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## B'desh HC commutes Paresh Baruah's life term



**DHAKA, Jan 15:** Bangladesh High Court has reduced the life sentence of ULFA leader Paresh Baruah to 14 years imprisonment in connection with an attempt to smuggle truckloads of weapons to the hideouts of the separatist group in Assam two decades ago.

Last month, the court had commuted Baruah's death sentence to life imprisonment.

Baruah, the United Liberation Front of Asom's military commander who is believed to be living in China, was sentenced to death after a trial in absentia in 2014. His name also figures in the 'most wanted' list of India's National Investigation Agency (NIA). "The two-judge bench commuted the life

imprisonment of Baruah and four Bangladeshis," an official of the attorney general's bureau said on Wednesday.

The High Court on Tuesday acquitted former Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) state minister for home affairs Lutuzzaman Babar and five others, who were sentenced to life imprisonment in the same case.

The court also commuted the prison sentences of five more convicts, including Baruah. The bench also declared abetted (ended) the appeals of other three accused as they died. Truckloads of weapons were seized in April 2004 that were being transported to ULFA hideouts in northeastern India through Chattogram, which was then spelled as 'Chittagong'.

The seized weapons included over 27,000 grenades, 150 rocket launchers, over 11 lakh ammunition, 1,100 sub machine guns and 11.41 million bullets.

One case was filed under the Special Powers Act 1974 for smuggling of firearms and the other under the Arms Act for illegal possession of arms.

Former junior minister Lutuzzaman Babar, ex-forces (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Five trapped workers yet to be traced

Dewatering continues in Dima Hasao mine ● Divers to go inside quarry only after the water level recedes

**GUWAHATI, Jan 15:** Dewatering continued in the coal quarry in Assam's Dima Hasao district, with the authorities failing to trace the five workers who are still trapped inside for 10 days.

Water was pumped out of the mine using machines brought by the ONGC and Coal India, and the water level has gone down considerably.

Dewatering is being carried out with the help of nine pumps while six others are on standby, the official said.

Nine workers had been trapped inside the mine on January 6 when the quarry was flooded. Four bodies were recovered since then.

The water level, which was initially at 100 ft, is coming down gradually and the current level is being ascertained, he said.

Divers will go inside the quarry only after the water level recedes to search for the trapped miners.

The four bodies were found floating



on the water with navy, army and NDRF divers bringing them out.

The first body was recovered last Wednesday and three others on Satur-

day. Navy divers who were requisitioned for rescue operations since the second day of the tragedy have been withdrawn and moved out of the incident site, an official said.

The rescue operations were being carried out jointly by the army, Assam Rifles, NDRF, SDRF and district administration since the first day.

"The hope of survival of the remaining trapped miners appears to be waning as they remain trapped for the ninth day but the rescue operations will continue," the official said.

An underwater Remote Operating Vehicle (ROV) is also being sent inside the quarry at regular intervals to capture images of the trapped miner, the official added.

The chief minister had earlier claimed that the mine was abandoned 12 years ago and was under the Assam Mineral Development Corporation till three years ago. (PTI)

### HT BRIEFS

#### Man killed

**GUWAHATI:** A night of drinking among friends in Guwahati's Kahilipara locality turned fatal, leaving a 29-year-old man dead and four of his companions behind bars, as reported in a news bulletin. The victim, Akash Choudhury, a Rapido rider by night, was murdered after an altercation during a drinking session with his friends on Tuesday night. The incident occurred at around 8:45 PM at a local shop near the Kahilipara Power House. During the altercation, Akash was severely assaulted and allegedly thrown in front of an oncoming vehicle, worsening his injuries. Following the attack, one of the accused, Jiyarul Ali, rushed Akash to Hayat Hospital in an auto rickshaw. Despite their efforts to save him, Akash was declared dead at 9:15 PM. The four accused Banjit Rajbongshi (27), Jiyarul Ali (28), Debabrat Mallik (27), and Tarun Buragohain (25) were arrested by the police. According to Jiyarul, the group had been drinking together when Akash became heavily intoxicated. Jiyarul claimed that he asked Akash to come down from the upper level of the shop, but the situation soon escalated into violence, although the exact circumstances remain unclear.

#### Dismantle plant

**GUWAHATI:** Assam could soon become home to a major aircraft dismantling facility, with Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announcing that talks are underway with a company interested in establishing a plant in the state, a press release said on Wednesday. Speaking at a felicitation ceremony for outstanding students in Pandu, Sarma revealed that the company is exploring the possibility of setting up a Boeing aircraft dismantling plant in Assam. The proposed facility would involve bringing decommissioned Boeing aircraft from around the globe to Assam, where they would be dismantled and processed. Meanwhile, the project is still in its initial stages, with discussions focused on securing the required land for the facility.

## 'US must not become complacent to growing terrorism threat'

**MCLEAN, Jan 15:** Brett Holmgren got woken up early on New Year's Day by alerts that a driver had plowed into a crowd of revellers in New Orleans.

The rampage, which killed 14 people, was the deadliest attack on US soil in years and was inspired by the Islamic State group. The National Counterterrorism Centre, which Holmgren leads, sprang into action to help the FBI run down information on the culprit from Texas and his plot.

It was a rare recent example of a mass attack motivated by religious extremism to hit the US homeland. But it didn't occur in a vacuum, coming at a time when a terror threat that has waxed and waned in the two decades since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks is decidedly on the rise around the world.

"We are in a period where we are

facing an elevated threat environment," Holmgren said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We faced that last year. We're going to face it again in 2025."

The NCTC emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 as a centralised US government hub to collect and analyze data and intelligence on the international terrorism threat, providing information to the White House and other agencies to shape policy decisions and protect against attacks.

A former counterterrorism analyst and assistant secretary of state, Holmgren was named its acting director last July and intends to step aside at the conclusion of the Biden administration. At that point, new leadership under President-elect Donald Trump will grapple with managing some of the global hot spots like Syria that have vexed (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Centre to give financial, executive, legislative autonomy to FNT

### HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, Jan 15:** The Central government has agreed, 'in principle,' to grant financial, executive, and legislative autonomy to the proposed Frontier Nagaland Territory (FNT), a unique arrangement for the six eastern districts of Nagaland.

Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) president Chingmak Chang disclosed this to media persons after coming out of nearly six-hour-long second round of tripartite talks between the ENPO, government of India and state government representatives at Chumoukiedima police complex on Wednesday evening.

Chang asserted that the ENPO should not sign any document without financial, executive and legislative autonomy.

He, however, added, "They did

give us anything in writing but we have discussed all issues thoroughly."

The central government officials was led by northeast adviser, ministry of home affairs, AK Mishra, who is also the Centre's interlocutor for Nagaland talks, ENPO team by its president Chang and state government representatives by additional chief secretary Sentiyanger Inchen in today's talks.

The first round of tripartite talks on the FNT issue was held in New Delhi on December 13 last year.

Asked about the demand of the eight tribal bodies under ENPO that a solution nothing below executive, legislative and financial autonomy should be accepted by the ENPO, Chang said this was the offer of the government of India.

"Our demand was for separate

statehood but the government of India offered the FNT. We hope that the government of India is serious and the solution will be acceptable and honourable to the ENPO," he said.

Chang further said they could not come to a conclusion only in a few key issues among many key issues included in their proposal in today's meeting.

He further hoped that the next round of talks will be held very soon. Chang also said they requested the central government representatives to allot a separate battalion or regiment of central forces to deal with the unemployment issue in the ENPO areas and enhancement and modernisation of village guards, which they accepted. The ENPO has been demanding a separate state (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Buffalo fights held in Nagaon, defying court ban

### HT Correspondent

**NAGAON, Jan 15:** A buffalo fighting event was organized on Wednesday in Ahatguri in Morigaon district, as well as at Jamuna Jalah near the Moukhati area in Nagaon district, on the occasion of Magh Bihu, despite a strict ban imposed by the court.

Notably, the organising committee had previously announced that they would not hold the event due to the court's ban. However, buffalo caretakers and owners defied the ban, citing the significance of the event in the Bhogali Bihu celebrations.

The event saw a large turnout, with thousands of spectators gathering to watch the buffalo fights. The atmosphere was charged with excitement, as traditional drums and pipes (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Rahul triggers row with 'fighting Indian state' remark

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday said his party was fighting the "BJP, RSS and the Indian state itself", triggering a row with the BJP alleging that everything the leader of opposition in Lok Sabha does or says is in the direction of breaking India and dividing the society.

Speaking at the inauguration of the new Congress headquarters here, Gandhi also hit out at RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, saying his remark that India got "true independence" after the Ram temple consecration amounts to treason and is an insult to every Indian.

"Do not think that we are fighting a fair fight. There is no fairness in this. If you believe that we are fighting a political organisation called the BJP, that we are fighting a political organisation called the RSS, you have not understood what is going on."

"The BJP and the RSS have captured every single institution of our

country. We are now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian state itself," he said addressing Congress leaders.

The remark drew sharp criticism from the BJP, with party chief and Union minister J P Nadda saying the Congress' "ugly truth" has been exposed by its own leader.

Nadda alleged on X that it is not a secret that Gandhi and his ecosystem have close links with urban Naxals and the deep state who want to "defame, demean and discredit" India. "Hidden no more, Congress' ugly truth now stands exposed by their own leader," Nadda said.

"I compliment Mr. Rahul Gandhi for saying clearly what the nation knows—that he is fighting the Indian state!" he said, alleging that the Congress has a history of encouraging forces that want to weaken India.

Everything he has done or said has been in the direction of breaking India and dividing our society,

Nadda alleged.

Union minister and senior BJP leader Nirmala Sitharaman said, "The LoP, who was sworn in by taking oath on the Constitution, is now saying, 'We are now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian State itself.' So, @INCIndia and @RahulGandhi, what for are you carrying a copy of the Constitution in your hand?" Addressing party leaders at Indira Gandhi Bhawan, Gandhi said they are fighting this battle of ideologies under difficult circumstances where institutions have been "captured" by the BJP and the RSS and investigative agencies are being used against opposition leaders.

He also hit out at the Election Commission and alleged there is a "serious problem" with the country's election system and the poll body needs to come clean on the issue of voter lists in Maharashtra and Haryana elections.

He said the Congress was getting its new (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## ED gets MHA sanction to prosecute Kejriwal in excise policy case

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** The Union Home Ministry has granted sanction to the Enforcement Directorate to prosecute former Delhi chief minister and AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal in the excise policy linked money laundering case, officials said on Wednesday.

The federal agency filed a chargesheet against the 56-year-old politician before a special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court here last year after arresting him in March.

Kejriwal, who is currently out on bail in this case, is contesting the Delhi Assembly polls from the New Delhi seat.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has recently granted the required sanction to the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for prosecuting Kejriwal under the anti-money laundering law in the Delhi excise policy case, officials said.

The ministry is the competent authority to okay such a request



moved by the agency through the Delhi LG, they said.

The officials said similar sanctions have also been obtained for other accused public servants, including former Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia, in this case.

The development comes ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls slated to be held on February 5.

The agency is now seeking such sanction against all accused political leaders, ministers and bureaucrats under Section 197(1) of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) against whom it (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Five held with contraband worth more than ₹ 3 crore

**GUWAHATI, Jan 15:** Five suspected peddlers have been arrested and contraband worth over ₹ 3 crore seized in separate operations in Assam's Cachar district, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Wednesday.

One operation was conducted at Silchar Bypass and the other at Sonai, he said.

"Carrying forward our anti-narcotics ops, @cacharpolice carried out 2 operations," Sarma posted on X.

During the operation at Silchar Bypass, two persons were arrested with 88 grams of heroin worth ₹ 60 lakh, he said.

In the other operation in Sonai, three persons were held and 9,000 Yaba tablets worth ₹ 3 crore recovered from them.

Yaba tablets are illegal in India, a Schedule II substance under the Controlled Substances Act. (PTI)

## 'I firmly believe Manipur will see a boost in trade, travel and tourism'

# NE reaping benefits of Act East Policy due to double engine govt's efforts: Minister

**IMPHAL, Jan 15:** Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu Kinjarapu on Wednesday said that Manipur and the northeastern region are reaping benefits of the Act East policy of the NDA government through "double efforts of the double engine government".

Naidu also said that his ministry implemented a dedicated scheme for air connectivity in the region under which the government providing viability gap funding to Alliance Air for connecting destinations in the NE.

The union minister was speaking at the launch of three new flights of Alliance Air under the Ministry of Civil Aviation, in a joint venture with the Manipur government.

The airlines will connect the Ma-



nipur capital Imphal with Kolkata, Guwahati, and Dimapur in Nagaland.

"Because of these new routes, I firmly believe Manipur will see a

boost in trade, travel and tourism," Naidu said.

He appreciated Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh for his commitment to make these flights a re-

ality.

"We are working together to bring Manipur closer to the rest of the country. I must say that with the double efforts of the double engine government, Manipur and the entire northeast is reaping the benefits of the Act East policy of the NDA government," he said.

In the last 10 years, the number of airports in the NE region has doubled from nine in 2014 to 19 now, the minister said.

"We are providing viability gap funding to Alliance Air for connecting destinations in the northeast region using ATR aircraft," Naidu said.

Since the launch of the Udaan scheme, 10 airports and two heliports have (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## India, Oman aiming to seal mega trade deal soon

**MUSCAT, Jan 15:** India and Oman are looking at sealing a broad trade and investment pact this year that will cut tariffs on each other's goods and boost the overall trade basket in line with renewed vigour in the relations, especially in the economic sphere.

The negotiations for a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) gained new momentum after Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tarik travelled to India over a year back.

Omani Commerce Minister Qais bin Muhammad Al-Yousef told PTI that Muscat is hopeful of concluding the ambitious trade pact with India this year that is expected to significantly expand the two-way trade and investment ties between the two countries.

There has been a major upswing in economic ties between the two countries in the last few years, with India emerging as one of the top trading partners of Oman.

India was the fourth largest market for Oman's crude oil exports for



the year 2023 after South Korea. India was also the third largest market for Oman's non-oil exports in 2023 after Saudi Arabia.

"The comprehensive economic partnership agreement is still under negotiations," the Omani Commerce Minister said.

"We already had several rounds of negotiations...we will see how it progresses," Al-Yousef said in an interaction with a group of visiting journalists.

A fresh round of negotiations was held in New Delhi on January 13 and 14, and it is learnt that progress has been made on a number of areas.

Al-Yousef said Oman is keen to expand overall trade relations with India and that there is a lot of inter-

est from Indian investors in Oman.

"We have several larger investors (from India) having shown interest in Oman and they are planning for the future," he said, without elaborating.

Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, Oman is also looking at reducing its reliance on oil revenues by focusing on clean energy sources and promoting various other sectors in line with Oman's 'Vision 2040'.

The 'Vision 2040' is a roadmap for Oman's economic and social development for the period of 2021-2040. It was approved by Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik in 2020 and then it was put into action in January 2021. The Omani Commerce Minister also complimented India for its impressive economic growth in the last over 20 years, calling the "achievements" and economic growth rate "very impressive".

"The people of India really worked hard to achieve economic growth. The growth in the digital transformation, science, technology and many (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



# Exports contract 1 pc in December

## Trade deficit narrows to about USD 22 bn

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** India's trade deficit narrowed to USD 21.94 billion in December after last month's shocking surge to a lifetime high on the back of miscalculations in gold imports, government data showed on Wednesday.

Exports contracted for the second month in a row by about one per cent year-on-year to USD 38.01 billion due to global uncertainties, while imports rose by about 5 per cent to USD 59.95 billion.

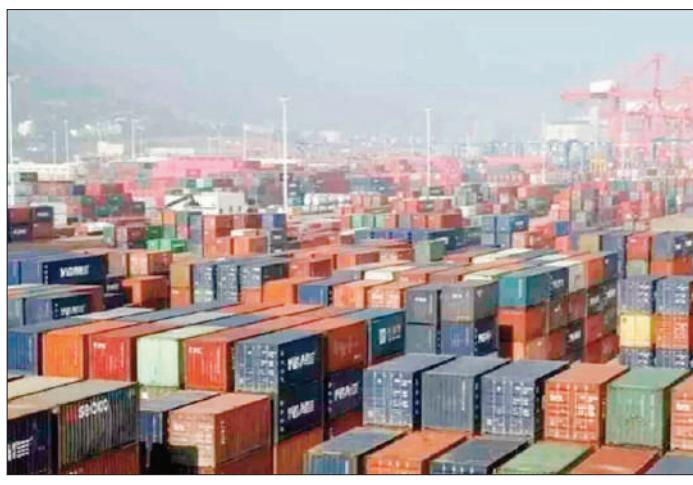
Key export sectors, including petroleum, gems and jewellery, and chemicals, have registered negative growth during the month under review.

Petroleum product shipments have declined by 28.62 per cent to USD 4.91 billion last month. During the first nine months of this fiscal also, these exports contracted by 20.84 per cent year-on-year to USD 49 billion.

However, textiles, electronics, engineering, rice and marine products recorded healthy growth in December 2024.

Cumulatively, during April-December this fiscal, exports recorded a growth of 1.6 per cent to USD 321.71 billion and imports by 5.15 per cent to USD 532.48 billion.

Trade deficit, the difference between imports and exports, during April-December widened to USD 210.77 billion from USD 189.74 billion during the same period previous fiscal.



Briefing the media on the latest data, Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said that India's exports are doing better than other countries both in goods and services.

"This shows the resiliency of our exports. In all the three quarters of this fiscal also, we have done better. We are doing much better in non-petroleum exports," he told reporters here.

The ministry has recently held a meeting with commercial wings of Indian Missions in 20 countries to deliberate on issues impacting exports and ways to resolve them.

These 20 countries account for about 60 per cent of India's exports.

In December last year, Barthwal said sectors which have registered healthy growth in exports included electronics, engineering and pharmaceuticals.

When asked about the revision of gold and silver import data for November 2024, the secretary said a committee has been set up to create a robust mechanism for publishing consistent data.

The government revised gold import data for November 2024, bringing down numbers by USD 5 billion to USD 9.84 billion.

As per the revised data, exports in November 2024 were down by 5.06 per cent to USD 32.03 billion, while imports rose by 16 per cent to USD 63.86 billion. The trade deficit stood at USD 31.83 billion.

"The data revision keeps on happening...we are following global practices of data release," Barthwal said.

Gold imports during the month under review rose by 55.4 per cent to USD 4.7 billion against USD 3 billion in December 2023. On the

other hand, silver imports jumped by 211 per cent to USD 421.91 million.

Raw cotton raw waste, used in the textiles industry, saw a surge in imports from USD 29.47 million in December 2023 to USD 142.89 million last month.

As per estimates, services export in December 2024 increased to USD 32.66 billion compared to USD 31.63 billion a year ago.

During April-December 2024-25, the exports rose by 11.61 per cent to USD 280.94 billion from USD 251.71 billion in the same period previous fiscal.

In December, India's shipment rose positively to the US, Saudi Arabia, France, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

During the month, the top five import sources were China, Switzerland, Thailand, Germany and the US.

Commenting on the data, Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) President Ashwani Kumar said the decline can be attributed to volatility in commodity and metal prices, along with ongoing international trade disruptions and currency fluctuations.

Geopolitical tensions in the Gulf region further exacerbated logistical challenges, affecting export flows to key markets like Europe, Africa, and the CIS (commonwealth of independent states), he said.

Kumar said there is an urgent need for enhanced support in the upcoming Budget. (PTI)

## Meta India apologises for CEO Zuckerbergs remark on India elections

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** Meta India on Wednesday apologised for CEO Mark Zuckerberg's remarks that the incumbent government in India lost power in the 2024 elections due to its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and termed it an "inadvertent error".

The apology came within days of Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw slamming remarks made by Zuckerberg as "misinformation", and asserting that Meta must uphold facts and credibility.

On Tuesday, BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, who heads the Parliament's Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology, made it clear that the panel will summon Meta over Zuckerberg's comments. Meta India's Vice President Shivnath Thakral took to X on Wednesday to tender an apology on behalf of the company.

"Dear Honourable Minister @AshwiniVaishnaw, Mark's observation that many incumbent parties were not re-elected in 2024 elections holds true for several countries, BUT not India."

"We would like to apologise for this inadvertent error. India remains an incredibly important country for @Meta and we look forward to being at the heart of its innovative future," he wrote.

Vaishnaw, earlier this week, had called out the remarks made by Zuckerberg on the Joe Rogan podcast.

"Mr Zuckerberg's claim that most incumbent governments, including India, in 2024 elections, lost post-COVID is factually incorrect," Vaishnaw had said in a post on X (formerly Twitter) on January 13.

"As the world's largest democracy, India conducted the 2024 elections with over 640 million voters. People of India reaffirmed their trust in NDA led by PM

@narendramodi Ji's leadership," said Vaishnaw, who is Minister for Information and Broadcasting as well as IT. The minister had expressed disappointment at Zuckerberg's remarks and had debunked the statement by the Meta honcho as "misinformation".

"From free food for 800 million, 2.2 billion free vaccines, and aid to nations worldwide during COVID, to leading India as the fastest-growing major economy, PM Modi's decisive 3rd-term victory is a testament to good governance and public trust. @Meta, it's disappointing to see misinformation from Mr Zuckerberg himself. Let's uphold facts and credibility," Vaishnaw had said. Meanwhile, Dubey on Wednesday said he treated the matter of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's remarks on Indian elections as "closed" after an official of the social networking platform tendered the apology. "A Meta India official has finally apologised for the mistake. This is a victory of the common citizens of India," Dubey said in a post on X.

Zuckerberg had triggered a row by claiming in the podcast interview that the Indian government lost the election in 2024 due to its weak COVID-19 response. He had said that 2024 was the big election year around the world and that in a lot of countries like India, the incumbents lost the polls.

"There is some sort of global phenomena, whether it was inflation because of the economic policies to deal with Covid or just how the governments dealt with Covid, seems to have this effect that is global, not just the US, but like a very broad decrease in trust, at least in that set of incumbents and maybe, in sort of these democratic institutions overall," the Facebook founder had said. (PTI)

"Traders may take cues from CPI data from US and speeches from various Fed speakers today. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 86.25 to Rs 86.65," he added.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.22 per cent lower at 108.87. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.35 per cent to USD 80.20 per barrel in futures trade.

In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 224.45 points, or 0.29 per cent, to settle at 76,724.08 points, while the Nifty rose 37.15 points, or 0.16 per cent, to 23,213.20 points. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 8,132.26 crore on Tuesday. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Centre to give financial, executive

carved out of Nagaland for six eastern districts and boycotted the Lok Sabha and civic body elections last year to press for its demand.

## Buffalo fights held in Nagaon

added to the festive mood. Interestingly, despite the court's order, no action was taken by the district or police administration to stop the event. Police personnel were seen standing by passively as the event took place.

The buffalo fighting event was also held at Jamuna Jalah near the Moukhati area in Nagaon district, where hundreds of people participated.

This event underscored the cultural importance of buffalo fighting in Assam, especially during the Bhogali Bihu celebrations.

## ED gets MHA sanction

has filed chargesheets or is about to file. This came after the Supreme Court's November 2024 ruling which said such a procedure has to be undertaken by the ED like the CBI.

Kejriwal has been made an accused in his personal capacity as well as in the capacity of being the national convener of the AAP.

The former chief minister was called the "kingpin and key conspirator" of the Delhi excise "scam" by the ED. It was alleged that he acted in collusion with Delhi government ministers, the AAP leaders and others.

The ED had earlier claimed that AAP, being a political party, is defined as an association or a body of individual citizens of India under the Representation of the People Act and hence it can be categorised as a "company" as contemplated under Section 70 of the PMLA.

As Kejriwal was "in-charge of and responsible" for the said company i.e. AAP during the time of offence, he and his party "shall be deemed guilty" of offences mentioned under the anti-money laundering law and liable to be prosecuted and punished, it said.

The excise case pertained to alleged corruption and money laundering in formulating and executing the Delhi government's excise policy for 2021-22, which was later scrapped.

Delhi Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena had recommended a CBI probe into the alleged irregularities. Subsequently, the ED registered a case under the PMLA. Taking cognisance of a CBI FIR lodged on August 17, 2022, the ED filed its money laundering case on August 22, 2022 to probe the alleged irregularities. (PTI)

## Rahul triggers row with

headquarters at a time when the RSS chief has stated that India never achieved independence in 1947 and that true independence in India was achieved when the Ram mandir was built. Bhagwat, he claimed, had said that the Constitution was not the symbol of our freedom.

"Mohan Bhagwat has the audacity to say to the nation what he thinks about the independence movement and the Constitution. In fact, what he said yesterday is treason... Because he is stating that the Constitution is invalid and everything, the fight against the British was invalid."

"He has the audacity to say this publicly. In any other country, he would be arrested and tried. That is a fact," Gandhi said. "To say that India did not get independence in 1947 is an insult to every single Indian person. And it is time to stop listening to this nonsense that these people think they can keep parroting out and shouting and screaming," he said.

"Mohan Bhagwat's audacious comment that India didn't gain true independence in 1947 is an insult to our freedom fighters, every single Indian citizen and an attack on our Constitution," Gandhi later said in a post on X.

The former Congress chief said the party has worked with the Indian people and built the success of this country on the foundations of the Constitution and that is what the new Congress headquarters symbolises.

"It is important that we take ideas from this building and spread them in the rest of the country," he said.

This building has emerged from the blood of our Congress people and not just Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Patel ji, he noted.

Gandhi said, "We are fighting a civilisational war with these people, they are attacking every day the ideas that we believe in" and asserted that only the Congress can fight the BJP and the RSS.

Noting that everyone in this room is under severe assault defending the ideas of the Congress party, he said, "But these people are facing systematic attack on them". The former Congress chief said there is no other party in this country that can stop them. The only party that can stop them is the Congress and there is a reason for it and the reason is that we are an ideological party and our ideology did not emerge yesterday, he said. Attacking the BJP, he alleged, "People who are in power today do not salute the tricolour, do not believe in the national flag, do not believe in the Constitution. And, they have a completely different vision of India than we do. They want India to be run by a shady, hidden secret society, they want India to be run by one man and they want to crush the voice of this country."

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge also condemned Bhagwat's remarks and warned that "it would become difficult for him to move around in the country if he continues to make such statements".

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said Bhagwat's latest pronouncement is not just astonishing but downright anti-national and he should apologise for his "outrageous" remarks. (PTI)

## India, Oman aiming to seal

other sectors," he said. Omani Sultan Tarik visited India in December 2023 during which he held extensive talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In their talks, the two leaders adopted a vision document to shore up bilateral engagement in 10 key areas.

The two sides had also announced the third tranche of USD 300 million for the Oman-India joint investment fund, which is a 50-50 venture between the State Bank of India and the Oman Investment Authority to channelise investments into the fastest growing sectors of the Indian economy. According to the think-tank GTRI (Global Trade Research Institute), Indian goods worth USD 3.7 billion like gasoline, iron and steel, electronics, and machinery will get a significant boost in Oman if the trade deal is sealed.

Currently, over 80 per cent of its goods enter Oman at an average of 5 per cent import duties, a GTRI report has said.

Oman's import duty ranges from 0 to 100 per cent, along with the existence of specific duties. A duty of 100 per cent is applicable on specific meats, wines and tobacco products.

Al-Yousef said the two sides will review the implementation of various decisions taken at the talks between the two leaders around a year back in a joint commission meeting soon.

Asked about the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEEC), the Omani Commerce Minister said it is a well-come move as any connectivity project that eases transportation is helpful for trade to grow.

In terms of the corridor, any sort of corridor, if it eases business and trade, is always welcome, he said.

Billed as a pathbreaking initiative, the IMEEC envisages a vast road, railroad and shipping networks among India, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Europe with an aim to ensure integration among Asia, the Middle East and the West. The IMEEC was signed up on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in September last year in Delhi. An agreement was signed by India, Saudi Arabia, the European Union, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the US and some other G20 partners for the corridor. (PTI)

## NE reaping benefits of

been operationalised in the region while 12 helicopter routes have also started functioning, he said. "Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim which earlier lacked air connectivity are now successfully connected under Udaan. We have invested more than Rs 500 crore on the development of airports and heliports in the northeast under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi," Naidu said. (PTI)

## B'desh HC commutes Paresh

intelligence (DGFI) chief major general Rezzakul Haider Chowdhury, ex-managing director of a state-run fertilizer plant Mohsin Talukder, its general manager Enamul Hoque, former additional secretary of industries ministry Nurul Amin and Jamaat-e-Islami leader Motiur Rahman Nizami were handed down death penalty in the cases. Baruah and four others were handed down life imprisonment in both the cases.

In the latest verdict, the bench said the prosecution could not prove the charges brought against all accused regarding actual control and possession of the firearms mentioned in the case.

"The conviction and sentence in criminal cases cannot be handed out without credible evidence," a defence counsel quoted the court observation as saying.

Motiur Rahman Nizami, former Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami Nizami, who was the industries minister of the then prime minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led alliance government too was handed down death sentence in the case.

However, in May 2016, he was executed in another case on crimes against humanity committed during the Liberation War in 1971. (PTI)

## US must not become

officials in recent months and that the NCTC has been tracking. Holmgren cites multiple factors for why the threat is higher than before, including passions arising from the Israel-Hamas war — a conflict that he says has been a driving factor in some 45 attacks worldwide since October 2023. He also points to mass migration from the Russia-Ukraine war that has sent central Asians, some with ties to the Islamic State group, to countries including Turkey, Syria, Iraq and even the U.S. Around the world, officials are monitoring tensions in Africa, which Holmgren called potentially the greatest long-term threat to U.S. security given that the Islamic State group has a large footprint on the continent and is investing resources there.

He says the "most potent overseas threat facing the United States" right now is the group's Afghanistan-based affiliate, known as Islamic State-Khorasan, whose attacks include a March 2024 massacre at a Moscow theater and the August 2021 bombing that killed 13 U.S. service members and about 170 Afghans in the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

One ongoing spot of concern is Syria, where an insurgent group named Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, led a lightning offensive last month that toppled the government of President Bashar Assad.

HTS is a Sunni Islamist group that formerly had ties with al-Qaida, although its leader has preached religious coexistence since taking over in Damascus. The group has not plotted against US interests in recent years and has been "the most effective counterterrorism partner on the ground," Holmgren said.

HTS has been designated by the State Department as a foreign terror organization, a label that carries severe sanctions. Asked whether that designation would remain, Holmgren said that was a policy decision, though he noted: "They want to be perceived as being on the right side of the international community at this time when it comes to (counterterrorism). But we will continue to evaluate not just their words but also the actions that they're undertaking."

In an indication of Syria's continued instability, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin told The Associated Press last week that the US needs to keep troops there to prevent the Islamic State group from reconstituting, and intelligence officials in Syria's new de facto government already have thwarted a plan by IS to set off a bomb at a Shiite shrine in a Damascus suburb. (AP)

## IDBI Bank announces launch of Super Senior Citizen FD

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Jan 15:** IDBI Bank on Wednesday announced the launch of the 'IDBI Chiranjeevi-Super Senior Citizen FD,' a special Fixed Deposit product which is aimed at addressing the financial needs of individuals aged 80 years and above.

This initiative offers an additional 65 basis points (bps) over the Bank's standard Fixed Deposit rates and 15 basis points (bps) over the Senior Citizen rates, an official statement said.

The statement further highlighted its offers starting with 8.05% per annum for a 555 day tenure alongside 7.90% per annum for 375 days; 8.00% per annum for 444 days; 7.85% per annum for 700 days.

Speaking on the launch, Sumit Phakka, deputy managing director at IDBI Bank, said, "This offer provides this esteemed segment with a safe and secure investing option, guaranteeing their financial security and peace of mind."

## Rupee extends gains, settles 13 paise higher at 86.40 against US dollar

**MUMBAI, Jan 15:** The rupee extended its recovery for the second straight session and settled with a gain of 13 paise at 86.40 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday, tracking favourable cues from domestic equity markets and softening crude oil prices.

The American currency index also descended from a record peak, adding to the gaining momentum in the local unit, though it remained under pressure from continuous exit of foreign institutional investors, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.50 and slipped to the intraday low of 86.55 against the greenback. It also touched A high of 86.28 before ending the session at 86.40 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 13 paise from its previous close.

On Tuesday, the rupee rebounded from its lowest-ever level and settled with a gain of 17 paise at 86.53 against the dollar.

Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the rupee gained for the second consecutive session on weak US dollar and soft US 10-year treasury yields. A pullback in the domestic equities and overnight decline in crude oil prices also favoured the rupee. However, FII outflows capped sharp gains.

Analysts attributed the weakening dollar to lower-than-expected producer price index, as per the latest data released in the US.

Going ahead, Choudhary said the US inflation is expected to remain elevated and it may lead to a recovery in the US dollar, which is likely to put pressure on the rupee.

## World's first robotic Cardiac Telesurgeries performed over a distance of 286 Km

### Using Made-in-India Surgical Robotic System, SSI Mantra

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Jan 15:** SS Innovations successfully performed two world-first robotic cardiac telesurgeries in just two days, a feat that has never been accomplished before.

This achievement has been made possible by the SSI Mantra 3 Surgical Robotic System, involved connecting SS Innovations' headquarters in Gurugram with Manipal Hospital in Jaipur, Rajasthan, spanning a distance of 286 kilometres.

The Telerobotic-assisted Internal Mammary Artery Harvesting procedure conducted remotely was successfully completed in just 58 minutes.

Led by Dr Sudhir Srivastava, Founder, Chairman, and CEO of SS Innovations International, Inc., from the SSI Headquarters in Gurugram, and supported by Dr Lalit Malik, Chief of Cardiac



Surgery at Manipal Hospital, Jaipur, the surgery demonstrated Jaipur, along with his expert exceptional precision with an in-team at the remote location in credibly low latency of just 35-

40 milliseconds (1/20th of a second).

This groundbreaking procedure was followed by another world-first, a Robotic Beating Heart Totally Endoscopic Coronary Artery Bypass (TECAB), a procedure known as one of the most complex Cardiac Surgical procedures; performed via telesurgery under the same collaboration, with an incredibly low latency of just 40 milliseconds.

Both surgeries connected Gurugram to Jaipur, and showcased seamless teamwork across long distances, setting a new standard for remote surgical interventions.

These achievements underscore the transformative potential of telesurgery in overcoming geographical barriers, enabling timely, high-quality medical care with unparalleled accuracy.



## Minister Jayanta Malla Baruah inaugurates Sivasagar BJP office

**HT Correspondent**

**SIVASAGAR, Jan 15:** Public Health Engineering minister Jayanta Malla Baruah on Wednesday inaugurated the new office building of the Sivasagar District BJP Office at AT Road near Sikh Gurudwara in the presence of the MLA Thowra Sushanta Borgohain, Sivasagar municipality chairperson Mrinallee Konwar, Sarabhi Rajkonwari, OBC committee chairperson, Mridusmita Sinha, president, Mahila Marcha, Ghana Gogoi, leader, AGP Rishiraj Hazarika, Sushila Goswami, and party workers.

Minister Jayantamalla Baruah, urged the party workers to work dedicatedly for the elections in 2026 and the Panchayat VC elections to be held after the HSLA and HSSLC Examinations in the state.

Baruah says the party works on



four principles of the 4Ks - Karma, Karmasuchi, Karmachari, and Kosh. The coordination of the four aspects is vitally important for the growth of an organisation.

The minister said that the time has come when big bridges, roads, and other massive development

works are being done without deterrent agitations by a section. Bitupon Raidongia, the new district president presided over the function and resolved to make a clean sweep in the 2026 elections with the cooperation of the party workers.

## Arunachal Guv presents Bharat Scouts & Guides Rajya Puraskar

**ITANAGAR, Jan 15:** Arunachal Pradesh Governor Lt Gen KT Parnaik (retd) on Wednesday presented the Bharat Scouts and Guides Rajya Puraskar to 69 scouts and 92 guides during a function at Raj Bhavan here.

Congratulating the awardees, Parnaik, the chief patron of Bharat Scouts and Guides State Association, said the award reflects their dedication, hard work, discipline and commitment to serving society, an official statement from Raj Bhavan said.

He said the award is not just a recognition, but a responsibility to continue serving with greater zeal. He exhorted the scouts and guides to uphold the values of discipline, service and patriotism and work for a stronger, united and developed India.

Parnaik said the Bharat Scouts and Guides State Association reflects the true process of how the young minds can be nurtured to become responsible citizens and good leaders.

He advised school students to join the scouts and guides movement, saying it is a wonderful platform to develop leadership skills, discipline, and a sense of responsibility.

Stating that the nation stands on the shoulders of its youth, the governor said, "As scouts and guides, you embody the spirit of 'nation first'".

Starting in Pasighat in 1948 with 24 boys, the movement now boasts 877 units in 439 schools with 13,183 members. (PTI)

## Jadav Payeng awarded

**HT Correspondent**

**BAKALIA, Jan 15:** Environmentalist Jadav Payeng was conferred Rongbong Terang Samanwaya Award 2025 in a function held at Bakaliaghat Anchalic Yuva Sangha Premises on January 13.

Padmashree Rongbong Terang birthday is celebrated on Jan 13 and on the occasion every year Chingthor Publication, Bakaliaghat presents the award to a special and selected person of Assam. In this award a Karbi Jacket, Karbi turban- Poho, bag, Karbi totem pole- jambili athon, a citation and cash money was presented to Payeng.

On the occasion, a library in the name of Rongbong Terang was inaugurated by Professor Guwahati University, Upen Rabha Hakasam. A wall magazine 'Pahar Rengoni' was also unveiled on this occasion.

Assam Sahitya Sabha vice president Padum Rajkhowa; newly appointed general secretary, Debajit Bora; president, Karbi Lammet Amei, Kamsing Hanse; general secretary (caretaker), AASU, Sorjion Hanse; president of Karbi Anglong Sahitya Sabha, Barim Ingti and many others attended the function.

'Samaya aaru Vastab', a book written by Bhaben Koch was also released on the occasion. It may be mentioned that due to ill health, Padmashree Rongbong Terang could not attend the programme.

## Bill passed in Tripura seeking 100 pc hike in salary of CM, minister, MLAs

**AGARTALA, Jan 15:** The Tripura Assembly on Wednesday unanimously passed a bill seeking an almost 100 per cent hike in the salary, pension and other benefits of chief minister, ministers, speaker, and MLAs.

The bill proposes that the chief minister will now receive a monthly salary of ₹ 97,000 with ₹ 13,000 as sumptuary allowance while ministers and the leader of the opposition will get ₹ 95,000 with an allowance of ₹ 12,000 per month.

The MLAs too will now draw ₹ 93,000 as salary with ₹ 12,000 as allowance.

Earlier, the chief minister, ministers and MLAs used to get salaries ranging from ₹ 50,000 to 48,000.

Parliamentary affairs minister Ratan Lal Nath moved the salaries, allowances, pension and other benefits of the CM, DyCM, minister, speaker, Dy speaker, leader of opposition, chief whip and MLAs Amendment Bill 2024 in the Assembly.

Taking part in the discussions, Leader of Opposition in Assembly, Jitendra Chowdhury said around a 100 per cent hike in the salaries and pensions of the lawmakers was not "hundred per cent correct".

"It is normal to hike salaries and pensions of lawmakers at regular intervals but there must be legitimacy in the process even as I am not against the hike of the lawmakers' benefits," he said.

Senior Congress MLA Sudip Roy Barman pointed out loopholes in medical reimbursement bills and sought correction by fixing the upper-limit cap on medical bills of lawmakers.

Roy Barman said, "It is being reported that some



MLAs are drawing ₹ 25,000 to ₹ 30,000 per month as medical reimbursement bills every month. It seems we are having ailing lawmakers. There shall be an upper limit in regard to medical reimbursement bills for lawmakers."

However, the parliamentary affairs minister strongly supported the bill saying that despite the hike the chief minister, ministers and MLAs of the state will receive the lowest perks.

"We have proposed the revised salaries, pension and other benefits for our lawmakers after a gap of six years. Our ministers and MLAs are contributing to the development of the state. They need support from the government. Keeping all aspects in mind, the salaries and pensions were revised," he said. The bill was passed by the Assembly unanimously. (PTI)

## VK Singh to take oath as Mizoram Governor today

**AIZAWL, Jan 15:** Former army chief General Vijay Kumar Singh will take oath as the 25th Governor of Mizoram on Thursday, an official said. The swearing-in ceremony will be held at the Raj Bhavan at 11 am, he said.

Mizoram chief minister Lalduhoma, his cabinet colleagues, Assembly speaker Lalbiakzama, deputy speaker Lalbamkima and MPs will attend the programme, he said.

Singh will be administered the oath of office and secrecy by Gauhati High Court Chief Justice Vijay Bishnoi, the official said.

He was supposed to take oath as the governor on January 9 but the swearing-in ceremony has been rescheduled to January 16 due to health issues of relatives of the governor-designate.

Singh arrived in Aizawl on Wednesday.



On his way to Mizoram, Singh visited Kamakhya temple in Assam's Guwahati and offered prayers to Maa Kamakhya, seeking her divine blessings and guidance to serve the people of Mizoram with dedication, humility and integrity, the official said.

Singh was appointed as the governor of Mizoram by President Droupadi Murmu on December 24 last year to succeed

Hari Babu Kambhampati, who was appointed as the governor of Odisha.

Born in 1951, Singh served as the 24th Chief of Army Staff from 2010 to 2012.

After he retired from the military, Singh joined the BJP in 2014 and was elected to the Lok Sabha for the Ghaziabad constituency in Uttar Pradesh in that year. He was re-elected from the same seat in 2019.

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term, he served as the minister of state for external affairs, development of north-eastern region and statistics and programme implementation ministries.

He had also worked as the minister of state for road transport and highways and civil aviation in the second term of the Modi government. (PTI)

## Rangpur Mela organised in Rangghar Bakori

**HT Correspondent**

**SIVASAGAR, Jan 15:** On the first day of the month of Magh, the traditional Rangpur Mela was organised by Tai Ahom Yuva Parishad with colorful programmes on Rangghar Bakori (foreyard).

Minister of Public Health Engineering Jayanta Malla Baruah attended the function as the Chief Guest. The minister along with Dr Sabyasachi Mahanta, Mayur Borgohain and other members of the organising committee released the souvenir published on the occasion. Earlier, Diganta Tamuly, president, TAYPA hoisted the flag.

Various cultural troupes from diverse ethnic groups like Mising, Tai, Tiwa and Bodo took part in the show. Traditional games like korikhel, tekeli bhonga, khuta boguwa, etc were also organised. Despite a ban from the Court, moh-juj( balfalo fight was also held as part of the Rangpur mela.

## Traditional pig-catching competition held

**HT Correspondent**

**MARGHERITA, Jan 15:** A traditional pig-catching competition marked its historic debut at this year's Magh Bihu festivities in Motabil village, Makumqilla under Margherita co-district adding a unique element to the harvest festival celebrations.

The two-day event, scheduled on January 13 and 14 forms part of the broader Bohagi Utsav celebrations in Motabil Makumqilla.

The festival features cultural mainstays including the ceremonial Bhela Ghar, Meji, traditional

## Touts in RPF net

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 15:** The Railway Protection Force (RPF) of Northeast Frontier Railway conducted different checks and drives over the zone and apprehended 4 touts during last month for illegal sale of railway tickets.

In the month of December 2024, RPF of NF Railway recovered 45 (06-Live & 39-Used) railway tickets worth above ₹ 1.15 lacs from multiple locations during the drives. Apprehended touts were prosecuted under the relevant section of the Railways Act.

In a recent incident on December 22, 2024, RPF CIB team of Katihar and RPF team of Purnea jointly conducted a raid & search operation at 'Galib Computers' located at Puranganj, Bihar. During the raid the team recovered 20 E-Tickets (01 Live & 19 used) worth around ₹ 47, 928.30 and apprehended one tout in this connection. A case was registered under section 143 of the Railways Act at RPF post Purnea for further course of action.

In another drive on December 7, 2024, the CIB team of RPF/Lumding along with RPF team of New Hafflong apprehended one tout and recovered 1 railway ticket worth around ₹ 2530/- . A case was registered under section 143 of the Railways Act at RPF post of New Hafflong for further course of action.

bihu songs, dance, various sports events and cultural nights.

"Our village has always celebrated Magh Bihu, but we wanted to preserve our traditions while introducing new elements," said Jatun Baruah, general secretary of the organising committee.

The attack, which took place during Uruka, the first day of the traditional Assamese harvest festival Magh Bihu, has raised concerns on security scenario in the Dehing tea estate area as the incident occurred within the jurisdiction of the Makum Pathar Gaon panchayat under Margherita Co-District.

Government of India  
Ministry of Minority Affairs  
Pandit Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan,  
CGO Complex, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110003

Dated: 7<sup>th</sup> January 2025

### NOTICE

**Attention: All Project Implementing Agencies under Seekho Aur Kamao / USTTAD / Nai Manzil / Nai Roshni Schemes of the Ministry of Minority Affairs.**

All Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs) who have been allocated project(s) for any target year(s) under the Seekho Aur Kamao / USTTAD / Nai Manzil / Nai Roshni Schemes of the Ministry of Minority Affairs are hereby informed and provided the last opportunity for submission of requisite documents for processing of the pending grants (i.e., all pending instalments) under the above mentioned schemes.

2. PIAs to ensure that all required valid documents be submitted to the Ministry latest by **5:00 PM of 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2025**. The documents thereby submitted shall be considered as the final documents for processing of the pending grants (i.e., all pending instalments). Additionally, the provision of submission of the documents on the respective scheme portals would be withdrawn thereafter.

3. **Any document submitted after 5:00 PM of 31<sup>st</sup> January 2025 shall not be considered for processing of the pending grants (i.e., all pending instalments) by the Ministry of Minority Affairs being time barred.**

Sd/-  
(Nivedita Roy Choudhury)  
Under Secretary to Government of India

File No.: SAK-17011/1/2024-SAK-MoMA  
CBC 27101/11/0004/2425

## Solar-powered pumps for irrigation in rural areas in Tripura



**AGARTALA, Jan 15:** Tripura Renewable Energy Development Agency (TREDA) has set a target of setting up over 10,000 solar-powered pump sets to ensure assured irrigation in the rural farmland under PM Kusum scheme, an official said on Wednesday.

Of the total target, the TREDA has already set up 3,616 solar power pumps bringing 7,232 acres of farmland under assured irrigation benefiting 3,616 marginal farmers, the official said.

Work for establishing 5,051 pump sets has been in progress while steps have been taken to set up 2,264 solar-powered pump sets at the earliest.

"The state government has taken steps so that the farmers who are living in rural areas could double their production by using irrigation. Under PM Kusum scheme, farmers are given solar power pumps at a subsidised price," TREDA joint director Debabrata Sukladas told PTI.

According to him, if any farmer doesn't have a water source for irrigation, the TREDA will provide subsidies under the PM Kusum scheme.

Sukladas said out of the target of setting up 10,895 solar-powered pumps, 3,616 pumps have already been installed which ensured irrigation in 7,232 acres of farmland owned by 3,616 marginal farmers.

"While work for setting up 5,015 solar-powered pumps was in progress, the remaining 2,264 pumps will be installed at the earliest. Once the scheme is implemented, around 21,790 acres of farmland will get irrigation facility," he said. Sukladas said the subsidy is available for the prospective farmers under the scheme.

"For one horsepower (HP) pump a prospective farmer will be required to pay only ₹ 10,000 out of the total cost of ₹ 1,39,000. In the case of 2 HP a farmer needs to provide only ₹ 15,000 out of the total cost of ₹ 1,77,528," he said. On the benefits of the scheme, he said "This will ensure irrigation for at least 25 years which will increase the agriculture production and the farmers don't need to pay electricity bills." (PTI)

### OBITUARY



**D**ilip Basfor (54), the man who had dissected over a thousand bodies with doctors while performing post mortem in the morgue of the Sivasagar Civil Hospital, died in the Jaysagar Harijan colony on Jan 13 following complicated kidney failure.

For his lifelong service to society, 27th All Assam Kobk Sanmilan felicitated him. Basfor leaves behind his wife, two sons, a daughter.

## Revocation of border pass on India-Myanmar border demanded Mizo group urges Centre to reinstate FMR

**AIZAWL, Jan 15:** An Aizawl-based Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi group has urged the Centre to reinstate the Free Movement Regime (FMR), which facilitates a visa-free movement across the India-Myanmar border.

The Zo Re-unification Organisation (ZORO), which represents ethnic Zo or Mizo tribes of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh, also demanded the revocation of the order mandating a border pass for people living within 10 km on either side to cross the international border.

Speaking to reporters, the organisation president R Sangkawia on Tuesday said that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has recently replaced the FMR with a new system to regulate movement across the India-Myanmar border.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in February 2024 had decided to scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar to ensure the internal security of the country and to maintain the demographic structure of India's North Eastern states bordering Myanmar.

However, officials said that no official notification scrapping the FMR with Myanmar has been issued



so far. As per the new system, which came into effect on January 1 this year, people living within 10 km on either side of the India-Myanmar border will now require a border pass to visit each other, Sangkawia said.

He said that in its letter communicated to the Mizoram chief secretary about the new system on December 24 last year, the MHA said that entry will be regulated from 18 entry/exit points along the India-

Myanmar border.

While Zokhawthar and Hnahlan cross points in east Mizoram's Champhai district will be implemented as pilot sites, 3 crossing points in Lawngtlai district will be set up under phase-I and another 13 points in all the six districts, which share border with Myanmar, will be set up under phase-II, the MHA said in the letter, according to Sangkawia.

According to the new guidelines, an individual will now require a "border pass" to travel to and from Myanmar, which will be issued by the Assam Rifles for only people living within 10 km on either side of the border for a stay-of up to 7 days, he said.

An individual seeking the border pass must produce a document or certificate to prove that he or she lives within a 10-km radius of the borders, he said.

The identity proof document can be issued by local police station officer-in-charge or village chief or village authority (administrator).

The MHA letter also said that movement of border residents from Myanmar and India would be allowed for "specific reasons such as visiting relatives, tourism, business, medical treatment and cultural exchange programmes," Sangkawia said. (PTI)



## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*The quality, not the longevity, of one's life is what is important.- Martin Luther King, Jr.*

## Doldrums in Bengal BJP

Riven with factionalism made worse by a rank and file lowering in morale, West Bengal unit of BJP is not a political outfit which has some reasons to fulfil its promise to emerge as the ruling dispensation of the state post 2026 Assembly elections. Nowhere matching its once grandiose description of the "Grand Old Party", the state Congress is just another political outfit which also ran. The commonality between the two boils down to the fact that they are unlikely to offer a semblance of political resistance to the TMC government in 2026 Assembly polls. The charisma of their leadership falls far short of the same of TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee even as they vainly promise to raise the upper limit of social welfare schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar and Kanyasree once they emerge victorious in the coming polls without much hope of winning the elections. Enjoying the status of the principal Opposition party in the state Assembly, the BJP can trace its rise in the state from the late '90s when it was a poll partner of a fledgling Trinamool Congress. Promising self rule to the Gurkhas, the saffron camp had its most winnable constituency in Darjeeling parliamentary constituency.

Apart from the hills, the BJP had Dum Dum and Krishnanagar Lok Sabha constituencies in its kitty during this time span. Apart from the support from Trinamool, "covert blessings" of CP(M) strongman late Subhas Chakraborty ensured that Dum Dum became almost a pocket borough of BJP. A slump came thereafter in the electoral fortune of the saffron camp. Mukul Roy, the second in command in TMC after Mamata Banerjee switching his loyalty to BJP led to an upsurge in number of saffron camp representatives from West Bengal in 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Together with Roy's knowledge about the weak spots of TMC, the organisational network woven by state party chief, Dilip Ghosh saw BJP winning 18 Lok Sabha seats. Just as the BJP seemed almost poised to replace Trinamool in 2021 Assembly elections, the saffron camp bit the dust. Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah making regular trips to campaign in West Bengal, the chinks in BJP's organisation became discernible.

The removal of Dilip Ghosh from the state chief's post opened a floodgate of intra-party feud. Sukanta Majumdar, an academic who replaced Ghosh could not rein in the feuding factions. Leader of the Opposition in the state Assembly, Subhendu Adhikari who had come over from Trinamool had engineered a spate of defections. But such is the state of West Bengal unit's organisational adhesion that many of the turn coats returned to TMC in ashes and sackcloth. Fissures turned into cracks as several BJP MLAs switched loyalty to the Trinamool Congress. Inner party squabble is eating into the state BJP as the differences between Adhikari "a projected leader" and Majumdar, a RSS protege show no indication of going away. Post 2021 Assembly elections, saffron camp organisation continued to go downhill as the party lost six seats in 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

## Tusu Puja: The soulful celebration of agriculture, sacrifice, and womanhood in Eastern India

Asking in the warmth of the winter sun with a cup of coffee and the morning newspaper in hand, my thoughts drift to the recently concluded celebrations of Tusu Puja in the tea gardens of Assam, a sight often overlooked amidst the grandeur of other regional festivals. As winter casts its cool embrace over the land, the festival of Tusu, coinciding with the harvest season, adds its own unique vibrancy to the rich cultural mosaic of the northeastern and eastern states of India. It is a time of celebration, devotion, and a reaffirmation of the bonds that tie people together—rooted deeply in both agriculture and mythology. Tusu Puja, though lesser known compared to other festivals like Magh Bihu or Makar Sankranti, holds an esteemed place in the hearts of the indigenous communities of Assam and Bengal.

Makar Sankranti marks a key moment in the Indian calendar, signaling the end of an inauspicious period from mid-December to mid-January, and heralding a time considered most auspicious for rituals, marriages, and other sacred occasions. Celebrated alongside festivals like Pongal in the South, Lohri in the North, and Magh Bihu in Assam, Makar Sankranti is a period of spiritual and cultural renewal. However, in the vast canvas of Indian festivals, there is one that is often overshadowed yet equally significant in its cultural context—the Tusu Puja, a festival of the indigenous tea garden communities of Assam and their counterparts in the Manbhum region of Bengal.

Tusu Puja, or Tusu Parab, is celebrated primarily by the Kudumi (Kurmi) people, an important agricultural community in Eastern India, spanning Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Assam. The festival is a beautiful amalgamation of rural devotion, mythological storytelling, and communal festivities. Falling on Makar Sankranti, Tusu Puja is dedicated to Tusu Devi, the Goddess of Agriculture, revered as the embodiment of Shakti and fertility. The festival unfolds with a blend of rituals, songs, dances, and feasts, all deeply rooted in the agricultural cycles of the region, marking the harvest of the winter crop and a time for social cohesion.

One of the most striking features of Tusu Puja is the devotion shown by the young girls of the village. They create and worship small idols or murtis of Tusu Devi, made of clay or sola wood, which are often adorned with vibrant colours, tin-foil crowns, and decorative jewellery. Tusu Devi is visualized as a youthful, chaste girl, symbolizing both purity and fertility. In the remote tea gardens of Assam and in the districts of Purulia, Birbhum, Bankura, and Burdwan in Bengal, the festival is a communal affair that brings together people of all



ages and backgrounds, particularly the women who perform the central religious and cultural rituals.

The preparations for Tusu Puja begin in late December, as the cold winter sets in, coinciding with the harvest of the Amone rice crop. During these days, the women of the village engage in a ritualistic practice where they prepare the murtis of Tusu Devi, usually during the nights leading up to the festival. Each evening, unmarried girls gather at a house and sing traditional Tusu songs, known for their melodious tunes and evocative lyrics. These songs are more than mere entertainment—they are expressions of longing, devotion, and a deep connection to the land and its cycles. The process continues for 29 nights, culminating in a grand exchange of garlands and an offering of pulses and rice on the 30th day, marking the peak of the celebrations.

Tusu Puja is not merely a religious event but a vibrant celebration of femininity, womanhood, and social bonding. The young girls, during the festival, dress in traditional attire, sing devotional songs, and perform dances in front of the deity. These performances are not only acts of religious devotion but also serve as opportunities for social interaction. The competitive nature of the songs—where girls sing to outsmart each other and boys tease them—adds an element of youthful playfulness to the festival, making it a joyous occasion for all involved.

The importance of Tusu Puja extends be-

yond its religious significance. It represents the collective aspirations and desires of young women for a loving husband, as they sing and dance with hopes of divine blessings. The girls, during the evening rituals, seek Tusu Devi's blessings to fulfill their wishes and ensure a prosperous future. The festival's social aspect is equally important; it provides an opportunity for young girls and boys to interact, forming bonds that may later lead to marriage, while older women act as guides and participants in the festivities.

A notable characteristic of Tusu Puja is its inclusivity, as it is a celebration of life and fertility shared by various indigenous communities like the Santhals, Mahatos, Lodhas, and others. The festive atmosphere transcends age, gender, and social status, creating an environment of unity and communal joy. The festival also carries with it a significant folk-cultural heritage, with regional variations that reflect the unique stories and traditions of each community.

The stories surrounding Tusu Devi, and how she came to be worshipped, are as diverse as the regions in which the festival is celebrated. The most popular narrative tells of a young girl named Tushmuni (or Tustumoni) who was betrothed to a prince but tragically lost him to an early death. In her grief, she chose to end her life, a poignant act of self-sacrifice that would later be commemorated as Tusu Puja. Other versions of the story involve a king's love for

Tusu, whose untimely death causes him to lose his mental stability, or the tragic tale of Tusu's defiance against the advances of a Mughal king. Each story is steeped in themes of sacrifice, love, and purity, symbolizing the eternal struggle between love, duty, and loss.

The physical manifestation of Tusu in the form of murtis is also rich in symbolism. The idols are typically made with a combination of clay, sola wood, rice bran (known as "tush"), and other locally available materials. These murtis are painted in vibrant hues, adorned with decorative paper ornaments, and placed in specially prepared spaces in the home. The rituals of Tusu Puja are simple yet profoundly meaningful. Each morning, women perform a ceremonial bath in the nearby river or pond, and in the evening, they offer prayers, food, and song to Tusu Devi. A key ritual is the offering of prasad, which includes a mixture of peas, sweetmeats, and flattened rice. The sound of folk songs, known as "jagoronigee" (awakening songs), fills the air as the community comes together to celebrate.

On the final day of the festival, the murtis are immersed in rivers or ponds in a ritual known as "bhasan," symbolizing the transient nature of life. The immersion ceremony is often accompanied by lively processions, singing, dancing, and the exchange of flowers and fruits. The act of immersing the idol into the river is a reminder of the impermanence of life and the cyclical nature of existence, where birth, life, and death are intertwined. After the immersion, the participants enjoy a feast, often consisting of rice, fish curry, and traditional sweet dishes, while also offering food to crows, a gesture of gratitude and reverence.

The immersion of the murtis and the subsequent feast symbolize the renewal of life and the promise of a prosperous future. As the Tusuini (the woman chosen to lead the rituals) immerses the idol and takes a holy dip in the river, she completes the spiritual cycle of the festival, which has brought the community closer together in worship, joy, and reflection.

Tusu Puja, with its blend of religious reverence, cultural expression, and community solidarity, is more than just a festival; it is a vivid reflection of the agricultural life, the bond between people and the land, and the timeless themes of sacrifice and renewal. It may not attract as much attention as other festivals, but for the people of Assam, Bengal, and the indigenous communities of Eastern India, Tusu Puja remains a cherished and deeply significant celebration, embodying the spirit of life and devotion in its most heartfelt and communal form. (The writer can be reached at [dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com](mailto:dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com))

## India courts Taliban 2.0

By: Asad Mirza

Last week saw an unusual diplomatic development led by India, when India's top-ranking diplomatic officer, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri held a meeting with the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Maulawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Dubai on January 8, 2024.

The meeting comes in the background of increasing Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions and may see this as India's move to edge out Pakistan from the Afghanistan equation. But the fact is that India has never given up on either Afghanistan or Taliban. In fact, though not at the diplomatic level yet unofficially Indian establishment has kept a line of communication open with the Taliban since their emergence on the Afghanistan's political landscape in 1996 as Taliban 1.0.

Pragmatically, India has not ignored Taliban at all. In fact, at the Moscow Dialogue of 2017 and the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks of 2020 in Doha, Indian representatives were present, further India's Ambassador to Qatar met Taliban representatives at their Doha office. In June 2022 Joint Secretary for Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran met key Taliban leaders paving the way for sending a technical team at the Indian embassy in Kabul. Subsequently, India allowed the Taliban to appoint a new Consul General in the Afghan Consulate in Mumbai.

The recent warming of ties between Kabul and New Delhi is not a sudden development but a result of quiet diplomacy since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan and India began informal talks with the government.

While there might not be a formal recognition of the Taliban government by New Delhi, India has maintained a neutral and non-judgmental approach. Security sources say the Taliban government has appreciated this non-interference, creating an understanding of mutual acceptance.

Additionally, the alignment of India's security and strategic interests is equally important to counter Pakistan's influence. Security officials also emphasise that India has learnt from past experiences, such as the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane in 1999, and now understands the importance of maintaining relationships with neighbouring states unless there are clear and credible reasons not to do so. In this context, New Delhi is focusing on securing its national security interests at a time when geopolitics in the region is in a flux.

Reportedly, the Foreign Secretary highlighted India's long-standing friendship with the Afghan people and the deep cultural and social ties shared by the two nations, at the meeting. He assured Afghanistan of India's commitment to addressing the immediate developmental needs of its people.

The discussions included a review of the ongoing Indian humanitarian assistance programmes in Afghanistan. The Afghan Minister expressed gratitude to India for its unwavering support and engagement with the Afghan people. Recognising the current developmental challenges, both sides agreed that India would explore additional development projects soon, complementing its ongoing humanitarian efforts.

India's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan has been extensive and diverse since 2021. Responding to a request from Afghanistan, India has committed to further material support, particularly in the health sector and for the rehabilitation of refugees. Both sides also discussed strengthening their collaboration in sports. Additionally, they agreed on promoting the use of the Chabahar Port to enhance trade and provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

In fact, the Chabahar Port may prove to be a part of promoting multilateral friendship with both Iran and Afghanistan, in addition to many central Asian republics. The distance from Chabahar to Kabul via Zahedan is only 1196kms by road or rail. Thus, the port could serve as an important linkage with Afghanistan in absence of Pakistan denying India the right of passage through its road or rail network repeatedly. Chabahar Port provides a direct route to Afghanistan through Zahedan without involving Pakistan. Resultantly, this also reduces Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for trade and helps build stronger economic ties with India, making trade smoother and more efficient.

Strategically, a growing relationship with Taliban may also help India to counter the Chinese push in Afghanistan and other central Asian countries through its BRI project. Further, an increased mechanism of interaction may help India to influence the Taliban to check anti-India elements operating from Afghanistan such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

In this regard it would be judicious for India if it courts Taliban leaders like Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, who was trained at Indian Military Academy, just like its old friend Hamid Karzai who also studied in India.

Another influence which India could leverage to its benefit to exert some sort of religious pressure on the Taliban leaders is the leading Indian seminary of Darul Uloom, Deoband. Many of the old guard Taliban leaders have been tutored at Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan and the border area of Afghanistan-Pakistan, run by several Deobandi alumnus. However, in the regard India should make sure that it asks the religious and not the political leaders of Darul Uloom to help in this regard, as such political leaders have no locus standi amongst the Taliban leaders.

A similar approach has been shown by Taliban leadership also, by appointing Ikrumuddin Kamil as the acting consul at the Afghan Consulate in Mumbai, in November 2024, marking the first such appointment by the Taliban in India. Kamil like Karzai studied in India for seven years, completing his doctorate from South Asia University in New Delhi on a scholarship provided by the MEA.

So, if the Taliban leaders are ready to utilise people who have a connect with India, similarly India can gain a lot by utilising people who may have a connect with the Taliban leadership. This could be a win-win situation for both by-passing their common foe Pakistan, in the long run. (The author is a New Delhi-based senior commentator on national, international, defence and strategic affairs, environmental issues, an interfaith practitioner, and a media consultant)

## Technology and freedom - Are parents able to strike a balance between them?

By: M. R. Lal

Never did it come to my conscious notice until recently that there had been a time, a childhood, that I had lived with more freedom than my kids do today. Certainly, we need to be apologetic about the restrictions that being parents we constantly hover over our children. Strictly confining their world between the walls of the house, most of the parents repeat this mistake. Always the illusive idea is parents are concerned about their children's safety. In my case, my parents blessed me with much freedom to move and play independently all along the complex dusty village patches and backyards. The moments I spent outside my living space were the moments of exploration and there was certainly the feeling of conquering the most stimulating and critical space of curiosity and with my friends, those were the heavenly days of childhood. Not only to my parents, but to most of the parents of those days, an interesting aspect was that they rarely had any idea about their children's whereabouts especially during holidays. They enjoyed abundant freedom like butterflies fluttering and dancing across lanes and landscapes of the beautiful village settings. When the merriment of the day was over, children snuggled into the warmth of their homes almost tired and disheveled. When they unusually delayed, they had to face moments of anger and outrage and eruption of disagreement. Altogether, my days as a child occupy the best part of my memory.

I think today we lost the genuine moments of fun and happiness. Obviously, children have multiple options of the sophisticated types such as smartphones, video games, internet and the Google University on their table. But don't they really miss the delight of being together with their friends enjoying the dusty patches of the village and its green and innocent ambience and its rich fragrance of humanness elevated by the power of love and compassion and if they are in the city, at least a lovely gathering at the courtyards. Enjoying the enchanting aroma of the soil freshly soaked in the first rain of the season while little children play into the pitter-patter of its sprinkle, splashing their tiny feet in the tiny torrent of muddy water flowing to fill the burrows and the infinitesimal streams, life as a child was a magical blessing.

Never would you find a child being singled out or isolated. Everywhere, to the school and back and at the temple and the mangroves, we had a pleasant reason to come together, a fantastic team spirit of togetherness learned naturally. More than anything was the warmth of friendship that cultivated a sense of inclusiveness with sharing and caring. Learning basic lessons of acquiescence, all among the little crowd of boys and girls were euphoric and healthy even if they missed a meal or two.

Today things are different. Friendship has lost its essential charm and depth. Instead it has gained a sense of artificiality; children bury their vision and health being glued to the internet. The horizon of knowledge revealed to them on the



screen is luxuriant, but it also critically preserves a dark area of seclusion, misunderstanding and cynicism. This version of new friendship has actually brought damaging ripples of temperament into families. Children easily get anxious as they confront even slightly confusing situations. Though they have all sorts of tech available for entertainment, what are amiss are the friends. A child, with a lot of active friends and pleasant chit-chat taking place outside their classrooms and family's quarantined atmosphere, will easily learn the art of collaboration. More efficiently he would find solutions to the problems that he would be hit at his age. I certainly would welcome a safety net that the parents draw around their children. But the danger it brings home is terrible. Children, in all usual conditions, would forget the need to open up their mind. A grave threat of being suppressed and questioned by their parents sustains while something like an apparent surrender to the tech-world by the children for every complex thing that they face would pop up and parents would fail to strike a balance between their child's privacy and freedom and critically fail to become a good supporter. This is mostly due to their scanty contribution in the child's emotional upbringing. The child naturally creates a periphery for securing his seclusion and would persistently grow into an anxious person frequently concealing the real problem. So the child's tech privacy, to the extent of leading to his self-alienation, would be the most horrific development.

To my mind, what I pick from my childhood may not be the best possible solution for the problems today. But to avail certain levels of freedom to the child to be independent while motivating him to be a co-explorer, satiating his curiosity outside the firm and closeted environment of the home might be the best way we can handle his childhood. To me, in the 80s, a childhood without television and computer was heavenly. This feeling cannot be blamed. As technology progressed and gradually tore into our little

minds, what they chose to emotionally stay away from were their parents. In most of the families, this could be emerging as a threatening situation. Do the parents find some leisure time with their kids to walk down the dark and dusty village lanes or at least to the park or to the beach? A weekly leisurely outing would help sweep the dust of discomfort that the child gathered about his parents or that could also be an event to unleash the tiny trash of disappointment he happened to nibble on secretly. If this is done routinely, there can be limited hours assigned for the child's personal entertainment on the screens and parents can have no reasons to worry about his tech wanderings. Small, yet prayers with the family members with a practice of silence for a while on a daily basis could alleviate the flow of annoyance on silly matters.

Between the golden days of yore to the present tech oriented life, what comes with complete earnestness is a falsehood that we need to break with a genuine enthusiasm. The myth or falsehood is that the generation swelled by the eminence of the internet and social media has been indubitably overloaded by complex facts and figures and there are serious chances for its horrible derailment. We cannot completely disagree with that. But, to the parents and the conscience keepers of the society, one thing emerges with great relevance and gravity, that the children of today are excellently blessed with the best ways of communication. Giving them the most sophisticated gadgets and leaving them to pass their precious time alone in the complexity of online contents may seriously collapse their socializing behavior. How can this enigma be broken completely? Parents have to give their children a blend of practical experiences of socializing in the present tech-ridden environment wherein the child discovers the essence of humanity from real life situations rather than from the world he captured on his smartphone screens. (The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at [mlralu@30gmail.com](mailto:mlralu@30gmail.com))



# Paper vs Plastic: A comparative analysis

By: Muskaan Jaggi & Snigdha Mishra

Paper vs Plastic is still a debate which has no clear solution to it. This debate has been longed for over generations with people having multiple views and opinions on the same. I personally feel that both these materials are equally harmful to our environment but if I had to choose one over the other than my choice would be using paper instead of plastic.

By our basic understanding of how paper is made we know that it requires the cutting down of forest trees for their barks and then further bleaching the substance to give it the plain white colour. Plastics are made by the polymerization reaction of chemicals that are chemically bonded very strongly, making it difficult to break these bonds.

Plastics remain in our environment, they are persistent and non-biodegradable which leads to the accumulation of plastic in landfill sites in multiple places in our world. It takes millions of years for plastic to be degraded in the soil. They can be reused but not recycled.

On the other hand, paper is a substance which can be reused and recycled into forming other important substances like manure. In my opinion, I feel paper is more environmentally friendly in terms of the toxicity.

Paper is biodegradable which means it can be attacked by microorganisms and made less harmful. Paper can be reused over and over again so it makes paper a better option when considered in terms of the ill-effects it has towards the environment.

But when talking about the durability somewhere paper lacks in this aspect which makes them less useful and reliable. For example plastic bags are more stronger and durable but the amount of strength paper bags is very less when both are compared. Thus the usage of plastic bags are seen more often than paper bags.

I personally as an individual would prefer using paper bags than compared to plastics. I am drawing this conclusion from a very personal experience which happened when I first went for scuba diving in Bali. The situation of the water was disastrous, there was plastic everywhere. Plastics affects the marine organisms the most, they enter the fish's gills and fins making it difficult for them to survive. Leading to the bioaccumulation of plastic in the body of the fish. This fish when consumed by humans is passed into the food chains affecting our lives and health conditions. Whereas paper might have its own cons like increase in deforestation because of cutting down of trees and many more.

In conclusion, I would say that in my view I think it would be less toxic

to the environment if we use paper made things than compared to plastic which is a far worse substance.

## OBJECTIVE:

### Introduction

The paper vs plastic decision remains a critical outstanding issue in environmental management, the economy, and consumer trends. As the problem of plastic leakages and deforestation becomes alarming, it is appropriate to appreciate the environmental footprint of both materials during their life cycle. Paper shall have merits in terms of biodegradability and source being renewable, while plastic shall be richer in terms of durability and lesser carbon footprint when being processed. To address these factors an excellent level of analysis is needed to find a proper equilibrium and orient towards a more sustainable choice of materials for packaging. Recent research has reviewed the impacts of these materials not only the environment but also the consumers' preferences and choices stressing the importance of obtaining proper and more informed decisions given the current increased focus on environmental issues.

Paper and plastic in today's society: An evaluation

As the issue of sustainability grows more significant, paper and plastic remain two traditional yet provoked choices between functionality and eco-friendliness. Proof that paper, derived from renewable resources, is in support of conservationism is the fact that paper is biodegradable and can also be recycled. It fosters good recycling incidences that enable the creation of a circular economy. However, due to its endurance, plastics cannot be avoided in many uses such as food containers and carriage but due to this endurance, plastics disturb our ecosystems in many ways. Knowledge of these effects may contribute to changing the consumption vectors toward these materials, as supported by other studies that examine the use and changing consumer opinions and attitudes toward materials.

For instance, studies have found that consumers have a preference for the usage of paper products whenever they are told about the benefits of paper on the environment. Yet, the utility of this product often makes people keep using plastic in many industries, as it is not easy to change our preferences. Such a contrast underlines the increasing discussion of 2 RA as to the largely interchangeable parts of these materials within everyday life, which calls for further investigation of their importance in the modern world of ER.

### Environmental Impact

Material selection is one of the great environmental influencers, with involvement spanning the function life cycle. Although paper is generally considered sustainable because it



is biodegradable it has a strong negative impact on the environment such as causing deforestation and using a lot of water during its manufacturing. Currently, the pulp and paper industry is one of the biggest users of water; hence, the sustainability impact of this sector cannot be overemphasized. On the other hand, plastic constitutes unconquerable waste management issues in society. The United States produces 35.6 million TPA of plastic waste which is recycled at only 9.5%, thereby polluting ecosystems. This inefficiency has led to increased research and policy focus on innovative approaches including recycling of plastics to usable goods including in the construction of road construction asphalt – proof of resource recovery.

However, the environmental cost of the paper cannot be overlooked. Most of the companies that seek to obtain wood pulp normally conduct deforestation processes that help them gain that, and many times this is achieved at the expense of the natural habitat and if the process is not controlled some species are even facing the risk of extinction. Further, while paper products are usually referred as biodegradable, the environmental conditions necessary for biodegradation—namely, appropriate moisture and microbial action are lacking in most landfills. Thus, the idea that paper is better than plastic, as far as the environment is concerned, doesn't seem this open and shut, either.

### Effect of Paper and Plastic Products on the Environment

When it comes to evaluating the environmental effects tied to paper and plastic making it becomes possible to make comparisons based on the carbon footprints of these products in their different aspects of use. Paper production for instance while being derived from renewable resources such as trees consumes a lot of water and energy in production. New re-

search indicates that paper has a high water intensity that can go up to 24000 l/t of paper produced. This is sharply compared to the resource consumption by plastic, the primary feedstock of which is fossil fuel but which uses far less water in the manufacturing process for every unit of environmental cost.

However, the comparison of the ecological footprints has to take into consideration end of life also. Some studies may suggest paper has more sustainable aspects at first glance, and pressures regarding the variable quick impacts of plastic, especially in terms of its endurance in ecosystems and in pollution, make use of this material questionable. For instance, a pursuit of the plastic bag will last for hundreds of years in the environment and a paper bag may disintegrate within weeks if dumped appropriately. Still, if such paper products reach the landfills, they undergo anaerobic conditions which slow down their decomposition and release methane powerful greenhouse gas. Hence, to reduce harm when making decisions on which materials to use it is important to focus on sustainability and recyclability for example noted from the practice of tackling recycling of multi-layered plastics.

New analyses have also suggested that there is a factor of segmentation involving consumer perception that determines the demand value for sustainability. Studying consumer behaviour it is notable that people when they prioritize the environment choose paper instead of plastic. However, many remain ignorant with regard to the processes remaining involved and hence more awareness in regard to the environmental impacts of both materials.

### Economic Considerations

Regardless of the effects that option between paper and plastic may have on the environment, the factors that stand out most crucial for companies and individuals are economic

factors. Evaluating the paper products indicates that the cost of production may be higher because raw materials and production procedures demand a lot of workforce and energy as compared to plastic. It means that costs are pushed towards plastic sometimes making it more attractive for those manufacturers who want to save money at the cost of a small percentage of their profit margin. Nevertheless, new market changes and consumers' preference towards sustainable consumption have led some firms to revisit some of these traditional economic theories.

Environmental responsibility in purchasing has gained currency thus creating room for responsible businesses in their economic activities to meet the changing face of the market. Research evidence reveals that consumers are more willing to pay a higher amount for green products and thus presently many firms are looking for other flexible packing materials than plastic. It also clearly demonstrates the innovation chance for the business world, and the chance to revitalize a circular economy which is to know as the materials to be used are used, and then recycled again.

However, the switch from the use of plastic to paper or any other recycled material involves a lot of analysis of the economic impacts. These activities should be complimented by an equally well-developed infrastructure for the management and recycling of waste. For instance, the costs expenses incurred in collection, sorting and processing the paper that will undergo the recycling process might again be costly thus reducing the overall gain that accrues from the process. This means that in order to refine stakeholders' awareness of the potential economic gains and losses connected with the sustainable use of both paper and plastic products, the cost-benefit ratio analysis must account for all factors impacting the economic feasibility of taking an environmental conservation action, including the potential future benefits of environmental cost savings.

### Recycling:

Paper can be recycled more easily and multiple times when compared to plastics. It is pulped, cleaned and reformed into new paper products. However the quality of recycled paper is lower than normal paper due to the presence of impurities and fibers. There are limitations to recycling for example contamination of food stains.

Plastic recycling involves sorting, cleaning and melting plastic waste to create new plastic products. Not all types of plastics are recyclable and the process can vary depending on the type of plastic. It is often hindered by contamination, limited infrastructure and the difficulty in separating different types of plastic.

Technology advancement and its

future trends

Questions tend to arise concerning the state and the developments of the technologies that are used in the production of these materials and trends in their usage. Due to such an invention, material science has been able to come up with biodegradable plastics which are as convenient as regular plastics, but environmentally friendly. These unique materials are intended to degrade faster thus derisking the impact of plastic products on the environment in the future.

Moreover, the emergence of biodegradable or partly biodegradable, fully compostable bioplastics based on renewable raw materials, similar to chemical application, corn starch, or sugarcane, opens the possibility of compromising between paper and plastic. The evidence shows that bioplastics are equally efficient as conventional plastics in terms of performance, thereby contributing less to carbon emissions and utilizing less fossil fuel. However, social doubts still persist over their termination and end-of-life.

### Solutions for the impact on environment:

The development of biodegradable plastic will be a great boon to the environment as they can decompose naturally in the environment, reducing pollution and waste. The growing regulations of single-use bags has also seen a significant difference in the environmental impact plastics have. Furthermore the use of trees like bamboos and coconut leaves to make paper which are easily biodegradable will be a better alternative. Also using electronic ink which involves the technology that can be used to create paper-like displays that can be written on and erased but doesn't actually use paper.

### Conclusion

Therefore, the paper versus plastic debate can be viewed along environmental, economic, cultural and regulatory perspectives. Paper products have some benefits in biodegradability and renewability in their raw materials but some drawbacks with regard to resource use and disposal. On the other hand, the use of plastic offers convenience and longevity but has catastrophic effects on ecology.

To address such challenges it is about informing the consumer about proper decision-making where sustainable living and consumption are part of the decision-making process. In this way, by making consumers more aware, supporting technological innovations and adopting the right policies, stakeholders can help to build a more sustainable world. In the long run, all the decisions being made today will affect the environment, society and the economy, hence the reason why sustainable practice should be embraced when seeking to have a healthier environment. (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

# Deforestation in Assam: Challenges and solutions

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Assam, situated in the northeastern part of India, is famed for its rich biodiversity, sprawling tea gardens, and dense forests. These forests not only provide critical habitat for countless species but also play an essential role in sustaining the livelihoods of millions of people. However, the state is facing a severe deforestation crisis that poses significant environmental and socio-economic challenges. This article explores the various factors contributing to deforestation in Assam, its implications for biodiversity and local communities, and potential strategies for addressing this pressing issue.

The rate of deforestation in Assam has been alarming, driven by several interrelated factors. One of the most significant contributors is agricultural expansion. With the population steadily increasing, there is a corresponding demand for food, leading farmers to clear forested areas to cultivate crops and raise livestock. The traditional practice of slash-and-burn agriculture, where forest land is burned to create fields, has also intensified. While this method may provide temporary benefits, it ultimately results in long-term soil degradation and a loss of forest cover, further exacerbating the cycle of deforestation. Moreover, the commercial cultivation of tea, for which Assam is renowned, significantly contributes to the loss of forested areas. As one of the world's leading tea producers, the state has seen a dramatic increase in the area dedicated to tea plantations. The expansion of these plantations often involves the clearing of vast tracts of forest, which not only diminishes biodiversity but also disrupts the delicate balance of local ecosystems. The environmental impact of monoculture

practices, typical in tea farming, can lead to soil depletion and an increased reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, further harming the environment.

In addition to agricultural expansion, infrastructure development has emerged as a critical driver of deforestation in Assam. The state has seen considerable investment in transportation projects, including roads, railways, and bridges, aimed at enhancing connectivity and promoting economic growth. However, the construction of these infrastructures often involves the clearing of forested land, leading to habitat fragmentation and increased access for illegal logging and poaching. The challenge lies in balancing the need for development with the imperative to protect the natural environment, which requires careful planning and regulation.

The role of illegal logging cannot be overstated in the context of Assam's deforestation crisis. The demand for timber and wood products, both locally and internationally, has led to rampant illegal logging activities in protected and un-protected forests. Corruption and weak enforcement of environmental regulations further exacerbate this issue, making it difficult to curb these destructive practices. The loss of valuable timber not only depletes forest resources but also has dire implications for wildlife, as many species rely on forest habitats for survival.

Climate change is another critical factor that intersects with deforestation in Assam. The state is vulnerable to extreme weather events, including floods, landslides, and droughts, which have become more frequent and severe due to climate change. Deforestation contributes to climate change by releasing stored carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, further accelerating global

warming. This, in turn, affects local weather patterns and increases the vulnerability of forests to diseases and pests. The interconnectedness of these issues underscores the complexity of addressing deforestation, as solutions must consider the broader implications of climate change.

The consequences of deforestation in Assam are profound and multifaceted. One of the most immediate impacts is the loss of biodiversity. Assam is home to several endemic and endangered species, including the Indian one-horned rhinoceros, the Asiatic elephant, and various primate species. The destruction of their habitats threatens their survival and disrupts the ecological balance that has developed over millennia. The decline of biodiversity has cascading effects on ecosystem services, including pollination, water purification, and soil fertility, which are crucial for both the environment and human well-being.

Furthermore, deforestation has significant socio-economic implications for local communities. Many indigenous and rural populations in Assam rely on forests for their livelihoods, gathering resources such as timber, fuelwood, medicinal plants, and non-timber forest products. The loss of forest cover jeopardizes their access to these resources, leading to food insecurity and economic instability. As communities are forced to migrate or adapt to changing conditions, traditional ways of life are disrupted, and cultural identities are at risk of being lost.

Soil erosion is another critical consequence of deforestation, impacting agricultural productivity. Without tree cover, the soil becomes more susceptible to erosion by wind and water, leading to reduced soil fertility and increased sedimentation in rivers. This degradation poses a threat not only to agricultural

yields but also to water quality, as sediments and pollutants from eroded land can contaminate water sources. This cycle of degradation can trap communities in a vicious cycle of poverty, as declining agricultural productivity directly impacts food security and livelihoods.

Water resources are also profoundly affected by deforestation. Forests play a vital role in regulating the hydrological cycle by maintaining water quality, preventing soil erosion, and facilitating groundwater recharge. The removal of trees disrupts this balance, leading to altered water flow patterns, increased runoff, and sedimentation in rivers and streams. These changes can exacerbate flooding during the monsoon season and lead to water shortages during dry spells, further threatening agricultural productivity and human livelihoods.

In light of these pressing challenges, addressing deforestation in Assam requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates sustainable land-use practices, improved governance, and community engagement. One of the most effective strategies is promoting agroforestry, which integrates trees into agricultural landscapes. This approach not only enhances biodiversity but also improves soil health and water retention, providing multiple benefits to farmers. Agroforestry practices can include planting fruit and timber trees alongside crops, creating diverse systems that enhance resilience to climate change.

Strengthening forest governance and law enforcement is crucial in combating illegal logging and ensuring the sustainable management of forest resources. This can be achieved through improved monitoring systems, increased transparency, and community involvement in forest management. Engaging local



communities in conservation efforts can lead to more effective and culturally sensitive strategies. When communities have a stake in protecting their forests, they are more likely to adopt sustainable practices and report illegal activities.

Reforestation and afforestation initiatives are also essential in restoring degraded landscapes. Planting native tree species in deforested areas can help revitalize ecosystems, sequester carbon, and provide habitat for wildlife. Community-based reforestation projects can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the environment, ensuring that local populations are actively involved in restoring their natural heritage. These initiatives can also provide alternative livelihoods through the sustainable harvesting of forest products.

Informing local communities about the importance of forests, biodiversity, and sustainable practices can mobilize collective action towards conservation. Educational programs in schools and communities can instill a sense of stewardship for the environment, encouraging responsible consumption patterns and fostering a culture

of conservation. By promoting alternatives to deforestation, such as sustainable timber sourcing and eco-friendly products, demand for products linked to deforestation can be reduced. Collaboration among various stakeholders is crucial for effective forest conservation in Assam. The government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities must work together to develop comprehensive policies and initiatives that address the root causes of deforestation. Collaborative efforts can facilitate knowledge sharing, resource mobilization, and the implementation of best practices. By aligning local initiatives with broader environmental goals, Assam can contribute to national and global efforts to combat deforestation and climate change.

International cooperation is also essential in addressing the challenges of deforestation. Climate change and biodiversity loss are global issues that require collective action. Financial mechanisms, such as carbon trading and funding for conservation projects, can provide the necessary resources to support sustainable practices and reforestation efforts in Assam. By

participating in international agreements and initiatives, the state can secure funding and technical support to enhance its conservation efforts.

In essence, deforestation in Assam presents a complex set of challenges that threaten the state's rich biodiversity, ecosystems, and the livelihoods of its communities. The drivers of deforestation, including agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, and illegal logging, require immediate and coordinated action. By promoting sustainable land-use practices, strengthening governance, and engaging communities, Assam can take meaningful steps toward mitigating deforestation and preserving its invaluable natural resources. Ultimately, a holistic approach that integrates environmental, social, and economic considerations is essential to ensure a sustainable future for Assam and its people. Through collective action, it is possible to protect the forests that are vital for the ecological health of the region and the well-being of its inhabitants. (The writer is Editor in Chief of the Assamese e-magazine SAMPROTIK who can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com)



## Planes douse homes and hillsides with bright pink fire-retardant chemicals Dire fire warning for LA area pushed back as winds ease

LOS ANGELES, Jan 15: Easing winds delivered a brief but much-needed reprieve to firefighters Tuesday as they battled two massive blazes burning in the Los Angeles area, and the National Weather Service pushed back its unusually dire warning of critical fire weather until early the following day. Forecasters said the winds were below danger levels in the evening, but they were expected to strengthen overnight with potentially fire-fuelling gusts. Red flag warnings remained in effect from Central California to the Mexican border until late afternoon Wednesday.

Winds increased Tuesday but not to the near-hurricane-force levels that were predicted to happen earlier in the day. Still the danger was not over, officials said.

"Key message: We are not out of the woods yet," the National Weather Service in Los Angeles said in a post on social media. "The winds underperformed today, but one more enhancement could happen tonight-tomorrow."

This round of Santa Ana winds was not expected to be as mighty as last week, but they could carry fire-sparking embers for miles and stoke new outbreaks in a region where at least 25 people have already been killed.

Firefighters made more progress on the Palisades Fire, the largest and most stubborn blaze. CalFire Operations Section Chief Christian Litz said he took a helicopter ride around the perimeter and saw no active flames, though it was far from over.

Nearly 90,000 households lost electricity as utilities shut off power to prevent their lines from sparking new blazes.

Wary and anxious residents were told to be ready to flee at a moment's notice. They remained vigilant, keeping an eye on the skies and on each other: Police announced roughly 50 arrests, for looting, flying drones in fire zones, violating curfew and other crimes.

Of those, three people were arrested on suspicion of arson after being seen setting small fires that



were immediately extinguished, LA Police Chief Jim McDonnell said. One was using a barbecue lighter, another ignited brush and a third tried to light up a trash can, he said. All were far outside the disaster zones. Authorities have not determined a cause for any of the major fires.

Among nine people charged with looting was a group that stole an Emmy from an evacuated house, Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman said.

The biggest worry remained the threat from intense winds. Now backed by firefighters from other states, Canada and Mexico, crews were deployed to attack flareups or new blazes. The firefighting force was much bigger than a week ago, when the first wave of fires began destroying thousands of homes in what could become the nation's costliest fire disaster.

Kaylin Johnson and her family planned to spend the night at their home, one of the few left standing in her neighbourhood in Altadena, near Pasadena. They intended to keep watch to ward off looting and to hose down the house and her neighbours' properties to prevent flareups.

"Our lives have been put on hold indefinitely," Johnson said via text message, adding that they cannot freely come and go because of

restrictions on entering the burn areas. "But I would rather be here and not leave than to not be allowed back at all."

Tuesday's forecast included a rare warning: The winds, combined with severely dry conditions, have created a "Particularly Dangerous Situation," the National Weather Service said, meaning that any new fire could explode in size.

The forecast was later adjusted to say gusts were expected to pick up strength early Wednesday.

Residents said they were ready to make a hasty escape. Javier Vega, who said he feels like he has been "sleeping with one eye open," and his girlfriend have planned out how they can quickly pack up their two cats, eight fish and leopard gecko if they get orders to evacuate.

"Typically on any other night, hearing helicopters flying overhead from midnight to 4:00 in the morning, that would drive anyone crazy," Vega said. But figuring they were helping firefighters to keep the flames from threatening their neighbourhood, he explained, "it was actually soothing for me to go to sleep."

Planes doused homes and hillsides with bright pink fire-retardant chemicals, while crews and fire engines deployed to particularly vulnerable spots with dry brush.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and other officials who were criticized over their initial response expressed confidence that the region is ready to face the new threat. The mayor said she was able to fly over the disaster areas, which she described as resembling the aftermath of a "dry hurricane."

Winds this time were not expected to reach the same fierce speeds seen last week but could ground firefighting aircraft, LA County Fire Chief Anthony Marone said.

He urged homeless people to avoid starting fires for warmth and to seek shelter.

With almost no rain in more than eight months, the brush-filled region has had more than a dozen wildfires this year, mostly in the greater Los Angeles area.

Firefighters have been jumping on small blazes that pop up. One, in a dry riverbed near Oxnard Monday night, was quickly smothered. "We've got helicopters ready to go, to drop water on any new fires," said Andrew Dowd, a spokesperson for the Ventura County Fire Department.

The four largest fires around the nation's second-biggest city have scorched more than 63 square miles (163 square kilometers), roughly three times the size of Manhattan. Of these, the Eaton Fire near Pasadena was roughly one-third contained, while the largest blaze, in Pacific Palisades on the coast, was far less contained.

The death toll is likely to rise, according to Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna. Nearly 30 people were still missing, he said Tuesday. Some people reported as missing earlier have been found.

Just under 90,000 people in the county remained under evacuation orders, half the number from last week.

Hollywood's awards season has been put on hiatus because of the crisis. The Oscar nominations have been delayed twice, and some organisations postponed their awards shows and announcements without rescheduling. (AP)

## Preventive power cuts introduced in Ukraine

KYIV, Jan 15: Russia launched a massive aerial attack against Ukraine on Wednesday, forcing the country to introduce preventive power cuts, the Ukrainian energy minister said.

"The enemy continues to terrorise Ukrainians," Herman Halushchenko wrote on Facebook, urging residents to stay in shelters during the ongoing threat and follow official updates.

The state energy company Ukrenergo reported emergency power outages in the Kharkiv, Sumy, Poltava, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kirovohrad regions.

Russian forces launched missile strikes targeting energy infrastructure in the western Lviv region early Wednesday, said the city's mayor, Andrii Sadovyi.

"During the morning attack, enemy cruise missiles were recorded in the region," he said. No casualties or damage were reported. Ukraine's air force detected multiple missile groups launched by Russia during a nationwide air-raid alert, though initial reports indicated no damage.

Wednesday's attack has further exacerbated the strain on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, which has been a frequent target during the nearly three-year-old war. (AP)

## Zelenskyy visits Poland as sides reach deal on exhuming Polish victims of WWII-era massacres

WARSAW, Jan 15: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other officials who were criticized after the two countries reached an agreement on a longstanding source of tensions between them: the exhumation of Polish victims of World War II-era massacres by Ukrainian nationalists.

The office of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said early Wednesday he would welcome Zelenskyy in the late morning, and that the two would hold a joint news conference shortly after noon local time.

The visit comes just days after Tusk announced progress on the issue of the exhumations, an issue that has strained relations for years.

"Finally a breakthrough. There is a decision on the first exhumations of Polish victims of the UPA," Tusk wrote on the social platform X on Friday, referring to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

"I thank the ministers of culture of Poland and Ukraine for their good cooperation. We are waiting for further decisions."

A non-governmental group, the Freedom and Democracy Foundation, said Monday it will begin exhumation work on victims in Ukraine in April.

Although Poland has been one of Ukraine's most stalwart supporters since Russia's full-scale invasion nearly three years ago, the issue of the Polish victims lying in mass graves in Ukrainian soil eight decades after they were killed has left a festering bitterness among many Poles.

It also has put pressure on Tusk, who is seeking to show progress on an issue of continued importance to many people in Poland. It is particularly important as his party's candidate in a presidential



election in May is expected to face a strong challenge from a nationalist opposition candidate.

The issue dates back to 1943-44, when Europe was at war. Ukrainian nationalists massacred about 100,000 Poles in Volhynia and other regions that were then in eastern Poland, under Nazi German occupation, and which are now part of Ukraine.

Entire villages were burned down and their inhabitants killed by the nationalists and their helpers who were seeking to establish an independent Ukraine state. Poland considers the events a genocide and has been asking Ukraine to let them exhume the victims to give them proper burials.

An estimated 15,000 Ukrainians

were killed in retaliation.

The issue is difficult for Ukraine because some of the World War II-era Ukrainian nationalists are regarded as national heroes due to their struggle for Ukraine's statehood.

As the two sides moved to resolve the issue, the chairman of Ukraine's parliament in May 2023 offered words of reconciliation in the Polish parliament.

"Human life has equal value, regardless of nationality, race, sex or religion," Ruslan Stefanchuk told Polish lawmakers at the time. "With this awareness we will cooperate with you, dear Polish friends, and we will accept the truth regardless of how uncompromising it may be." (AP)

## Bangladesh Supreme Court acquits former prime minister Khaleda Zia

DHAKA, Jan 15: Bangladesh Supreme Court on Wednesday acquitted former prime minister and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in a corruption case, overturning the High Court's earlier 10-year prison sentence.

The verdict was delivered by a bench led by Chief Justice Dr Syed Rezaul Karim after reviewing 79-year-old Zia's appeal against the High Court's ruling on Wednesday, the Dhaka Tribune reported.

The Supreme Court acquitted Zia, the party's Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman, and all other suspects in their appeal over the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case, the report added.

The Appellate Division noted that the case was motivated by revenge. Zia was sentenced on February 8, 2018, by Dhaka's Special Judge Court-5 to five years of imprisonment for alleged embezzlement of government funds in the name of the Zia Orphanage Trust.

The same verdict handed down 10 years of rigorous imprisonment for five other accused, including Zia's son Tarique and former chief secretary Kamal Uddin Siddiqui.

Each of the accused was also

fined Tk2.1 crore.

Among the accused, Tarique, Siddiqui, and Ziaur Rahman's nephew Mominur Rahman have remained absconding.

Zia appealed the trial court's verdict to the High Court, but the sentence was increased to 10 years by a High Court bench comprising Justice M Enayetur Rahim and Justice Md Mostafizur Rahman on October 30, 2018.

Zia subsequently filed a leave-to-appeal petition against this sentence.

Following years of delays due to legal procedural issues and a lack of initiative from lawyers, the Appellate Division accepted Zia's leave-to-appeal on November 11, 2024.

The court also stayed the High Court's 10-year sentence pending the final hearing of the appeal.

After concluding the hearing, the Appellate Division announced its decision to acquit Zia, officially clearing her of the charges in the case.

Zia is ailing and travelled to London earlier this month for medical treatment.

Zia served as the prime minister of Bangladesh from March 1991 to March 1996, and again from June 2001 to October 2006. (PTI)



## Australia's PM demands Russia explain what happened to Australian POW

MELBOURNE, Jan 15: Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said on Wednesday his government will take the "strongest action possible" if Russia has harmed an Australian who was taken prisoner while fighting for Ukraine.

Video posted on social media in December showed Oscar Jenkins, 32, dressed in a military uniform with his hands bound being questioned and struck by a Russian interrogator.

Australian authorities were seeking comment from Russia on reports that the Melbourne school teacher had been killed since he became a prisoner of war.

Albanese said Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade officials were seeking "urgent clarification" of Jenkins' circumstances.

"We call upon Russia to immediately confirm Oscar Jenkins' status. We remain gravely concerned," Albanese told reporters.

"We will await the facts to come out. But if there has been any harm caused to Oscar Jenkins, that is absolutely reprehensible. And the Australian government will take the strongest action possible," Albanese added.

Jenkins had no previous military experience before joining the Ukraine defense forces early last year. While other Australians have been killed in combat in Ukraine, none has died in Russian captivity.

Albanese did not elaborate on what action Australia might take if Jenkins has died.

Monash University political scientist Zareh Ghaz-

arian said the maximum extent of Australia's response was likely to be expelling Russia's ambassador, withdrawing the Australian ambassador from Moscow and imposing additional sanctions against Russia.

Opposition leader Peter Dutton, who could become prime minister in elections due by May 17, said the Russian and Australian ambassadors should be sent home if the Russians killed Jenkins.

"If there is confirmation that Oscar Jenkins has been killed, the government should take the strongest possible action and that is the ambassador should be withdrawn and that the ambassador here in Australia should be sent packing," Dutton told reporters.

"We should send a very clear message to Russia and to other similarly minded regimes that Australians are sacrosanct, that they deserve to be protected by their government and if they're harmed in this way and if they're brutally executed, as seems to be the suggestion in this case, and we wait for confirmation, then there should be a strong reaction from the prime minister," Dutton added.

Australia's military involvement in Ukraine has involved training missions, but no Australian combat troops have been involved in the war.

Australia has been one of the most generous donors to the Ukraine war effort outside NATO.

Three months ago, Australia announced it will give Ukraine 49 of its aging M1A1 Abrams tanks valued at 245 million Australian dollars (\$152 million). (AP)



## Japan, Philippines plan to convey to Trump need for US engagement in Asia

MANILA, Jan 15: Japan and the Philippines will convey to President-elect Donald Trump the urgent need for the US to remain committed to help uphold the rule of law in an Asian region where security concerns have become "increasingly severe," Japan's top diplomat said Wednesday.

The US, Japan and the Philippines have been building an alliance under outgoing President Joe Biden since last year to deal with China's increasingly aggressive actions in the disputed South China Sea and East China Sea. Trump's "America First" foreign policy thrust has triggered concerns about the scale and depth of US commitment to the region under his new term.

"We will approach the next US administration to convey that constructive commitment of the United States in this region is important also for the United States itself," Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya said in

a news conference with his Philippine counterpart, Enrique Manalo, in Manila.

Iwaya said he was scheduled to attend Trump's January 20 inauguration as one of Washington's closest treaty allies in Asia along with the Philippines.

"Amid the increasingly severe strategic environment in the region, Japan places importance on our bilateral cooperation as well as on maintaining and strengthening trilateral cooperation between Japan, the Philippines and the United States," Iwaya said.

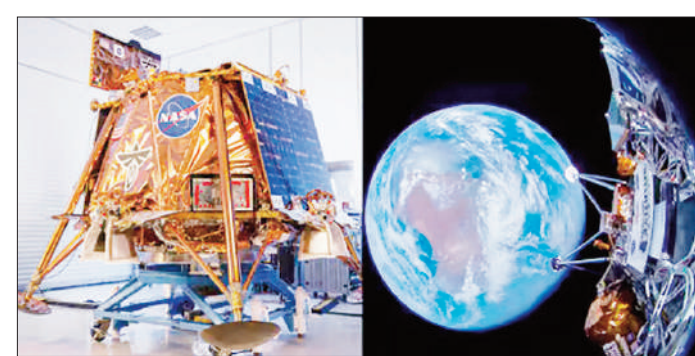
An alarming spike in confrontations between Chinese and Philippine coast guard and other forces in the busy sea passage has set off fears of a major escalation that could draw in the United States, which has repeatedly warned that it's obligated to help defend Philippine forces if they come under an armed attack in the South China Sea. (AP)

## Two private lunar landers head toward the moon in roundabout journey

CAPE CANAVERAL (US), Jan 15: In a two-for-one moonshot, SpaceX launched a pair of lunar landers Wednesday for US and Japanese companies looking to jumpstart business on Earth's dusty sidekick.

The two landers rocketed away in the middle of the night from NASA's Kennedy Space Centre, the latest in a stream of private spacecraft aiming for the moon. They shared the ride to save money but parted company an hour into the flight exactly as planned, taking separate roundabout routes for the monthslong journey.

It's take 2 for the Tokyo-based ispace, whose first lander crashed into the moon two years ago. This time, it has a rover on board with a scoop to gather up lunar dirt for study and plans to test potential food and water sources for future explorers. Lunar newcomer Texas-based Firefly Aerospace is flying 10 experiments for NASA, including a vac-



uum to gather dirt, a drill to measure the temperature below the surface and a device that could be used by future moonwalkers to keep the sharp, abrasive particles off their spacesuits and equipment.

Firefly's Blue Ghost — named after a species of US Southeastern fireflies — should reach the moon first. The 6-foot-6-inches-tall (2-meter-tall) lander will attempt a touchdown in early March at Mare Crisium, a volcanic plain in the

northern latitudes.

The slightly bigger ispace lander named Resilience will take four to five months to get there, targeting a touchdown in late May or early June at Mare Frigoris, even farther north on the moon's near side.

"We don't think this is a race. Some people say race to the moon, but it's not about the speed," ispace's founder CEO Takeshi Hakamada said this week from Cape Canaveral.

Both Hakamada and Firefly CEO

Jason Kim acknowledge the challenges still ahead, given the wreckage littering the lunar landscape. Only five countries have successfully placed spacecraft on the moon since the 1960s: the former Soviet Union, US, China, India and Japan.

"We've done everything we can on the design and the engineering," Kim said. Even so, he pinned an Irish shamrock to his jacket lapel Tuesday night for good luck.

The US remains the only one to have landed astronauts. NASA's Artemis program, the successor to Apollo, aims to get astronauts back on the moon by the end of the decade. Before that can happen, "we're sending a lot of science and a lot of technology ahead of time to prepare for that," NASA's science mission chief Nicky Fox said on the eve of launch.

If acing their respective touchdowns, both spacecraft will spend two weeks operating in constant daylight, shutting down once dark-

ness hits.

Once lowered onto the lunar surface, ispace's 11-pound (5-kilogram) rover will stay near the lander, travelling up to hundreds of yards (meters) in circles at a speed of less than one inch (a couple centimeters) per second. The rover has its own special delivery to drop off on the lunar dust: a toy-size red house designed by a Swedish artist.

NASA is paying \$101 million to Firefly for the mission and another \$44 million for the experiments. Hakamada declined to divulge the cost of ispace's rebooted mission with six experiments, saying it's less than the first mission that topped \$100 million.

Coming up by the end of February is the second moonshot for NASA by Houston-based Intuitive Machines. Last year, the company achieved the first US lunar touchdown in more than a half-century, landing sideways near the south pole but still managing to operate. (AP)



# Everything Rahul Gandhi says is in direction of breaking country: Nadda

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** Rahul Gandhi's remarks that "we are now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian state itself" drew a sharp response from the BJP on Wednesday, with its president J P Nadda alleging that everything the Congress leader does or says is in the direction of breaking India and dividing the society.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman asked what for the Congress and Gandhi carry a copy of the Constitution when the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha is using such a language.

Nadda said on X that Gandhi has exposed his own party's "ugly truth", claiming that it is no secret that Gandhi and his ecosystem have close links with urban naxals and the deep state who want to "defame, demean and discredit" India.

He said Gandhi's repeated actions have also strengthened this belief.

Everything he has done or said has been in the direction of breaking India and dividing our society, Nadda alleged.

Speaking at the inauguration of the new building of the Congress party's headquarters, Gandhi had said earlier said that the BJP and the RSS have captured every single institution of our country.

He added, "We are now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian state itself."

Sharing a video clip of Gandhi's remarks,



BJP IT department head Amit Malviya said, "Rahul Gandhi has now declared an open war against the Indian State itself. This is straight out of George Soros's playbook."

Hitting back at Gandhi, Sitharaman said, "The LoP, who was sworn in by taking oath on the Constitution, is now saying, 'We are now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian State itself.' So, @INCIndia and @RahulGandhi, what for are you carrying a copy of

the Constitution in your hand?" Nadda said, "Hidden no more, Congress ugly truth now stands exposed by their own leader."

"I 'compliment' Mr. Rahul Gandhi for saying clearly what the nation knows- that he is fighting the Indian state!" he said.

The BJP president charged that the Congress has a history of encouraging all those forces who want a weak India.

"Their greed for power meant compromising the nation's integrity and betraying the trust of the people," he said, adding, people of India are wise, and they have decided they will always reject Rahul Gandhi and his rotten ideology.

At a press conference, BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia said Gandhi had taken oath to preserve the country's sovereignty and integrity but is now speaking fighting the Indian state.

He also brushed aside Gandhi's charge that RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's assertion that India got "true independence" after the Ram temple inauguration amounted to treason.

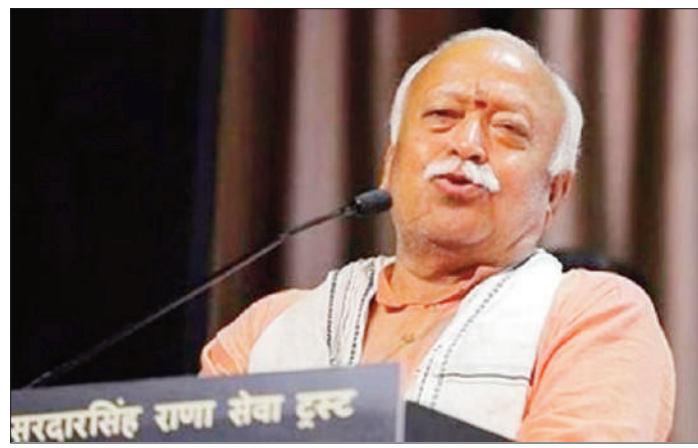
Citing Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, he said it prescribes imprisonment for seven years for words endangering India's sovereignty, unity and integrity, claiming that if anybody has committed a crime, then it is Gandhi.

Bhatia said, "Truly, it is our misfortune we have a part-time immature, irresponsible leader of opposition who happens to be guided by forces like George Soros and forces which are inimical to our country."

He is a "blot", the BJP leader alleged, saying people feel hurt and let down by him.

He asked if this is the stand of the Congress, its president Mallikarjun Kharge and Sonia Gandhi. (PTI)

## Congress slams Bhagwat's 'independence' remark, demands apology



**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** Senior Congress leader Jairam Ramesh on Wednesday described RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's remarks that India's "true independence" was established on the day of the Ram temple's consecration as "anti-national" and demanded an apology over the statement.

Ramesh's remarks came after Bhagwat said the date of the Ram temple's consecration in Ayodhya should be celebrated as "Pratishtha Dwadashi" as the "true independence" of Bharat, which had faced "parachakra" (enemy attack) for several centuries, was established on this day.

"Shri Mohan Bhagwat has made ridiculous statements frequently. But even by his lowest of low standards, his latest pronouncement is not just astonishing but downright anti-national," the Congress leader said in a post on X.

It is not only a gross insult to Mahatma Gandhi and that remarkable generation that secured freedom for the country, but also yet another assault on the Constitution that came into effect on January 26, 1950, he added.

"Shri Bhagwat should immedi-

ately apologise for his outrageous remarks, which reflect the mindset of an ideology that neither participated in the freedom movement nor gave respect to the Father of the Nation and Dr Ambedkar during their lifetimes," Ramesh said.

Bhagwat said on Monday that after India got political independence from the British on August 15, 1947, a written Constitution was made according to the path shown by that specific vision, which comes out of the "self" of the country, but the document was not run according to the spirit of the vision at that time.

He was speaking after presenting the "National Devi Ahilya Award" to Champat Rai, general secretary of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, in Indore.

Two days after the first anniversary of the Ram temple's consecration, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief said the date should be celebrated as "Pratishtha Dwadashi" as the true independence of India, which had faced "parachakra" (enemy attack) for several centuries, was established on this day. (PTI)

## Bengal BJP leader Adhikari demands Mamata's arrest, resignation over woman's death

**KOLKATA, Jan 15:** Senior BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari on Wednesday demanded the arrest and resignation of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for the death of a woman following childbirth allegedly due to the administration of 'expired' intravenous fluid in a state-run hospital. Adhikari, who led a delegation of BJP MLAs to Swasthya Bhavan here, told reporters, "Being the health minister, the TMC supremo cannot absolve herself of the charges. Action must be taken against her."

"The CM is responsible for the death of the poor woman. The administration of expired intravenous fluid proves the shoddy state of affairs in state-run healthcare system and the criminal negligence of the government. Banerjee must be arrested and she should also immediately step down owning moral responsibility," the leader of the opposition in the state Assembly said.

A woman died and four others became critically ill after childbirth at Midnapore Medical College and Hospital (MMCH) allegedly due to the administration of 'expired' intravenous fluid, prompting the health department to constitute a 13-member committee to investigate the matter. On Monday, the state government also ordered a CID probe into the incident. On Sunday, three women were shifted to Kolkata and admitted to SSKM hospital. The fourth woman, whose condition improved slightly, remained at MMCH. Talking to reporters, Adhikari also called for arrests and resignation of state health secretary N S Nigam and superintendent of MMCH, where the woman died. He also demanded the formation of an inquiry committee led by the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court and a SIT consisting of both CBI and CID.

Regarding the state government's decision for a CID probe, Adhikari said, "The health department wants to suppress the facts, just as they tried to hush up the rape and murder of a medic at RG Kar hospital. But the BJP will not let this happen."

"As the Assembly is not in session presently, we cannot raise the issue in the House. But our MLAs will continue to hit the streets for a fierce and massive movement in the coming days," he added.

Adhikari also demanded publication of the list of patients who had been administered the fluid in past one month and payment of ₹ 50 lakh as compensation for the bereaved family. He later filed an FIR at Electronics Complex police station holding health officials responsible for the death of the woman in the intravenous fluid case. (PTI)

## SC bars announcing Bihar legislative council bypoll result

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** The Supreme Court on Wednesday barred from declaring the Bihar legislative council by-election result for the seat previously held by expelled RJD leader Sunil Kumar Singh.

On July 26, last year, Singh was expelled from the Bihar legislative council for unruly behaviour in the House.

Singh, considered close to RJD supremo Lalu Prasad and his family, was charged for sloganeering against Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on February 13, 2024, during a heated exchange in the House.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kotiswar Singh was informed by senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, appearing for Singh, that the by-election result was likely to be announced on January 16 for the seat as the election was unopposed.

The bench said since it was already hearing the arguments on the matter, no results for the seat should be declared in the meantime.

Singhvi said the court was hearing his plea against the expulsion since August, 2024, and if tomorrow the court allowed the petition, it would be a peculiar situation with there being two candidates for a single seat.

The bench said it would on January 16 hear the response of the state legislative council and the ethics committee and others, following which it would reserve its judgement on the issue.

In 2024, the motion for Singh's expulsion was passed by voice vote, a day after the ethics committee submitted its report to acting chairman Awadhesh Narain Singh. (PTI)

## Cong leadership has said no one should speak on leadership change in Karnataka: Parameshwara

**BENGALURU, Jan 15:** Karnataka Home Minister G Parameshwara on Wednesday said that the AICC General Secretary, representing the Congress high command, instructed everyone in the ruling party not to make any statements regarding a change of guard in the state.

He said that he and other leaders will discuss and decide on the next steps regarding the meeting of Congress leaders, ministers, and lawmakers from SC/ST communities, which was postponed last week.

"Our General Secretary, Ran-deep Singh Surjewala, who represents the high command, has instructed us not to talk about any change. So, we will say less about it," Parameshwara told reporters when asked about the issue of a potential Chief Minister change."

Responding to Minister R B Timmapur's reported statement about Dalits becoming Chief Minister, while also pointing out that he is a Dalit, Parameshwara—who is also a Dalit and seen as a CM aspirant—said, "He (Timmapur) is also capable; he has been in politics for over 30 years."

Amid the power struggle within the ruling Congress in Karnataka, the party leadership, during a legislature party meeting on Monday attended by Surjewala, instructed all its lawmakers not to make public statements and emphasized that everyone must abide by the high command's decisions.

This message to Congress legislators comes in the wake of several members, including Ministers, openly speaking to the media about the leadership change. While some have hinted at its possibility, others have rejected the idea outright.

Siddaramaiah's recent dinner with select Dalit and ST Cabinet colleagues at Minister Satish Jarkiholi's residence has created a buzz within the Congress, amid specu-



lation of a possible change of guard in the state after the budget presentation in March, under a "rotational chief minister" or "power-sharing" formula.

Such an agreement was reportedly reached in 2023, following the party's electoral victory, with both Siddaramaiah and DK Shivakumar—now the Deputy CM—competing for the top post.

While Shivakumar and his supporters appear to be waiting for Siddaramaiah to step down in line with the power-sharing agreement, party sources indicate that the Chief Minister's followers are in no mood to accept Shivakumar as the leader.

Regarding the postponed meeting of the party's SC/ST leaders under his leadership, Parameshwara said, "Now that the meeting has been postponed, we will discuss and decide on the next move."

In response to a question about reported instructions from the leadership that community-related meetings of party leaders, including those from SC/ST communities, to discuss their issues, will be organised by the state Congress

self, Parameshwara said, "Let them do it. Who said no? For us, getting our issues resolved is what's important."

He further said, "Are we not the party? Is the party different from us? We are the party. If we are there, the party exists. By 'we,' I mean the public community. Congress is a party built by the public community. The Congress party is a movement. That's why we say Congress is not a cadre-based party—it is a movement. Let whoever wants to interpret it in their own way do so."

A meeting of Congress leaders, ministers, and lawmakers from SC/ST communities, scheduled for January 8 evening under the leadership of Parameshwara, was postponed following instructions from Surjewala. According to sources, this came after Shivakumar met AICC General Secretary (Organisation) K C Venugopal in New Delhi on the night of January 6.

A section within the Congress believes that the planned SC/ST convention and Parameshwara's meeting could revive the demand for a Dalit or AHINDA (a Kannada

acronym for minorities, backward classes, and Dalits) leader to become the next Chief Minister. This could complicate Shivakumar's prospects if Siddaramaiah steps down after the state budget, as speculated.

When asked about the possibility of political changes by March, Parameshwara said, "I don't know... I'm not an astrologer. If I were good at astrology, I would have said something."

Regarding the possibility of a cabinet reshuffle, based on a consolidated report on the performance of 31 ministers in the state government submitted by the Chief Minister and Shivakumar to Surjewala on Monday, he said, "I don't know. Those who have taken the report should comment."

Noting that he had also submitted a report on his performance and his department, the Home Minister said, "I have provided the report regarding my department. Those who received it will have to explain why they asked for it."

When asked about Minister Satish Jarkiholi's alleged verbal exchange with Shivakumar and Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar during the CLP meeting on Monday, Parameshwara said, "Nothing like that happened. Regarding the construction of the Congress office in Belagavi, he (Jarkiholi) told Shivakumar, 'I too have contributed money for setting up a party office. Please include my name as well. Why only mention one or two names?' Other than that, nothing else occurred."

According to sources, Shivakumar, while emphasizing the importance of ministers taking the initiative in constructing new party offices in districts during the CLP meeting, reportedly cited Hebbalkar's efforts in building a new party office in Belagavi. In response, Jarkiholi is said to have objected, highlighting his own contributions. (PTI)

## BJP slams Sharad Pawar for his remarks on Amit Shah

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** The BJP on Wednesday slammed NCP (SP) supremo Sharad Pawar for his "tadipaar" remark on Amit Shah and asked the veteran leader to stop spreading "wrong information" about the Union home minister. This came a day after Pawar attacked Shah for his comments that the BJP's victory in the Maharashtra assembly polls ended "the politics of betrayal and treachery started by him (Pawar) in 1978".

Bemoaning the lack of communication among current political leaders, Pawar also asked the Union home minister to maintain the decorum of the post he holds.

In an apparent reference to Shah being externed in 2010 from Gujarat for two years in connection with the Sohrabuddin Sheikh fake encounter case, the NCP (SP) chief had told a press conference in Marathi in Mumbai, "This country has seen many excellent home ministers, but none of them was a 'tadipaar' from his own state (externed)."

Shah was acquitted of all the charges in 2014.

Hitting back at Pawar, BJP national general secretary Vinod Tawde said in a statement, "NCP (SP) leader Sharad Pawar has called Amit Shah a 'tadipaar' home minister. Do you know why he was externed from the state?" (PTI)

## Prosecution sanction against Kejriwal ahead of Delhi polls misuse of power by BJP: AAP

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** The AAP on Wednesday said the home ministry granting sanction to prosecute Arvind Kejriwal was a "misuse" of power by the BJP and an attempt to defame the ruling party ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls. The Union Home Ministry has granted sanction to the Enforcement Directorate to prosecute the former Delhi chief minister in the excise policy-linked money laundering case, officials said.

The federal agency filed a chargesheet against the 56-year-old politician before a special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court here last year after arresting him in March.

The Aam Aadmi Party said the excise policy case registered in November 2022 was "unprecedented" as Kejriwal was arrested without any "sanction". (PTI)

## Pixxel, Digantara launch satellites to monitor earth, space objects

**BENGALURU/NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** Two Indian space start-ups -- Pixxel and Digantara -- on Wednesday announced the launch of their satellites onboard a SpaceX rocket to closely monitor the earth and objects orbiting around it, marking a new era for the private firms in the space sector.

Pixxel became the first private company in India to have its own constellation of satellites using the cutting-edge hyperspectral frequency that allows observation of the earth in over 150 bands, a technology that is useful in sectors as diverse as agriculture and defence.

Digantara Aerospace announced the launch of the world's first commercial satellite - Space Camera for Object Tracking (SCOT) - for surveillance of objects as small as 5 cm orbiting the earth to ensure safer space operations.

Surveillance of outer space or situational space awareness (SSA) is important to ensure the safety of spacecraft as orbits around the earth become crowded with artificial satellites as well as space debris.

Pixxel's three Fireflies, currently the world's highest-resolution commercial-grade hyperspectral satellites, are six times sharper than the 30-meter standard and are capable of capturing fine details previously invisible to conventional systems.

"For the first time a 5 meter hyperspectral is available. That is what makes it unique, not just in India, but globally," Pixxel co-founder and CEO Awais Ahmed told PTI.

Pixxel plans to launch three more Firefly



satellites over the next two months and follow it up with 18 more in future.

"This milestone by Pixxel, marks a significant step forward, as hyperspectral satellite imaging has a potential to play a transformative role for many use cases, especially the defence sector. The advanced hyperspectral imaging capabilities of these satellites are poised to unlock new possibilities," Lt Gen A K Bhatt, Director General, Indian Space Association (ISPA), told PTI.

Lt Gen Bhatt said Digantara's SCOT satellite was a crucial stepping stone to ensure a more sustainable space environment

and to tackle the growing issue of space debris and congestion, which pose a greater threat as the number of man-made objects in space increase in future.

Digantara CEO Anirudh Sharma said SCOT aimed to enhance space safety, optimise traffic management and bolster national security initiatives.

From the sun-synchronous orbit, SCOT will track objects in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) with greater efficiency than existing sensors, which are constrained by weather conditions, geographic limitations and restricted fields of view.

"Unlike these traditional systems, SCOT offers persistent monitoring of Resident Space Objects, detecting and tracking objects as small as 5 cm," a company statement said.

As one of the world's first commercial Space Situational Awareness (SSA) satellites, SCOT is engineered to track Resident Space Objects (RSOs) with unmatched frequency and precision.

SCOT forms a key part of Digantara's mission to establish a hybrid network of surveillance systems, delivering persistent monitoring of the near-Earth environment to ensure improved safety and the long-term sustainability of space operations.

The cutting-edge resolution of Fireflies enable them to detect subtle changes in chemical compositions, vegetation health, water quality and even atmospheric conditions with unmatched accuracy. Pixxel co-founder and CTO Kshitij Khandelwal said at the headquarters of the start-up in Bengaluru.

While traditional earth observation satellites rely on broader spectral bands, the Firefly's narrowband sensors uncover hidden patterns and anomalies critical for applications, ranging from agriculture to climate action, he said.

Pixxel already has signed up more than 60 clients, including the US National Reconnaissance Organization, companies like Rio Tinto, British Petroleum, and the Union Ministry of Agriculture, who are receiving hyper-spectral data from its technology demonstration satellites. (PTI)



# Novak Djokovic breaks a tie with Roger Federer for the most Grand Slam matches in tennis history

**MELBOURNE, Jan 15:** Novak Djokovic added yet another record to his lengthy list, breaking a tie with Roger Federer for the most Grand Slam matches played in tennis history by reaching 430 on Wednesday at the Australian Open in what was a tougher-than-expected second-round victory.

Djokovic improved to 379-51 for his career at major tournaments, a .881 winning percentage, by defeating 21-year-old Portuguese qualifier Jaime Faria 6-1, 6-7 (4), 6-3, 6-2 in a match briefly interrupted by light rain before Rod Laver Arena's re-

tractable roof was shut.

"Grand Slams, of course, they are the pillars of our sport. They mean everything for the history of the sport. ... Definitely the most important tournaments," Djokovic said. "I'm just blessed to be making another record, I guess, today."

Oh, yes, Djokovic already holds so many marks, many of which used to belong to Federer — who went 369-60 during his 429 Slam matches, a .860 winning percentage — and there are more on the horizon.

As it is, Djokovic has won the most Grand Slam singles titles of any man, 24,

ahead of Rafael Nadal's 22 and Federer's 20 (those other two members of the Big Three are now retired). The 37-year-old Serb has spent more weeks at No. 1 in the rankings than any other player. He's played in 37 Slam finals, six more than Federer's old record. And so on and so on.

Consider, too, what could possibly await for Djokovic.

A title at the end of the 15 days at Melbourne Park would be his 25th at a major, a number never reached by any man or woman. It would also be his 11th at the Australian Open, equaling Margaret Court for the most. It would make

him the oldest man in the Open era — which began in 1968 — to collect a Grand Slam singles trophy (Ken Rosewall was about six months younger when he won the 1972 Australian Open). And it would be Djokovic's 100th tour-level tournament title, a nice round number behind only Jimmy Connors' 109 and Federer's 103 in the Open era among men.

Not everything has gone perfectly this week in Australia for Djokovic in his first tournament working with former on-court rival Andy Murray as his coach.

Both of Djokovic's matches so far came against

a young player making his Grand Slam debut. And both times, he was pushed to four sets.

In the first round, it was against Nishesh Basavareddy, a 19-year-old American who turned pro only last month and is ranked 107th. In the second, it was Faria, who is ranked 125th, giving him a bit of a hard time, especially during a four-game run in the second set.

"He was playing lights-out tennis. ... I had to weather the storm," Djokovic said. "I think I responded very well in the third and, particularly fourth, (sets)." (AP)



# Mandhana smashes 70-ball ton as records fall by wayside in India's 304-run-victory

**RAJKOT, Jan 15:** Records tumbled like nine pins as the Indian women's cricket team, powered by skipper Smriti Mandhana's 70-ball century, demolished Ireland by a whopping 304 runs to claim its biggest-ever ODI win and complete a 3-0 clean sweep here on Wednesday.

The result of the match was a mere formality once India set Ireland a massive target of 436, and Ireland could only garner 131 before getting bundled out in 31.4 overs.

India put the first step forward towards a crushing victory through record-breaking Mandhana and her opening partner Pratika Rawal, reaching 435/5, highest total by an Indian team — men's or women's — in ODIs.

India men's highest ODI total is 418/5 made against the West Indies in Indore in 2011.

Mandhana and Rawal added a whopping 233 runs for the first wicket in just 26.4 overs and there was no looking back.

Then spinners Tanuja Kanwar and Deepti Sharma took over, sharing five wickets among them to decimate the Irish line-up, which was well short on experience. Orla Prendergast and Sarah Forbes added 64 runs for a fluent third wicket stand that helped Ireland to recover from a shaky 24 for two to reach 88 without further damage.

But once Prendergast was cleaned up by Kanwar, India were



all over the tourists like a bad rash, claiming the remaining seven wickets for just 33 runs.

It also helped India eclipse their previous largest margin of victory — 249 registered against the same opposition in 2017 at Potchefstroom, South Africa.

Mandhana's 10th ODI century came off just 70 deliveries as the left-hander surpassed Harman-

preet Kaur's 87-ball hundred mark against South Africa last year.

It also set the tone for India breaching the 400-run mark for the first time, joining Australia and New Zealand in that elite list.

Mandhana was in her usual destructive self, and was not afraid to take the aerial route over the 'V' and clear the 30-yard circle.

Pratika complemented her captain brilliantly with a measured knock, making the occasion even more special by notching her maiden international century in her sixth innings.

Pratika relied on precise placement and deft touches in the point region and she showed her aggression only after reaching the ton, hitting Freya Sargent for her

first six. Demonstrating hunger for a bigger knock, she powered her way to an impressive 150 — a perfect blend of composure and aggression. Their 233-run partnership made them only the fourth Indian pair to record a 200-run stand in Women's ODIs.

It was also the third instance of both Indian openers scoring hundreds in ODIs, following Reshma Gandhi and Mithali Raj's feat at Milton Keynes in 1999 and Deepti and Raut's partnership at Potchefstroom in 2017 all against Ireland.

The duo added 90 runs during the Power Play and 67 in the subsequent 10 overs, maintaining a brisk scoring rate.

Mandhana reached her first century of the calendar year with an exquisite drive off Arlene Kelly.

Kelly bore the brunt of her onslaught, conceding successive sixes in one over.

Even Kelly's variations, including back-of-the-hand deliveries, were dispatched with ease, with the Indian batter following a six with another boundary in the 24th over. Mandhana also took on Ireland's leading bowler, Prendergast, smashing her for a boundary down the ground and a towering six over long-on.

Promoted to No. 3, Richa Ghosh also returned to form, making a 37-ball fifty, her fifth in ODIs. (PTI)

## Zheng loses to No 97 Siegemund, Osaka rallies to advance at the Australian Open

**MELBOURNE, Jan 15:** Distracted by a time penalty and unable to counteract No. 97-ranked Laura Siegemund's aggressive approach, Zheng Qinwen's loss in the second round Wednesday fell a long way short of last year's run to the Australian Open final.

Zheng lost the 2024 decider at Melbourne Park to Aryna Sabalenka and went on to win the Olympic gold medal in Paris and finish runner-up at the WTA Finals in a breakout season.

But her first tournament of the year ended in a 7-6 (3), 6-3 loss on John Cain Arena against 36-year-old Siegemund, who attacked from the first point and put Zheng off her game. Zheng needed a change of shoes early in the second set, got a time warning on her serve from the chair umpire — she said she couldn't clearly see the clock — and was worried about some minor issues which sidelined her before the Australian Open.

"I feel maybe today is not my day. There's a lot of details in the important points. I didn't do the right choice," Zheng said.

Of a weak serve that bounced before the net, Zheng said the time warning from the umpire "obviously that one really distracted me from the match." "This is my fourth year in the tour, and never happen that to me." Both of last year's women's finalists were playing at the same time on nearby courts. Sabalenka, the two-time defending champion, extended her

run to 16 wins at Melbourne Park by winning the last five games to beat No. 54-ranked Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 6-3, 7-5. Naomi Osaka, another two-time Australian Open champion, reached the third round of a major for the first time since 2022 when she weathered an early barrage from U.S. Open semifinalist Karolina Muchova before rallying to win 1-6, 6-1, 6-3.

Osaka lost in the first round here last year to Caroline Garcia in her comeback from maternity leave but avenged that with a first-round victory over Garcia this week.

Osaka said she used a loss to Muchova at the U.S. Open as motivation. "She crushed me in the U.S. Open when I had my best outfit ever," Osaka joked in a post-match interview. "I was so disappointed. I was so mad. This was my little revenge."

Osaka will next meet Belinda Bencic, the Tokyo Olympic gold medalist who is playing in her first major since the birth of her daughter, Bella, last year.

Also advancing were No. 7 Jessica Pegula, had a 6-4, 6-2 win over Elise Mertens, and 17-year-old Mirra Andrejeva, the No. 14 seed who beat Moyuka Uchijima 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (8). The scoreline in Sabalenka's match didn't reflect the difficulty, with Bouzas Maneiro taking huge swipes at the ball in her Australian Open debut and dictating some of the points against the world No. 1-ranked player. (AP)

## Australian Open: Osaka is back in a Slam's 3<sup>rd</sup> round for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in 3 years

**MELBOURNE, Jan 15:** Naomi Osaka's second-round match at the Australian Open could not possibly have started in a worse way. All of 21 minutes in, she sailed a forehand service return well long and, just like that, trailed 5-0.

Osaka strode to the sideline for the changeover, plopped herself down and draped a white towel over her head, blocking out all sights and leaving her with just her thoughts. She stayed like that throughout the break between games, even maneuvering a water bottle under that towel to take a drink.

This was not a match against some unknown opponent, someone Osaka knew for sure she could beat. It was against 20th-seeded Karolina Muchova, the runner-up at the 2023 French Open and a three-time semifinalist at other majors, including at Melbourne Park in 2021.

Muchova also had defeated Osaka in their two most recent matchups. None of that mattered on this afternoon, though: Osaka forgot about that disappointing start and came all the way back to win 1-6, 6-1, 6-3 on Wednesday.

What was her mindset? "Just be aware and try not to get so negative on yourself. I think, for me, the score in the first set was very dramatic, but there was key points that I could have maybe won a game here or there," Osaka explained. "So I kept trying to tell myself that."



This was, in some ways, a significant moment for Osaka, who once reigned atop women's tennis, winning four Grand Slam titles — two at the Australian Open, two at the U.S. Open — and ascending to No. 1 in the WTA rankings. The victory allowed her to reach the third round at a major tournament for the first time since the 2022 season.

Getting to that stage was not considered a big deal at one point for her. But time off because of mental health breaks and then a pregnancy — Osaka's daughter, Shai, was born in July 2023 — changed things.

Since returning to action a year ago, Osaka has shown signs of getting her game back together, including a memorable and narrow loss to then-No. 1 Iga

Swiatek at the French Open. This, though, followed a win against 2022 U.S. Open semifinalist Caroline Garcia in Melbourne and meant the progress is real.

"It definitely was something that is a goal of mine, especially after last year; I wasn't able to beat a seed in a Grand Slam," Osaka said. "I'm obviously very thankful that happened so early this year."

She also joked about gaining a measure of "revenge" by defeating Garcia — who eliminated Osaka in Melbourne a year ago — and Muchova in consecutive matches.

Next for Osaka is a matchup against Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic, who is also a mother; her daughter, Bella, was born last year. Both Osaka and Bencic are big hitters. (AP)

## East Bengal seek govt intervention over ISL 'step-motherly treatment, refugees club' tag

**KOLKATA, Jan 15:** Allying "step-motherly treatment" by the Indian Super League organizers, century-old East Bengal club has sought Union Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya's intervention, claiming that systemic bias, the outdated "refugees club" tag, and refereeing controversies have stalled their progress in the top-tier football competition.

The incident occurred during the 'Kolkata Derby' in Guwahati on Saturday where East Bengal lost to arch-rivals Mohun Bagan by a solitary goal.

The club claimed the match was marred by biased officiating, including the denial of a clear penalty and a controversial yellow card issued to midfielder Souvik Chakrabarti, which led to his red card and team being reduced 10 players.

In an emotional plea to the sports minister, East Bengal highlighted how the "refugees club" tag has led to their ongoing marginalisation in Indian football.

"Fight, Fight and Fight -- this has been the perennial motto of East Bengal club for the last 150 years. This club and its supporters have endured the tumultuous period pre and post-partition only through its fighting spirit."

"While the displaced people fought tooth and nail for their substance, the club had to fight the stigma and the tag of a 'Refugees Club' to establish itself as the leading football club of the country," East Bengal general secretary Rupak Saha wrote in a statement.

"We are surprised that even 75 years after independence, we are in a situation where East Bengal Club has been victimised in almost every match of the ISL."

"We are forced to think why all this is happening to us is it because we are still considered the

'Refugees Club'. Throughout the last 10-12 years, we had to bear the brunt of biased refereeing, be it in the I-League and more so in the ISL."

"During this period, we must have sent close to 50 complaint letters to all the concerned authorities but to no avail and the standard of refereeing has only gone from bad to worse to the worst."

"Even in the last ISL derby on January 11, we were denied a genuine penalty and one of our vital players, Souvik Chakrabarty, was unnecessarily shown a first yellow, which paved the way for a red card and suspension in the 2nd half." Saha alleged that those who run Indian football establishment do not want the red and gold brigade to shine.

"It is now crystal clear that the powers that be would never allow us to flourish and prosper in the ISL. It is pertinent to mention here that our only two victories over our arch-rivals in the last 5 years have both been in non-ISL tournaments - the Durand Cup and the Super Cup."

"The step-motherly treatment in ISL is still being run in the spirit of one city, one club with which it was envisaged originally." Calling for government intervention, it further states: "Football has always been the key unifier of people. It's a simple sport which, by its nature, is inclusive. Football as a game has always broken the barriers between the rich and the poor, colour, caste, religion and creed."

"We would soon be seeking an appointment with the Honorable Union Sports Minister to appraise him of the sorry state of affairs in Indian football and demand his intervention," it concluded. (PTI)

## Anupama, Tanisha-Ashwini enter second round of India Open

**NEW DELHI, Jan 15:** HS Prannoy and Priyanshu Rajawat went down fighting but former national champion Anupama Upadhyaya progressed to the second round in a mixed day for home shuttlers at the Indian Open Super 750 badminton tournament here on Wednesday.

Priyanshu put up a valiant fight before succumbing 16-21, 22-20, 13-21 to world number 7 Kodai Naraoka of Japan in an hour and 22 minutes. Meanwhile, Prannoy was defeated by Su Li Yang of Chinese Taipei 21-16, 18-21, 12-21 on the adjacent court.

In women's singles, Anupama defeated compatriot and academy mate Rakshitha Sree 21-17, 21-18 to reach the second round. The two Gopichand Academy trainees, who share a close bond off the court, exchanged friendly banter and mutual admiration after the match.

Tanisha Crasto and Ashwini Ponnappa, who clinched the Guwahati Masters title last month, eased past Kavya Gupta and Radhika Sharma 21-11, 21-12 to also advance to the second round.

The Panda sisters, Rutuparna and Swetaparna, also advanced to the second round with a remarkable come-from-behind win, overcoming Thailand's Phatharisa Aiamvareesrisakul and Sarisa Janteng 7-21, 21-19, 21-14.

In the morning, Aakarshi Kashyap fell to Thailand's Pornpawee Chochuwong 17-21, 13-21 in the opening round.

Malvika Bansod, who has emerged as the second-best Indian after PV Sindhu, showed glimpses of her potential but fell short against world number 4 Han Yue of China.

Malvika, who had lost to Han in straight games at the Malaysia Open last week, was 14-11 up in the opening game. However, soft errors crept in and a cross-court shot from Han on the Indian's forehand allowed her to claw back to 15-15. The battle intensified, and a smash from Han gave her two game points.

Malvika saved both after Han went wide twice, and the Indian earned a game point herself after Han sprayed the shuttle wide. Malvika sealed the game when Han again sent the shuttle wide. (PTI)