavour profile", he added.

Planned for a pan-India launch, Blenders Pride Four Elements whisky is currently available in Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Assam, Tripura and Rajasthan.



hectares with an expected production of 1,041,730 MT in 2023-24, there is a pressing need for targeted interventions to stabilise production and empower farmers", the statement said.

"According to the findings, third-party certified organic helps farmers to get a better

price, but it is costly, and there is no subsidy. Hence, the report recommends subsidy for third-party organic, streamlining regulatory bodies and signing mutual recognition agreements for regulatory cooperation that will help to promote exports", it further said.

The report also pointed out that India is able to supply only 10 percent of global demand of high-curcumin (over 5 per cent) turmeric with lower Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs). Hence, R&D is needed to develop, high-curcumin variety and such varieties should be marketed in global platforms, it said, adding that with six GI products, GI discussions in trade agreements are important. "India has more than 30 varieties of turmeric and there is scope for more GI products. Focus should be to secure GI in products above 5 per cent curcumin," the Report emphasised.

The Report, co-authored by Dr. Arpita Mukherjee, Dr. Souvik Dutta, Ms. Eshana Mukherjee, Ms. Ketaki Gaikwad, Ms. Trishali Khanna, and Ms. Nandini Sen, highlights strategies to position India as the global leader in turmeric production, value addition, and exports, it stated.

## Reliance Q3 net rises 7.4 pc on rebound in retail, higher telecom earnings

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** Reliance Industries Ltd on Thursday reported a 7.4 per cent rise in its December quarter net profit as retail business rebounded, telecom earnings surged on higher tariffs and mainstay oil and petrochemicals business delivered consistent performance.

Its consolidated net profit of ₹ 18,540 crore, or ₹ 13.70 per share, in October-December - the third quarter of April 2024 to March 2025 fiscal (FY25) - compared to ₹ 17,265 crore, or ₹ 12.76 a share, in the same period a year back, according to a company statement.

Profit was also up sequentially from ₹ 16,563 crore in the July-September quarter.

The profit before tax (EBITDA) rose 7.8 per cent to ₹ 48,003 crore. This was despite an almost 7 per cent rise in finance cost due to higher debt (₹ 3.5 lakh crore as of December 31, 2024, compared to ₹ 3.36 lakh crore in September and ₹ 3.11 lakh crore in December 2023). Its revenue was up 7.7 per cent year-on-year to ₹ 2.67 lakh crore.

Higher tariffs and more customers helped telecom arm profits jump, while more stores and higher footfalls helped retail businesses rebound. Good domestic demand and rising petchem margins helped oil-to-chemicals businesses post decent numbers.

While Jio Infocomm's standalone profit jumped 24 per cent to ₹ 6,477 crore in Q3, Jio Platforms - the unit that houses all digital business - reported a 26 per cent rise to ₹ 6,861 crore.

All four key parameters - data minute usage, data consumed, average per-user earnings and number of

subscribers - grew. The customer base rose to 482.1 million from 478.8 million in July-September 2024 and 470.9 million in October-December 2023, average revenue per user crossed the Rs 200 per month mark. ARPU in Q3 was ₹ 203.3 against ₹ 195.1 in the previous quarter and ₹ 181.7 a year back.

The residual impact of the tariff hike implemented in mid-2024 will flow through over the next few months, the firm said.

Retail arm Reliance Retail Ventures Ltd posted a 10 per cent year-on-year rise in profit to ₹ 3,458 crore as it opened 779 new stores to take the number to 19,102 and footfalls rose to 296 million on festive buying from 282 million a year back.

Oil-to-chemical business, which houses the company's twin refineries at Jamnagar in Gujarat and petrochemical plants, saw EBITDA rise 2.4 per cent to ₹ 14,402 crore. The refineries processed more crude and petchem margins improved.

In the fuel retail business, Jio-bp - its joint venture with BP of the UK - posted "highest ever quarterly sales across both petrol and diesel", the statement said.

Lower gas production from the KG-D6 block and a fall in the price of coal seam gas led to a 4.1 per cent fall in pre-tax profit of its oil and gas business to ₹ 5,565 crore in Q3.

"The average KGD6 production for the 3Q is 28.04 million standard cubic metres per day of gas and 21,000 barrels a day of oil," it said, adding that the current rate of production is around 27.9 mmscmd of gas and 20,700 bpd of oil. (PTI)

## Rupee drops 21 paise to 86.61 against US dollar

**MUMBAI, Jan 16:** The rupee depreciated 21 paise to close at 86.61 against the US dollar on Thursday, dragged down by a strong American currency overseas, elevated crude oil prices and foreign fund outflows.

However, positive domestic equity markets provided support at the lower level, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.42 and touched the intraday high of 86.37 before ending the session at 86.61 against the greenback, 21 paise lower from the previous close.

The local unit settled with a gain of 13 paise at 86.40 against the dollar on Wednesday, a day after rebounding 17 paise from its lowest-ever level.

Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the rupee declined due to increased demand for dollars by importers.

"Importers may continue to buy dollars, which may further pressurise the rupee. Traders may take cues from retail sales and weekly unemployment claims data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of ₹ 86.35 to ₹ 86.75," he said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.05 per cent higher at 108.97.

The rupee's weakness was due to a recovery in the dollar index, which regained strength above 109 levels, coupled with continued volatility in crude prices, Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said.

"Concerns over global economic conditions and muted FII flows added to the pressure on the rupee. The trading range for the rupee remains between 86.40 and 86.80 in the near term," he added.

*Contd. from Page 1...*

## State govt orders judicial

nine workers. He said the Cabinet approved a judicial enquiry into the incident, with Justice (Retd) Anima Hazarika to head the one-person committee and submit its report to the government within three months.

"The DGP has been asked to form a SIT for criminal enquiry into the incident and the Justice Hazarika committee will monitor the SIT. Those responsible for it will be punished," he added.

The CM said that 220 similar rat-hole coal mines have been located in the same area and satellite mapping technology will be used to determine the time when these quarries were first opened.

"The Revenue and Disaster Management department has been asked to carry it out and seek help of ISRO or even foreign agencies to establish the timeline," he said.

Sarma added that the process for filing up these quarries will also be started in consultation with Central Mine Planning and Design Institute.

Meanwhile, officials in Dima Hasao said operations to rescue the remaining five miners are being hampered by suspected seepage of fresh water from underground streams which is slowing down the dewatering process. Even as several pumps remained pressed into action to dewater the mine, water continued to recede at a slow pace thus delaying rescue operations, they said.

"Water is being continuously pumped out. But it has been slow as it is now suspected that fresh water from some source underground keeps replenishing it," they said.

The officials said NDRF, SDRF and Army personnel remained engaged in the rescue operations, while navy divers were withdrawn.

The general officer commanding (GOC) of Spear Corps, Lt Gen Abhijit S Pendharkar, visited the site and interacted with the specialist army troops, Assam Rifles and other agencies involved in the rescue operations, the Spear Corps said in a post on X.

It said army divers are undertaking regular search operations in coordination with other agencies.

Sappers have been assisting the civil administration for over ten days and are currently involved in pumping out water using 15 pumps at a rate of 7.9 lakh litres per hour, it added.

"The Corps Commander appreciated the commitment of the troops and all individuals involved in the operation and exhorted them to be relentless in their efforts to aid the civil administration," the post in the Spears Corps official X account added. (PTI)

## Assam cabinet approves ₹ 2,000

crore to ₹ 6,000 crore in Assam Power Generation Company Ltd, the CM said. Guidelines for constituting Anganwadi Centre Management Committees for proper functioning of these centres and ₹ 401.50 crore for projects to be implemented by Bodoland Territorial Council were also okayed by the cabinet, he added.

Sarma said the cabinet also approved several projects for Morigaon district, including a drainage system in Jagiroad town, renovation of the circuit house, construction of a new auditorium, completion of a stadium and new buildings for century old schools.

Referring to the Tata Group's semiconductor assembly unit coming up in Jagiroad, the CM said the government is ready to set up another industrial park in the same area if the district administration can hand over 1000 bighas without hassles.

"If there are no agitations and strikes, no one can stop development of the state," he asserted. (PTI)

## Lok Sabha MP Dilip Saikia

new state chief will be made by Shekhawat on Friday, along with the nominees from the state for the national executive body of the party.

Saikia, aged 51, has held various positions in the BJP and its youth wing and was first elected to the Lok Sabha in 2019.

Shekhawat had reached Guwahati on Thursday evening, while three other top central leaders Harish Dwivedi, Sambit Patra and Sunil Bansal had been overseeing the election process.

Consultations were held with state leadership to arrive at a consensus candidate for the top post. (PTI)

## Over 1.28 million pages of

which are accessible for free, he said. The second phase aims to integrate OCR-AI technology to enable advanced keyword-based search, revolutionising how researchers and scholars access these materials, NTF secretary Mrinal Talukdar said. (PTI)

## US removes sanctions on BARC

has benefited both countries and their partner countries around the world, BIS said. "As these actions demonstrate, the Entity List is a powerful tool that can be used to shape behaviour that advances US national security and global cooperation," said under secretary of Commerce for Industry and Security Alan F Estevez.

"With these Entity List additions and removals, we have sent a clear message that there are consequences for supporting the PRC's military modernization, and alternatively, incentives for working with the US to further shared foreign policy goals and stronger bilateral relationships," he said.

The removal of the three Indian entities will enable closer cooperation between the United States and India to secure more resilient critical minerals and clean energy supply chains, said principal deputy assistant secretary of Commerce for Export Administration Matthew Borman.

"This action aligns with and supports the overall ambition and strategic direction of the US-India partnership," he added.

India's former Ambassador to the US, Taranjit Singh Sandhu, welcomed the move and described it as a result of a "deepening" India-US partnership. (PTI)

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 16:** A day after the launch of the National Turmeric Board, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) and Amway India Enterprises Pvt Ltd, unveiled a comprehensive joint report titled "Making India the Global Hub for Turmeric" on Thursday, addressing the pressing challenges faced by turmeric farmers and offering a strategic roadmap to enhance India's position in the global turmeric market.

An official statement said that the ICRIER-Amway Report highlights that while the global turmeric market, valued at USD 58.2 million in 2020, is expected to grow at a CAGR of 16.1 per cent by 2028, Indian turmeric farmers face hurdles such as fluctuating prices, limited market access, and inadequate post-harvest infrastructure.

"Despite India cultivating turmeric across 297,460



## CM visits Jonbeel Mela, hands over subsistence grant to Tiwa 'kings'

Sarma announces construction of a permanent stage at the Mela venue



**MORIGAON, Jan 16:** The annual three-day Jonbeel Mela, known for its barter system for business transactions, began in Assam's Morigaon district on Thursday, with Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma among the visitors on the first day. A Tiwa community festival be-

lieved to have started in the 14th century, begins on the first Thursday of the Assamese month of Magh, immediately after Magh Bihu.

Sarma, making a brief stop at the venue, handed over the royal subsistence grant to the ceremonial Tiwa kings.

"Today, HCM Dr. @himantabiswa visited the historic Jonbeel Mela in Morigaon. He presented the 'Annual Bhatta' cheque to Gobha Raja Shri Dipsing Deo Raja and 22 other Tiwa kings," the chief minister's office (CMO) posted on X.

Sarma also inaugurated a book, 'Tiwa Rajyar Buranji' (history of Tiwa kingdom), authored by Narayan Kumar Radu Kakaty. "Reaffirming the government's commitment, he emphasised continuing efforts to preserve and promote the rich heritage of Jonbeel Mela," the CMO added.

Sarma, who chaired a Cabinet meeting in the district earlier in the day, had announced the construction of a permanent stage at the Mela venue. (PTI)

## Govt plans to equip Police with AI control rooms, modern tech: Tripura CM

HT Correspondent

**AGARTALA, Jan 16:** Chief Minister Manik Saha has announced an ambitious modernisation drive for Tripura Police, introducing advanced technologies like AI-based control rooms, drones, smart CCTVs, and upgraded systems at the district and state levels.

Addressing the Police Week Parade-2025 at the Manoranjan Debbarma Smriti Police Parade Ground in AD Nagar, Agartala, Saha emphasised the vital role of the police force in ensuring public safety and law enforcement.

"Tripura Police is our pride. Last year, we celebrated 150 years of this historic force, one of the oldest in India. From safeguarding lives to protecting property, the police are the first line of help for citizens in distress. It is imperative that we work with honesty to maintain the faith of the people," he said.

The chief minister expressed gratitude to banks for supporting the families of police personnel who sacrificed their lives in service and reiterated the government's commitment to the welfare of both the public and the police force.

Highlighting the state's achievements in maintaining law and order, Saha shared that crime in Tripura dropped by 19.3% in 2024 compared to the previous year, marking the lowest crime rate in a decade. He credited the police for ensuring peaceful Lok Sabha and Panchayat elections during the year.

The chief minister also lauded the police and Tripura State Rifles (TSR) for organising over 25,000 community welfare initiatives in the past three years, benefiting more than five lakh citizens. He



announced increased allowances for rations, uniforms, and dearness allowance (DA) as part of the government's ongoing efforts to improve police welfare.

Outlining the modernization plans, Saha said, "We are introducing AI-based control rooms, drone technology, and smart CCTVs at both district and state levels. A new police headquarters is under construction, and efforts are underway to modernise the East and West Agartala Police Stations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also stressed the need to rebuild old police stations and residential quarters, and we are committed to fulfilling this vision."

During the event, Saha presented awards in various categories including Life Time Award of Tripura Police to Kajal Ghosh, Retired Inspector, Best Investiga-

tor of the Year Sanjay Majumder, SI, North District, Policeman of the Year Dhurba Nath, Additional SP, West (Rural), Best Police Station for Technology Use New Capital Complex Police Station, Best Police Station for Beat System Kamapur Police Station, Dhalai District, Best Police Station is Birganj PS, Gomati District, and Damcherra PS, North District, Best District for Beat System is Dhalai District, Best Unit for Technology Use is KTDS Police Training Academy, Narsingarh, Tripura, Best TSR Battalion is 3rd Battalion TSR, Best District is Gomati District, Best Clerical Staff from TSR Battalions is Nb/Sub (Clerk) Bipul Karjee, 7th Battalion TSR, Best Clerical Staff from Civil Police Units is Uttam Biswas, Head Clerk-Cum-Accountant, SB Organisation.

## CEM holds direct interaction with residents

HT Correspondent

**HAMREN, Jan 16:** The Chief Executive Member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), in his continued effort to be in touch with the people of KAAC, held direct interaction with the people of Dhansiri Member of Autonomous Council (MAC). The interaction was held at Dhansiri ground.

In his speech, the CEM said that the Council would work to fulfil the people's aspirations. The roads of each MAC constituency will have roads; electricity; health services, and a good education system. He promised to implement various public welfare schemes.

The CEM also distributed free blankets to the people at the meeting.

The meeting was attended by MP Amar Sing Tisso; MLA Bidya Sing Englang; Executive Members of KAAC, Tilottoma Hasnu, Kache Rongpipi and Madhuram Lekhe.

## EM releases souvenir at Junbeel Mela

HT Bureau

**DIPHU, Jan 16:** The Executive Member of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), D Upping Maslai released the Souvenir 'Junbeel' at the Junbeel Mela at Morigaon.

It may be mentioned that D Upping Maslai is a prominent leader of the hill Tiwas in Karbi Anglong and takes an interest in the development of Tiwa language and culture.

Junbeel Mela is to be held between January 16 to 18. The Mela boasts the only barter system in today's day and age.

## NFR collects over ₹48.11 Cr from ticketless travellers till Dec 2024

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Jan 16:** Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has conducted a drive aimed at curbing ticketless and irregular travel, which causes inconvenience to genuine passengers.

The conduct included regular, intensive ticket-checking drives to ensure hassle-free and comfortable travel for all bonafide passengers.

During the period from April to December 2024, a total of 5,70,141 cases of ticketless or irregular travel were detected. The checks & drives resulted in revenue earnings of approximately ₹48.11 crore through fare realisation and penalties imposed on unauthorised travellers.

In the same period, NFR carried out eight surprise ticket-checking drives against unauthorised passengers with the assistance of railway magistrates. As a result, 448 individuals were prosecuted, of which 380 were found violating provisions of the Railways Act.

They were fined accordingly, with the total amount collected during these drives amounting to approximately ₹2.13 lakh. The fines included fares, penalty charges, and government levies. Passengers travelling without proper tickets or beyond the authorised distance are liable to excess charges and fares. In cases where passengers fail or refuse to pay on demand, they may face prosecution under relevant sections of the Railways Act, 1989.

NFR appeals to the general public to travel with proper & valid tickets and carry valid identity cards in order to avoid inconvenience. Passengers can purchase unreserved tickets from one part of the country to another through Unreserved Ticketing System (UTS) mobile application on their smartphones. The UTS application can be downloaded from both Android & iOS platforms.

## Nagaland legislator calls for strong united Naga community

HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, Jan 16:** Nagaland adviser to food and civil supply and legal metrology KT Sukhalu, on Thursday appealed to the Nagas not to allow false division in the community and to strive for a bigger and stronger united Naga Community. He said the Nagas as a community have been coexisting together through the ages and must continue with the same spirit as brothers and sisters.

Addressing the second day of the three-day Tsungkamnyo-cum-mini hornbill festival as the special guest at Yimkhung Heritage Pungro in Kiphire district, Sukhalu said, "We as a community must be the architect of our destiny. We must look to the future and think about prosperity and progress." The Tsungkamnyo festival is a harvest festival celebrated by the Yimkhung Naga tribe of Nagaland.

Noting that the Tsungkamnyo festival is a time to celebrate community and the cultural heritage of our people, he said it is thus an apt time to reflect on the meaning of community.

Asserting that "we cannot forget our history and tradition", Sukhalu said, "It is not just about our festivals, traditional attire and customs. Our culture is rooted in the village ethos, which is marked by community, shared experience and generosity."

"No matter what tribe, all our festivals are marked by community festivals where everyone participates in the songs, dances and feast," he said. Sukhalu stressed that education assumed more importance than ever.

Touching on education, he said it is increasingly important to not only be educated and get a degree, but one must also have technical skills to be successful or even to gain employment.

Stressing on misinformation and fake news, Sukhalu said one of the bigger dangers that we are facing lately is misinformation.

"With artificial intelligence and malicious groups generating false information and facts, we must be cautious about what we choose to believe and spread," he said. Sukhalu added that if the Nagas are to decide their own future, they must be spiritually and intellectually strong.

Cultural items presented by various cultural troupes were the main highlights of the programme.

## Huge cache of arms and ammo recovered in Manipur

**IMPHAL, Jan 16:** In Manipur, search operations and area domination continued in the fringe and vulnerable areas of hill and valley districts as security forces recovered a huge cache of arms and ammunition in Thoubal and Bishnupur districts.

One 9 mm CMG magazine, four 36 HE hand grenades, 27 live rounds, 7.62x39 mm empty cases numbering 117, one Helican Antenna, five Ni-Cad Battery, three tear smoke shell soft noses (SR), one chilli tear smoke shell, one arming ring, one detonator, three radio sets, one radio set charger, two radio set adapters, and three radio set antennas were recovered from Salam Patong village areas under Nongpok Sekmai Police Station, Thoubal district, a police report said on Thursday.

One 51 mm mortar tube launcher, one SLR with magazine, one sniper rifle, three 40 mm cathode shells, four live rounds of SLR, four 36 HE grenades, one smoke bomb, one 12 bore cartridge, five .303 blank cartridges, six rubber bullets, three tear smoke shells, one tear smoke shell, one chilli tear smoke shell, three stunt shells, one HE MK-1, two WT sets, three pairs of camouflage long pants, two magazine pouches, and two pairs of hunting shoes were also recovered from the adjoining fringe area of Aigejang and Leimaram Uyok Ching under Nambol Police Station, Bishnupur district, the police report also said.

Meanwhile, a combined team of security forces destroyed illegal poppy cultivation on 4.8 acres in Manipur's Churachandpur district on Wednesday. (NNN)

## Assam Rifles destroys cannabis plantation

HT Correspondent

**AGARTALA, Jan 16:** In a decisive operation against illegal drug cultivation, Assam Rifles, in coordination with the Police and Tripura Forest Service (TFS), conducted a meticulously planned operation in the early hours of Thursday and destroyed cannabis plants worth ₹3.5 Crores.

The operation targeted extensive cannabis plantations in the Kathalia area, under Jatrapur Police Station, Sepahijala District.

Assam Rifles officials said that covering approximately 110 acres (44.5 hectares), the operation resulted in the destruction of an estimated 90,000 cannabis plants, valued at ₹3.5 crore in the illicit market.

"This large-scale crackdown reflects the unwavering commitment of Assam Rifles to combat the drug menace and protect the region from its harmful effects. The success of this mission was made possible through the crucial support of the local administration, highlighting the significance of a collaborative approach in addressing drug-related challenges. This operation marks a critical step toward fostering a drug-free environment and safeguarding the community's future," said Assam Rifles officials.

## Protesters demand justice for 22-year-old victim outside Lahowal police station

HT Correspondent

**DIBRUGARH, Jan 16:** Hundreds of people from the tea tribe community on Thursday gheraoed Lahowal police station in Dibrugarh to protest against the alleged brutal rape and murder of a 22-year-old girl. The protesters demanded the immediate arrest of the accused.

According to reports, on January 13, the dead body of the 22-year-old girl was found floating in the Sessa river.

The girl was reported missing on January 9. Her lifeless body, bearing signs of severe injuries, was found floating in the river four days later. The girl had a relationship

with Barun Murah.

The crime reportedly occurred in the Bakul Maj Gaon Chapori Line area. The accused is identified as Barun Murah of Timona in Lahowal.

"On January, 9 my sister went outside with Barun Murah and since then she has been missing. Her body was found floating in the Sessa river on January 13. We suspect that she was raped and murdered by Barun Murah," said the victim's sister. The protesters have accused the police of negligence and inefficiency, expressing frustration over their failure to apprehend the accused.

"Due to police inaction, the crime happened. If police took quick action then the girl could be saved. When the missing report was filed at Lahowal, why police did not take swift action to nab the culprit," said an enraged protester.

The victim's family members have filed an FIR at Lahowal police station on Thursday. Additional Superintendent of Police (HQ) Nirmal Ghosh said, "We have arrested the accused and started our interrogation. A case has been registered at the Lahowal police station and we have started the investigation into the matter. We are waiting for the post-mortem report."

## Singpho King passes away; tributes pour in from across state

HT Correspondent

**MARGHERITA, Jan 16:** Singpho King Bisa Nong Singpho, a well-known name in Assam, passed away on Wednesday night due to old age-related ailments. He was undergoing treatment for many months at his home located at Bisagaon, a Singpho tribe heritage residence, situated at Bisagaon, Ledo under Margherita Co-District. At the time of death, Singpho was 76 years old. Bisa Nong was famous for making a significant contribution to the Singpho society as well as to social life. His death sent shockwaves to the entire people of Assam including neighbouring state Arunachal Pradesh. He was the last king of the Singpho tribe, who resides in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. "The king's idea was to give equal status to the subjects with equal vision. He practised Rajdharma in his golden way of life that's why he broke the boundaries and was everyone's favourite irrespective of caste, creed, race, language, and religion," said D B Sonar, eminent Tea planter and noted social worker of Margherita. "Bisa Nong Singpho's simple speech will always ring in people's ears, steps taken to har-

monise all ethnic groups will always be a symbol of harmony in the hearts of millions of people where without allowing himself to dissolve into the clutches of modernity, the royal honour of the hereditary tradition clan remained intact and set a pattern for the upliftment for the Singpho community is real inspiration for everyone," said Jagat Changmai, veteran journalist, eminent litterateur, and best friend of Bisa Nong Singpho. Margherita Journalists Association, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Ledo Xakha Xahitya Xabha, Margherita MLA Bhaskar Sharma, Asom Jatiyatibadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) Margherita Regional committee, Tinsukia District Committee, Assam Tea Tribes Student Association (ATTSA) Margherita branch committee, All Assam Tanga Student Union, All Assam Singpho Student Union, Man Tai Speaking Student Union, All Assam Gaon pradhan Association, veteran journalist of Ledo Jagat Changmai, eminent litterateur and poet Dr Ranjit Dutta and many known dignitaries and organisations of Margherita including Singpho tribes conveyed deep condolence to the bereaved family members of Bisa Nong Singpho.

## Guwahati Asian Film Festival to begin on Feb 7

'GAFF 2025 to be a vibrant celebration of Asia's rich storytelling traditions'

HT Correspondent

**KOKRAJHAR, Jan 16:** The much-awaited Guwahati Asian Film Festival (GAFF) 2025 is set to take place from February 7 to 9, 2025, at the historic Jyoti Chitran Film Studio in Guwahati.

A landmark event for film enthusiasts, creators, and industry professionals, this three-day festival will showcase the best of Asian cinema while providing a platform for cultural exchange and creative dialogue.

The festival will open with the Iranian film 'In the Arms of the Tree', directed by Babak Khajepasha, setting an inspiring tone for the inaugural edition of GAFF. The closing film will be 'My Melbourne' by directors Intiaz Ali, Rima Das, Onir, and Kabir Khan.

GAFF 2025, organised by Trending Now Media, is dedicated to showcasing the dynamic and diverse storytelling traditions of Asia while placing a special spotlight on the rich and vibrant cinema of Assam and the Northeast region.

The festival will feature a curated selection of over 200 feature films from



across Asia, representing countries such as Iran, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Azerbaijan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. A special competitive section, exclusively for films from Northeast India, will recognise outstanding achievements in categories including Best Film, Best Direction, and Best Performance, celebrating creativity, technical excellence, and storytelling.

Addressing a press conference on Thursday, Honorary Festival Director Monita Borgohain said: "GAFF 2025 is all set to be a vibrant celebration of Asia's rich storytelling traditions. We are proud to present a thoughtfully curated lineup that promises to capti-

masterpieces from across Asia. GAFF 2025 is set to bring the world to our doorstep, allowing audiences to experience diverse cultures, stories, and artistic expressions right here in the heart of Assam."

Enhancing the festival's prestige, the internationally renowned Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage will grace the event as a chief guest. Moreover, adding to the festival's fame, renowned film critic and festival advisor Srinivasa Santhanam, National Award-winning film critic and filmmaker Utpal Borpujari, National Award-winning filmmaker Manju Borah, and prominent film critic, music journalist, and editor Dalton Christopher will be integral parts of the 1st GAFF.

By celebrating the creativity and narratives of both established and emerging filmmakers, the inaugural edition of the Guwahati Asian Film Festival aims to become a cornerstone cultural event, fostering global appreciation for Asian cinema. For registration and more information about the festival, visit gaff.co.in.

No.CHD/UDD/2/15<sup>th</sup> FC/Tied/1<sup>st</sup>Inst./2024/NIT-CS/3365

### PRESS NOTICE INVITING TENDER

The Council Head of Department, Urban Development Department, BTC, Kokrajhar invites bid for the following scheme under 15<sup>th</sup> FC Tied Grant (1<sup>st</sup> Installment) for the year 2023-24 during 2024-25.

| Group No. | Name of Schemes                                                       | Bid cost (Rs.) | Tender Value (Rs.) |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Group-1   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Gossaigaon Town. | 600.00         | 19,84,080.00       |
| Group-2   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Fakiragram Town. | 400.00         | 11,32,817.00       |
| Group-3   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Kokrajhar Town.  | 600.00         | 19,84,080.00       |
| Group-4   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Basugaon Town.   | 600.00         | 19,76,680.00       |
| Group-5   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Kajalgaon Town.  | 600.00         | 19,84,480.00       |
| Group-6   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Bijni Town.      | 600.00         | 19,84,480.00       |
| Group-7   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Goreswar Town.   | 600.00         | 19,76,680.00       |
| Group-8   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Udalguri Town.   | 600.00         | 19,84,080.00       |
| Group-9   | Supply of Dustbin 60 ltrs. capacity in Urban area of Tangla Town.     | 500.00         | 16,34,510.00       |

Last date of submission of completed tender is 17.01.2025 (up to 2:00 PM) and will be open on the same day. The detail tender documents may be obtained from the office of the undersigned during office hours till 16.01.2025.

N.B.: The bill of contractor will be paid only after receiving the fund from BTC.

Sd/- CHD  
Urban Development Department,  
BTC, Kokrajhar  
IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/1302

No.CHD/UDD/2/6<sup>th</sup> ASFC/2<sup>nd</sup>Inst./Devolution/2024/NIT-CS/3370

### PRESS NOTICE INVITING TENDER

The Council Head of Department, Urban Development Department, BTC, Kokrajhar invites bid for the following scheme under 6<sup>th</sup> ASFC (Devolutio) 2<sup>nd</sup> Installment) for the year 2022-23 during 2024-25.

| Group No. | Name of Schemes                                                               | Bid cost (Rs.) | Tender Value (Rs.) |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Group-1   | Supply and installation of 70 watt LED Solar Street Light at Kajalgaon Town.  | 600.00         | 19,58,000.00       |
| Group-2   | Supply and installation of 70 watt LED Solar Street Light at Bijni Town.      | 600.00         | 19,58,000.00       |
| Group-3   | Supply and installation of 70 watt LED Solar Street Light at Basugaon Town.   | 600.00         | 19,55,000.00       |
| Group-4   | Supply and installation of 70 watt LED Solar Street Light at Gossaigaon Town. | 600.00         | 19,58,000.00       |
| Group-5   | Supply and installation of 70 watt LED Solar Street Light at Kokrajhar Town.  | 600.00         | 19,58,000.00       |
| Group-6   | Supply and installation of 70 watt LED Solar Street Light at Tangla Town.     | 600.00         | 19,58,000.00       |
| Group-7   | Supply and installation of 70 watt LED Solar Street Light at Udalguri Town.   | 400.00         | 11,98,500.00       |

Last date of submission of completed tender is 17.01.2025 (up to 2:00 PM) and will be open on the same day. The detail tender documents may be obtained from the office of the undersigned during office hours till 16.01.2025.

N.B.: The bill of contractor will be paid only after receiving the fund from BTC.

Sd/- CHD  
Urban Development Department,  
BTC, Kokrajhar  
IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/1301



## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*The most wasted day of all is that on which we have not laughed - Nicolas Chamfort*

## Farmers' fast-unto-death

**D**eteriorating health condition of the farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who has been fast-unto-death hunger strike since November 26, 2024, has become a matter of serious concern, since he has been willing to end his hunger strike if Prime Minister Narendra Modi led government agrees for talks on farmers demand, but the Centre has shown no willingness yet. On the 51st day of Dallewal's hunger strike on January 15, 2025, Khanauri border turned tense with another 111 farmers joining him on fast-unto-death. As opposed to the Punjab side of the Khanauri border, there is a heavy deployment of security forces by the BJP-led Haryana government blocking their road to Delhi. Farmers have been on sit-in protest there since February 13, 2024, when they were stopped from marching to Delhi to press for their demands, the chief among them was a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP). Modi-led government has been asserting that they have been providing MSP at remunerative rates to farmers, but has not conceded the legal guarantee for the same, which has created a great suspicion among the farmers. The Centre has not been showing even any interest in beginning talks with the farmers on their demand.

It has a political ramification which is felt more by the Punjab unit of the BJP, a delegation of which had met Akal Takht Jathedar last week and expressed concern over Dallewal's deteriorating health and requested the supreme Sikh body Akal Takht's Jathedar Giani Ragbir Singh to intervene and give a direction to Dallewal to end his fast since Dallewal is also a Sikh. In the history of farmers movement has entered a sensitive phase breaking past records. Dallewal's fast-unto-death hunger strike is now one among the longest. Number of people, now 112 farmers, sitting on fast-unto-death at any place in independent India is perhaps the largest. Supreme Court of India has also shown its concern about the deteriorating health of Dallewal. On January 15, a bench comprised of justices Surya Kant and N Kottiswar Singh has given direction to the Government of Punjab to furnish a complete set of comparative medical reports of the farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal for an independent evaluation for his deteriorating health condition by the director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi. Supreme Court bench was sceptic about the report of the Chief Secretary of Punjab who said that Dallewal's platelet count and haemoglobin levels had improved, which prompted the bench to give the fresh direction.

Supreme Court has been hearing a contempt petition against Punjab's chief secretary and DGP over the ineffective handling of Dallewal's hospitalisation and the prolonged blockade at the border points which Haryana at Shambhu and Khanauri. Haryana has been keeping both the points blocked since February 13, 2024, so that the farmers can not march to Delhi for pressing on their demand from the PM Narendra Modi government. This second leg of the farmers agitation is led by Samyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha.

## Jyoti Prasad Agarwala: The architect of modern Assamese culture

**J**yoti Prasad Agarwala (1903-1951) stands as the revered cultural luminary of Assam, heralding a cultural renaissance that played a pivotal role in delineating Assamese identity from the shadows of Bengali influence. In 1935, he etched his name in history by spearheading the Assamese film industry with the creation of the pioneering film "Joymoti." Agarwala's profound impact extended far beyond the realms of art and culture, as he intricately wove the fabric of Assamese literature through his compelling dramas, poignant poems, and captivating short stories. His journalistic prowess and musical compositions, collectively known as "Jyoti Sangeet," echoed not only in the hearts of Assam but resonated across the entire North-East region, leaving an indelible mark on generations.

An emblem of fervent patriotism and a revolutionary spirit, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, despite being born into one of Assam's most affluent families, became a torchbearer for the freedom movement from his teenage years. His commitment deepened upon his return from Edinburgh University and Germany in 1930, where he delved into the realms of Economics and Film-making. Endowed with Mahatma Gandhi's blessings during the latter's stay at the ancestral home "Poki" in Tezpur, Agarwala founded the "Mrityu Bahini" (Death Squad) imbued with the tenets of non-violence, yet embracing the motto "Karengay ya Marengay" (Do or Die).

His patriotic melodies reverberated as anthems of inspiration during the struggle for Indian independence, particularly in the North-East region. In the throes of the "Quit India" movement in 1942, Agarwala fearlessly led the populace, especially in northern Assam, to confront British bullets. The indomitable spirit of the people, guided by Agarwala, was evident in acts of bravery such as the attempts to hoist the tricolour in places like Gohpur, Sootea, Tezpur, and Dhekiajuli, where individuals like schoolgirl Kanaklata and Mukunda Kakoty embraced martyrdom. Agarwala,



facing imprisonment, opted for the clandestine path to continue steering the independence movement, marked by his frequent underground sojourns.

Every January 17th marks the solemn observance of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's death anniversary in Assam, celebrated as "Silpi Divas" or Artists' Day. On this significant occasion, heartfelt homage is paid through the offering of floral tributes and the illumination of earthen lamps (diyas) before his portrait. The collective gatherings and voluntary functions serve as poignant moments of reflection, where the profound contributions and sacrifices of this genuine son of the soil are fondly remembered. Bestowed with the title "Rupkonwar" (Prince of Enlightenment) by the people of Assam, Agarwala's legacy transcends time. His selfless dedication to the public cause and unwavering service to the nation have etched his name as a true patriot and a man of the people. The annual "Silpi Divas" stands as a testament to the enduring impact of his life's work and the enduring reverence he commands in the hearts of the people.

The roots of Rupkonwar trace back to the village of Tai in the bygone princely state of Jaipur. His ancestors, hailing from a prosperous merchant lineage, found themselves ensnared in the grip of envy and hostility from the local zamindar, leading to their forced exodus to Churu in a state of des-

titution. The Agarwala family's tale unfolds in 1828 when Nabarangam Agarwala, Rupkonwar's great grandfather and a mere teenager at the time, became the pioneer to venture into Assam. Arriving in Assam with nothing but unyielding determination, Nabarangam embarked on a mission to resurrect the fortunes that had eluded his forefathers. The saga of resilience and tenacity began with this courageous leap into the unknown, setting the stage for the Agarwala family's enduring legacy in Assam.

In the year 1830, Nabarangam Agarwala (1811-1865) initiated a modest enterprise, establishing a small shop in Gomri, a secluded village nestled on the northern banks of the Brahmaputra River in eastern Assam. His astute business sense, industrious spirit, and dedicated efforts propelled him swiftly towards prosperity. Yet, his impact transcended mere economic success, as he made a conscious choice to fully assimilate into the local Assamese community.

Embracing the ethos of the Assamese people, Nabarangam seamlessly integrated by marrying into the community, adopting their language and cultural practices, and immersing himself in the local way of life. Noteworthy is his decision to retain his original title "Agarwala," distinguishing

him from others who, during that era, often adopted local titles after migrating to Assam for work or business.

By the time of his passing in 1865, Nabarangam Agarwala had not only laid the groundwork for a burgeoning business empire but had also emerged as a prominent figure within the Assamese community. His legacy extended beyond personal success, sowing the seeds for a lineage that would play a pivotal role in enriching the socio-cultural tapestry of the State and contributing significantly to the modernization of Assam.

The legacy forged by Nabarangam found a stalwart successor in his eldest son, Haribilash Agarwala (1842-1916), who carried forth the principles of assimilation, enterprise, patriotism, and social service. As the patriarch of the family, Haribilash not only elevated the family fortunes to unprecedented heights but also left an indelible mark on

the trade and industry landscape of Assam. Despite facing

discrimination from the British administration, he ardently championed Assamese literature and culture while actively engaging in community development initiatives.

Haribilash's multifaceted contributions extended to the realm of language and literature. In a groundbreaking move in 1899, he unveiled the ancient hand-written manuscripts of Sri Sankardev and Sri Madhabdev, a watershed moment that showcased Assam's rich literary and cultural heritage to the wider world and a new generation of Assamese scholars and litterateurs. This transformative effort played a pivotal role in propelling the movement for the revival and recognition of the Assamese language, dispelling the notion that it was merely an offshoot of Bengali. By the turn of the century, Haribilash, driven by the discriminatory practices of the British against native entrepreneurs, found resonance with the Indian National Congress, aligning himself with the burgeoning movement for national independence.

His life's work, characterized by resilience, cultural preservation, and nationalist fervor, marked him as a beacon in the tapestry of Assam's socio-cultural and political evolution.

The torchbearers of cultural and literary progression within the Agarwala lineage emerged in the form of Haribilash's second eldest son, Chandra Kumar Agarwala (1867-1938), and his nephew, Ananda Chandra Agarwala (1874-1939), each leaving an indelible mark on the growth of the Assamese language and literature. Chandra Kumar, during his undergraduate years at Presidency College, Calcutta, emerged as a trailblazer in the movement for the revival and acknowledgment of the Assamese language. Venturing into uncharted territory, Chandra Kumar became a pioneer of Assamese journalism, etching his name in history with the publication of the first Assamese literary journal, Jonaki, in 1889. A further testament to his commitment came in 1918 when he launched the Assamese newspaper, Asomiyā. This publication not only played a crucial role in spreading awareness about the struggle for Indian independence in Assam but also became a catalyst for cultural and literary enlightenment in the region. The efforts of Chandra Kumar and Ananda Chandra stand as pivotal chapters in the narrative of Assamese language and literature's renaissance.

In contrast to the typical migration patterns of Marwaris seeking fortune in Assam, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's forefather, Nabarangam Agarwala, stands out as a singular example of socio-cultural integration. Unlike others, he forged a unique connection between two communities hailing from opposite corners of the country, uniting the northwest and the northeast in a remarkable display of patriotism. This extraordinary case not only contributed to the upliftment of a community but also played a significant role in fostering national integration, setting it apart with few parallels in India. *(The writer can be reached at dipakkurmigpld@gmail.com)*

## Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad - Cultural pioneer of modern Assam

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

**R**upkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala stands as a pivotal figure in the cultural landscape of Assam, whose profound contributions during the early 20th century not only revived the Assamese cultural identity but also laid the foundation for modern Assamese art, literature, music, and cinema. His relentless efforts to blend tradition with modernity led to a cultural renaissance in Assam, where the region's artistic expressions flourished even under the shadows of colonialism and socio-political subjugation. Agarwala's legacy as a poet, playwright, filmmaker, composer, and nationalist positions him as one of Assam's greatest cultural architects, whose influence remains deeply woven into the cultural fabric of the region.

Born in 1903 in the midst of British colonial rule, Agarwala's early exposure to both traditional Assamese culture and modern education shaped his worldview. The socio-political climate of Assam during this period was marked by colonial suppression, economic stagnation, and a cultural identity crisis. Assamese art forms, literature, and language were gradually eroding under the weight of colonial hegemony and the imposition of Bengali language and culture during the 19th century. Agarwala recognized the urgency of cultural preservation and the need for a creative resurgence rooted in the region's rich heritage. His response to this cultural decline was to harness the power of art as a tool for revival, resistance, and social transformation.

Agarwala's most groundbreaking contribution to Assamese culture was his pioneering work in cinema. His landmark film Joymoti (1935), the first-ever Assamese feature film, marked a historic milestone not just for Assam but for regional Indian cinema as a whole. At a time when filmmaking was still an emerging art form in India, Agarwala undertook the immense challenge of producing a film rooted in Assamese history and identity. Joymoti narrated the tale of the Ahom princess Joymoti, who sacrificed her life for the freedom of her land, symbolizing resistance against oppression. This film, despite facing severe financial constraints and limited technological resources, was a profound artistic statement aimed at reviving historical consciousness and inspiring patriotism among the Assamese people. Though Joymoti did not achieve commercial success during its release, its cultural impact was far-reaching, establishing cinema as a powerful medium for cultural storytelling in Assam and inspiring future generations of filmmakers.

Parallel to his contributions in cin-

ema, Agarwala was a transformative figure in Assamese music. His creation of Jyoti Sangeet revolutionized the musical landscape of Assam. These songs, composed and written by Agarwala, reflected a blend of Assamese folk traditions, classical influences, and lyrical simplicity. What made Jyoti Sangeet remarkable was its accessibility and emotional depth, making it resonate with the masses. Songs like "Luitore Parore Ami Deka Lora", "Biswa Bijoy Nojawan", and "Luitore Pani Jabi o Boi", celebrated themes of patriotism, humanism, and social awakening. The music was not merely artistic; it was a cultural movement aimed at instilling pride and a collective consciousness in the Assamese identity. His compositions served as anthems of cultural resurgence and continue to inspire generations in Assam.

Agarwala's literary legacy is equally profound. As a playwright, poet, and essayist, he used literature as a tool for social commentary and cultural reawakening. His plays, including Karengar Ligiri, Rupalim, Lavita and Sonit Konwari, are celebrated for their exploration of Assamese folklore, historical themes, and social issues. These plays were not mere theatrical expressions but powerful instruments for awakening public consciousness. Agarwala's literature often portrayed strong female characters, historical narratives, and the importance of moral courage, which mirrored his vision for a culturally empowered society. His writings also reflected a synthesis of romanticism and realism, emphasizing both the beauty of Assamese traditions and the challenges posed by colonialism and modernity.

Theatre remained central to Agarwala's artistic philosophy. His theatrical innovations introduced modern stagecraft, dialogues drawn from the Assamese linguistic heritage, and narratives that blended folklore with contemporary realities. Through his plays, Agarwala sought to educate the masses about their own cultural richness while simultaneously critiquing social evils such as feudalism, gender oppression, and the erosion of indigenous identities. His theatre was not just art but activism, a platform for igniting collective introspection and transformation.

Agarwala's contributions were not confined to the artistic domain alone; they were inherently political. As a cultural nationalist, he believed that the revival of Assamese identity was intrinsically linked to India's struggle for independence. He saw cultural preservation as an act of defiance against colonial attempts to erase indigenous identities. His works consistently reflected anti-colonial sentiments, emphasizing the importance of self-re-

spect, historical consciousness, and cultural pride. Agarwala's vision of Assamese nationalism was inclusive and progressive, focusing not on exclusion but on the assertion of Assamese identity within the broader Indian context.

A vital aspect of Agarwala's cultural renaissance was his ability to bridge the gap between the classical and the folk traditions of Assam. While he drew inspiration from ancient art forms like Borgeet and Bhakti Sangeet, his creations also incorporated folk elements from Assam's diverse communities, such as the Bihu and Deodhani dances. This synthesis of the classical and the folk, the elite and the grassroots, made his artistic language universally relatable. His artistic vision was not about preserving tradition in isolation but reinterpreting it for contemporary relevance, ensuring that Assamese art evolved without losing its core essence.

Agarwala also understood the profound relationship between culture and education. He believed that artistic awareness must be cultivated from a young age, and therefore, he advocated for the integration of Assamese literature, music, and history into the educational curriculum. His commitment to education extended beyond theoretical ideals; he actively worked to spread cultural literacy among the masses, believing that a culturally conscious society would be better equipped to resist oppression and preserve its heritage.

The legacy of Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala continues to shape Assamese culture today. His contributions laid the groundwork for a cultural movement that emphasized artistic innovation, historical consciousness, and social responsibility. Institutions, festivals, and artistic movements in Assam continue to draw inspiration from his works, celebrating his role as a pioneer of modern Assamese cultural identity.

In conclusion, Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala was not merely an artist but a visionary cultural architect who reshaped Assamese identity during a critical period of its history. His multifaceted contributions to cinema, music, literature, and theatre transformed Assam's cultural landscape, empowering its people to reconnect with their roots while embracing modernity. Agarwala's unwavering belief in the power of art as a force for social change and national pride makes him an enduring symbol of Assam's cultural awakening. His legacy remains a powerful reminder of how art can inspire collective consciousness, resist cultural erasure, and build a more enlightened society. *(The writer is Editor in Chief of the Assamese E-magazine SAMPROTIK. He can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com or 9954812261, 9864000260)*

## Sree Narayana Guru and Kerala's caste conundrum

By: M.R.Lalu

**I**ndia's caste centric politics frequently gives us devastating jolts. It turns unpredictable as churn in the caste equations topple fortunes of parties and candidates alike. So are the conflicts about controversies on the narrative wars and the resentments of castes, groups and religions. In the present scenario, castes can topple governments and even reinstate them as well. Why do I call the politics caste centric? Most of the parties while strategizing the winnability of candidates first choose to underline the caste equations of the region. And the matter that I am going to discuss in detail here exposes the divergent views that the parties carry out without a sense of blemish. The recent narrative war began with Udayanithi Stalin the DMK scion in Tamil Nadu whipped up a storm. His call for the eradication of Sanatana Dharma, which he accusingly declared as an epidemic of malice, was the most devastating remarks that any politician could have uttered. His non-conformist verbal war on the world's oldest religion was a reintroduction of an ideology that his party continued to execute in a turbulent Dravidian political mobilization in his state which began with a convulsive and atheistic political movement by Ramaswamy Naicker popularly known as Periyar. The movement remained a detractor of Sanatana Dharma, especially of its alleged caste discrimination. Junior Stalin's call for its elimination continued to serve as fertilizer for the BJP's Hindu mobilization, which successfully captured the power of the wind possibly consolidating the majority sentiments especially while the Northern states went to polls. Throughout its campaign in the National Elections too, the BJP did not leave a leaflet of controversy the Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu triggered. That was understandable as politics is played out from unpredictable directions.

Unsurprisingly, the second in the line of a similar raging controversy was from the Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. He represents the

Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the party that throughout its electoral ascend and downfall consistently maintained its anti-sanatana stance. This time, he chose to highlight the social influence of Sree Narayana Guru, the most popular saintly social reformer of Kerala from the 20th Century. He said Sanatana Dharma commands the patronage of the powers that has resulted in the continuing oppression of Dalits, backward classes and minorities in rural areas in North India and in Kerala. Vijayan continued that Sree Narayana Guru consistently fought against it and therefore, he did not belong to the Sanatana fold of spirituality. Now, who was Sree Narayana Guru and what is the significance of the Sivagiri Madhom that the Guru founded? For reasons ranging from Sree Narayana Guru's spiritual dimensions to his involvement in eradicating untouchability, Vijayan's attempt to ridicule the notion of the social reformer's Sanatana line did not sit well with his political opponents, especially the BJP.

Sree Narayana Guru, deeply disturbed by the casteism and untouchability in Kerala, began his revolutionary reform movement. A section of the marginalized society was prohibited from entering temples where the entry was only for the upper communities. Agitations to abolish temple discrimination later led to the Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936. It opened temples to all Hindus irrespective of their castes. Being a member of the oppressed Ezhava community, Narayana Guru's agitation took a different line. He consecrated a Siva idol by the Aruvippuram River. The reform movement he started was to abolish caste discrimination and the temple he consecrated was for all castes. As he faced resentment from the Brahmins and the upper castes, he announced that the idol he sanctified was of the Ezhava Siva. The philosophy he propounded "One Caste, One Religion, One God for mankind" became the slogan of the mass. It got easily popularized and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) which was es-

tablished by his blessings had the sole purpose of uniting the backward communities. Calling it Sree Narayana Dharma, the saintly reformer wanted to clarify to his cohorts that the idea of propagation was not different from Sanatana Dharma, though he fought against certain practices of the creed.

The Ezhava community is classified as an Other Backward Caste comprising an estimated 24% of the state's population. Ezhavas are known to be the traditional vote bank of the Communist Parties and the event that Vijayan chose to put his controversial view was the inaugural function of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage at Varkala on December 31, 2024. Vijayan sought to criticize Sanatana Dharma equating it with Varnashrama Dharma which according to him, is regarded as the foundation of the modern day caste system. Narayana Guru remained a principal opponent of the malpractice of the caste system and it led a huge population of the marginalized communities to suffer mostly at the hands of the upper castes. Vijayan purposefully refused to highlight the Guru's stance on Sanatana Dharma. Guru remained an ardent follower of the Advaita philosophy and its proponent. Against the casteist oppression he chose spiritual renaissance.

Why did Vijayan have to stir up this new controversy while he knew the opposition, especially the BJP would jump into frame him as anti-Sanatana? Though electorally weak, the BJP has considerably intruded into the space of dominance of the Left parties especially among the Ezhavas. Previously, the Sivagiri pilgrimage was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. The Madhom invites political leaders and spiritual personalities from across the spectrum and allows them to feel the spiritual realms of the Guru. A probable political shift that the Left parties sensed among the Ezhavas to the BJP gave it a threatening realization that the saffron party's gain in the last Lok Sabha election witnessed a significant share of votes drifting from the community. Being a

spiritual institution established by the Guru, Sivagiri Madhom is known for its equidistant political stance from all parties. Vellappally Natesan, the President of the SNDP Yogam remains a fishy character as he keeps changing his political line. His son Tushar Vellappalli's party Bharat Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS), though electorally insignificant, is a member of the NDA faction in Kerala. Eventually, the Sivagiri speech by the Chief Minister was later justified as an attempt to question the Brahminical element in Sanatana Dharma.

Sanatana Dharma is seen to be an all encompassing philosophy which substantiates life giving and eternally sustainable practices that the world recognizes as the oldest. Sanatana Dharma and Hinduism are seen to be the same, but there are differing views that consider Hinduism as its ritualistic branch. Guru's social revival was to consolidate the marginalized population of Kerala that, in those days, remained scattered in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Swami Vivekananda, while touring the region, likened the dark days of untouchability in Kerala to a lunatic asylum. There had also been community leadership emerging from different castes. All wanted to refine and rebuild the power of its population. Ayyankali was one among those reformers who emerged from the extremely backward communities while Mannathu Padmanabhan worked for the Nairs, known to be an upper caste. The parties opposing Sanatana Dharma have been grievously hiding their double standard. The INDI Alliance headed by the Congress has been demanding a caste census in order to arrive at the stakeholding of each caste. And Narayana Guru remained a principal opponent of caste identification and marginalization. He wanted castes to be abolished. The question is, were Vijayan's assertions mere political stunts aiming to gain electoral goals or did he really mean to stand by the principles of Narayana Guru?

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# What Are the Structural Reasons Behind the Rupee's Fall?

By: Dhananjay Sinha

The crash of the Indian rupee against the US dollar, an all-time low of 86.71, has surprised many. This is because until recently, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) was hailed for dextrously managing financial stability, and maintaining a resilient financial system and robust macro-economic balance.

But now, the sentiment is turning less sanguine. The rupee has depreciated over 3.2% since September 2024 and more is in the offing. And it entwines with the Indian stock markets (NSE) losing Rs 60 trillion or 12.6% market cap since the end of September 2024. The conviction on Indian markets being insular to the vagaries of global impulses has waned.

What's in store is rooted to both structural and cyclical factors chained to global and domestic impulses. The RBI tried to suppress it with an overtly interventionist currency intervention. But, as it unwinds in the face of renewed dollar rebound, the pace of depreciation could be higher than historical averages.

Our multi-dimensional framework, including models for the US dollar index and INR-USD indicate that the dollar can depreciate to 90-92 levels in the next six to 12 months; the bias is towards a higher and quicker depreciation.

From long-term perspective, the performance of the INR/USD is pro-cyclical, appreciating during cyclical up-turn (for example, 18% during 2002-2009) and depreciating during downturns. Indexed to 2008, the INR-USD has depreciated (90%) more than other currencies (38% dollar emerging markets index, and 21% AE dollar indices) because of the narrowing growth differential versus global.

## A mercantilist approach

Trends since 1993 show structural depreciation during the downcycle rising to 7% YoY (year over year) with one standard deviation ordaining a range of 13% and 1%. However, since October 2022, the trend depreciation has mellowed to 4% and an annualised average depreciation of 0.5%, contributed by the suppression of volatility resulting from aggressive interventions by the RBI following the Ukraine-Russia war.

Our currency inflexibility measure



shows that while at 0.38, the Chinese Yuan is increasingly getting flexible, INR close to ~1 is mimicking a peg [0 represents a fully flexible currency and 1 represents currency peg].

This mercantilist approach is contrary to RBI's de-jure position that the rupee is a managed float, with interventions utilised only for the purpose of managing large volatility. Since October 2024, RBI's foreign currency assets (FCA) declined by US \$ 47 billion, leading to a drain of Rs 4 trillion of domestic liquidity drain. This in turn led to a deficit liquidity situation notwithstanding the 50-basis point cash reserve ratio cuts and collateralised lending against government securities by RBI.

But this position is becoming untenable as the rapid strengthening of dollar is accentuating the misalignment. An aggressive rundown of forex reserves may reduce RBI's ability to control markets, leading to speculative currency attacks.

## 'Growth' story

On the domestic front, the discord between the perceived growth and actual situation is converging with the successive downscaling of growth projections by RBI and the Central Statistical Office from 7.2% to the latest 6.4%. The shift in narrative has manifested from the vocal concerns from Indian corporates over the shrinking middle class, and the inability to associate with the official claims of robust growth.

But earlier, demand slackness manifested in prolonged weakness in rural demand, even as the truncated

post-pandemic rebound in urban demand and leveraged consumption camouflaged persistent household fragility. Receding productivity at the broader level is demonstrated in rising ruralisation, increased dependence of workers on agriculture, contracting real income per worker, declining value addition in the unorganised sector and eroding household savings. These glaring symptoms were overlooked in the official and consensus assessments. Thus, any downside surprises can expose the rupee to greater vulnerability.

The 10% resurgence in the US dollar index since September 2024 aligns with the US economy emerging stronger than expected, forcing the US Fed to scale back two out the guided four rate cuts in 2025. With Trump 2.0, the impact of his expansionary impact of corporate tax cuts and tariff hikes could be elevated inflation and the US Fed's remaining hawkish.

What has bolstered the US dollar valuation matrix is the widening growth divergences with eurozone that continues to face persistent economic challenges.

Further, China has been running down its dollar reserves while also adopting greater currency flexibility to counter slowdown and the prospective impact of Trump 2.0 mercantilism. This will have a bearing on the dollar emerging markets (EM) index. And the added sliver is the surging geo-political risks inducing increased global policy uncertainty.

## An investment plan

As these global and domestic impulses

pan out, the capital flows into EMs and India, including portfolio flows, FDI and external commercial borrowings, can see increased volatility. A modest 8.3% YoY return from the benchmark India equity indices, Nifty, and Sensex, is significantly lower than 26% from US S&P 500. And with a 3% INR/USD depreciation, the underperformance is starker. Pervasive demand weakness and margin pressure forebode further moderation even for the coming years. Consensus Nifty earnings-per-share growth for FY25-FY27 is placed at 11% compound annual growth rate. These compared weaker than the projected earnings for US S&P 500. A relatively lower price/earnings to growth ratio for the US markets may continue to impact foreign institutional investor flows.

How RBI and the government respond to the impending rupee weakening will demonstrate the expanse of policy options. To us it appears limited as the landscape, including monetary policy, fiscal headroom, peak credit-deposit ratio of banks, rising retail defaults and languid private capex, is muddled with multiple constraints. The RBI's currency inflexibility may have been motivated by the desire to sustain a façade of macro-financial robustness, but it has constricted growth.

Thus, it will be imperative for the RBI to let go of currency inflexibility, and allow greater depreciation, thereby limiting liquidity tightness and ease the pressure on the economy. The attempts to limit the imbalances in the banking system, to contain reckless retail lending, can be hastened. As the real policy rate differential of India versus the US Fed rate is negative, the RBI's window to ease policy rate is narrow. This is especially so as the US Fed has rolled back two out of four cuts guided earlier for 2025; in fact, there are chances that the US rate cut cycle can just halt. In any case, given the structural underpinnings, monetary easing by the RBI will largely be futile from the growth standpoint.

Given the rising traction in NRI deposits, in response to outward migration and easing of statutory requirement on NRI deposits, there is a high possibility of falling back on an NRI deposit scheme of the type mobilised in the aftermath of the Taper Tantrum in 2013.

(Courtesy: The Wire)

# How Sri Lanka can untangle its geo-political knot

By: Ajay Darshan Behera

Sri Lanka finds itself at the heart of a geopolitical tug-of-war between China and India, with far-reaching implications across the Indo-Pacific region. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's visit to New Delhi in December underscored the delicate balance the island nation must maintain.

In a public assurance to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Dissanayake unequivocally stated that Sri Lanka would not allow its territory to be used in any way detrimental to India's security. Yet, this commitment is under strain as Colombo wrestles with the pressures of economic dependence on China, particularly in light of the controversy surrounding Chinese research vessels docking at Sri Lankan ports.

These vessels, often classified as dual-use platforms with civilian and military functions, have raised significant security concerns in India and among Western powers. In the recent past, the docking of the Yuan Wang 5 and Shi Yan 6 vessels sparked apprehensions due to their advanced surveillance capabilities, which India perceives could be used to monitor its defence infrastructure.

India's apprehensions are not unfounded. Such ships reportedly possess advanced tracking capabilities for missiles and satellites and could significantly compromise India's strategic assets in the Indian Ocean.

Security analysts have noted that such vessels are often used to gather intelligence on naval activities and defence installations. To address growing Indian apprehensions, Sri Lanka implemented a year-long moratorium on foreign research vessels docking at its ports in 2024, a move partly influenced by India's insistence during earlier high-level meetings.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis has deepened its reliance on Chinese investments, with Beijing accounting for over 20% of its external debt in 2022. China's financial leverage is evident in its significant infrastructure investments, such as Sinopec's \$4.5 billion Hambantota refinery project. While providing much-needed financial inflows, these investments have also restricted Colombo's ability to outright deny docking requests from Chinese vessels.

## China's broader strategic goals

China's strategic interest in Sri Lanka extends beyond research vessels. Its "Look South" policy aligns with its broader ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, seeking to secure influence in key maritime zones. With its prime location along these routes, Sri Lanka is an essential asset in this strategy.

To advance these objectives, Beijing has invested heavily in Sri Lanka's infrastructure and energy sectors. These investments cement China's role as a dominant creditor and provide a platform for future strategic and economic activities in the region.

Moreover, China's potential leverage over Sri Lanka's International Monetary Fund negotiations emerged as a critical obstacle, forcing Colombo into a vulnerable position. This dynamic became glaringly apparent during the controversy surrounding the docking of the Yuan Wang 5 vessel.

Analysts noted that China's refusal to restructure Sri Lanka's debt significantly delayed the approval of the IMF bailout package. Given that the IMF requires creditor nations to agree on debt sustainability measures before disbursing funds, China's hesitancy to support restructuring was pivotal in prolonging Sri Lanka's economic crisis. Beijing's tactics reinforced accusations of "debt-trap diplomacy," as its inflexibility kept Sri Lanka tied to its financial dependence on China.

## Regional dynamics and India's role

The broader geopolitical ramifications are significant, with Sri Lanka caught in the complex interplay of influence between India, China and the US. India's proactive engagement has included financial assistance and infrastructure investments, such as the US-supported West Container Terminal project in Colombo, designed to enhance regional economic integration and bolster Sri Lanka's growth. This partnership underscores India and the US's intent to counterbalance China's extensive economic and strategic footprint on the island.

As Sri Lanka navigates the tumultuous waters of international diplomacy, it stands at a crossroads where its decisions today will shape its sovereignty and stability for years to come. Dissanayake's administration faces a daunting task: finding a path forward that mitigates economic dependence on China while safeguarding its strategic autonomy in a region teeming with geopolitical rivalries.

The natural starting point for Sri Lanka lies in deepening its relationship with India. Colombo's northern neighbour has proven to be a steadfast ally during the island nation's most challenging moments, offering critical financial aid and technical assistance.

By fostering stronger bilateral ties, Sri Lanka could unlock new opportunities for collaboration. Joint maritime research, for instance, could serve as a diplomatic counterweight to China's presence in Sri Lankan waters, reassuring New Delhi of Colombo's commitment to regional security.

## Multilateral engagement

However, Sri Lanka's path forward cannot solely rest on India's shoulders. It must embrace the difficult but necessary task of diversifying its economic partnerships. China has dominated Sri Lanka's infrastructure development for years, leaving the country heavily indebted and diplomatically vulnerable.

Colombo should actively court investments from other regional powers, such as South Korea and the ASEAN countries, to break free of this dependency. Diversifying its sources of investment would reduce the outsized influence any single player may wield over its policies.

At the same time, Sri Lanka recognises the urgent need for clarity and consistency in its maritime policies. The government's plan to establish an SOP for foreign vessels is a step in the right direction.

Such a framework may bring much-needed transparency to decision-making, ensuring that all nations – friends or otherwise – are subject to the same rules. This approach would signal to the international community that Sri Lanka is committed to fairness and sovereignty while also addressing security concerns raised by its closest neighbours.

Sri Lanka can enhance its diplomacy by engaging actively with multilateral forums like the Quad and other Indo-Pacific initiatives. These platforms offer Colombo the opportunity to establish itself as a stabilising force in the region.

Positioned strategically along key maritime routes, Sri Lanka is well-placed to promote maritime security and boost regional trade. Such collaboration allows the nation to balance the competing influences of India and China, steering clear of perceptions of aligning too closely with either power.

## The debt challenge

However, the most pressing issue for Sri Lanka is restructuring its overwhelming debt. With China as one of its largest creditors, Colombo faces the delicate task of negotiating debt relief while maintaining Beijing's goodwill. This will require deft diplomacy and a willingness to engage multilaterally, leveraging institutions like the IMF and World Bank to ensure that debt restructuring serves the broader goal of economic recovery rather than merely servicing existing obligations.

Sri Lanka stands at a critical juncture, navigating the complexities of economic dependency and strategic vulnerabilities. Dissanayake's assurances to India reflect a commitment to regional stability, but actions must follow words.

By adopting a balanced approach that prioritises transparency, economic diversification and multilateral engagement, Colombo can navigate its dilemmas without succumbing to the pressures of great-power rivalry. However, the road ahead will demand astute diplomacy and resolute policymaking to secure Sri Lanka's sovereignty and long-term stability. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

# India and Russia at a crossroads

By: Ivan Shchedrov

In Russia, 2024 was perceived as one of the most eventful years in the modern history of bilateral relations. Against considerable odds, the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, made a double visit to Russia. His first visit was in July as a part of the agreements within the 2000 Declaration on Strategic Partnership, followed by a second one in October to participate in the 16th BRICS summit in Kazan. While repeated visits are not rare—former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Russia twice in 2009 and 2013, and Narendra Modi in 2015—this time, however, this gesture holds significance. It indicates India's commitment to secure traditional political ties and is thus considered to have more value than ever before.

From this perspective, India's message to the international community is reminiscent of 2009, when Indian leadership participated in the BRICS meeting and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Ekaterinburg, Russia, for the first time, shortly after the Indo-United States (US) civil nuclear agreement was signed in 2008. By reaffirming its commitment this year, India also placed the onus on Russian leadership, with 2025 slated to be the year of a reciprocal visit from Russia's President, Vladimir Putin. Although the scope of future proposals is still unknown, the early announcements about Putin's upcoming visit, in stark contrast to the

unexpected trip of Narendra Modi, may indicate that the Russian side is preparing well in advance for the meeting.

## Global aspirations as a backbone of bilateral ties

In 2024, bilateral relations were shaped by India's global posturing on the international stage. In other words, the country's growing aspirations placed the global agenda above certain regional and bilateral issues. In July, during his first visit to Russia, Prime Minister Modi highlighted that India is pursuing important peacekeeping efforts aimed at resolving the Ukrainian conflict. This visit to Russia was also Modi's first after his re-election, breaking the tradition of prioritizing countries in India's immediate neighbourhood. The reasoning behind this decision seems to be quite obvious—relations with the Maldives had been tense, Bangladesh was grappling with an acute social and political crisis, and Sri Lanka was entering a new electoral cycle.

Additional reasoning comes from India's participation in multilateral meetings. The invitation to visit Italy for the G7 Summit in June was perceived as being of top importance, especially since it provided ground to amplify the voice of the Global South, as well as to hold talks with the Ukrainian president. In some regards, it was placed at a higher priority than participating in summits of important regional formats, for example, the SCO Summit in Astana and the second India-Central Asia

Summit, which was scheduled in 2024. Participation at the BRICS summit in Kazan in October is another great example. The decision to take part in the meeting of a non-binding organisation with global ambitions counters some observations about the limited benefits that India could get from the format. Despite some disagreements among its members and abstention from India on the issues of de-dollarisation and the extension of memberships, BRICS is still considered the only group actively pushing for a balanced approach, thanks to its focus on promoting global multipolarity.

In bilateral and multilateral relations with Russia, India has effectively highlighted the visibility of fruitful cooperation, yet it has been cautious about making any political commitments. For Russia, this policy may be deemed sufficient today, but shortly, it will require more tangible outcomes.

## Economic relations: Nuanced but paramount

In the absence of political commitments tied to financial negotiations, 2024 also gave bilateral economic relations new value, but the prospects for growth are still unknown.

During the 25th session of the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Cultural Cooperation (IRIGEC-TEC), the volume of bilateral trade was said to have reached US\$66 billion, indicating positive growth. Russia has reached the

fourth position among India's trade partners and is the second-largest exporter to India after China.

However, challenges become evident when we examine these numbers more closely. Although in January-August 2024, trade broke records, the volume of Russian exports has approached its local maximum. During this period, it constituted US\$43.4 billion (mainly energy resource exports)—a modest increase of 5 percent compared to the previous period. As a result, the next stage of trade and economic cooperation will hinge on Russia's ability to diversify its export basket and expand India's export base. In the mid-term, Russia's key objective is to curb its inflation rate, eliminate the socio-economic imbalances caused by an overheated military-industrial complex, and ultimately facilitate a seamless transition from military to civilian production. For India, it will be necessary to resolve infrastructure and socio-economic problems to maintain its attractiveness to foreign investors and increase production and overall gross domestic product (GDP) growth.

Chronic imbalances remained a key problem in bilateral trade—India's imports from Russia were 12 times greater than its exports to the country between January and August.

The two countries acknowledged the importance of promoting export in India through increased investments in export-oriented production.

This measure is also highly nec-

essary to solve payment-related issues. For instance, Russia's exporters could theoretically use ruble transactions to secure payments with Indian importers and conduct foreign currency transactions with Indian counterparts. However, in practice, such a system is limited by the huge negative trade balance. Nonetheless, 2024 showed some progress in that regard—from January to August, the combined exports of India to Russia constituted US\$4.2 billion, marking a 35 percent increase compared to 2023. Considering the current pace of incremental growth, the target of US\$100 billion trade turnover by 2030 that the countries have set seems to be more indicative than prescriptive.

## Conclusion

This year demonstrated that, despite prevailing prejudices, India's commitment to its traditional ties with Russia remains resilient and not prone to sudden shifts. However, it also brought to light the challenges that need to be addressed in the coming years. Many of these, particularly in the military and political spheres, are speculative. In areas like trade and investment, despite record performances, both countries will require structural reforms. To further strengthen their ties, they must address these challenges swiftly and effectively in 2025. However, success will hinge on shifts in Russia's approach to the West, as well as the stability of India's positioning.

(Courtesy: ORF)

# India's Gorkha Brigade: A legacy at crossroads

By: Ashok K Mehta

The press and media are flooded with stories about Nepal Domiciled Gorkha soldiers and their imperiled future in the Indian Army under the Agnipath scheme. With the last NDG in India's Gorkha Brigade likely to retire around 2045-50, it is possible two Gorkha soldiers could confront each other in Doklam, or elsewhere along the LAC should NDGs start joining the PLA. Traditionally, they have joined the British Army since the early 19th century, later the Singapore Police and Brunei Army and still later, the French Foreign Legion and the Russian Army (around 15,000 according to Al Jazeera news). Soldiering is in their blood with the first choice always and every time, the British Army has pampered as well as exploited them. On 10 November 2024, Kathmandu Post carried a front-page picture of impeccably smart Gorkhas at an attestation parade in the UK.

Three brothers in a Nepali family could still be in British, Indian and Nepalese armies in that order of preference. But Britain does not recruit Indian Domiciled Gorkhas. NDGs ceased joining the Indian Army for 5 years rendering hopelessly bleak the future of the Gorkha Brigade and a strategic glue that binds India and Nepal. Last year, in November and December, Indian and Nepalese Army Chiefs who became honorary Generals in each other's army spent a week in the other's country and were made much of. Last week, 1/11 Gorkha Rifles commanded by Col JP Singh went for joint training with the Sri Sri Jung battalion of the Nepal Army at Saljhandi near the border town of Butawal. (With PLA Nepal Army does only platoon-level joint training restricted to Kathmandu Valley).

No weapons are carried by either contingent as the host country provides them. No two sovereign armies and their Chiefs have such unique rapport. Despite the shared

history, geography and historic links between the two countries and their armies, recruitment of NDGs has been frozen since India took the unilateral decision in June 2022 to change the terms of engagement that Kathmandu says violated Treaty arrangements. Curiously both countries have remained silent at the political and military levels. India's seniormost officer, Chief of Defence Staff, Gen Anil Chauhan from 11 Gorkha Rifles has been approached by several Gorkha veterans to try to break the stalemate but he is loath to approach PM/RM/NSA saying that the government 'has taken a political decision'.

It is his responsibility to raise the decision-making process to the next level as other Army Chiefs in the past have done in the national interest. During the economic blockade in 2015, Gen Dalbir Singh was able to persuade PM Narendra Modi and FM Sushma Swaraj that prolonging the blockade would adversely affect the livelihood of Indian Army Gorkha ex-servicemen and families of serving soldiers in Nepal which in turn would impact bilateral relations. The blockade was ended but bilateral ties were seriously disturbed. After King Gyanendra conducted the Palace coup in 2004, India decided to stop the supply of lethal armaments to the Nepal Army which was fighting the Maoists.

Then Army Chief, Gen JJ Singh, recommended against it. In a slanging match between MoD and EAM, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh upheld the embargo. On the other hand, Siachen, Army Chiefs had prevailed in convincing Singh not to budge over any withdrawal from or concessions on Siachen.

In 1986, during the Gorkhaland movement in North Bengal, as a senior Gorkha officer who had been deployed there, I was invited to a meeting by Principal Secretary to PM, Sarla Grewal along with Deputy Chief of Army Staff, Lt Gen Rawat for discussion on the violence

and our response.

In the higher direction of war in 1971, PM Indira Gandhi consulted Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw at every stage for planning and conduct of battle. In 1975, then Army Chief, Gen Gopal Bewoor, 11 Gorkha Rifles convinced Gandhi of the negative impact of stopping the recruitment of NDGs. So this is not the first time that the absurd idea of ending NDG recruitment has come up. But this time government decided on NDGs that CDS accepted. Lt Gen Sanjeev Chauhan is the senior officer and President Gorkha Brigade which meets annually in February in a unique assembly of seven Gorkha regiments to discuss professional matters. On recruitment of NDGs, they too are stuck at the Army Chief/CDS level.

Two years ago, I wrote a letter on strategic loss accruing from altered rules of NDG recruitment to the Principal Secretary to the PM, PK Mishra. No acknowledgement nor reply was received. Service Chiefs in the past have been willing and able to advise political authority on military matters. The consultative process has stopped with this government.

On December 15, 2024, while inaugurating India's World magazine, Foreign Minister Jaishankar conspicuously omitted to mention national security or the military component of international relations as part of India's foreign policy vision. Answering a question last year on why no NDG recruitment he said foreign policy is determined by India's national interest and not that of any other country, implying Nepal. India's national interests in terms of defence and security are entwined with those of Nepal with whom New Delhi claims a special relationship which Kathmandu mildly reaffirms. It was Modi who said in Nepal's Parliament in 2014 that India has fought no war where Nepalese blood was not shed. India-Nepal relations are written in blood. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)



# Netanyahu says 'last minute crisis' with Hamas holding up approval of Gaza truce, hostage deal

TEL AVIV, Jan 16: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday that a "last-minute crisis" with Hamas was holding up Israeli approval of a long-awaited ceasefire that would pause the fighting in the Gaza Strip and release dozens of hostages. Israeli airstrikes, meanwhile, killed at least 72 people in the war-ravaged territory.

Netanyahu began signalling there were issues with the deal just hours after US President Joe Biden and key mediator Qatar announced it was complete.

The objection created a dual reality: War-weary Palestinians in Gaza, the relatives of hostages held there and world leaders all welcomed an agreement, expected to begin Sunday, even as Netanyahu said it was not yet finalised.

It was not yet clear if Netanyahu's statements merely reflected jockeying to keep his fractious coalition together or whether the deal was at risk.

Netanyahu's office said his Cabinet won't meet to approve the deal until Hamas backs down, accusing it of reneging on parts of the agreement in an attempt to gain further concessions, without elaborating.

Izzat al-Rishq, a senior Hamas official, said the militant group "is committed to the ceasefire agreement, which was



announced by the mediators."

The deal announced Wednesday would see a scores of hostages held in Gaza released and a pause in fighting with a view to eventually wind down a 15-month war that has destabilised the Middle East and sparked worldwide protests.

Hamas triggered the war with its October 7, 2023, cross-border attack into Israel that killed some 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage.

Israel responded with a fierce offensive that has killed over 46,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, who do not distinguish between civilians and militants but say women and children make up more than half of those killed. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The military campaign has

also levelled vast swaths of Gaza, and pushed around 90 per cent of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people from their homes. Hundreds of thousands are struggling with hunger and disease in squalid tent camps on the coast, according to United Nations officials.

Netanyahu's office earlier accused Hamas of backtracking on an understanding that he said would give Israel a veto over which prisoners convicted of murder would be released in exchange for hostages.

The Israeli prime minister has faced great domestic pressure to bring home the scores of hostages, but his far-right coalition partners have threatened to bring down his government if he makes too many concessions.

He has enough opposition support to approve an agree-

ment even without those partners, but doing so would weaken his coalition.

One of his far-right allies, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, has already come out against the deal. Another, Bezalel Smotrich, posted on X late Wednesday that he was demanding "absolute certainty" that Israel can resume the war later, calling the current deal "bad and dangerous" for Israel.

The departure of both of their factions would seriously destabilise the government and could lead to early elections.

Palestinians in Gaza reported heavy Israeli bombardment overnight as people were celebrating the ceasefire deal. In previous conflicts, both sides have stepped up military operations in the final hours before ceasefires as a way to project strength.

"We were expecting that the occupation would intensify the bombing, like they did every time there were reports on progress in the truce (negotiations)," said Mohammed Mahdi, who fled his home a few months ago and is sheltering in Gaza City.

Ahmed Mattar, who lives near the city's Al-Ahly hospital, said he heard "massive airstrikes" overnight.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Israeli strikes have killed at

least 72 people since the ceasefire deal was announced. It said the toll from Thursday's strikes only includes bodies brought to two hospitals in Gaza City, and that the actual toll is likely higher.

"Yesterday was a bloody day, and today is bloodier," said Zaher al-Wahedi, head of the ministry's registration department.

An Associated Press reporter on the Israeli side of the border near Gaza heard more airstrikes and artillery fire on Thursday.

Under the deal reached Wednesday, 33 of some 100 hostages who remain in Gaza are set to be released over the next six weeks in exchange for hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. Israeli forces will pull back from many areas, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians would be able to return to what's left of their homes, and there would be a surge of humanitarian assistance.

The remainder of the hostages, including male soldiers, are to be released in a second — and much more difficult — phase that will be negotiated during the first. Hamas has said it will not release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal, while Israel has vowed to keep fighting until it dismantles the group

## 'With Gaza deal, IMEC Corridor can become reality'



WASHINGTON, Jan 16: With the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the path-breaking IMEC Corridor that stretches from India to Europe through the Middle East could now become a reality, US President Joe Biden has said.

The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) is seen as an alternative to China's One Belt, One Road Initiative.

Signed by eight countries — India, US, Saudi Arabia, UAE, European Union, France, Germany and Italy — in New Delhi on September 9, 2023, it aims to bolster transportation and communication links between Europe and Asia through rail and shipping networks.

"At the G20 in Delhi on September 23, I rallied key countries behind a vision of an economic corridor from India across the Middle East to Europe. That vision can now become a reality," Biden told reporters on Wednesday at the White House as he announced the agreement between Israel and Hamas on Gaza and hostages.

The IMEC Corridor project hit a roadblock with the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023.

According to a recent Hudson Institute think-tank report, the IMEC provides another example of how New Delhi is using multilateral initiatives to pursue its expanding strategic and economic interests.

The IMEC initiative helps position India as a key player in reshaping global supply chains and trade routes.

"By offering an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, this project underscores New Delhi's proactive approach to regional economic integration and infrastructure development," the report said.

"India's involvement in the negotiations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates that ultimately resulted in the Abraham Accords marks another significant diplomatic shift toward greater flexibility and engagement," said the report. (PTI)

## Death toll rises to 87 as standoff between police, miners ends in South Africa

STILFONTEIN, Jan 16: The death toll in a months-long standoff between police and miners trapped while working illegally underground at an abandoned gold mine in South Africa has risen to at least 87, police said Thursday as they wound down a rescue operation that has pulled more than 240 survivors out from deep underground.

National police spokesperson Athlenda Mathe said that 78 bodies were retrieved from the mine in an official rescue operation that began Monday, while another nine had been recovered previously.

She did not give details on how those other bodies were retrieved. Community groups have said they launched their own rescue attempts when authorities said last year they would not help the miners because they were "criminals."

The miners are suspected to have died of starvation and dehydration. Authorities now believe that nearly 2,000 miners were underground working illegally at the Buffelsfontein Gold Mine southwest of Johannesburg since August last year. Many of them resurfaced on their own over the last few months, police said, and all the survivors have been arrested.

Police announced Wednesday that they were ending the rescue operation and believed no one else was underground. A camera would be sent down on Thursday to make certain, Mathe said. The mine is one of the deepest in South Africa and the miners were working up to 2.5 kilometres underground.

Mathe said at least 13 children had also come out of the mine before the official rescue operation. The vast majority of the miners are foreign nationals from neighbouring countries, police said.

South African authorities have been widely criticised for their approach, having cut off food and supplies to the miners for a period of time last year in an attempt, as one Cabinet minister said, to "smoke them out."

Civic groups have said authorities have contributed to dozens of deaths, while there are calls for an independent inquiry to investigate what happened.

Police maintain that the miners were able to come out through several different shafts but many refused out of fear of being arrested. (AP)

## Bulgaria's parl approves new coalition government

SOFIA, Jan 16: Bulgaria's parliament on Thursday formally approved a coalition government led by the centre-right GERB party which has pledged to restore financial stability and maintain a pro-European Union and pro-NATO track.

Lawmakers voted 125-114 to elect Rosen Zhelezkov, a lawyer and former speaker of parliament, as prime minister. Zhelezkov, 56, has served as minister in several governments of his GERB party.

The party picked Zhelezkov to head a new government over its leader, Boyko Borissov, who led three governments between 2009 and 2021, when his third Cabinet resigned following major anti-corruption protests.

The main political actor in the country, the GERB party, finished first in last October's elections, the seventh in the last three years, but with 69 legislators in the 240-seat National Assembly it lacks a majority to govern alone.

Zhelezkov said his party had made "the necessary compromises," addressing the ideological differences with the two junior partners in the uneasy coalition — the pro-Russia Socialist Party (BSP) and the populist group There Is Such a People (ITN).

Although the coalition commands less MPs than the number needed for a majority, it was approved in a separate vote due to the support of a small ethnic Turkish party that gave its votes for the coalition without being part of it.

The new government is dominated by former ministers and party officials of GERB who received 11 ministerial seats, while the BSP and ITN have four ministers each. (AP)

## UK's Starmer arrives in Ukraine for security talks with Zelenskyy

KYIV, Jan 16: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer arrived in Ukraine Thursday with a pledge to help guarantee the country's security for a century, days before Donald Trump is sworn in as US president.

The British government says Starmer and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will sign a "100-Year Partnership" treaty in Kyiv, covering areas including defence, science, energy and trade.

Starmer's unannounced visit is his first trip to Ukraine since he took office in July. He visited the country in 2023 when he was opposition leader, and has twice held talks with Zelenskyy in 10 Downing St. since becoming prime minister.

One of Ukraine's biggest military backers, the UK has pledged 12.8 billion pounds (USD 16 billion) in military and civilian aid to Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion three years ago, and has trained more than 50,000 Ukrainian troops on British soil.

Starmer is due to announce another 40 million pounds (USD 49 million) for Ukraine's post-war economic recovery.

But the UK's role is dwarfed by that of the United States, and there is deep uncertainty over the fate of American support for Ukraine once Trump takes office on January 20.

The president-elect has balked at the cost of US aid to Kyiv, says he wants to bring the war to a swift end and is planning to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, for whom he has long expressed admiration.

Kyiv's allies have rushed to flood Ukraine with as much support as possible before Trump's inauguration, with the aim of putting Ukraine in the strongest position possible for any future negotiations to end the war.

Zelenskyy has said that in any peace negotiation, Ukraine would need assurances about its future protection from its much bigger neighbor.

Britain says its 100-year pledge is part of that assurance, and will help ensure Ukraine is "never again vulnerable to the kind of brutality inflicted on it by Russia," which seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and attempted a full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The deal commits the two sides to cooperate on defense — especially maritime secu-

rity against Russian activity in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Sea of Azov — and on technology projects including drones, which have become vital weapons for both sides in the war. The treaty also includes a system to help track stolen Ukrainian grain exported by Russia from occupied parts of the country.

"Putin's ambition to wrench Ukraine away from its closest partners has been a monumental strategic failure. Instead, we are closer than ever, and this partnership will take that friendship to the next level," Starmer said ahead of the visit.

"This is not just about the here and now, it is also about an investment in our two countries for the next century, bringing together technology development, scientific advances and cultural exchanges, and harnessing the phenomenal innovation shown by Ukraine in recent years for generations to come."

Zelenskyy says he and Starmer also will discuss a plan proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron that would see troops from France and other Western countries stationed in Ukraine to oversee a ceasefire agreement.

Zelenskyy has said any such proposal should go alongside a timeline for Ukraine to join NATO. The alliance's 32 member countries say that Ukraine will join one day, but not until after the war. Trump has appeared to sympathize with Putin's position that Ukraine should not be part of NATO.

As the grinding war nears the three-year mark, both Russia and Ukraine are pushing for battlefield gains ahead of possible peace talks. Ukraine has started a second offensive in Russia's Kursk region, where it is struggling to hang onto a chunk of territory it captured last year, and has stepped up drone and missile attacks on weapons sites and fuel depots inside Russia.

Moscow is slowly taking territory at the cost of high casualties, along the 600-mile (1,000-kilometre) front line in eastern Ukraine and launching intense barrages at Ukraine's energy system, seeking to deprive Ukrainians of heat and light in the depths of winter. A major Russian ballistic and cruise missile attack on regions across Ukraine on Wednesday, and compelling authorities to shut down the power grid in some areas. (AP)

## Lawyers for detained S Korean Prez say he will reject questioning by investigators

SEOUL, Jan 16: Lawyers representing South Korea's impeached president said Thursday he will refuse further questioning after being detained by anti-corruption officials over his ill-fated declaration of martial law last month, maintaining that the investigation is illegal.

President Yoon Suk Yeol exercised his right to remain silent as he underwent more than 10 hours of questioning on Wednesday at the headquarters of the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, following a massive law enforcement operation to detain him at his official residence in Seoul.

Investigators are expected to move to place him under arrest in the coming days.

The anti-corruption agency, which is leading a joint investigation with the police and the military over whether Yoon's martial law declaration amounted to attempted rebellion, has 48 hours either to request a court order for his formal arrest or to release him.

Yoon's lawyers have argued that the detention warrant issued by the Seoul Western District Court is invalid and have asked the Seoul Central District Court to consider his release. The clock for the arrest warrant is on hold while the court reviews his petition, which can take up to 48 hours.

Yoon didn't attend a hearing at the Central District Court on Thursday, which was part of the review, due to security concerns, according to Seok Dong-hyeon, one of the president's lawyers.

It was expected that the decision could come sometime during the evening. Hundreds of Yoon's supporters gathered in the streets near the court amid a heavy police presence, waving banners and chanting slogans calling for his release.

Yoon set off the country's most serious political crisis since its de-

mocratization in the late 1980s when he attempted to break through gridlock in legislation by declaring martial law and deploying troops around the National Assembly on Dec 3. The standoff lasted only hours before lawmakers managed to get through the blockade and voted to lift the measure.

His presidential powers were suspended when the opposition-dominated assembly voted to impeach him on Dec 14, accusing him of rebellion. His fate now rests with the Constitutional Court, which has begun deliberating on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reject the charges and reinstate him.

Yoon and his allies have defied efforts to investigate his role in the chaos of Dec 3. He ignored requests to appear for questioning for weeks, remaining in his official residence to avoid detention as his lawyers turned away police, citing a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge — Yoon himself. They also said that the anti-corruption agency had no legal authority to investigate rebellion allegations.

Yoon also resisted one attempt to detain him as the presidential security service barricaded the residence. He was finally brought into custody after hundreds of anti-corruption investigators and police raided the presidential compound for some five hours in a second attempt.

In a video message recorded shortly before he was escorted to the headquarters of the anti-corruption agency, Yoon lamented that the "rule of law has completely collapsed in this country." He echoed the arguments of his lawyers that the anti-corruption agency does not have the authority to investigate his actions, but said he accepted detention to prevent violence. (AP)

## 'American accused of sexually assaulting Pennsylvania student being extradited to US'

PARIS, Jan 16: French Appeal Court prosecutors said an American man accused of sexually assaulting a Pennsylvania college student in 2013, and later sending her a Facebook message that read "So I raped you", was being extradited Thursday to the United States.

The Appeal Court prosecutors' office in Metz in northeastern France said Ian Cleary was handed over to US authorities at the Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport.

Cleary (31) from Saratoga, California, was detained in April last year in Metz after a three-year search. He was held in custody pending extradition proceedings since his arrest.

In July last year, the Appeal Court in Metz ruled that he could be extradited.

Cleary had been the subject of an international search since authorities in Pennsylvania issued a 2021 felony warrant in the case, weeks after an Associated Press story detailed the reluctance of local prosecutors to pursue campus sex crimes.

The arrest warrant accuses Cleary of stalking an 18-year-old Gettysburg College student at a party in 2013, sneaking into her dorm, and sexually assaulting her while she texted friends for help.

He was a 20-year-old Gettysburg student at the time, but didn't return to campus.

The accuser, Shannon Keeler, had a rape exam done the same day. She gathered witnesses and evidence and spent years urging officials to file charges.

She went to the authorities again in 2021 after discovering Facebook messages that seemed to come from Cleary's account. "So I raped you," the sender wrote in a string of messages.

"I'll never do it to anyone ever again."

"I need to hear your voice."

"I'll pray for you."

According to the June 2021 warrant, police verified that the Facebook account used to send the messages belonged to Cleary.

The AP doesn't typically identify sexual assault victims without their permission, which Keeler has granted. (AP)

## Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin launches massive New Glenn rocket on first test flight

CAPE CANAVERAL (US), Jan 16: Blue Origin launched its massive new rocket on its first test flight Thursday, sending up a prototype satellite to orbit thousands of miles above Earth.

Named after the first American to orbit Earth, the New Glenn rocket blasted off from Florida, soaring from the same pad used to launch NASA's Mariner and Pioneer spacecraft a half-century ago.

Years in the making with heavy funding by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the 320-foot (98-metre) rocket carried an experimental platform designed to host satellites or release them into their proper orbits. Company employees erupted in cheers and frenzied applause once the craft successfully reached orbit.

For this test, the satellite was expected to remain inside the second stage while circling Earth. The mission was expected to last six hours, with the second stage then placed in a safe condition to stay in a high, out-of-the-way orbit in



accordance with NASA's practices for minimising space junk.

The first-stage booster missed its landing on a barge in the Atlantic minutes after liftoff so it could be recycled, but the company stressed that the No. 1 objective was for the test satellite to reach orbit. "What a fantastic day," Blue Origin's launch commentator Ariane Cornell said.

New Glenn was supposed to fly before dawn Monday, but ice

buildup in critical plumbing caused a delay. The rocket is built to haul spacecraft and eventually astronauts to orbit and also the moon.

Founded 25 years ago by Bezos, Blue Origin has been launching paying passengers to the edge of space since 2021, including himself. The short hops from Texas use smaller rockets named after the first American in space, Alan Shepard. New Glenn, which han-

ders John Glenn, is five times taller.

Blue Origin poured more than \$1 billion into New Glenn's launch site, rebuilding historic Complex 36 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. The pad is 9 miles from the company's control centres and rocket factory, outside the gates of NASA's Kennedy Space Centre.

Bezos — taking part in the launch from Mission Control — declined to disclose his personal investment in the programme. He said he does not see Blue Origin in a competition with Elon Musk's SpaceX, long the rocket-launching dominator.

Blue Origin envisions six to eight New Glenn flights this year, if everything goes well, with the next one coming up this spring.

"There's room for lots of winners," Bezos said from the rocket factory over the weekend, adding that this was the "very, very beginning of this new phase of the space age, where we're all going to work

together as an industry ... to lower the cost of access to space."

New Glenn is the latest in a series of big, new rockets to launch in recent years, including United Launch Alliance's Vulcan, Europe's upgraded Ariane 6 and NASA's Space Launch System or SLS, the space agency's successor to the Saturn V for sending astronauts to the moon.

The biggest rocket of all, at approximately 400 feet, is SpaceX's Starship. Elon Musk said the seventh test flight of the full rocket could occur later Thursday from Texas. He hopes to repeat what he pulled off in October, catching the returning booster at the launch pad with giant mechanical arms.

Starship is what NASA plans to use to land astronauts on the moon later this decade. The first two moon landings under the space agency's Artemis programme, which follows the Apollo missions of the 1960s and 1970s, will see crews descending from lunar orbit to the surface in Starships. (AP)



# Closure of Hindenburg Research not clean chit for 'Modani': Congress

*'These are all serious acts of blatant favouritism and brazen criminality'*

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** With Hindenburg Research set to disband, the Congress on Thursday said its closure does not mean a clean chit for "Modani" and asserted that without a JPC, the "already-compromised" institutions of the Indian state will continue to act only to protect the powerful.

The opposition party's assertion came after Hindenburg Research founder Nate Anderson announced that the US short-seller would disband.

Hindenburg Research made international waves with allegations against billionaire Gautam Adani that wiped billions from the market value of his group companies.

The Adani group had earlier denied all allegations against it. Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said, "The closure of Hindenburg Research does not, in any way, mean a clean chit for Modani."

The Hindenburg report of January 2023 proved serious enough to compel the Supreme Court of India to set up an Expert Committee to probe the allegation made in it against the Adani Group "whose prime patron is none other than the present Prime Minister of India", he said in a statement.

"However the Hindenburg Report covered only one part of securities laws violations - of the



hydra-headed Modani MegaScam. Out of the 100 questions on the Adani Mega Scam that the Congress party had asked of the PM in the Hum Adani ke Hain Kaun (HAHK) series during January-March 2023, only 21 questions related to revelations made in the Hindenburg report," Ramesh said. "The matter goes far deeper. It involves the abuse of Indian foreign policy to enrich the PM's close friends at the expense of the national interest. It involves the misuse of investigative agencies to force Indian businesspersons to divest critical infrastructure assets and help Adani build monopolies in airports, ports, defence and cement," Ramesh alleged.

He further said it involves the capture of once-respected institutions such as SEBI whose "dis-

credited" chairperson continues in her position despite "clear evidence" of conflicts of interest and financial links to Adani.

It is worth noting that a SEBI investigation that the Supreme Court gave two months to present its report has conveniently dragged on for almost two years with no end in sight, Ramesh said.

"Modani may have -- and it has -- captured India's institutions, but criminality exposed outside the country cannot be covered up in this way. The US Department of Justice has accused Adani of bribing Indian officials to secure lucrative solar power contracts," he said. The Swiss Public Prosecutors Office has frozen several Adani-linked bank accounts operated by Chang Chung-Ling and Nasser Ali Shaban Ali that are "suspected of

engaging in illicit activities, including money laundering and embezzlement", Ramesh claimed, citing a Swiss Federal Criminal Court order. As evidence of criminality has emerged, many countries have cancelled their Adani projects, Ramesh said.

"These are all serious acts of blatant favouritism and brazen criminality that can only be fully investigated by the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC). Without a JPC, the already-compromised institutions of the Indian state will continue to act only to protect the powerful and the PM's friends, while India's poor and middle classes are left to fend for themselves in a deteriorating economic environment," Ramesh said.

Announcement of the closure by Anderson, 40, who started Hindenburg in 2017, came just days before Donald Trump's inauguration as the new President of the United States.

While he cited the toll of the "rather intense, and at times, all-encompassing" nature of the work as the reason for his decision", critics were quick to link the shutting down Hindenburg's alleged ties with George Soros and the so-called deep state being under significant pressure from the incoming Trump administration.

Adani Group CFO Jugeshinder

Robbie Singh in a cryptic post on X said: "Kitne Ghazi Aaye, Kitne Ghazi Gaye".

Hindenburg, in January 2023, published a report accusing the Adani group of "pulling the largest con in the corporate history", wiping out more than USD 150 billion in value of the group's shares at their lowest point.

The Adani group vehemently denied all the allegations including that being "engaged in a brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme over the course of decades" and improper use of offshore tax havens to shore up group share prices.

Business tycoon Adani was ranked the world's fourth-richest and Asia's wealthiest person a day before the report was published. He slipped following the heavy selling witnessed in the group stocks.

On Thursday, with a net worth of USD 75 billion, he was ranked at No.20, behind Mukesh Ambani (ranked 17th with USD 91.5 billion net worth).

The Hindenburg report against Adani led to a political storm in India. But as months passed, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition from litigators based on it while the Adani Group recovered lost ground with strong operating performance and stock recovering most of the losses. (PTI)

## Akhilesh Yadav terms Milkpur bypoll 'biggest by-election'

**LUCKNOW, Jan 16:** Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday declared the upcoming Milkpur assembly bypoll in Ayodhya as the "biggest bypoll in the country" and exuded confidence that his party will defeat the BJP.

"This bypoll will be a decisive moment. The representative of the PDA (pichhde, Dalit, alpsankhyak) is the Samajwadi Party's candidate contesting the bypoll. I appeal to all journalists to cover this historic election. Such a unique and significant by-election deserves to be studied for its impact on democracy," Yadav said at a press conference at the party's headquarters here.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister also called on the government to ensure a free and transparent election process, presenting an example for the nation and the world.

Highlighting the BJP's waning influence, Yadav claimed, "Even in Milkpur, the BJP is losing its footing. Farmers, traders, youth, and women are all ready to defeat them. The BJP will face a resounding loss in this bypoll."

The SP president also cautioned against political manipulation. "We've seen how discussions about SP's strong position can lead to misuse of power by the ruling party. However, the people's resolve to

oust the BJP is unshaken," Yadav concluded.

Continuing his attack on the BJP-led dispensation, he accused the government of exploiting farmers by forcibly acquiring their land in Ayodhya at unfair prices.

"The BJP government is deliberately taking away farmers' ancestral lands under the guise of development. Farmers are not against progress; they want fair compensation and their share in Ayodhya's development," Yadav said, emphasising that the SP supports making Ayodhya a world-class city with infrastructure benefiting both locals and visitors.

"The government should compensate farmers at six times the circle rate. If they fail to do so, the SP will ensure this when we form the government," Yadav promised.

He reiterated that farmers are willing to contribute to Ayodhya's development but deserve equitable treatment.

Accusing the government of prioritising profits over public interest, Yadav questioned the focus on building luxury hotels instead of essential facilities such as ashrams and dharamshalas.

"They talk of culture but are building five-star hotels with bars. Is that the BJP's vision for Ayodhya?" he remarked.

Yadav expressed gratitude to Ay-

odhya's farmers for placing their trust in the SP.

"We thank the farmers and citizens of Ayodhya for their support. They believe in the SP's vision for justice and fair governance," he said, adding the SP is ready to challenge the BJP on issues of land acquisition and development.

The BJP on Tuesday nominated Chandrabhan Paswan as its candidate for the Milkpur bypoll, while the Samajwadi Party has fielded Faizabad MP Awadhesh Prasad's son Ajit Prasad. Awadhesh Prasad was the MLA of Milkpur before he got elected to the Lok Sabha necessitating the bypoll.

The Congress has decided not to field its candidate and instead support the nominee of the Samajwadi Party (SP), a constituent of the INDIA bloc. The bypoll is scheduled for February 5 and votes will be counted on February 8.

The SP chief has often used his party's victory in Milkpur in the 2022 Assembly polls and then in the Faizabad Lok Sabha polls in 2024 to take potshots at the Yogi Adityanath government and the BJP, accusing them of misgovernance and divisive politics.

In the run up to the high-stake bypoll, the BJP has pressed six ministers for the campaign being led by Adityanath, who has had a series of tours to Ayodhya recently. (PTI)

## Bhagwat's 'independence' remarks biggest challenge for democracy: CPI (ML) Liberation

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's terming the consecration of Ram Temple in Ayodhya as the establishment of India's "true independence" is in line with the group's longstanding rejection of India's freedom movement, CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation leader Dipankar Bhattacharya said on Thursday.

RSS is the "biggest ideological-political challenge" to the democratic future of India, he added.

Bhagwat, earlier in the week, said the true independence of India, which suffered foreign invasions for centuries, was established when the Ram temple was consecrated in Ayodhya.

In a statement, the CPI (ML) Liberation General Secretary said Bhagwat has reiterated the RSS' line of rejecting India's freedom movement and the Constitution.

"By terming the consecration of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya as the establishment of India's true independence, Mohan Bhag-

wat has reiterated the customary RSS line rejecting India's freedom movement and the Constitution of India even as India celebrates the 75th anniversary of the Constitution and foundation of the Republic," Bhattacharya said.

"The rejection of India's anti-colonial nationalism right at the time of its rise in opposition to the British colonial rule defined the congenial pro-colonial collaborationist character of the Sangh which has always sought to camouflage in the name of 'cultural nationalism'," he said.

The Left leader alleged that the RSS did everything possible in its attempt to derail and obstruct the rise of India's anti-colonial nationalism, and rejected the Constitution of Independent India by branding it "unIndian." "Today, from the vantage position of political power it is trying to impose its dubious legacy and toxic agenda as the fruition of India's 'true independence'." (PTI)

Chief Minister) and then the country, he never harboured any negativity in his mind. He worked for the welfare of the poor in the entire country to ensure no other child has to face the kind of poverty he faced," said Shah.

The Union minister observed that despite facing adversity in early years of life, only a God-gifted and talented child can think of doing good for the entire society without harbouring any negativity.

Apart from inaugurating the school built in 1888, which has now been redeveloped as "Prerna Complex", Shah also opened an Archaeological Experiential Museum and a sports complex in Vadnagar.

The former BJP president noted that Modi gave top priority to education when he assumed the office of Gujarat Chief Minister in 2001.

"Thanks to his efforts, the school

dropout ratio, which was 37 per cent when he took over as CM, came down to just 1 per cent in 2014. He visited every corner of the state as an RSS pracharak (full-time volunteer) to understand the issues being faced by the people of Gujarat. He then resolved all the issues one by one after becoming the CM," he maintained.

Shah recalled that when Modi, during his early political career, used to talk about India's cultural revival and cultural nationalism, BJP workers, including he, used to wonder how this will become a reality.

"Ram Lalla was in a tent for over 500 years. After Modi became the PM, our dream of a grand temple in Ayodhya has become a reality. Similarly, Jammu and Kashmir truly became an integral part of India after the abrogation of Article 370," emphasised Shah. (PTI)

## Will incorporate suggestions from all sections to prepare a good budget: J'khand Finance minister



**RANCHI, Jan 16:** Jharkhand Finance minister Radha Krishna Kishore on Thursday held pre-budget consultation with different departments as part of preparations for the annual state budget for fiscal 2025-26.

Kishore said that they are seeking suggestions from every section of society to prepare a good budget.

"We started a two-day pre-budget consultation with different departments on Thursday. We are also taking suggestions from experts. Earlier, a portal was launched in which we have received around 800 suggestions so far," Kishore said.

The minister said that they held meetings with agriculture, forest, urban development and some other departments and they gave valuable suggestions.

"Issues were also discussed regarding storing of surface water and groundwater recharge. We could use only 20 per cent of the surface water. We will focus on storing the remaining 80 per cent of the surface water in the budget. I have also suggested to the forest department to provide connectivity to those who are given Van Patta (forest lease)," he said.

Kishore further said that he would write to the Centre seeking Jharkhand's pending grants-in-aid. "Grants-in-aid from the Centre for Jharkhand was estimated at around ₹ 16,000 crore this fiscal. But, we have received only ₹ 4,000 crore so far. I will write to the Centre after a meeting with officials of concerned departments and seek

the pending grants," he said.

The pre-budget consultation started with the Agriculture department. Agriculture minister Shilpi Neha Tirkey was also present at the meeting.

"During the meeting, I have demanded the budget allocation of my department should not be slashed at any cost as there were many projects that could not be implemented in the previous tenure due to various reasons such as Covid pandemic and elections. My focus is to implement them on ground," Tirkey said.

The budget session of the Jharkhand assembly will be held from February 24 to March 27. The budget for the fiscal 2025-26 will be tabled on March 3, an official said.

This will be the first budget of the Hemant Soren government after the JMM-led alliance returned to power, winning 56 seats in the 81-member assembly in November 2024.

Earlier on January 5, Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren launched a portal and a mobile application to seek suggestions, opinions and ideas from people for the preparation of the state budget for the 2025-26 fiscal.

The portal and mobile app are open for submissions till January 17. The platform - Abua' (own) Budget Portal and Mobile App - offers a unique opportunity for citizens, experts, and stakeholders to contribute to the budgetary process, ensuring a more inclusive and responsive fiscal plan, an official said. (PTI)

## Delhi riots accused Tahir Hussain files nomination from Mustafabad

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** Delhi riots accused Tahir Hussain filed his nomination papers from the Mustafabad constituency on Thursday and returned to Tihar Jail, officials said.

The former Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) councillor is the candidate of Asaduddin Owaisi-led All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) from Mustafabad for the February 5 assembly polls.

Hussain filed his nomination and returned to custody at 2:16 PM after leaving Tihar Jail earlier in the day to complete the process, a source said.

"He was released from jail under heavy security provided by Delhi Police. He left the jail around 9:15 AM," the source added.

The party may announce its other candidates later in the day.

Speaking to PTI, AIMIM's Delhi president Shoaib Jamal said, "We will not contest all seats but, wherever we do, we will leave no stone unturned. Our candidates will be strong, like Tahir Hussain from Mustafabad and Shafa-ur-Rehman from Okhla. Both are currently jailed in cases related to the CAA-NRC protests."

The Delhi High Court had on Tuesday granted custody parole to Hussain in a riots-related murder case to enable him to file his nomination papers.

Violence broke out in northeast Delhi on February 24, 2020, leaving 53 dead and several injured. (PTI)

## Has Rahul Gandhi got 'contract' of Hindenburg's closed shop, asks BJP

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** The BJP alleged on Thursday that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is in the "complete grip" of the thinking process of "urban naxals", and asked if he has now got the "contract" for the Hindenburg Research's closed "shop".

BJP leader and former Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad also slammed Gandhi for his comments that the Congress is "now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian State itself", and asserted the Indian State represents the constitutional identity of India as a free country.

Prasad lauded the RSS as a nationalist organisation which, he said, has been working for society and for spreading patriotism, and asked Gandhi to reflect on where his party has reached and what the RSS and BJP have become.

Taking a swipe, Prasad said US-based short-selling firm Hindenburg Research "shut its shop" the day the Congress inaugurated its new headquarters building here. "Has Rahul Gandhi now got the contract of this shop," he asked at a press conference here. "Rahul Gandhi is in complete grip of urban naxals' thinking process."

Prasad said it seems the "shop" of US-based billionaire investor George Soros is also going to close down with new administration under President-elect Donald Trump set to take over. Soros, he said, funds Hindenburg.

Hindenburg Research, which made international waves with campaigns targeting billionaire Gautam Adani that wiped billions from market value of the group companies, will disband, its founder Nate Anderson announced on Thursday.

The announcement by Anderson, 40, who started Hindenburg in 2017, came just days before Donald Trump's inauguration as the new President of the United States. Prasad, a former law minister, said the Indian State also includes the President, Vice President, judiciary, state assemblies and the media.

Targeting the Aam Aadmi Party, he cited reported remarks of Delhi Chief Minister Atishi that she favours bringing back the scrapped controversial excise policy, which led to the charges of corruption against her party leaders and the arrest of some of them, including her predecessor Arvind Kejriwal. (PTI)

## Despite born in poverty, Modi never harboured any negativity, says Shah in PM's hometown

**VADNAGAR (GUJARAT), Jan 16:** Despite being born in a poor family, Prime Minister Narendra Modi never harboured any negativity and transformed his impoverishment into compassion for the needy and strenuously worked for people's welfare, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Thursday.

After becoming the PM in 2014, Modi has changed the lives of crores of poor citizens by providing them various facilities such as houses, toilets, water, gas and electricity connections, medicines at affordable prices and free ration, he noted.

Shah, who is on a Gujarat visit, was addressing a gathering at Modi's hometown Vadnagar in Mehsana district after inaugurating three key projects, including a redeveloped school where the PM received his early education.



"In psychology, it is taught that a child whose childhood is spent in poverty and deprivation is driven by negativity. Such children also develop destructive thinking and grow up with a feeling of revenge. But,

Modiji, born in a poor tea-seller's family, transformed his poverty into compassion for the needy people," opined the senior BJP leader.

"When that poor child took over the reins of the state (Gujarat as

Chief Minister) and then the country, he never harboured any negativity in his mind. He worked for the welfare of the poor in the entire country to ensure no other child has to face the kind of poverty he faced," said Shah.

The Union minister observed that despite facing adversity in early years of life, only a God-gifted and talented child can think of doing good for the entire society without harbouring any negativity.

Apart from inaugurating the school built in 1888, which has now been redeveloped as "Prerna Complex", Shah also opened an Archaeological Experiential Museum and a sports complex in Vadnagar.

The former BJP president noted that Modi gave top priority to education when he assumed the office of Gujarat Chief Minister in 2001.

"Thanks to his efforts, the school

dropout ratio, which was 37 per cent when he took over as CM, came down to just 1 per cent in 2014. He visited every corner of the state as an RSS pracharak (full-time volunteer) to understand the issues being faced by the people of Gujarat. He then resolved all the issues one by one after becoming the CM," he maintained.

Shah recalled that when Modi, during his early political career, used to talk about India's cultural revival and cultural nationalism, BJP workers, including he, used to wonder how this will become a reality.

"Ram Lalla was in a tent for over 500 years. After Modi became the PM, our dream of a grand temple in Ayodhya has become a reality. Similarly, Jammu and Kashmir truly became an integral part of India after the abrogation of Article 370," emphasised Shah. (PTI)

### LOST

I, Mangang Maitai, S/O Anil Kumar Singha, a resident of Vill.- Moinapathar, Matikhola, P.O. Siliguri Basti, P.S.- Hojai, Dist.- Hojai, Assam have lost my Birth Certificate vide registration no. 947(Date of registration 12/04/2006), HSLC- Admit Card, Passing Certificate and Marksheet bearing Roll B 22 -0842 No. 0035 of 2022, Caste Certificate, AHSEC Admit Card (HS 1st Year and HS 2nd Year) bearing Roll 0477 No. 10137 of 2022-23.

### E-AUCTION FOR PARKING CONTRACT

E-auction for parking mixed and passenger carrying commercial vehicles contract at following Railway stations for a period of 03 (Three) years. Description: Parking Lot for Two Wheelers, Three Wheelers and Four Wheelers. Auction Catalogue No.: TSK-PARKING-30; Auction Start Date & Time (All Lots) : 15:00 hrs. on 28-01-2025; Auction Close Date & Time : 16:40 hrs. on 28-01-2025; Rate Unit: Annual Licensing Fee; Trips/Days: 1095.

| Seq No. | Lot No.                       | Stations                                          |
|---------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| AA/1    | PARKING-TSK-SRTN-MX-36-24-1   | Sibsagar Town                                     |
| AA/2    | PARKING-TSK-DBRT-MX-1-22-1    | Dibrugarh Town                                    |
| AA/3    | PARKING-TSK-NCH-MX-9-22-2     | Nakachari                                         |
| AA/4    | PARKING-TSK-TSK-MX-38-24-1    | Tinsukia                                          |
| AA/5    | PARKING-TSK-MRHT-MX-3-22-1    | Moranhat                                          |
| AA/6    | PARKING-TSK-DMGN-MX-30-24-1   | Bogibeel Guide Bund for both North and South Bank |
| AA/7    | PARKING-TSK-BFD-MX-6-22-2     | Borhat                                            |
| AB/1    | PARKING-TSK-JTNN-PCCV-29-23-1 | Jorhat Town                                       |

The e-auction catalogue has already been uploaded on 10-01-2025 through IREPS website.

Divisional Commercial Manager (I/C), Tinsukia  
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"SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE"



## Playing domestic cricket best way to regain form: Yuvraj on Rohit, Kohli

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** Former India batter Yuvraj Singh reckons a player struggling for form should always return to playing domestic cricket irrespective of his stature in the national team amid the raging debate on whether stars like Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma should show up in Ranji Trophy matches.

The clamour for Rohit and Kohli playing Ranji Trophy to regain red-ball form has grown since India's loss to Australia in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Both batters struggled for runs over the course of five Tests, more so Rohit, who benched himself for the final Test in Sydney.

"Domestic cricket is important. I

have always felt if you have time and if you are not performing, you should definitely come and play domestic cricket.

"That is the best way to get practice and game time. I feel domestic cricket is very important if you have the time and if you are not injured," said Yuvraj in response to a PTI query at the launch event of the Celebrity Cricket League on Thursday.

Even the likes of Sunil Gavaskar, Ravi Shastri and even India head coach Gautam Gambhir have spoken about the importance of domestic cricket post India's successive Test series losses, including a first ever series whitewash at home by

New Zealand.

While Rohit has turned up in Mumbai's practice sessions ahead of the resumption of Ranji Trophy on January 23, Kohli is yet to show any signs of a domestic comeback for Delhi.

Other stars such as Rishabh Pant, Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill have confirmed their availability for the respective games of their home teams.

Yuvraj, one of the finest left-handers to have played the game, lauded Rohit for resting himself from the Sydney Test due to a lean run. Gambhir's role has also come under the scanner following the Australia debacle but Yuvraj de-

fended both his former teammates.

"I have said it previously also. You guys look at series by series. If India wins a series you talk good things, if they lose you criticise.

"I always look at the team graph over a five-year period or three years. If you talk about Rohit, Gautam has just come into the system, he needs more time. Rohit Sharma has won the T20 World Cup as captain, he was captain when India played the ODI World Cup final. He led MI (Mumbai Indians) to five IPL titles.

"The guy has stepped down from the last match and given somebody else a chance. How many captains have done that in the past? Please

tell me," he asked.

He reiterated that losing 0-3 to new Zealand at home was more "questionable".

"...that is a tougher pill to swallow," said Yuvraj.

India lost the series Down Under but standout performances came from opener Yashasvi Jaiswal and rookie Nitish Reddy, who made a memorable hundred in the Melbourne Test.

"Nitish scored a hundred on his first tour, it is amazing. Not sure how many have done that. Jaiswal scored 150 plus in his first Test in Australia, it is highly commendable. We should talk about these performances more," added Yuvraj. (PTI)



### MBSG SIT COMFORTABLY AT THE TOP OF THE POINTS TABLE

## Formidable Mohun Bagan SG face counter-attacking Jamshedpur FC



**JAMSHEDPUR, Jan 16:**

Playing possession-based football with efficiency in the final third, table toppers Mohun Bagan Super Giant will seek to unlock Jamshedpur FC's propensity to hit on the counter, in a duel of two thriving teams in the Indian Super League here on Friday. Mohun Bagan Super Giant sit comfortably at the top of the points table, garnering 35 points from 15 matches with 11 victories and two draws to their name. Jamshedpur FC are fourth, having won 27 points from 14 outings. Interestingly, they can bridge the gap with the Mariners with a prospective victory in this clash, since they have a game in hand as compared to the Jose Molina-coached team.

Jamshedpur FC will look to further their three-game victorious streak, as the Mohun Bagan Super Giant will pursue securing a league double over the Red Miners for the second straight season.

The last time the Red Miners went on a longer winning streak was in 2022, when they recorded seven consecutive victories, including a 1-0 win over Mohun

Bagan Super Giant.

However, Jamshedpur have lost each of their last three ISL meetings with the Mariners, failing to score in the last two. Another defeat will equal their joint-longest losing streak against any opponent in ISL history.

Meanwhile, Mohun Bagan Super Giant are in a purple patch upfront, scoring in each of their last 12 ISL games (25 goals in total). A goal in this match will set a new record for the Mariners' longest scoring streak in the competition.

Having won the reverse fixture 3-0 on November 23, they will look to record consecutive league doubles over Jamshedpur FC, a feat previously achieved against East Bengal FC, Hyderabad FC, and NorthEast United FC.

Jamshedpur FC have permitted an average of 26.6 touches per game in their own penalty box this season, the highest of any team, while managing just 3.1 sequences of 10+ open play passes per game, the third lowest in the league.

They have developed a distinct style of play, which has seen them score 22 goals, and has cov-

ered over these aspects so far, but the Mariners will have their eye out on exploiting these areas.

Despite these challenges, Stephen Eze and Javi Siverio have excelled in aerial duels, winning 3.8 and 3.6 aerial duels per game, respectively, which is the highest in the league.

The Mariners will have their task cut out against Jamshedpur FC, since the Red Miners prefer stretching the opposition's defences and delivering lateral balls, while Eze's presence ensures that they aren't vulnerable in defence when the opposition undertakes a similar route. Mohun Bagan Super Giant have dominated possession with an average of 8.2 sequences of 10+ open play passes per game, the best in the league.

They will naturally look to assume total control of the proceedings, but will have to be wary of Jamshedpur FC hitting them on the counter-attack and outnumbering their defence.

Manvir Singh is two goal contributions away from becoming only the fifth player in ISL history to register 40+ contributions for a single side. (PTI)

## Barcelona reach Copa del Rey quarterfinals with 5-1 rout of Real Betis

**BARCELONA, Jan 16:**

Barcelona followed up its rout of Real Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup final with a comfortable 5-1 victory over Real Betis in the round of 16 of the Copa del Rey.

Gavi and Jules Koundé scored a goal each in the first half-hour and Raphinha, Ferran Torres and Lamine Yamal added to give the Catalan club the win and a spot in the quarterfinals.

It was the fourth straight victory in 2025 for Barcelona, which on Sunday defeated Madrid 5-2 in Saudi Arabia to win the Spanish Super Cup.

"We wanted to keep the momentum from the Super Cup here at home in front of our fans," Barcelona defender Pau Cubarsí said. "We continue like this and keep the foot on the throttle. The (Christmas) break did well for us, we were able to refresh."

Barcelona had lost its last two games in 2024 before going on a winning streak against Barbastro in the Copa del Rey and Athletic Bilbao and Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup.

Playmaker Dani Olmo, registered in the last minute after a long battle between Barcelona, the Spanish league and Spain's federation because of a missed deadline by the club, helped set up Gavi's opening goal in the third minute at Montjuïc stadium.

Yamal gave the pass for Koundé's goal in the 27th.

Koundé thought he had added to the lead in first-half stoppage time but his effort was disallowed by video review because he was offside. Yamal also had one called back by the VAR because of offside early in the second half.

Barcelona's third goal finally counted when Raphinha found the net in a breakaway in the 58th. Torres scored the fourth from inside the area in the 67th, a few minutes after coming off the bench, and Yamal sealed it after a nice run in the 75th.

Vitor Roque scored Betis' lone goal by converting an 84th-minute penalty kick.

Atletico Madrid, playing without many regular starters, routed second-division club Elche 4-0 to extend its record winning streak to 15 matches.

The club had never won more than 13 games in a row across all competitions before.

Alexander Sorloth scored from close range in the eighth and converted a 29th-minute penalty kick. Rodrigo Riquelme scored the third from long range in the 61st, and Julián Alvarez closed the scoring in the 75th.

Elche played a man down from the 50th after Nicolás Fernández was sent off with a second yellow card.

Álvaro Rodríguez scored two minutes into the match as Getafe won 1-0 at fourth-division club Pontevedra. (AP)

## NCA's Sitanshu named India's batting coach; Nayar under pressure

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** Former Saurashtra batter Sitanshu Kotak was on Thursday named India's batting coach ahead of the upcoming limited-overs series against England and the Champions Trophy next month after assistant coach Abhishek Nayar's performance came under scrutiny during the tour of Australia.

The 52-year-old Kotak is a longtime staff of the National Cricket Academy as its batting coach. He has been on tours with both the senior and A teams during the past few years.

"It is clear that Abhishek Nayar's expertise isn't helping the players. Kotak has been a specialist batting coach for a lengthy period of time and has also got the trust of the players," a senior BCCI official told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

The Indian batters were found wanting on the technical front in Australia with Virat Kohli's outside the off stump troubles becoming a recurring problem. The Indians lost the five-match series

1-3.

Kotak was considered a dogged left-hander during his in domestic cricket, where he amassed over 8,000 first-class runs, including 15 hundreds, in 130 appearances.

He was particularly known for two strokes -- the cover drive when the ball used to be pitched up and the flick when it was pitched on pads.

It is understood that this could be a one-off appointment as away series against England is still some time away in June.

The home engagement against the same side starts on January 22 and features five T20 Internationals and three ODIs.

"We have an India A shadow tour and Kotak normally handles the A team. He is a qualified Level 3 coach and has assisted VVS Laxman in the past and was also the head coach when India toured Ireland last year. Since he is NCA staff, he can be put anywhere," the source added. (PTI)

## India women must make this year their best in ODIs: Mandhana

**RAJKOT, Jan 16:** Smriti Mandhana believes India's back-to-back 3-0 series wins against the West Indies and Ireland have provided the perfect momentum for making it their "best year in one-dayers" as the team gears up for the 50-over World Cup at home.

India will host the women's ODI World Cup later this year and the team, which has been able to rediscover its form with six consecutive ODI wins, should drive home the advantage now, says Mandhana.

"Two 3-0 sweeps are definitely really good in a World Cup year especially. We have to like keep going and have this for the best year for one-dayers (days)," Mandhana said in a video shared by BCCI.

Mandhana (135) and Pratika Rawal (154) put on 233 for the first wicket for the third highest opening wicket partnership for

India in ODIs, setting up their highest ever total of 435/5 and eventually for their biggest ever ODI win by 304 runs on Wednesday.

"I wanted to go out and bat with a lot of freedom. I said in the dugout before I went in



about that you know, I'm going to try and play my shots because not many times you get an opportunity to do that," Mandhana said.

Rawal, who notched up her first hundred to make 154 off 129 balls with 20 fours and one

six, admitted she slowed down nearing her century but gained pace of scoring once she was past the landmark.

"As a batter I always wanted to score more runs and doing that for your country is actually a privilege and I am very happy," she said.

"After (crossing) 70 (runs) I was a bit conscious that there was a hundred (on the cards). I was taking singles and going slow but when I got the hundred, I was like, let's just go for it. The 50 runs after the hundred came a bit quicker. I was able to score the way I score," she said.

Talking about her 233-run opening stand with the senior batter, Rawal said, "It felt like that was happening with the flow, we didn't think about it."

"We got to know stats now, actually," Mandhana added. (PTI)

## Willow that saved the follow-on: When Kohli asked Akash Deep 'Tumko bat chahiye?'

**NEW DELHI, Jan 16:** "Who wouldn't want it, Bhaiyya?" It was all that a shy Akash Deep could blurt out when Virat Kohli asked if he would like to own one of his bats that ultimately scripted a rare happy memory in an otherwise devastating tour of Australia for Team India.

The newest pace bowling workhorse in the Indian dressing room bowled nearly 88 overs (87.5 overs) for his five wickets across the two Tests that he played in the five-match rubber.

But it was his follow-on and eventually match-saving 31 at the Gabba that garnered attention. India, however, lost the series 1-3 to surrender the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

"Yes, that was Virat Bhaiyya's bat, the one with MRF logo, everyone

knows," Akash Deep said, breaking into a chuckle during an exclusive interaction with PTI.

When asked about the sequence of events which led to that moment, the Bengal speedster fondly said, "Bhaiyya (Kohli) ne khud mujhse pucha 'Tumko bat chahiye?' (Virat Bhaiyya asked me, do you need a bat?)." "Maine bola 'Haan Bhaiyya, aapka bat kaun nahi lena chahega duniya mein?' Then he presented it to me," Akash Deep recalled.

The 28-year-old admitted that it was impossible for him to be upfront with a senior player of Kohli's stature and ask for his most precious equipment.

"I have been there with Bhaiyya (Kohli) for some time now (they are teammates in Royal Challengers

Bengaluru). But you always have that thing at the back of your mind, whether it is the right thing to ask for a bat from someone of Virat Bhaiyya's stature.

"Especially during match time, when he is focussed and in his zone, you don't want to disturb him but Bhaiyya, on his own, gave me the bat," he was a trifle chuffed about that bit.

Asked to revisit his last-wicket stand of 47 with Jasprit Bumrah in the drawn Brisbane Test, the Sasaram-born cricketer said he was very clear with his plans.

"That day, my mindset was that I was ready to get hit and take any number of body blows but won't get out. I needed to score runs...I had to bat as long as possible. It wasn't as

if (saving) follow-on was on my mind," Akash Deep explained his thought-process.

"In my mind, I knew the longer I would bat, our batters would have to bat for reduced amount of time in the second essay. That particular day, I was watching the ball well," he said.

His effort was expectedly lauded by the entire team but what made Akash Deep more happy was the reaction of Indian fans.

"...I would remember it forever. I didn't envisage that just because of that batting effort, how many millions felt relieved and happy that day. That evening, I got to know from social media how happy people were. The dressing room was obviously happy," he said.

He might not have got more than five wickets but nearly 30 overs (29.5) in the first innings at the Gabba and another 26 overs in the first innings in Melbourne have earned him the workhorse tag.

Akash Deep was unlucky that crucial catches ended up being dropped off some of his lethal deliveries.

"Rohit Bhaiyya had a lot of trust in me that I can take wickets anytime, 'Woh bolte hai ki mujhko lagta hai tum har ball pe wicket le sakte ho' (You can take wickets with every delivery)," he proudly said.

The brief given to him by the skipper and team management was simple -- he would bowl one line consistently and let the pitch and batters do the rest. (PTI)