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- South Korean protesters brave cold to demand Yoon's ouster
- 180 million people have been denied their voting rights, says B'desh CEC

8

- No welfare scheme to be shut if BJP comes to power in Delhi: PM
- BJP only national party not owned by any family but by its workers: Fadnavis

## CM Himanta meets top industry players in Mumbai ahead of Advantage Assam



**HT Bureau**  
GUWAHATI, Jan 5: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday held a series of meetings in Mumbai with top industrialists of the country to attract potential investors for the upcoming investment and infrastructure summit in the state—Advantage Assam 2.0 which is scheduled to take place in the February month in Guwahati. The chief minister met Noel

Tata, chairman of Tata group where he discussed about synergising their efforts to improve the ease of living of the people. "It was an absolute pleasure to meet Shri Noel Tata, the Chairman of @tatatrusters. We talked about synergising our efforts to improve the ease of living of our people and augmenting the Trust's phenomenal intervention in Assam's health-care and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Chinese annexation of Indian territory occurred during Nehru's term: BJP

NEW DELHI, Jan 5: The BJP on Sunday flayed the Congress for alleging Chinese occupation of the Indian territory during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's term and said the grand old party cannot get away with "such lies" as all of it occurred during Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure. The BJP's reaction came a day after the Congress alleged in a post

on X, "China kept occupying India's land. Narendra Modi kept giving clean chit." Reacting sharply, BJP IT department head Amit Malviya said the Congress has the "dishonesty" to speak of Chinese annexation of the Indian territory despite the fact that all of it occurred during Nehru's tenure as the prime minister. "Imagine blaming Prime Minis-

The major change in party organisation will be from booth to state level: Bhupen Borah

# 2026 assembly polls: Assam Cong set for major shuffle

GUWAHATI, Jan 5: Assam Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah on Sunday said he will carry out a statewide reshuffle of all office-bearers of the party in February, with an eye on the assembly elections next year. In an interview with PTI, he said around 90 per cent of the office-bearers will be changed after assessing their capability, loyalty and performance in the last three-and-half years. "I'll carry out a statewide reshuffle in February to strengthen the party, keeping an eye on the next year's assembly elections," Borah said. The major reshuffle in party organisation will be from booth to state level, and the central leadership of the Congress has also given its consent to the proposed reorganisation, he added.



"When I took charge as the PCC president in 2021, the party was demoralised after losing the state elections for the second time in a row. At that time, many MLAs and party leaders left us and joined the BJP," Borah said. He, however, asserted that the situation has changed now and the common people want a change of guard in the state. "Now, people are coming back

and joining the Congress. So, we have more capable and deserving people in the party. Those who have capability to work will get chance accordingly," Borah said. Elaborating the proposed reshuffle process, the senior Congress leader stated that the party formed a Political Affairs Committee (PAC) in every district and it gave suggestions to change office-bearers at booth, block and district levels. He said that the reshuffle exercise will begin from the booth level as per the recommendations of the district PACs and almost 90 per cent of the Assam Congress's office-bearers will be changed. Borah also spoke about the forthcoming panchayat election in the state and the party's preparedness for it. Asked about tie-ups between Congress and other anti-BJP parties, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 200 join Raijor Dal in Teok

**HT Correspondent**  
JORHAT, Jan 5: A total of 200 people from several political parties joined the Akhil Gogoi-led Raijor Dal during a public meeting held at Kaliapani Block Tiniali, Teok, under the Mariani assembly constituency. The public meeting was attended by Raijor Dal president and Sivasagar MLA Akhil Gogoi. Addressing the gathering, Gogoi stated that people joined Raijor Dal because they were inspired by the party's ideals. "The party plans to field candidates from the Mariani constituency in the 2026 assembly elections. Raijor Dal aims to be part of the government after defeating the BJP in 2026," he added. Gogoi promised that if the party becomes part of the government, it would focus on providing irrigation for all agricultural lands to enable year-round cultivation and would (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## B'desh cancels planned training of judges in India

DHAKA, Jan 5: Bangladesh's interim government on Sunday cancelled a planned training programme for 50 judges and judicial officers in India, scrapping a previous notification. "The notification has been cancelled," a law ministry spokesman said without elaborating. The Daily Star newspaper, however, reported the cancellation came in compliance with a directive from Bangladesh's Supreme Court. The cancellation order came a day after the state-run Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha reported that (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Assembly Speaker rejects petition seeking Cong MLA's suspension

GUWAHATI, Jan 5: The Assam Congress on Sunday said the assembly Speaker has rejected its petition seeking disqualification of its suspended MLA Sherman Ali Ahmed from the House. State Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah termed the Speaker's decision as "politically incapable". "We had petitioned the Speaker to disqualify Ahmed, but he has dismissed our application. This is a politically incapable decision by the Speaker and it will hurt the BJP more," Borah told reporters here. He said Ahmed was suspended from the party for al-

legedly insulting the Assam Agitation and its martyrs. "We will approach the high court and if needed, we will go to the Supreme Court. We have discussed with the leader of the opposition and will take a decision," Borah said. Baghbor legislator Ahmed was suspended from the party in October 2021 for "repeatedly violating party discipline". He was also arrested prior to the suspension over 'provocative' remarks he had allegedly made against an eviction drive in Darrang district in September that year. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# GUNOTSAV 2025

## Ensuring Quality Education

1<sup>ST</sup> PHASE (6 - 9 JANUARY 2025)

BARPETA, BAJALI, SRIBHUMI, KAMRUP, KARBI ANGLONG, KOKRAJHAR, LAKHIMPUR, NAGAON, SIVASAGAR, SOUTH SALMARA-MANKACHAR AND UDALGURI

DATE OF SELF EVALUATION  
6 JANUARY 2025

DATE OF EXTERNAL EVALUATION  
7-9 JANUARY 2025

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS 16,056

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

NUMBER OF STUDENTS 14,11,874

Classes I to IX

NO. OF EXTERNAL EVALUATORS 6,365

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

Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma  
Chief Minister, Assam

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## Govt should lower GST on cement at 18 pc, frame policy to boost demand: JK Lakshmi

**PATNA, Jan 5:** The government should reduce GST on cement to 18 per cent from 28 per cent and take some policy measures in the upcoming Budget to boost consumption of this key building material, a senior official of JK Lakshmi Cement said.

In an interview with PTI, Arun Shukla, President and Director of JK Lakshmi Cement, said there is a case to increase cement manufacturing capacity in India to meet the rising demand, which is expected to grow at an average annual rate of 7-8 per cent. "One of the long-cherished dream, or the wish for us, has been reducing GST on cement," Shukla told PTI on the sidelines of 'Bihar Business Connect 2024' meet held here recently.

In India, cement is taxed at the highest rate of 28 per cent and this needs to be reduced to 18 per cent, he said while replying to a query on the Budget wishlist from the industry. "Cement is, I would say, one of the major component of driving growth in the economy," Shukla said, adding that cement is required to build world-class infrastructure that can support the growth of the Indian economy.

He also emphasised on the need to enhance the consumption of cement in India. "Cement is one of the major drivers of growth, so how we can really increase consumption of cement?" he said.

Shukla said the cement concrete roads have more longevity and in the long run and it is more cost-effective than bitumen roads.



fective than bitumen roads.

"So my wish would be to really kind of drive this (cement consumption), through maybe some of the policies and specifications..." he said. JK Lakshmi Cement, part of the JK Organisation, is investing Rs 500 crore in Bihar to set up a manufacturing plant in Madhubani district. The Bharat Hari Singhania family-promoted JK Lakshmi Cement had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the state government in 2023 investors' meet itself for its proposed manufacturing unit.

The company has already acquired land and is in the process of obtaining other approvals to set up the plant. "We want to cater to local demand from this plant at Madhubani in Bihar," he said, adding that the plant is expected to be operational within a year.

Shukla complimented the Bihar government for fulfilling its promises, including fiscal incentives, saying "they are really walking the talk". About the company's experience in Bihar so far, Shukla said, "I think the experience has been encouraging, and the very reason I am here for the second time to attend this meeting was to express my gratitude, but to also encourage my other colleagues to set up..."

"The kind of support we have got from all corners, all departments and the bureaucracy in Bihar was amazing. And this is one of perhaps the best experience which we had in setting up a new plant at new location," he said.

JK Lakshmi Cement has 18 million tonnes of annual capacity. "We have set a target to reach 30 million tonnes by 2030," he said. The 12 million additional capacity

expansions across various geographies are on track, Shukla said.

On consolidation in the cement sector, Shukla said, "I think this is a myth. I would say, if you really look at the statistics, top five players have been kind of holding on to about 55-57 per cent of the cement capacity, that situation is still there, it's not changing much."

Although cement demand in 2024 was low due to elections and cyclic nature, he said, "going forward, I think we clearly see a CAGR of 7-8 per cent. "And if you really look at the capacity addition, which is happening is about 5-6 per cent. So still, I think the demand and supply is in favour of adding cement capacity. So consolidation in that way also is not going to impact much," he said.

The prices go along with the demand and if the demand improves, prices will improve, he quipped.

JK Organisation has overseas manufacturing operations in Mexico, Indonesia, Romania, Belgium, Portugal, and the UAE. It owns companies such as JK Tyre, JK Paper, JK Fenner, and Umang Dairies besides JK Lakshmi Cement.

Shukla said the JK Organisation is exploring to invest in other sectors as well like tyre and paper manufacturing. "JK Organization is quite a diversified group. And the objective was to really explore other opportunities as well," Shukla said, adding that the group will decide on further investments after studying all aspects. (PTI)

## 2 pilots, 1 crew member killed as chopper crashes at Porbandar airport

**GUJARAT, Jan 5:** Two pilots and a crew member were killed on Sunday after an Indian Coast Guard helicopter on a routine sortie crashed at Porbandar airport runway in Gujarat and caught fire, officials said. The maritime security agency said the reasons for the incident are being investigated through a Board of Inquiry.

"ICG ALH MK-III helicopter CG 859 met with a mishap at Porbandar Airport Runway at about 1215 hrs on Jan 25. The ICG helicopter had 02 Pilots and 01 Air Crew Driver at the time of the incident and was on a routine training sortie," an ICG statement said.

Immediately after the incident, the crew was rescued and shifted to a government hospital at Porbandar, where they were declared as brought dead.

The deceased are Commandant (JG) Saurabh, Deputy Commandant SK Yadav and Navik Manoj Pradhan. They will be cremated as per service tradi-

tions and honour, the ICG stated.

Porbandar Superintendent of Police Bhagirathsinh Jadeja said the chopper crashed while landing near the Porbandar airport runway and caught fire.

"The chopper was returning and trying to land when the incident occurred near a runway. Three crew members were present on the chopper. They were rescued and rushed to Bhavsinh Civil Hospital in Porbandar with severe burn injuries, but none of them survived," the police officer told reporters earlier in the day.

The Porbandar airport contains separate enclaves for the Indian Navy and the ICG.

The latest incident comes four months after ICG's ALH MK-III helicopter crashed into the Arabian Sea off Porbandar on September 2, 2024, killing three crew members.

The bodies of its pilot and a diver were recovered soon after the incident, while the mortal remains of the third crew member after more than a month. (PTI)

## Karur Vysya Bank adds two more branches in TN

**CHENNAI, Jan 5:** Private sector Karur Vysya Bank has inaugurated two more branches, taking the overall presence of the banking network to 866 across the country.

The Tamil Nadu-based bank inaugurated two branches, one each in Chennai and the other at Tiruchirappalli.

According to a press release,

during the current financial year, the company has added 28 new branches, taking the overall presence of the banking network to 866 across the country.

The new branches would provide basic banking transactions and would also address the specific needs of customers. It would also provide banking and financial

services covering retail, institutional and consumer lending.

As on September 30, 2024, the bank's total business stood at Rs 1,76,138 crore with a deposit base of Rs 95,839 crore and advances at Rs 80,299 crore. In the last financial year, the bank recorded its highest net profit of Rs 1,605 crore, the release added. (PTI)

*Contd. from Page 1...*

## 2026 assembly polls: Assam Cong

he said, "No alliance will take place at the state level, but district units have been authorised to take a decision on the alliance with like-minded opposition parties." He pointed out that there are nearly 22,000 wards in 2,200 gaon panchayats and it is not possible to form an alliance for so many wards while sitting in Guwahati.

"So, Assam PCC has already instructed its district units that they can make an alliance with any anti-BJP party at district or block level. They are free to do so. We will be happy if any of our district units form alliances with any anti-BJP parties," Borah said.

The Congress state chief also mentioned the party's preparation for the assembly elections in Assam in 2026 and elaborated various programmes, including several 'yatras', planned during the year.

"The day panchayat elections are over, we will start a new journey from Sadiya to Dhubri, covering 45 assembly constituencies at one stretch. The second yatra will be from Sadiya to Mandia. All leadership will participate in these yatras," he added.

Borah said that the government is likely to announce the panchayat election schedule within January, following which every party leader and worker will be busy for it.

In the meantime, All India Congress Committee has declared 'Jai Sangbhidhan, Jai Bhim and Jai Babu' Yatra in every booth and mandal of the country, and the Assam unit will also implement such programmes, he added.

"These are our immediate plans. In between, I think there will be another round of elections in Rabha Hasong, Tiwa and Sonowal-Kachari autonomous councils. We will accordingly participate in these councils polls also," he said.

Asked about the Congress's strategy to fight the 2026 assembly elections in Assam, Borah said the aim of the party is to unite all the anti-BJP political parties, organisations and individuals to defeat the NDA.

"For this, definitely we will have to sacrifice some seats and we are ready to do so. In 2021 also, we contested 97 seats out of 126. This time as well, we will definitely sacrifice as per the situation," he added.

The Congress chief stated that during the recent Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting in Karnataka, it was decided to intimate the possible candidates 8-9 months before the assembly elections so that he or she can be involved in all party activities and prepare their constituencies in the run-up to the voting.

"AICC will make an independent survey to see who will be the best candidate for the 2026 polls. In earlier elections, our prime criteria for selection of candidates was only winnability. This time, along with winnability, ideological commitment to the party or credibility of the candidate will also be assessed.

"We do not want a similar situation like Manipur, Maharashtra or Madhya Pradesh. We are very confident that the people of Assam want a change and kick the BJP government out of power. So, winnability and loyalty of a candidate will be the primary criteria in the selection of the candidate," he added.

Borah said that chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's assertion that 'Assam is shining' will bring the same result like what the 'India Shining' campaign of former PM Atal Behari Vajpayee did to the BJP government in 2004.

"The India Shining campaign brought Manmohan Singh government for 10 years. Likewise, Assam Shining as stated by our CM will bring the curtains down on the BJP government in Assam. The state is shining only for Sarma, his syndicate friends, non-Assamese contractors and non-Assamese capitalists," he added. (PTI)

## 200 join Rajor Dal in Teok

advocate for a minimum support price for the produce. "Another priority would be establishing an industrial unit in every village in the state and making the state one of the top tourist destinations in the country," he said.

The meeting was presided over by Pradip Sarkar, president of the Jorhat district unit of Rajor Dal, and was also attended by the party's Central Committee secretary and Mariani in-charge, Debango Saurav Gogoi, and Central Committee organisational secretary Biswajit Baruah, among others.

## Assembly Speaker rejects petition

In September 2024, the Gauhati High Court issued notices to the Assam assembly Speaker and the Congress MLA, among others, over the non-disposal of a petition by the opposition party seeking the disqualification of its suspended legislator.

Earlier in May last year, the Congress wrote to speaker Biswajit Daimary for the second time seeking the disqualification of the suspended MLA from the Assam Assembly, handing over a 167-page complaint to the authorities. The Congress had written to Daimary seeking Ahmed's disqualification for the first time in April 2022 for alleged anti-party activities. (PTI)

## Chinese annexation of Indian

of He'an County lies in the G219 Highway, which China formally opened in 1957. Prime Minister Nehru acknowledged its construction in Parliament in 1959," Malviya said.

The "key features" of the He'an County include Haji Langar, occupied by China in 1959 and an Indian patrol was detained here in 1958, he said. "Qizil Jilga, captured by China in 1962. Chung Tash, occupied by China in 1962. Dehra Compas, taken over by China in 1961. Shamal Lungpa, seized by China in October 1959, close to the site of a 1959 attack on an Indian patrol," Malviya said. (PTI)

## B'desh cancels planned

50 lower judiciary judges would undergo a one-day training programme from February 10 at the National Judicial Academy and the State Judicial Academy in Madhya Pradesh.

The trainee judges selected under the programme were district and sessions judge or its equivalent officers, additional district and sessions judge, joint district judge, senior assistant judge and assistant judge.

The Indian government was supposed to bear all the expenses for the training programmes. India and Bangladesh have witnessed strained ties since the deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled to New Delhi on August 5 last year following a massive student-led protest that toppled her Awami League's 16-year regime.

There have been a series of attacks on Hindu community members and their places of worship after the interim government headed by Muhammad Yunus came to power on August 8. New Delhi has already raised concern with Dhaka, especially after a Hindu monk was arrested in a sedition case and put in jail after he was denied bail last month. (PTI)

## CM Himanta meets top industry

education sectors, particularly in cancer care. I have also invited him to attend #AdvantageAssam2," Sarma wrote on X.

Moreover, Sarma also held discussions with director of Adani group, Jeet Adani and chairman of Mahindra group Anand Gopal Mahindra in Mumbai. "It was such a delight to meet Shri @anandmahindra. His passion for an industrialised India and intellectual prowess is admirable. I have invited him to partner with the Assam Government in our quest for industrial growth," the chief minister mentioned.

Sarma further informed that Adani group has expressed its keen interest to explore opportunities in the infrastructure, power and defence sectors in Assam.

"Today during my meeting with Shri Jeet Adani, Director of @AdaniOnline, the group expressed their keen interest to explore opportunities in the infrastructure, power and defence sectors in Assam," Sarma mentioned adding that the Adani group has many industry expansion plans in Assam.

"I am happy to see our State feature prominently in the Group's expansion plan," he added.

Sarma is focusing on the investor summit to attract a good number of investments in the state.

The top brass of Union ministry is set to attend the event in Guwahati which will be kickstarted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Meanwhile, Sarma said that the event, which is set for February 24 and 25, would highlight the traditional Jhumur dance of the tea tribe clans. "This summit is a platform to showcase Assam's rich traditions to a global audience in addition to attracting investors," he added.

A spectacular Jhumur dance performance with more than 7,500 dancers and artists will be part of the event. It will be an extraordinary show, the chief minister said. The preparations are underway for this cultural event.

## FDI in India surging as global investors see top destination: Piyush Goyal

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** FDI inflows into the country are surging, with investors from the Middle East, Japan, European Union, and the US recognising India's status as a top investment destination, driving rapid economic growth and generating millions of new jobs, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal has said.

He said that global investors are showing keen interest in India as the country offers several advantages such as strong domestic market, skilled and talented workforce and rule of law. "I can clearly see FDI (foreign direct investment) in India once again growing rapidly and creating millions of jobs. Countries in the Middle East, EFTA region, Japan, and investors from the EU and the US are all realising that India continues to be the most preferred destination for FDI," Goyal told PTI.

He added that India's stable and predictable regulatory framework, coupled with a favourable business environment and progressive policies aimed at enhancing ease of doing business, is attracting an increasing number of investors from around the world. "Last month I met a CEO of one of the largest funds in the US, who is also the largest investor in India, and he shared with me that his investments in India over the last 10 years have been some of the best investments his funds have ever done," he noted.

The US fund, Goyal said, informed him that they are investors in India for the last 20 years, but more than 80 per cent of their investments happened in the last few years.

"The CEO told me that he will be coming to India to celebrate 20 years of investing in India by announcing a further tranche of investments in India," he said. The healthy performance of the Indian stock market will also attract more and more FIIs (foreign institutional investors), the minister said. India is averaging over USD 4.5 billion in monthly foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows since January this year despite global uncertainties and challenges. (PTI)

## Tighter anti-spam norms in a month TRAI pilot soon to onboard past user consents onto digital system

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** TRAI will start, this month, a pilot to onboard paper-based and past permissions given by customers for receiving commercial communications onto its digital distributed ledger technology (DLT) platform, a process that in the long-run would include scrubbing and verifying their current validity and offering opt-outs to those keen on it, Chairman Anil Kumar Lahoti said, adding that tighter regulations on curbing spam as well as new consultation examining an authorisation framework for telemarketers can also be expected in coming weeks.

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has also ruled out any rethink on its latest regulation that mandates service providers to offer separate special tariff vouchers (STV) for voice calls and SMS. Lahoti told PTI in an interview that while consumers can be encouraged to use data, they cannot be "compelled" to do so. TRAI's focus is to protect not only the interest of the industry, but also the interest of the consumer, who must have the option to pay only for services they need, he said.

The regulator is also all set to initiate a massive overhaul of its IT system, a move, it expects, would lead to rationalisation and reduction in multiple instances of filings by telecom companies and other industry stakeholders. Deloitte which has been roped in as a consultant is on the verge of submitting its report on revamp of its IT systems.

The regulator will thereafter appoint an agency for the revamp and the entire exercise will be prioritised and completed this year, Lahoti said. On TRAI's list of priorities for 2025 are recommendations on satellite communications spectrum -- arguably one of the most keenly watched events in a high-stakes game involving telcos like Jio, and Airtel on one side and Elon Musk's Starlink pitted on the other. Lahoti declined to comment on the specifics or timeline for release of the recommendation except to say "all comments are being examined on their merits and we will take a balanced view". TRAI's 2025 to-do list also includes framing recommendations for network authorisation, new authorisation framework for broadcasting, and revamp of national numbering

plan for fixed line, while work will continue on combating and curbing spam calls and pesky messages. TRAI is in the process of operationalising system of separate 160 series for service or transactional calls by principal entities (say banks, insurance companies or other service providers) to differentiate them from promotional calls. Currently, both types of calls are being routed under 140 series, which will henceforth be used only for promotional calls.

Lahoti said the regulator will firm up its recommendations on millimetre wave spectrum band (auction of spectrum in 37-37.5 GHz, 37.5-40 GHz and 42.5-43.5 GHz bands) in about a month's time and also bring out a consultation paper on backhaul spectrum by March this year.

"Another thing which we will be working on is the digital consent acquisition. Although the provision for this exists in the regulation (TCCCPR), the practical constraint has been the legacy consents... because there are volumes of consent which have been acquired on paper or reside in the past systems of principal entities, the challenges has been about how to take those consents onboard to the DLT, because you cannot completely discard them," Lahoti said.

TRAI plans to work with all stakeholders to find a workable solution, to ensure such onboarding and scrubbing does not cause any disruptions.

"Presently, if you receive message or a call from a particular service provider or seller and you complain that this is spam, they are able to say that no, we have the consent of this particular subscriber on paper. Still, this is not on record, on the system, but with the principal entities. So we want to move to a system where all these consents come on the DLT platform," he said. "The problem is how to onboard the consents which are already there and how to provide the consumer an option that if he/she has not given that consent, they should be allowed to exit," he said, adding TRAI's pilot, which starts in January, will rope in select service providers and principal entities to devise and test a mechanism by which the past consents, can be migrated onto DLT. (PTI)

## CII proposes seven-point agenda to boost employment generation in budget

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** The upcoming annual budget for FY26 could announce further measures to boost employment generation, CII said on Sunday, emphasising that job creation at a mass scale is important to engage the young population productively, and drive inclusive growth in the world's most populous nation.

The industry body has suggested a seven-point agenda to harness India's demographic dividend, including an integrated national employment policy, support to labour-intensive sectors, and setting up an international mobility authority, among other targeted measures. With a median age of just 29 years, India is a young country, and is set to add 133 million people to its working-age population by 2050.

The government could consider launching an internship programme in government offices in rural areas for the college-educated youth, CII said. It argued that this initiative would create short-term employment opportunities in government offices while bridging the gap between education and professional skills.

The programme would also help augment the available manpower



resources for the effective implementation of various rural programmes and government initiatives. CII has also proposed introducing a new provision under income tax rule in lieu of Section 80JJA to encourage new employment. The new provision should continue as Chapter VIA deduction from gross total income, which is available even if a taxpayer opts for concessional tax regime.

It has proposed an integrated national employment policy which could subsume under its ambit the slew of employment generating schemes currently in works by various ministries/states.

In addition, the unified policy could also build on the single inte-

grated employment portal -- National Career Service (NCS) -- wherein all the data can flow into this from various ministries and state portals.

Highlighting that increasing women's participation in the workforce, which currently is low, can further boost the Indian economy, CII said, new initiatives including the construction of dormitories using CSR funds, the formalisation of sectors like care economy, and establishing government-supported creches in industrial clusters could be taken to increase female labour force participation.

Moreover, rolling out labour codes while ensuring social security coverage to the gig and plat-

form workers would further strengthen the employment landscape. Many parts of the world are facing workforce shortages due to ageing populations, and India should leverage this opportunity. The government could consider setting up an international mobility authority under the Ministry of External Affairs. This authority could facilitate G2G collaborations for helping Indian youth tap the overseas employment opportunities.

The authority could also work with the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship to help develop skill development programmes aligned with global opportunities. In addition to technical skills, the programmes should also include cultural training, and foreign language skills.

Chandrajit Banerjee, Director General, CII, said, "Coupled with higher employment, India also needs to ensure that productivity goes up. India's Incremental Capital Output Ratio (ICOR) needs to trend down from its present level of 4.1. We need to establish metrics of measuring this. In fact, the Union Budget could set up an expert committee to study this in greater detail and recommend measures on way forward. (PTI)



## First Prime Minister to stay overnight in Kaziranga National Park Modi's visit leads to high tourist footfall in Kaziranga: Himanta



**HT Bureau**  
GUWAHATI, Jan 5: Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit and overnight stay last year, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma stated on Sunday that the number of visitors to the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve has significantly grown.

Assam's UNESCO World Heritage Site—Kaziranga National Park saw a record number of visitors, the most in the past 20 years, according to the chief minister. In the recent three months, 1.6 lakh tourists visited Kaziranga, he said.  
Taking to X, Sarma wrote,

"Brand Bharat has its biggest Ambassador in the form of Adarniya Shri @narendramodi ji. After Hon'ble Prime Minister's overnight stay & appeal to the people to visit @kaziranga, the Park has witnessed record footfall of 1.6 lakh tourists in the last 3 months, highest in 20 yrs."

Modi is the nation's first prime minister to stay overnight in Kaziranga National Park. He went there in March of last year, right before the Lok Sabha elections started.

The Prime Minister took an elephant and jeep safari in the park with forest officials and other senior government officers. He also interacted with forest staff and gave them a series of suggestions to increase the tourist footfall.

Meanwhile, the Assam government signed a MoU with the Tata group on Saturday to establish a luxury hotel in Kaziranga. Sarma claimed that the initiative was taken to increase the tourist inflow in the UNESCO world heritage site.

"Taking forward Hon'ble PM's thrust in developing tourism in the region and to further attract tourists and visitors to the State, we signed an MoU today for the establishment of a 5star property in Kaziranga. This property will provide world-class experience to the visitors and encourage them to spend more time in Assam," the chief minister had said.

## UPPL holds CWC meeting at Mushalpur



**HT Correspondent**  
KOKRAJHAR, Jan 5: The ruling United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) held the 24th central working committee (CWC) meeting at the cultural complex, Mushalpur in Baksa on Saturday.

Pramod Boro, the chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and UPPL president, chaired the meeting where members discussed at length on the strengthening of party affairs.

Many senior leaders, including Assam cabinet minister, Urkhao Gwra Brahma, MPs Rwingwra Narzary, Joyanta Basumatary, MLAs, EMs of Bodoland Territorial Region,

MCLAs, CWC members were present in the event.

The meeting has been convened for the first in the year of 2025 that witnessed a good number of participants.

Several resolutions, including strengthening of the party at the grassroots with active involvement of party workers, working relentlessly for the welfare of the BTR people among others were taken in the meeting.

CEM of BTR and UPPL president, Pramod Boro said that the party has been garnering popularity amongst the citizens in the Bodoland region, and subsequently new members from different political parties are joining massively in the UPPL party.

He said that the peace has prevailed in BTR region and a sense of brotherhood can be felt among communities since signing of the BTR peace accord in 2020 (27th January) that have been paving the way for sustainable development and welfare of the people.

"I'm glad to have attended the sitting of UPPL's Central Working Committee, the first in the year 2025, at Mushalpur on Saturday. Extended my New Year greetings to my fellow CWC members and discussed several key party matters with them. We resolve to redouble our efforts to further strengthen our party's grassroots presence, and keep working relentlessly for the welfare of BTR people," Boro said.

## UPPL indulging in extravagance under guise of festivals: BPF

**HT Correspondent**  
GOSSAIGAON, Jan 5: Kokrajhar district committee president Shovaram Basumatary criticised the Pramod Boro-led government, accusing it of indulging in extravagance under the guise of festivals.

Basumatary stated that the UPPL is a party focused on change, but it has failed to implement even a single clause of the Third Bodo Accord despite taking control of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).

"The Third Bodo Accord was signed on January 27, 2020, and with just 22 days remaining to complete five years, the question arises whether the current administration can constitute 60 BTC constituencies as promised?" Basumatary said.

The Bodoland People's Front (BPF) is a regional political party and hence a regional party's primary objective is to focus on the development of its region while maintaining peace and harmony among all communities and moving forward collectively. The BPF works for equal development and progress for all communities while Congress and BJP are national parties, focusing on national politics. The core principle of regional parties is to prioritize the interests of their region, he said.

While addressing a meeting held at the BPF District Office on TP Road, Shovaram Basumatary administered the oath to various committee members under the Saraibil Block Committee and emphasized that there is no issue in having differences in ideologies between national and regional parties.

Addressing the women, he encouraged them not to consider themselves weak. Women are politically strong, and examples of prominent women leaders globally attest to this. He urged women to become politically conscious. Instead of relying on the government's Orunodoi scheme offering ₹1,250 monthly, he suggested that the government should focus on setting up small-scale factories and create employment opportunities, which would be more beneficial.

He also accused the government of taking with a "spoon" but snatching with a "shovel." Basumatary urged the youth and students to be politically aware. He announced that the BPF's Kokrajhar District Committee will hold a day-long session on January 8 at Gandhi Maidan, Kokrajhar, and a central convention will be organized at Bengtoli on January 21.

Explaining the purpose of the meeting, MCLAs and Saraibil Block Committee President Mrityunjay Narzary mentioned that since 2005, the BPF has consistently retained victory in the Saraibil constituency. He urged party workers to work diligently to ensure the party's dominance in the upcoming BTC elections.

At the event, the district committee's general secretary, Billa Kumar Brahma, administered the oath to officials from various BPF wings, including the Youth Wing, Women's Wing, Bengali Cell, Minority Cell, Tribal Cell, and Koch Rajbongshi Cell. The central committee's treasurer, Dhruva Kumar Brahma, along with other senior leaders of the district committee, also attended the event.

## Horrendous road conditions irk residents in Margherita



**HT Correspondent**  
MARGHERITA, Jan 5: Dilapidated condition of roads and

bridges in Makum Pathar Gaon Panchayat in Margherita co-district has brought the administration

under scanner.

A field visit to the area revealed that only a portion of the road in 3 number Makum Pathar has been constructed, while the rest remains undeveloped.

Local residents have complained that travelling on this road, especially during the rainy season has turned extremely difficult for students and villagers.

A bridge in the area collapsed two years ago due to use of sub-standard quality materials, local residents alleged.

The residents of Makum Pathar Gaon Panchayat have now appealed to the Margherita co-district commissioner, chairman of Tinsukia Zilla Parishad, Margherita development block officer, Margherita Anchalik Panchayat president and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to conduct impartial enquiry against the representative of makum pathar gaon panchayat and other officials who were involved in large scale alleged corruption.

## Accidental shot kills constable in Dibrugarh

**HT Correspondent**  
DIBRUGARH, Jan 5: A police constable lost his life after being accidentally shot with his service AK-74 rifle in Dibrugarh on Sunday.

The deceased police constable has been identified as Madhab Chutia.

According to reports, the constable was serving as the PSO to the additional superintendent of police.

While cleaning his service weapon, he accidentally pulled the trigger, and the bullet pierced his chest before hitting the television in his house.

He was immediately rushed to AMCH (Assam Medical College and Hospital), but he succumbed to his injuries.

## Student leader passes away

**HT Correspondent**  
DEMOW, Jan 5: Biswajyoti (Akoni) Dutta (45), son of Ranu Dutta, and a resident of Sukanpukhuri near Demow passed away in a private hospital in Dibrugarh on Sunday.

Biswajyoti Dutta was the former president of the Demow Regional Student Union and former organizational secretary of Sivasagar District Students Union.

Dutta was suffering from liver ailments. The leaders of the Demow Regional Students Union paid tribute to Dutta and offered their deepest condolence to the bereaved family. He is survived by his wife, parents, and a host of relatives.

## District BJP president felicitated

**HT Correspondent**  
HAMREN, Jan 5: The newly elected district BJP president of Dima Hasao district executive Member of NC Hills Autonomous Council, Manjit Naiding was welcomed and facilitated at the BJP Mandal office in Umranago.

The meeting was attended by member of autonomous council (MAC), Pranat Raijung; NCHAC chief executive member (CEM), Devalal Garlocha laid the foundation stone of 19 home stay houses to be constructed at Umranago Goal Field.

The project will be implemented under the Prime Minister's Mineral Sector Welfare Scheme through the District Mineral Foundation Trust. The construction of the house is said to develop the tourism sector in the district.

The CEM of the Council hoped that it will promote domestic and foreign tourism.

## Body of youth recovered

**HT Correspondent**  
SIVASAGAR, Jan 5: Body of a youth, identified as Khyanik Baruah (19) of Kowamora Satra, was recovered on Sunday in an illegally stored diesel filled syntax tank in the residence of one Manoj Dutta of Betbari Kakoty gaon near here.

Manoj Dutta's son Kaustov Dutta and another person were taken into police custody in this connection. Police investigation is currently undergoing.

## Rongker celebrated in Karbi Anglong



**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, Jan 5:** Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong and its adjoining districts in the state of Assam celebrated Rongker on the occasion of traditional Karbi New Year. However, there is no fixed date for celebrating Rongker by the Karbi tribe. Each Karbi village observes the same on a date convenient for the villagers.

On Rongker the Karbis who are still safeguarding and following the indigenous faith perform Rongker – a sacrificial worship to deities Hemphu, Mukrang and Goddess Rasinja to seek their blessing for protection from evil and good health the year round.

## Pachyderm tramples woman

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, Jan 5:** A woman from a tea estate adjacent to Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary under Mariani Range of Jorhat Forest Division, was reportedly trampled to death by a herd of elephants when she along with four other women on Saturday afternoon had gone inside the sanctuary to collect firewood.

According to a Forest department source in Mariani, four of the women managed to flee from the spot but one identified as Anjana Samasi (54) could not escape. Her body with one of her hands torn apart from the body and bearing several injury marks was found late on Saturday night by the Forest department that carried out a search.

Mariani MLA Rupjyoti Kurmi too had accompanied the team. The body was sent to Jorhat Medical College and Hospital for conducting the post mortem. The source said that going by the account given by the surviving four women from Dahingepaar Tea Estate, who managed to flee from the spot, the deceased died from elephant attack.

Meanwhile, a vendor who sold goods by ferrying them on a bicycle and was passing through the sanctuary on Saturday afternoon also sighted the herd of jumbos and luckily managed to flee. Mahabir Mahato of Mariani town had his bicycle and goods damaged by the wild animals.

## CM's post on visually impaired teacher garners accolades

**HT Correspondent**

**DEMOW, Jan 5:** A post on X (formerly Twitter) from Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma highlighting hard work of a visually impaired teacher working at Demow Town LP School stole limelight recently and garnered emotional support from social media users. Sarma shared the inspirational story of Ranjit Borah and said that the govt would actively support him in his journey of life of dignity. Ranjit Borah, a resident of Demow Kaliapani Lakhminagar is works as an assistant teacher at Demow Town LP School, located at Janatapath.

When contacted, Borah told this correspondent that he as an assistant teacher teaches Assamese, English, and Environment subjects. CM Sarma wrote on X (Saturday), "On #World Braille Day, sharing the inspirational story of Asst Teacher Shri Ranjit Bora. Despite being blind, he uses a Braille book to teach his students & has never let adversaries define him. Our Govt is actively supporting Shri Bora & many like him to live a life of dignity."

## Only ownership of land would secure Assamese identity: Palash Changmai

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Jan 5:** The 22nd biennial session of the district unit of Asom Jatiyatadi Yuva Chatra Parishad concluded recently.

The session, which began on January 2, featured a colourful cultural procession in the Dakshinpat area, showcasing the state's diverse cultures. The open session, presided over by Pragiyotish Bania.

Borghain emphasised the need to protect Assam's land and identity. Palash Changmai, the state president of the organisation also attended the event and inaugurated the open session in the afternoon here.

While addressing the occasion, Changmai welcomed the new law initiated by the state BJP led government to protect the land of Barduwa and Barpeta satra areas in the state, stating that the government banned the sale of land of those two satras areas to the people outside the state.

He asserted that the people from outside the state had already occupied almost 35 to 40 per-



cent land in urban areas as well as 10 to 12 per cent land in rural areas of the state. He said that only the ownership of land would secure the identity of the indigenous people of the state in the days to come.

During the session, a new executive committee for the Nagaon district unit, with Praval Sharma as president and Hemanta Das as general secretary was elected.

## Bharat Gaurav Train between Rana Pratap Nagar and Kamakhya Special trains celebrate cultural diversity and heritage of India

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 5:** The NFR is going to operate a Bharat Gaurav Special train with no 00968 between Rana Pratap Nagar and Kamakhya in order to promote tourism.

The tour programme of this special tourist train will be for 7 days which has commenced its journey from January 3 and will conclude on January 9.

The train no 00968 has departed from Rana Pratap Nagar on January 3 to reach Kamakhya at 2:25 pm on January 5 and will halt for 2 days for visits to various places of tourist interest. Again, the train will depart from Kamakhya at 5:15 pm on January 7 to reach Rana Pratap Nagar at 10:15 pm January 9. The train will run via Berach Jn, Cabin, Ajmer Jn., Madar, Jaipur Jn. Agra Cantonment, Etawah Jn., Govindpur, Prayagraj Jn., Varanasi Jn, Pt. DD Upadhyaya Jn., Patliputra, Barauni Jn., Katihar, New Jalpaiguri, New



Coochbehar and New Bongaigaon railway station etc. during its both way journey. The train will consist of Sleeper class and AC-3 tier coaches for the accommodation of tourists.

This Bharat Gaurav Special trains aims to offer an unique travel experience, celebrating the

cultural diversity and heritage of India.

People from North Bengal areas and its adjacent states will be highly benefitted from this tour programme that covers most of the destination at a single go instead to which it would have cost much higher if planned individually.

Bharat Gaurav is the first such type of tourism special train for the travel enthusiasts and it is in line with the Government of India's initiative "Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat" & "Dekho Apna Desh". Passengers can book their tickets from IRCTC website to avail the journey.



## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*There are lots of people who mistake their imagination for their memory -Josh Billings*

## Labour reforms and budget

The year 2024 saw the Union Government of India meticulously preparing the ground for proposed labour reforms, including the four controversial labour codes, and Employment Linked Incentive (ELI), though could not roll them out because of a range of issues, including hesitant attitude of India Inc and opposition from the joint platform of the 10 Central Trade Unions (CTUs). However, preparations reached an advanced stage, and the Union Government is almost ready to implement labour reforms in a big way in 2025. The Union Ministry of Labour and Employment has been consistently working for harmonization of rules under the four labour codes – the Code on Wages 2019, Industrial Relations Code 2020, Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code 2020, and Code on Social Security 2020, which have been resisted by the joint platform of 10 CTUs since 2020 even organizing all India strike actions, and are still demanding their withdrawal, alleging that they are anti-labour and pro-corporate, and their implementation would make workers suffer like economic slaves. Union Government on the other hand claims that implementation of these codes would bring much desired labour reforms which will benefit both the workers and employers.

PM Narendra Modi has committed himself for implementation of these codes which he said the biggest reform in independent India. During the year, 6 regional meetings were held between August and October, 2024 to facilitate State/UT Governments for framing the Rules within the ambit of Labour Codes, since labour is a state subject and rolling out implementation of the Codes legally require states own rules. Now, all 36 States/UTs are expected to complete harmonization and pre-publication of draft rules by 31st March 2025, the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment has said. Not only that, the Union Ministry of Labour & Employment has identified four reforms in Labour Laws to be carried out viz. Single Registration, Single Return, Firm-based common license with 5 years validity. Further the Ministry is also moving for change of role of Inspector to Inspector-cum-Facilitator. These steps, the Centre expects, would act as a catalyst for Ease of Doing Business (EODB) by reducing compliance burden. EPFO has released the updated Manual for Inspector cum Facilitator describing entire spectrum of duties and responsibilities of an Inspector cum Facilitator.

As for ELI Scheme announced in July 2024 in the Union Budget 2024-25 is concerned, it could not take off last year, again due to a range of issues, including the hesitations among the employing companies of the country in participating in the programme. Union Government had announced this programme as a major step towards incentivising job creation, promoting formalisation in job market, and improving employability. Three Schemes announced for large number of decent job creation under ELI and two other schemes as part of the five-package schemes had a total outlay of Rs 2 lakh crore and was expected to benefit around 4.1 crore young people over the next five years. Since, the Union Budget 2025-26 is expected to be tabled in the parliament of India on February 1, there is not much time left in implementation of the ELI Schemes announced in the Union Budget 2024-25. One year has already been lost. Nevertheless, Union Government is trying hard to roll out the scheme in the current financial year 2024-25 ending on March 31, 2025 itself.

## Panchayati raj institutions in India

By: Sanjib Kumar Sarma

Panchayati raj is unquestionably Indian in origin. Panchayati raj bodies which are genuine and effective democratic decentralized institutions, provide ample opportunities for large number of rural people to take genuine and effective participation in development and democratic decision making process and to infuse in minds of the rural people a spirit of self help, self dependence and self-reliance and to obtain the experience in the art of local self government. The concept of panchayat raj, since its inception, faced various interpretations both from its protagonists and antagonists. On the one hand, the emphasis was on maximum local autonomy and minimization of control by higher authorities especially the state government on the one considered it to be ruination for country. The panchayat raj system is really an effective instrument of participation. In order to make the panchayats and edifice of democracy, they should be given more powers, more autonomy and financial resources. It also means to overcome the prevalent socio-economic deficiencies in rural society. The panchayat raj institutions are statutorily elected bodies at the Village, Block and District levels with powers of local government. There are village panchayats at the Village level, panchayati samithis at the block/taluka level and the Zilla panchayats at the district level. The primary objective of panchayati raj is to strengthen the base of democracy at grass roots and to enable the people of each village to achieve intensive and continuous development in the interests of the entire population, irrespective of the caste, class, creed and religion. The panchayat raj is different from all other government as a whole, is not an administrative arm of the government but a part of the whole government.

Rural development is generally conceived as a multi-sectoral activity which includes, besides agricultural development, rural industries, the establishment or improvement of social overhead facilities or infrastructure, such as schools, clinics, roads, communication, water supply, markets, welfare sources, improved

nutrition, literacy, adult education etc. The primary objective of rural development is to enrich the quality of the rural masses, particularly the poorer and the weaker sections. The implementation of democratic decentralization through the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) was meant to give an opportunity for local initiative and participation in the developmental activities. India's vast majority of people live in rural villages. They are largely dependent on remote and unresponsive government (the Central and the State) historically



characterised as —centralised, bureaucratic, corrupt and non-transparent. In most parts of rural India there had been a continuous and deep rift between the people and the government. The people do not have proper access to the information regarding the developmental plans, schemes and actions of governments. Further, they have no effective means to influence the policies, programmes or resource allocations for their development.

The Constitution of India has given a place of pride to the attainment of the ideal of securing justice to all citizens. The Preamble speaks of the resolve to secure to all the citizens of India Justice which is defined or elaborated as social, economic and political. More significantly, the Preamble places justice higher than the other principle of liberty, equality and fraternity. The concept of Justice in the Preamble is indeed very wide. It is not confined to the narrow legal justice as administered by the Courts. Again the juxtaposition of words is important in as much as it gives precedence to social and economic over political justice. Article 38 especially embodies the preambular concept of justice

where it speaks of social order in which —justice, social and economic and political shall inform of national life.]

The Constitution provides a clear mandate for democratic decentralization through the institutional framework of self-governing local elected bodies, i.e., the Panchayats (Panchayati Raj Institutions: PRIs) and the Municipalities (Urban Local Bodies: ULBs). The local bodies are critical to the inclusive governance as they facilitate direct participation of people, particularly the marginalized, in

governance. They also ensure transparency and accountability of the public institutions and functionaries through processes such as, social audit. They can prepare context specific plans to address poverty, local infrastructure and socio-economic needs. The Eleventh Plan document recognizes PRIs as the „primary means of delivery of essential services that are critical to inclusive growth“. Strengthening of the local bodies is, therefore, critical to improving governance across the

country and ensuring that the benefits of the huge funds routed through the Central/State Schemes reach the people in full measure. The rural and urban areas represent a political, social, economic and geographical continuum. However, in the present system, there is an artificial divide between rural and urban local governments, which has several shortcomings. First, the planning and management of socio-economic development including basic public services are artificially segmented. Second, in a rapidly urbanizing society, the boundaries between rural and urban territories keep shifting. The peri-urban areas around cities have dual characteristics of both the village and the town. Finally, as a democratic body representing the whole district does not exist and the District Collector continues to be the symbol of authority in the district, democratic decentralization is undermined. In all, the artificial separation of rural and urban local governments leads to fragmented planning and implementation, sub-optimal utilization of resources (manpower and financial) and vital gaps.

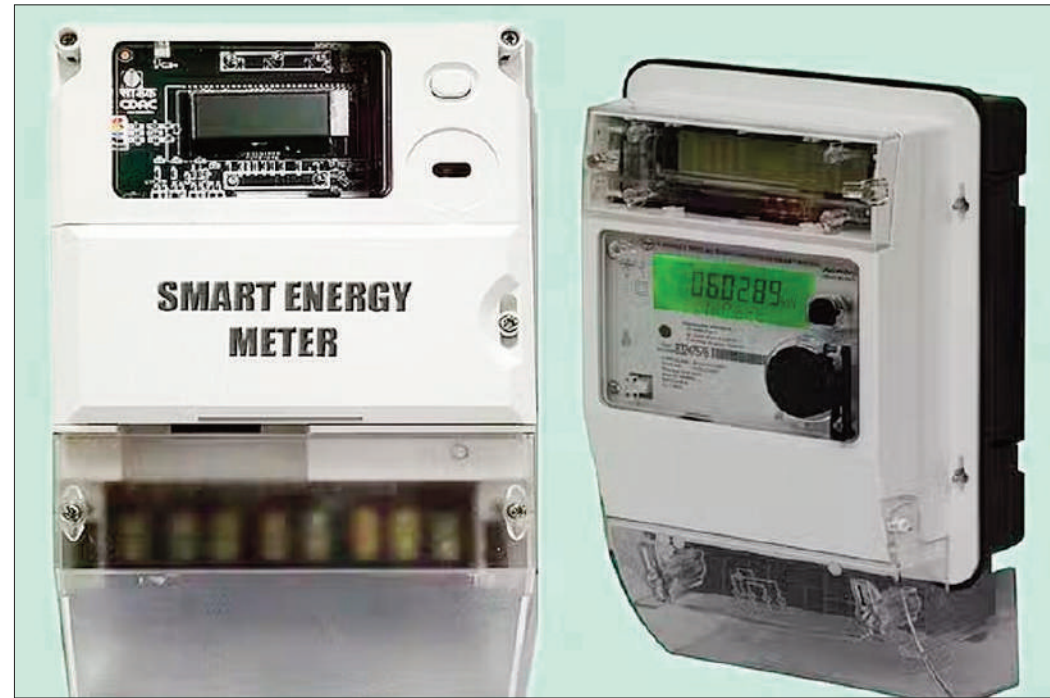
The significance of book fairs is particularly evident in Assam, where events like the North East Book Fair and the Guwahati Book Fair provide a lifeline to the region's publishing industry. These fairs are cultural landmarks, uniting readers, writers, and publishers while preserving Assam's rich literary heritage. The North East Book Fair, initiated in 1995, is a premier event in the region, bringing together thousands of visitors and fostering a thriving literary culture. However, challenges such as secur-

## Smart meters and public perception

The deployment of smart meters in Assam has sparked a highly polarized debate in society about the utility or non-utility of smart meters. With people on both sides voicing opinions, people today increasingly perceive smart meters as the building blocks for the modernization of energy use. They are based on the ability to offer correct billing, efficient energy management, and reduced power theft, all of which fall in line with the overall sustainability and enhanced electricity supply objectives of the state. However, the deployment of that technology has been faced with disbelief and anxiety, since fears of ballooning electricity bills, health effects, and data security drive the agenda in public debate. This study examines the complex component of public attitude and looks into the promise and problems in regard to the smart meters introduction in Assam.

Supporters of Smart metering assert that all the basic solutions to these old-time energy management problems are to be gained by using them. The problem and reasons behind consumer disputes, especially concerning the billings, can be traced majorly from analog meters due to the potential error that a human mind makes in it. Smart meters eliminate these problems as they offer accurate real-time information about the amount of electricity being used and bill accurately users for the amount of electricity they used. In Assam, which is facing a scenario of billing errors with consequent loss of public trust in the utility companies, the technological one is perceived to be the first step to re-earning public confidence. Furthermore, smart meters empower consumers to take better control of their energy use. With a detailing of patterns of usage, the reason for households to adapt energy-saving practices will consequently result in aggregate cost decreases and also aid in saving the environment. As a state facing a volatile power supply with increasing energy needs, the potential of smarter demand-side management delivered by smart meters is attractive.

All of these benefits, however, are accompanied by the pervasive feeling of mistrust in smart meters. Of most concern to the public is



the rise in electricity tariff. Installation and operation of smart meters are highly costly, and there is public anxiety about liability falling on consumers' shoulders. Electricity rates already compare unfavorably with the national average in Assam, burdening household incomes barely above subsistence level. The threat of additional installation charges for meters, service charges, or even increased tariffs has been something that has fueled fear particularly within economically weaker communities. Critics argue that government and utility companies have a responsibility to ensure that technology does not worsen existing disparities in access to energy or exacerbate the burden of energy costs on consumers.

Utility companies' failure to communicate candidly has only amplified these fears. There is still much confusion for residents as to what effect the roll out of smart meters will have on their monthly costs. Lack of well-defined protocols and public consciousness raising actions have led to mistrust in that part of the population believes the scheme is driven by financial profitability rather than consumer well being. These fears need to be addressed through proactive engagement with the public, includ-

ing transparent explanations of cost structures and assurances that tariffs will remain affordable.

Health issues are, however substantially shaping public attitudes. Smart meters give minimal levels of electromagnetic radiation emitters to transmit data that though literature is seen being under the limit of a safe threshold, the people are not ready to welcome it. The skepticism to the new installation is nothing new to Assam rather an expression of anxiety happening around the globe on effects to health brought about by the new technologies. Advocacy groups and community members are questioning the need to carry out more research-intensive studies on chronic exposure impact to electromagnetic radiation that might specially affect susceptible populations - such as children, and older adults. However, because there is no concrete evidence to put to rest the concerns, the concept of risk remains to overshadow the value that may be gleaned from smart meters.

Data privacy is another issue that greatly influences public opinion. Smart meters record information that details how consumers

consume energy, leaving one wondering about how that information will be stored, shared, and used. In the digital world today, data breaches and unauthorized access are not out of place. The residents fear the misuse of private information by utility companies or data might be utilized by third parties for commercial purposes. Strong regulatory frameworks are absent in Assam at this stage, making these concerns worst. In such a situation, proper data management protocols and harsh measures

against its misuse can be the decisive features that can ensure public trust over the system.

The main driver for the deployment of smart meters in Assam will be the resolution of these interrelated issues. The government agencies and APDCL have to be transparent and cooperative in resolving the issues so that there are no more rumors and the system can gain the trust of people. Public education and outreach programs through which the residents learn about the benefits of smart meters and clear out their apprehensions related to cost, health, and privacy. Community leaders, health profes-

sionals, and consumer advocacy organizations can be an important intermediary point for communicating between policymakers and the public to ensure that different experience is taken into consideration within the decision-making process.

Policy measures also need to focus on consumer protection. That is, falling installation costs for low income households can be said to ease the cost-related problems, and the rules of the regulatory regime would ensure fair and transparent structures of pricing. On the health side of things, independent studies on electromagnetic radiation with findings presented openly to the public should help dissipate the myth and allay fears. Taking note of issues of privacy, utilities should then take measures towards assuring their security, acting on stringent ethical imperatives in dealing with such consumer information.

The use of smart meters in Assam speaks of problems more generally with switching over to this new generation energy solutions. Despite the great potential of the technology for efficiency and sustainability, the adoption of the technology is shaped by managing the public relations challenges of negative and positive public sentiment. The modernization process should be taken into account with the needs of the population, a careful and open to all involved strategy. Clear communication, equitable policies, and strong safeguards must ensure that the smart meters do not end up benefitting only one section of society.

The Smart Meters could be one of the steps ahead for the energy future in Assam. Acceptability would have to be derived from addressing the public angst. Importance by the officials and utilities about transparency and consumer engagement as well as fairness shall assist in infusing confidence and the requisite structure into smooth acceptance. The process towards energy system modernization must be characterized by innovation and inclusiveness, so the benefits reaped would reach all in the state equally. (The Writer is Editor in Chief of the Assamese E-magazine SAMPROTIK. He can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com)

## Book fairs: Bridging tradition and modernity in a digital age

By: Dipak Kurmi

In an era dominated by digital devices and virtual experiences, the role of book fairs as cultural and intellectual beacons remains unparalleled. Far from being relics of the past, these gatherings are vibrant celebrations of literature, creativity, and human connection. Book fairs are not merely about selling books; they are multidimensional events that foster intellectual growth, social cohesion, and cultural exchange. By bringing together authors, publishers, readers, and other stakeholders, book fairs reaffirm the timeless value of books in shaping human civilization.

Throughout history, books have been pivotal in documenting knowledge, sharing stories, and preserving cultural heritage. In modern times, book fairs have become platforms where these ideals thrive. They transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries, offering a meeting ground for the exchange of ideas and creativity. From local events to grand international gatherings like the Frankfurt Book Fair and the Bologna Children's Book Fair, book fairs across the globe play a vital role in enriching societies intellectually and culturally.

In India, a country with one of the highest reading times per capita globally, book fairs hold a unique position in promoting the joy of reading and the growth of the publishing industry. With over 12,000 publishers and an annual production of around 90,000 titles in multiple languages, India's book fairs are a testament to the country's literary vibrancy. The Calcutta Book Fair and the New Delhi Book Fair rank among the top global literary events, attracting visitors from across the world. These fairs are not just showcases of literature but also serve as hubs of cultural and academic exchange.

The significance of book fairs is particularly evident in Assam, where events like the North East Book Fair and the Guwahati Book Fair provide a lifeline to the region's publishing industry. These fairs are cultural landmarks, uniting readers, writers, and publishers while preserving Assam's rich literary heritage. The North East Book Fair, initiated in 1995, is a premier event in the region, bringing together thousands of visitors and fostering a thriving literary culture. However, challenges such as secur-



ing appropriate venues and the economic pressures on local publishers underscore the need for greater support from government and society.

Book fairs are more than commercial marketplaces for books; they are spaces for community engagement and intellectual enrichment. Unlike digital platforms, which often limit human interaction, book fairs create opportunities for meaningful connections. Readers meet authors, engage in discussions, and discover new perspectives. These interactions foster a sense of belonging and cultural pride, creating lasting memories that transcend the transactional nature of online book purchases.

The tactile experience of a book fair is irreplaceable. The physical presence of books, the sensation of turning pages, and the aroma of freshly printed paper evoke emotions that no digital medium can replicate. For many, attending a book fair is an act of nostalgia, a journey back to a time when reading was a cherished pastime. This sensory engagement reinforces the emotional bond between readers and books, reminding us of the enduring charm of the written word.

Book fairs also play a crucial role in promoting diversity and inclusivity in literature. Unlike online algorithms that curate recommendations based on past preferences, book fairs offer a serendipitous exploration of genres and topics. Readers can stumble upon hidden gems, discover works by emerging authors, and broaden their horizons. This sense of discovery is integral to the joy of reading and cannot be replicated in the digital

realm. Moreover, book fairs are invaluable for fostering a culture of reading among younger generations. They provide children and students with access to a wide range of educational and recreational materials, inspiring them to develop a lifelong love for books. Storytelling sessions, workshops, and interactions with authors enrich their learning experiences and ignite their imaginations. By nurturing young minds, book fairs contribute to building a more informed and creative society.

In the digital age, book fairs have adapted to contemporary challenges while retaining their core essence. Many events now incorporate sustainable practices, such as promoting eco-friendly publishers and reducing waste. These initiatives align with global sustainability goals, demonstrating that book fairs can evolve without losing their cultural and intellectual significance.

The global landscape of book fairs is marked by inspiring examples of government support. In Norway, a country with one of the highest Human Development Index rankings, the government purchases copies of newly published books for distribution to schools and libraries. Such initiatives underscore the transformative potential of books in empowering individuals and communities. Indian policymakers could draw valuable lessons from these models to strengthen the local publishing industry and ensure the continued success of book fairs.

Despite their numerous benefits, book fairs in Assam and other parts

of India face significant challenges, from logistical issues to economic pressures. For instance, the decision by the Assam government to provide free academic books has created economic hardships for local publishers, reducing their participation in major events like the Guwahati Book Fair. These obstacles highlight the need for collaborative efforts among stakeholders to address these issues and ensure the sustainability of book fairs.

The significance of book fairs extends beyond economics and education; they are cultural events that celebrate human creativity and expression. By hosting panel discussions, literary debates, and storytelling sessions, book fairs create platforms for the exchange of ideas and the preservation of cultural heritage. These events foster a sense of community, encouraging individuals to engage with literature on a deeper level and ensuring that the magic of books endures for generations.

Book fairs are vital cultural and intellectual events that bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. They offer a unique blend of sensory, emotional, and intellectual experiences that digital platforms cannot replicate. By promoting reading, fostering human connections, and supporting the publishing industry, book fairs enrich societies and contribute to the development of human civilization. As we navigate an increasingly digital world, the enduring appeal of book fairs reminds us of the timeless power of books to inspire, educate, and unite us. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmi@gmail.com)



# Medical myths: All about dementia

By: Tim Newman

Today, an estimated 5.8 million people aged 65 years or older in the United States have dementia.

Due to the fact that the average lifespan of people in the U.S. has increased over recent decades, some experts project that by 2050, the number of older adults with dementia could reach 13.8 million.

Figures of this stature spark justifiable fear, and, as we have found in previous Medical Myths articles, fear tends to breed misconceptions.

In this article, we aim to dispel 11 of these myths.

## 1. Dementia is inevitable with age

This statement is not true. Dementia is not a normal part of aging.

According to a report that the Alzheimer's Association published, Alzheimer's disease, which is the most common form of dementia, affects 3% of people aged 65-74 years in the U.S.

As a result of the risk increasing as we age, 17% of people aged 75-84 years and 32% of people aged 85 years and older have a dementia diagnosis.

## 2. Dementia and Alzheimer's disease are the same thing

This is not quite correct. Alzheimer's is a type of dementia, accounting for 60-80% of all dementia cases. Other types of dementia include frontotemporal dementia (FTD), vascular dementia, mixed dementia, and Lewy body dementia.

The National Institute on Aging define dementia as "the loss of cognitive functioning — thinking, remembering, and reasoning — and behavioral abilities to such an extent that it interferes with a person's daily life and activities."

Although dementias share certain characteristics, each type has a distinct underlying pathology.

Alzheimer's disease is associated with a buildup of so-called plaques and tangles in the brain. These structures interfere with brain cells, eventually killing them. In contrast, brain cell death in vascular dementia occurs due to a lack of oxygen, which can result from a stroke, for instance.

FTD, as another example, occurs when abnormal protein structures form in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, causing the brain cells in these regions to die.

## 3. A family member has dementia, so I will get it

A common myth is that dementia is purely genetic. In other words, if a person's family member has a dementia diagnosis, they are guaranteed to develop dementia later in life.



This is not true.

Although there is a genetic component to some forms of dementia, the majority of cases do not have a strong genetic link.

As we learned above, rather than genetic factors, the most significant risk factor for dementia is age. However, if a parent or grandparent developed Alzheimer's when they were younger than 65 years, the chance of it passing on genetically is higher.

Early-onset Alzheimer's is relatively uncommon, though. It occurs in about 5.5% of all Alzheimer's cases.

As the majority of dementia cases are Alzheimer's disease, this means that most dementia cases are not hereditary. FTD, which is much less common, has a stronger genetic link, but if a parent or grandparent develops the condition, it does not mean that children or grandchildren are guaranteed to develop it.

Today, FTD affects an estimated 15-22 in every 100,000 people. Of these individuals, 10-15% have a strong family history of the condition.

## 4. Dementia only affects older adults

Age is a risk factor for dementia, but dementia can affect younger adults in rare cases. Some scientists estimate that, in people aged 30-64 years, 38-260 people in 100,000 — equivalent to 0.038-0.26% — develop early-onset dementia.

In the 55-64 age bracket, this increases to close to 420 people in 100,000, or 0.4%.

## 5. Using aluminum pans causes Alzheimer's

In the 1960s, scientists injected rabbits with high levels of aluminum. They found that the animals developed neurological lesions similar

to those that form in the brains of people with Alzheimer's.

Additionally, some studies have identified aluminum within the plaques associated with Alzheimer's. However, aluminum also appears in the healthy brain, and researchers have not established a causal link between this element and the disease.

Following on from these studies, myths still circulate that drinking from aluminum cans or cooking with aluminum pots increases the risk of Alzheimer's.

However, since those early experiments, scientists have not found a clear association between Alzheimer's and using aluminum pots and pans.

Although researchers will, eventually, establish the precise relationship between aluminum and Alzheimer's, consuming aluminum through the diet is unlikely to play a major role.

As the Alzheimer's Society explain: "Aluminum in food and drink is in a form that is not easily absorbed into the body. Hence, the amount taken up is less than 1% of the amount present in food and drink. Most of the aluminum taken into the body is cleaned out by the kidneys."

However, they also write that some research has found "a potential role for high dose aluminum in drinking water in progressing Alzheimer's disease for people who already have the disease."

## 6. Dementia signals the end of a meaningful life

Thankfully, this is not the case. Many people with a dementia diagnosis lead active, meaningful lives. Some people fear that if a doctor di-

agnoses them with dementia, they will no longer be able to go for a walk alone and will have to stop driving their vehicle immediately.

It is true that these adjustments may come in time as the condition progresses, but in mild cases of dementia, no changes may be necessary. As dementia worsens, changes to the way an individual leads their life are likely, but that does not mean that the person cannot lead a fulfilling life.

"Too many people are in the dark about dementia — many feel that a dementia diagnosis means someone is immediately incapable of living a normal life, while myths and misunderstandings continue to contribute to the stigma and isolation that many people will feel," explains Jeremy Hughes, former Chief Executive of the Alzheimer's Society.

"[W]e want to reassure people that life doesn't end when dementia begins." — Jeremy Hughes

## 7. Memory loss always signifies dementia

Although memory loss can be an early symptom of dementia, it does not necessarily signify the start of this condition. Human memory can be unpredictable, and we all forget things occasionally. However, if memory loss is interfering with everyday life, it is best to speak with a doctor.

Although memory issues tend to be an early sign of Alzheimer's disease, that is not the case for other forms of dementia. For instance, early signs and symptoms of FTD can include changes in mood and personality, language difficulties, and obsessive behavior.

## 8. Dementia is always preventable

This, unfortunately, is untrue. Importantly, though, certain factors can either reduce the risk of certain types of dementia developing or delay their onset.

For instance, the Lancet Commission's 2020 report on dementia prevention, intervention, and care lists 12 factors that increase the risk of dementia:

- less education
- hypertension
- hearing impairment
- smoking
- obesity
- depression
- physical inactivity
- diabetes
- low levels of social contact
- alcohol consumption
- traumatic brain injury
- air pollution

Some of these factors are more difficult to modify than others, but working on changing any of them might help reduce the risk of developing dementia. The authors of the report explain:

"Together, the 12 modifiable risk factors account for around 40% of worldwide dementias, which consequently could theoretically be prevented or delayed."

However, as Dr. Nancy Scotte, a neurologist at Cedars-Sinai hospital in Los Angeles, CA, explains, "Reducing your risk requires starting these lifestyle changes from the get-go, not waiting until you're 70."

## 9. Vitamins and supplements can prevent dementia

Linked to the section above, this is also false. To date, there is no strong evidence that any vitamin or mineral supplements can reduce the risk of dementia. In 2018, the Cochrane Library conducted a review with the aim of answering this question.

Their analysis included data from more than 83,000 participants across the 28 included studies. Although the authors report "some general limitations of the evidence," they conclude:

"We did not find evidence that any vitamin or mineral supplementation strategy for cognitively healthy adults in mid or late life has a meaningful effect on cognitive decline or dementia, although the evidence does not permit definitive conclusions."

## 10. All people with dementia become aggressive

In some cases, people with dementia might find it increasingly hard to make sense of the world around them. This confusion can be frustrating, and some individuals might respond to the emotions in an angry manner. However, this is not the case for everyone.

In a study involving 215 people with dementia, 41% of the participants developed aggression during the 2-year study. When they looked at factors that increased the risk of developing aggression, the researchers identified two of the primary factors as physical pain and a low quality relationship between the person and their caregiver.

## 11. Dementia is never fatal

Unfortunately, dementia can be fatal. According to a 2020 study among adults aged 70-99 years, dementia may be a more common cause of death than experts have traditionally thought. The authors "found that approximately 13.6% of deaths were attributable to dementia over the period 2000-2009."

Dementia worries people, especially as they age, and this is justifiable in many ways. However, it is important to counter misinformation that might enhance concerns and stigma.

For now, researchers are working tirelessly to develop better ways to treat and prevent dementia. In the future, hopefully, science will reduce the impact of dementia and, therefore, the fear associated with the condition. (Courtesy: *Medical News Today*)

# Lower the mercury, higher the chances of stroke

By: Dr. Vipul Gupta

Every year it has been seen that the dipping temperatures are responsible for a rise in number of cardiovascular problems, among which stroke is one of critical illness. This year, the temperatures have started to take sudden dip and is expected to be so throughout the new year period especially in the Northern part of the country.

Stroke, which can be because of blockage causing paralysis or burst of blood vessel leading to bleeding, is seen more commonly during the winters. This is an important problem, as stroke is recorded to be the third leading cause of death and disability and WHO estimates suggest that one in four people may suffer stroke over a lifetime.

It is particularly worrisome that many young patients with uncontrolled blood pressure have developed bleeding in the brain during this vulnerable period. Probably the sudden increase in blood pressure in cold weather has played a role in these particular patients.

Various studies conducted in Japan, Korea, USA and China also suggests that there are more chances of stroke during the winter months. Several studies suggest that during extreme cold conditions, the risk of getting a stroke attack increases by 80% particularly when temperature dips below 15 degrees Celsius. Last year a study of around 56000 stroke deaths (over

a decade) in Sao Paulo, Brazil found that falling temperatures may increase the number of deaths from stroke, particularly among people over 65 years. Another German study published in the same year in the European Journal of Epidemiology discerned that for every 2.9-degree Celsius drop in temperature over 24 hours, strokes increased 11 percent, and at higher rates for those already at risk. In the year 2016, a study published in the Journal of Stroke and Cerebrovascular Diseases examined nearly 1.72 Lakh ischemic hospitalizations in the United States and found that most of them occurred in cold average temperatures and when temperatures fluctuated significantly. Taking care of this issue is very important because this may lead to more chances of this deadly disease.

## Why is winters a potential season for the rising incidences of stroke?

One of the prime reasons can be attributed that during the cold seasons the blood vessels constrict, which leads to the increase in blood pressure, which is a major risk factor for stroke. Also, there are various changes in the chemical balance in our body during the winters that increases the chances of clotting. Probably the reason number of stroke cases go up by 11 per cent during winters.

Other factors include prevalence of unhealthy habits like too much eating and drinking combined with decrease in physical activity. And in countries like India, High pollution levels and depleting Air

Quality Index (AQI) clubbed with winter smog also aggravates the condition.

Though anyone is susceptible to get a stroke, however, people with existing cardiac problem, high blood pressure problem, smokers, obese and elderly need to be watchful as with the weather getting cold, they are the ones more vulnerable to get a stroke. In fact, such patients have a higher risk of even dying from heart disease as well.

## Reducing the risk of stroke in winters

In order to curb down the chances for stroke and other cardiovascular events, the most vulnerable groups need to take sensible precautions to ensure and minimize the after-effects of extreme cold weather. It is strongly recommended to regularly monitor your blood pressure during this changing weather, particularly those who are already hypertensive. And even with mild changes or rise in the blood pressure, one need to immediately consult the doctor who can prescribe an adjustment in the medications.

It is also advised to keep warm and avoid sudden exposure to severe cold temperatures as the risk of stroke remains for many days after the exposure. The elderly are advised to keep warm and if possible heat the home as well. It is advisable to keep oneself well hydrated and avoid sudden excessive exertion, excessive drinking or unhealthy eating. (The author is the Group Director and Head of Neurointervention at Paras Hospital, Gurugram)

# Cutting calories isn't the only way to live healthy

By: Divya Tripathi

Festive season is here, along with all its trappings: cake, turkey, wine, roast chicken, pudding and gingerbread men. And there's that dreaded thing: holiday flab, or the tendency to pack on the pounds during holiday season.

The tendency to consume food high in fat, salt and sugars accompanied by reduced physical activity increases susceptibility towards obesity and metabolic disorders such as hypertension, diabetes, heart diseases and cancer.

While non-communicable diseases (NCDs) impact people of all ages, locations and nationalities and these illnesses are more frequently linked to older age groups, research indicates 17 million premature NCD deaths take place before the age of 70, with a majority in low- and middle-income countries.

Although weight gain is often the price of eating and drinking with family and friends, new research shows the link between eating healthy and living a long life may be more complex than we thought.

In other words, burning fat isn't the only guarantor of a long and healthy life.

In 440 BCE, the Greek physician Hippocrates proposed: "Let food be thy medicine and let thy medicine be food" that emphasises the importance of nutrition to maintain overall health. As science continues to reveal the intricate effects of diet on health, longevity and quality of life, this ancient wisdom is more relevant today than ever.

People tend to throw caution to the winds during the festive season but it's what we eat over a longer period of time and other associated factors that most impact how our bodies function.

Changing the quantity, type and timing of food intake, including fasting, has become one of the most effective, practical and safe ways to enhance health and increase lifespan and healthspan, the lifespan minus the amount of time spent in illness.

The goal of this dual focus is to increase the number of years people live with full functional capacity and vitality.

## Healthspan vs. lifespan

While extending life is a noble objective, improving healthspan is becoming more and more important. If the extra years are tainted by ill health and diminished functionality, then a longer life has little value.

To balance longevity and ensure healthspan, dietary interventions must target non-genetic aspects of human health such as immunological function, inflammation and nutrient balance.

Promoting general health requires eating a diet that is well-balanced and full of proteins, lipids, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. Individual dietary requirements, however, differ according to age, sex, heredity and metabolic risk status. Dietary advice can be customised to these factors to maximise the advantages of any nutritional intervention.

Effects of calorie restriction on longevity  
Reducing caloric intake from one's daily requirements without causing malnutrition is known as calorie restriction. It has been demonstrated to increase lifespan in a variety of species, including humans.

According to available data, calorie restriction may be able to alter risk factors for serious chronic illnesses such type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer and neurological conditions. Adopting a calorie restricted diet can have major advantages for people, though the extent of these advantages will vary depending on the age that the diet is started.

Chronic systemic inflammation, which can result in cellular damage, immune system deterioration,

organ malfunction and age-related illnesses, frequently occurs alongside aging.

Although calorie restriction and other dietary changes can lower inflammation and enhance metabolic health, new research indicates that the advantages of calorie restriction extend beyond metabolic management, which can promote longevity.

Immune system health, red blood cell function and the body's ability to resist insufficient consumption of essential nutrients without developing any disease — all of which are frequently genetically encoded — are important determinants of lifespan. This research emphasises how crucial it is to optimise healthspan by addressing both hereditary and non-genetic factors.

## Beyond cutting calories

Even while traditional calorie restriction has demonstrated promise, many people find it difficult to keep it up over time. As a result, novel dietary strategies including protein restriction and intermittent fasting have become attractive substitutes. These methods promote healthy aging without requiring a large calorie cut, making them simpler to follow.

Because of its potential to enhance metabolic health and lower inflammation, intermittent fasting — modulating the timings of food consumption while maintaining the required amount of calories by alternating between eating and fasting — has grown in popularity.

Protein restriction, which involves limiting the consumption of specific amino acids, also has advantages for preventing disease and aging. These methods support the overall objective of sustaining or even increasing longevity while improving health span.

## Well-rounded strategies for longevity

Although aging and longevity are mostly determined by heredity, it is possible to control non-genetic factors like nutrition and lifestyle to increase longevity and health span through undertaking some fundamental changes.

Adopting a balanced diet with food that is high in vitamins and minerals and optimal for proteins, fats and carbs can promote immunological and general health. Moderating calorie consumption — consuming only the daily required amount of calories — by maintaining a healthy weight and avoiding overeating is a suitable alternative to a calorie restrictive diet as not everyone may find the latter feasible.

Without drastically cutting calories, incorporating fasting intervals into diet regimens can improve metabolic health and lower inflammation. Certain anti-inflammatory foods including leafy greens, almonds, and fatty fish can help fight chronic inflammation linked to aging. Reducing protein consumption, especially from animal sources, can also promote healthy aging.

It can be beneficial to customise nutrition intake through creating a nutrition plan with medical experts that takes into consideration age, sex, genetics, and metabolic risk factors.

Holistic health behaviours like consistent exercise, stress reduction and enough sleep are necessary to support dietary efforts. A balanced diet and long-term adherence to dietary therapies are essential for long-lasting results. It is also important to be consistent.

Although reducing calories and implementing new dietary techniques can have a big impact on aging and lifespan, these actions need to be a part of a more comprehensive, customised strategy. People can lead longer, healthier and more satisfying lives by combining a balanced diet with tailored interventions and a dedication to general wellness. (Courtesy: *Down to Earth*)

# Lethal smog: How pollution surge fuels stroke cases

By: Dr. Amit Shrivastav

Air pollution has long been recognized as a significant contributor to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. However, growing evidence now highlights its alarming connection to stroke, one of the leading causes of death and disability worldwide. The recent surge in pollution levels across North India has underscored this link, with deteriorating air quality posing severe risks to public health, including an increased incidence of strokes.

## How Pollution Contributes to Stroke

Stroke occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted due to a clot or bleeding, leading to brain cell damage. While lifestyle factors like poor diet and sedentary habits are well-established stroke risk factors, air pollution has emerged as a silent yet potent contributor.

Fine particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, and other pollutants can infiltrate the bloodstream, causing inflammation and oxidative stress. These processes damage blood vessels, accelerate atherosclerosis (narrowing of arteries), and raise blood pressure, all of which heighten the risk of ischemic and haemorrhagic strokes. Studies suggest that even short-term exposure to high pollution levels can trigger strokes in vulnerable individuals, while prolonged exposure significantly increases the lifetime risk.

## The Situation in North India

North India, particularly during the winter



months, experiences hazardous pollution levels due to a combination of factors such as stubble burning, vehicular emissions, and industrial discharge. Cities like New Delhi and its surrounding regions frequently record air quality indices (AQIs) in the "severe" category.

This toxic air is not only affecting the lungs but is also contributing to a marked rise in stroke cases. Neurology departments across hospitals in North India report a surge in stroke-related admissions during high pollution periods. Patients with pre-existing conditions, such as hypertension or diabetes, are particularly susceptible to pollution-induced strokes.

## Vulnerable Groups and Immediate Impact

Children, the elderly, and individuals with pre-existing cardiovascular conditions are most vulnerable to the effects of pollution. Pregnant women exposed to high pollution levels may also face increased risks of complications that could affect both maternal and foetal health, including the likelihood of strokes.

In urban areas with poor air quality, people are often unknowingly inhaling pollutants that compromise their cardiovascular systems over time. Short-term spikes in pollution levels, such as during festive seasons or crop residue burning, can act as immediate triggers for strokes, leading to emergency situations in hospitals.

## Mitigating the Risks

Tackling the pollution-stroke connection requires both individual and collective action. At a policy level, stricter regulations on emissions, better public transport systems, and promoting cleaner energy sources are critical. On an individual level, people can minimize exposure by wearing masks, using air purifiers, and avoiding outdoor activities during high-pollution days.

Healthcare professionals emphasize the importance of regular health check-ups, especially for those in high-risk groups, to monitor blood pressure, cholesterol, and other stroke risk factors. Raising public awareness about the link between air pollution and strokes is equally vital to encourage proactive measures. (The author is the Director and Head of Department, Neurology, Yatharth Hospital, Greater Noida)



# South Korean protesters brave cold to demand Yoon's ouster as detention deadline looms

**SEOUL, Jan 5:** Hundreds of South Koreans, bundled up against freezing temperatures and snow, rallied overnight into Sunday near the residence of impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol, calling for his ouster and arrest, as authorities prepared to renew their efforts to detain him over his short-lived martial law decree.

Dozens of anti-corruption agency investigators and police attempted to execute a detention warrant against Yoon on Friday but retreated from his residence in Seoul after a tense standoff with the presidential security service that lasted more than five hours.

The one-week warrant for his detention is valid through Monday. There were no immediate indications that anti-corruption authorities were ready to send investigators back to the residence as of Sunday afternoon. Staff from the presidential security service were seen installing barbed wire near the gate and along the hills leading up to Yoon's residence over the weekend, possibly in preparation for another detention attempt.

A Seoul court last Tuesday issued a warrant to detain Yoon and a separate warrant to search his residence after the embattled president repeatedly defied authorities by refusing to appear for questioning and obstructing searches of his office. But enforcing them is complicated as long as Yoon remains in his official residence.

Investigators from the country's anti-corruption agency are weighing charges of rebellion after the conservative president, apparently frustrated that his policies were blocked by a legislature dominated by the liberal opposition, declared martial law on Dec. 3 and dispatched troops to surround the National Assembly.

The Assembly overturned the decla-



ration within hours in a unanimous vote and impeached Yoon on Dec. 14, accusing him of rebellion, while South Korean anti-corruption authorities and public prosecutors opened separate investigations into the events.

If the anti-corruption agency manages to detain Yoon, it will likely ask a court for permission to make a formal arrest. Otherwise, Yoon will be released after 48 hours.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which is leading a joint investigation with police and military investigators, says detaining Yoon would be "virtually impossible" as long as he is protected by the presidential security service. The agency has urged the country's acting leader, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, to instruct the service to comply with their execution of the detention warrant, but Choi has yet to publicly comment on the issue.

The chiefs and deputy chiefs of the presidential security service defied summonses on Saturday from police,

who planned to question them over the suspected obstruction of official duty following Friday's events.

Yoon's legal team said it will file complaints against the anti-corruption agency's chief prosecutor, Oh Dong-woon, and approximately 150 investigators and police officers involved in Friday's detention attempt, which they claim was unlawful. The team said it will also file complaints with public prosecutors against the country's acting defense minister and police chief for ignoring the presidential security service's request to provide additional forces to block the detention attempt.

Yoon's lawyers had submitted an objection to the warrants against the president on Thursday, but the Seoul Western District Court dismissed the challenge on Sunday.

Park Chan-dae, floor leader of the main opposition Democratic Party, called for the anti-corruption agency to move quickly to detain Yoon, saying it was deeply disappointing to see the agency "hesitating and letting time slip

away."

Hundreds of anti-Yoon protesters rallied for hours near the gates of the presidential residence from Saturday evening to Sunday, voicing frustration over the failed detention attempt and demanding stronger efforts to bring Yoon into custody. Separated by police barricades and buses, pro-Yoon protesters were gathering in nearby streets, denouncing his impeachment and vowing to block any efforts to detain him.

"With barely a day left before the execution deadline for Yoon Seok Yeol's detention warrant, the presidential security service continues to hide a criminal and the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials cannot be more relaxed," Kim Eun-jeong, an activist, said on a stage during the anti-Yoon rally.

"Angry citizens have already spent two freezing nights demanding his immediate detention. Are their voices not being heard?"

Yoon's lawyers have challenged the detention and search warrants against the president, saying they cannot be enforced at his residence due to a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge - which would be Yoon. They also argue the anti-corruption office lacks the legal authority to investigate rebellion charges and that police officers don't have the legal authority to assist in detaining Yoon.

While the presidential security act mandates protection for Yoon, it does not authorize the presidential security service to block court-ordered detentions. The service's attempts to block the execution of the warrant may amount to an obstruction of official duty, according to Park Sung-bae, an attorney specializing in criminal law.

## 180 million people have been denied their voting rights, says B'desh CEC

**DHAKA, Jan 5:** Bangladesh's Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) AMM Nasir Uddin on Sunday said that almost 180 million people have been denied their voting rights and the Election Commission wants to end their deprivation. The Dhaka Tribune newspaper reported.

The CEC, while addressing the inaugural ceremony of a training programme for election officers ahead of a voter list updating exercise, said the Election Commission (EC) wants to remove the fact that the people have been deprived of the voting right for so long.

"We want to remove the pain of their deprivation. We are steadfast in our commitment," he said.

The countrywide door-to-door data collection for updating the list of possible voters will start on January 20.

The CEC said they are here to hear the 180 million people who have been suffering from the deprivation of voting rights.

"We've taken the responsibility so that we can remove their deprivation," he said.

He said the commission's main goal is to arrange a fair and credible election.

"It's a marathon race beginning from today up to the delivery of the result," he said.

"Our goal, commitment and promises to the nation is to present a free, fair and credible election as the nation has been deprived of it for so long," the CEC said.

Meanwhile, the EC has decided to investigate irregularities and shortcomings in all previous elections, including the three preceding elections that have been controversial during the Awami League-rule in 2014, 2018 and 2024. The 2014, 2018 and 2024 national elections are widely regarded as some of the most controversial in the country's history.

The newly formed EC, which assumed office on November 21, has already initiated several reform measures while preparing for the 13th National Election. A few days ago, CEC Nasir Uddin said that ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League may participate in elections unless the government or the judiciary issues a ban against the party.

Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, 84, who was sworn-in to lead the interim government after the ouster of Hasina in August, during his Victory Day speech on December 16 indicated that elections might be held by early 2026.

"Broadly speaking, the election can be scheduled between the end of 2025 and the first half of 2026," he said. Yunus said that the elections would be held after updating the voters' list. (PTI)

## Biden administration was one of most pro-India administrations in decades: Expert

**WASHINGTON, Jan 5:** The outgoing Biden administration was one of the most pro-India administrations in decades and will be a tough act to follow, an eminent expert has said, observing that Trump 2.0 administration will be one that believes in great power politics, not strategic altruism.

"The outgoing Biden administration was one of the most pro-India administrations in decades and will be a tough act to follow for any presidential administration. Ties with India were cemented because of the belief that India's rise is in and of itself important to American national security interests," Aparna Pande, director, Initiative on the Future of India and South Asia at the prestigious Hudson Institute think-tank told PTI in an interview.

There was a deepening of relations on the security and defense realm, including high technology, something India has sought for decades, said Pande, author of several books, including From 'Chanakya to Modi: Evolution of India's Foreign Policy'.

"Irritants - like democratic backsliding and the issue tied to the 'murder for hire' incident - were not allowed to derail the partnership. India's concerns - whether Pakistan or China - were borne in mind and the US provided intelligence and other support to India with respect to China. Bangladesh was one country over which the two continued to disagree, even publicly," she said in response to a question.

When asked about India-US relationship during the incoming Trump administration, she said India remains one of a handful of countries that continues to enjoy bipartisan support.

"President-elect Trump has a good relationship with PM Modi and has an overall favourable view of India. His nominees for key positions - Rep Mike Waltz, Senator Marco Rubio - have long expressed pro-

India positions and that is likely to ensure that most policies will continue. It was during Trump 1.0 that the Indo Pacific policy, the Quad and sharing of high technology (STA-1) with India was started so most of these are likely to continue," she said.

"Similarly, Trump 2.0's desire to push-back or contain China's rise - economic, technological, and military - will help ensure that India is seen as a partner in this endeavour. When it comes to Pakistan, we will have to see how things pan out but as of now, there is no sign that things will improve. With respect to India-China relations, the Trump 2.0 is likely to continue its policies and the Biden administration policies of support for India. Things may improve on the Bangladesh front and the two countries may be able to work together," Pande said.

At the same time, she noted that there will be challenges - the long-standing trade disagreements, high illegal immigration from India, and impact on even legal immigration from India (and most countries).

"Further, there may be a quid pro quo asked for in return for sharing of high technology, whether that is in the trade realm or defense sales area. What policy the incoming Trump administration takes on human rights and religious freedom will remain to be seen. However, the 'murder for hire' incident is as of now unlikely to go away but it will remain to be seen how much of focus remains on it. The Trump 2.0 administration will be one that believes in great power politics, not strategic altruism," Pande said.

Trump, 78, would be sworn in as the 47th president of the United States on January 20. He has nominated Florida Senator Marco Rubio and appointed Congressman Mike Waltz as his National Security Advisor. Both are China-hawk and India-friendly. (PTI)

## World Bank to approve USD 20 bn lending package for Pakistan: Report

**ISLAMABAD, Jan 5:** The World Bank is set to approve a USD 20 billion indicative lending package for Pakistan - a pioneering 10-year initiative to protect its funded projects from political transitions and focus on six targeted areas, according to a media report.

The programme, titled "Pakistan Country Partnership Framework 2025-35", aims to improve social indicators in the most neglected but important areas. The Express Tribune newspaper reported, citing official documents.

It will focus on reducing child stunting, combating learning poverty, enhancing climate resilience, decarbonising the environment, expanding fiscal space, and boosting private investment to improve productivity.

These areas have broad support across the political spectrum and are expected to remain unaffected by government changes during the 2025-2035 period, which is anticipated to include at least three general elections.

This 'Country Partnership Framework' is scheduled to be approved by the World Bank board on January 14, following which the global lender's Vice President for South Asia Martin Raizer is also expected to visit Islamabad.

According to the World Bank's assessment, the planning framework "will help shield the programme from the country's volatile polity and frequent swings in priorities and requests that follow government changes."

The requests arising from government changes have caused "fragmentation of the World Bank portfolio and diluted impacts," it said.

A key Pakistani official, who was part of the framework development, said that the World Bank picked Pakistan as the first country where it would introduce the 10-year partnership strategy.

"The World Bank's total indicative lending envelope for fiscal year 2025 to 2035 will total around USD 20 billion," reads a draft of the framework.

Out of the USD 20 billion, the World Bank's concessional arm, the International Development Association (IDA), will lend USD 14 billion and the remaining USD 6 billion is projected to be provided through the relatively expensive window - the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD).

"However, these indicative loans will depend upon the evolution of the IDA funding over the years, Pakistan's standing and performance, including with respect to the Sustainable Development Finance Policy and its debt vulnerability indicators," reads the document. (PTI)

## UK Opposition wants PM Keir Starmer to scrap plans for Islamophobia definition

**LONDON, Jan 5:** Britain's Opposition Conservative Party is leading calls for Prime Minister Keir Starmer to scrap government plans for an official definition of Islamophobia over fears it would restrict free speech and action against wrongdoing.

Shadow justice secretary Robert Jenrick said this weekend that a "false label" of Islamophobia had hampered investigations into the child abuse grooming gang scandal involving men of Pakistani heritage.

It comes as The Daily Telegraph newspaper claims that the Labour Party government is considering a formal definition of anti-Muslim discrimination.

"The government should drop its plans for such a deeply flawed definition of Islamophobia," Jenrick told the newspaper.

"Throughout the grooming gang scandal the false label of Islamophobia was used to silence people. It appears that the government has learnt nothing and is determined to press ahead with a definition that will have a chilling effect on freedom of speech," he said.

In a social media post, the Tory MP elaborated that "for decades the most appalling crimes from predominantly British-Pakistani men were legalised and actively covered up to prevent disorder".

"The rule of law was abandoned to sustain the myth that diversity is our strength, destroying the lives of thousands of vulnerable white working class girls in the process," he noted.

The shadow minister blamed the "onset of mass migration" for the scandal, brought back into focus by Tesla chief Elon Musk posting se-

verely critical remarks on his X platform over the British government's handling of young girls' sexual exploitation across a number of towns and cities in England more than a decade ago.

"The foreign nationals responsible must be deported - no ifs, no buts. And the officials that covered up must be sent to jail for their appalling cowardice. Even that won't be enough for the victims," added Jenrick.

His intervention comes as sources in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), led by Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner, were referenced by The Daily Telegraph to claim that officials were considering whether to introduce a formal definition of Islamophobia.

Such a definition, though not legally binding, would require organisations to adopt it.

Back in 2018, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims had defined Islamophobia as a "type of racism" that targets expressions of Muslimness.

Fiyaz Mughal, the founder of Tell Mama, which stands for Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks, is among those who is warning against the APPG definition.

He is quoted by The Daily Telegraph as saying: "Bad behaviour wherever it is, in whichever religious group, needs to be called out. This does not mean that all Muslim or all Pakistani men are bad. But when there is a concentration of issues within a certain group, we must hold the line in defence of our core values.

"There is a real danger that if they

get the definition wrong, it will become the Achilles heel of Labour."

Last year, the Network of Sikh Organisations (NSO) wrote to Rayner to caution against the government incorporating into law this "flawed" unofficial definition of Islamophobia as it would jeopardise the factual discussion of the history of the Indian subcontinent and persecution of religious minorities around the world.

The NSO letter said: "Adoption of this contested definition into law would have serious implications on free speech, not least the ability to discuss historical truths... targeting criminality with a flawed definition of 'Islamophobia', would be counter-productive and there is no evidence it would reduce anti-Muslim hatred in any case."

Faith Minister Lord Wajid Khan had replied to acknowledge that "the definition proposed by the APPG is not in line with the Equality Act 2010, which defines race in terms of colour, nationality and national or ethnic origins".

At the time in September 2024, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Faith, Communities and Resettlement in the MHCLG also admitted that defining Islamophobia is a "complex issue" and something ministers are approaching in a "more holistic" way.

"We want to ensure that any definition comprehensively reflects multiple perspectives and implications for different communities. This government is actively considering our approach to tackling Islamophobia through a more holistic lens, and will provide further information on this in due course," he said. (PTI)

## Biden honours Hillary Clinton, George Soros, Lionel Messi with Presidential Medal of Freedom

**WASHINGTON, Jan 5:** Outgoing President Joe Biden has presented the US' highest civilian award to 19 people, including former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, football superstar Lionel Messi, controversial philanthropist George Soros and actor Denzel Washington, for their contributions to America and the world.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is presented to individuals who have made exemplary contributions to the prosperity, values, or security of the United States, world peace, or other significant societal, public or private endeavours.

Due to a scheduling conflict, Argentinian football star Messi could not be present in person at the White House to receive the award from the US president.

"For the final time as President, I have the honour of bestowing the Medal of Freedom on our nation's highest civilian honour on a group of extraordinary, truly extraordinary people who gave their sacred effort, their sacred effort, to shape the culture and the cause of America," Biden said at a glittering function in the East Room of the White House.

Former president Bill Clinton, several of his Cabinet members including Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin along with several celebrities were present in the East Room of the White House during the awards ceremony Saturday afternoon.

"This group of people leave an incredible

mark on our country with insight and influence that can be felt around the globe in major cities and remote areas of life, finding us closer as people and showing us that what's possible as a nation, nothing beyond our capacity," Biden said.

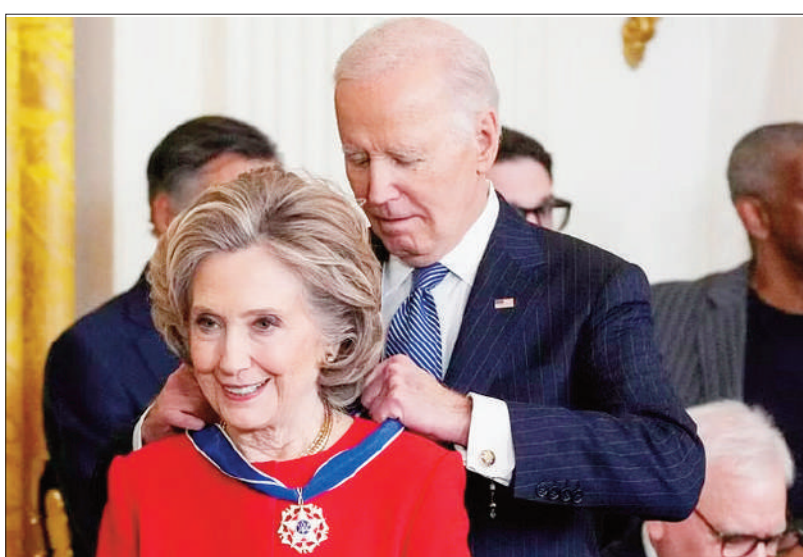
"As cultural icons, ... humanitarians, rock stars, sports stars, you feed the hungry, you give hope to those who are hurting, and you craft the signs and sounds of our movements and our memories. It's amazing...you inspire, and you bring healing and joy to so many lives that otherwise wouldn't be touched," the President said.

"You answer the call to serve and lead others to do the same thing. You defend the values of America even when they're under attack, which they have been," Biden said after which he presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Fannie Lou Hamer, who transformed the struggle for racial justice in America, Ashton Carter, who served as the 25th Secretary of Defence, Robert Francis Kennedy remembered as an Attorney General who fiercely combated racial segregation, and George W Romney, a businessman who served as the chairman and president of American Motors Corporation, were awarded posthumously.

The medals were received by their family members.

Hillary Clinton was the only recipient to get a standing ovation.



"As a lawyer, she defended the rights of children. As First Lady, she fought for universal health care and declared women's rights are human rights," a military aide read the citation as she was presented the medal by the president.

"As Senator, she helped New York rebuild after September 11, 2001. As Secretary of State, she championed democracy worldwide. Her nomination for president broke barriers and inspired generations. Through it

all, her career has been dedicated to an eternal truth. America's ideals are sacred, and we must always defend and live by them," according to the citation.

Alex Soros accepted the award on behalf of his father George Soros, an investor, philanthropist, and founder of the Open Society Foundations.

"Born into a Jewish family in Hungary, George Soros escaped Nazi occupation to build a life of freedom for himself and count-

less others around the world," said the citation as read by the military aide.

"Educated in England, he settled in America as he became an investor and philanthropist supporting key pillars of open societies, rights and justice, equity and equality, freedom now and in the future," it said.

"As an immigrant who found freedom and prosperity in America, I am deeply moved by this honour," George Soros said in a statement.

"I accept it on behalf of the many people around the world with whom the Open Society Foundations have made common cause over the past 40 years," he said.

However, Biden was slammed by Make America Great Again (MAGA) supporters and Republican leadership for giving the award to Soros.

"Giving George Soros the Presidential Medal of Freedom is another slap in the face of America after reducing the sentences of murderers and pardoning his son. 16 days is a long time until the Inauguration. What is he capable of sliding in next? January 20th can't come soon enough," Republican leader Nikki Haley said.

"George Soros spent millions electing soft-on-crime politicians that let criminals wreak havoc in our major cities," Montana Senator Tim Sheehy told The New York Post.

Tech entrepreneur Elon Musk said that

Biden giving Soros the Medal of Freedom is a "travesty".

Alex who received the award on behalf of his father said his father is an American patriot who has spent his life fighting for freedom and human rights.

On George Soros, the White House said, "Through his network of foundations, partners and projects in more than 120 countries, Soros has focused on global initiatives that strengthen democracy, human rights, education, and social justice."

Soros, 94, in the recent past has spoken openly against Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The ruling BJP believe that he tried to interfere in Indian elections.

Other awardees include conservationist Jane Goodall; longtime Vogue Magazine editor-in-chief Anna Wintour; American fashion designer Ralph Lauren; American Film Institute founder George Stevens Jr.; entrepreneur and LGBTQ+ activist Tim Gill; scientist Bill Nye and David Rubenstein, co-founder of The Carlyle Group global investment firm.

Spanish-American chef Jose Andres, Irish singer-songwriter and activist Bono, Canadian-American activist and retired actor Michael J Fox, entrepreneur, philanthropist, and LGBTQ+ rights activist Tim Gill and legendary retired basketball player Earvin "Magic" Johnson were also among the recipients of the award. (PTI)



## Residents within 10 km radius will also require border pass

# Movement of people across Mizoram-Myanmar border regulated: Official

**AIZAWL, Jan 5:** Security has been beefed up along the 510-km long Mizoram-Myanmar border and movement of people living within 10 kilometres on either side of the unfenced international border has been regulated following the directive of the Centre, an official said.

The official said that residents of both countries living within 10 km on either side of the border now require a border pass to visit each other.

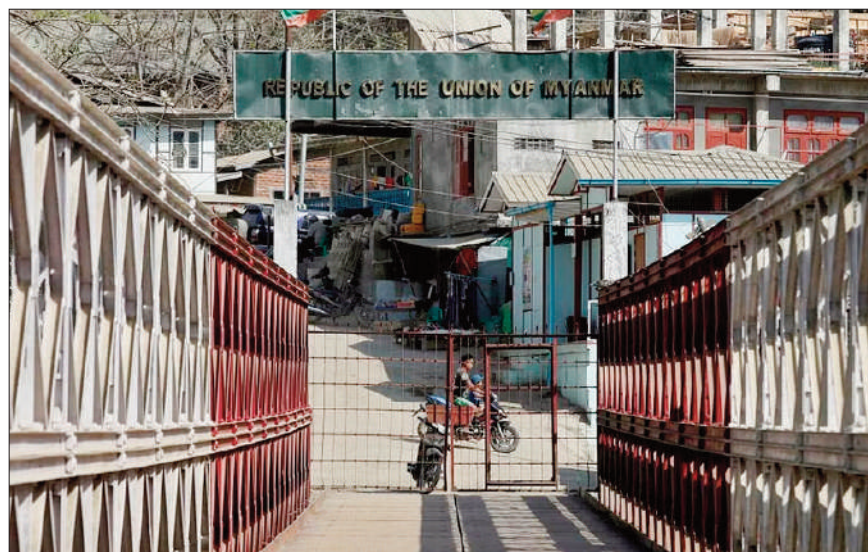
The border pass valid for a stay of up to seven days is being issued to both Myanmar and Indian citizens visiting each other countries on production of documents verifying that they live within the territorial limit of 10 km on either side of the international border, he said on Saturday.

The initiative was taken by state police, Assam Rifles, and health officials at some entry and exit points from December 31 based on the order and new guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), he said.

Six Mizoram districts - Champhai, Siaha, Lawngtlai, Hnahthial, Saitual and Serchhip - share a 510 km-long border with Myanmar's Chin state.

A public notice issued by Champhai district police on Friday also said that residents from both India and Myanmar intending to visit each other countries will now require a border pass, which will be valid for seven days.

Any resident intending to enter Myanmar or India through Zokhawthar and Nnahlan



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

The identity proof document can be issued by the local police station officer-in-charge or village chief or village authority (administrator) acknowledged by the government and is valid for one year, while the border pass is valid for 7 days only, the notice said.

The border pass should be returned by the holder at the same crossing point where it was issued within seven days, it said.

The crossing points will be open from

Monday to Saturday between 6 am and 3:30 pm, it said.

The border pass will be issued to only one adult, and minors have to be accompanied by parents.

The details of a maximum number of three children can be captured in a single border pass belonging to either parent, while an additional border pass will be issued to parents, who bring more than three children, the notice said.

The initiative of issuance of border passes will be undertaken by state police, Assam Rifles and medical officials, it said.

On December 24, the MHA issued a new protocol restricting and reducing the range of movement of people under the free movement regime (FMR) from the earlier 16 km to the present 10 km.

Although Union home minister Amit Shah had announced in February last year that the FMR would be scrapped, an official notification in this regard is yet to be issued, sources said.

According to the new guidelines, an individual crossing the border from India to Myanmar and from Myanmar to India will be given a "border pass" by the Assam Rifles, which guards the Indo-Myanmar border, for a stay of up to seven days.

Individuals will have to report at the designated border crossing points and fill out a form.

The Assam Rifles will conduct the document inspection followed by a security and health check by the state police and health department officials, respectively.

The Assam Rifles will upload all the forms on the Indo-Myanmar Border portal, record biometrics, and issue a border pass with a photograph of the applicant and a QR code.

The pass will have to be deposited on return at the same crossing point before completion of seven days.

The guideline stated that police will do physical checks to verify the visit of Myanmar nationals as per the details provided in the border pass and anyone violating the conditions will face legal action. (PTI)

## KHNAM not ready to work with other political parties: Passah



**SHILLONG, Jan 5:** The Khun Hynniet National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) has informed that it is not ready to work with other political parties because of its 'pro-Hynniet agendas'.

After the party's central executive committee (CEC) meeting on Saturday, working president Thomas Passah said that the reason for the party's decision not to consider going for a pre-poll alliance ahead of the autonomous district council (ADC) elections is because its ideology and manifesto are very different.

"We have pro-Hynniet agendas. I think it will differ a lot from the mission and agenda of the other political parties. Therefore, for sure, we will not be working with the NPP, BJP, UDP. The only point is that we will be preparing our manifesto consisting of very strong and effective points," he said.

"If we work with any party, our manifesto has to be accepted in toto and hundred per cent then only we may consider working with other political parties. If our agendas are not being taken on board in the common minimum program hundred per cent then we will not be working with any political parties," Passah added.

The working president also informed that in the meeting, all the ten candidates in the first list were called to arrive at a common point of understanding about the ideology of the party and how to go about these MDC elections.

"We have to listen to their hardships also so that we make sure we have one goal, one agenda for these MDC elections so that we ensure we go as a team and not as individual candidates," he said.

With the absence of the anti-defection law in the ADCs, Passah said, "Therefore we have tried to discuss with the candidates to show there is unity among all the candidates, especially after winning, no candidates should leave the party but we will be united in one goal."

The KHNAM has so far fi-

nished 10 candidates for the KHADC polls, to be held on February 21. The party is likely to release its second list of candidates within 6-7 days.

"We have another 10 applications pending and the state election committee is looking into this on what to do about them. It depends on the recommendation of the SEC and the CEC will take a call likely within 7 days," Passah said while adding that the party is not going to field from all 29 seats.

Stating that the party is making all efforts to win the elections, he said, "But at the end of the day it is a democracy, it will be at the hands of the people. What is their mindset and what is their choice, we have to respect that but we hope that the general public at large will give an opportunity to the candidates set up by the party from the constituencies concerned."

He said that the KHNAM in the past elections have come up with 4 winning MDCs and "I think we will be crossing that (this time)."

Further, the working president informed that the party would be releasing its manifesto very soon.

"The main agenda is to look into the various acts and regulations of the district council, which need immediate attention by amendment and by other ways and to show that the district council live up to the expectation of the people," he said while adding, "As of now for 72 years, we have the district council but it is very sad to see that the functioning of the district council is not upto the mark."

"The various parties, various MDCs, who have been elected to the district councils for the past 72 years have not been able to live up to the spirit of the Sixth Schedule. So our objective is mainly to strengthen the district council as provided by the Sixth Schedule," he added.

Meanwhile, Passah remarked that it is more of a political drama during the last five years in the KHADC. (NNN)

## Vehicle fall in deep gorge in Arunachal Pradesh; four injured



**HT Correspondent**  
**DIBRUGARH, Jan 5:** Four persons of a family dealt major injuries during a road accident near Hunli in the Lower Dibang Valley district of Arunachal Pradesh on Saturday.

According to police, the four persons were coming back from Anini in Dibang Valley district when the car (Eco Sport) bearing Regn no. AS 01BF 0234 skidded off the road and fell into a deep gorge.

The injured persons are Hiten Buragohain (81 yrs), Bedabratta Buragohain (45), Promila Buragohain (41), and Jaslin Buragohain (13) hailing from Dibrugarh.

According to reports, all the injured were being rushed to Dibrugarh for better treatment after they were rescued by the police and BRO (GREF) personnel.

Notably, eight members of two families had gone to Anini on January 1 on a holiday trip. The members of the family were on their way home when the mishap took place.

According to sources, the condition of Promila Buragohain is stated to be critical.

## VPP asks voters to reject all other political parties

**SHILLONG, Jan 5:** The opposition Voice of the People Party (VPP) has asked the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills region to reject all the other political parties contesting the upcoming elections to the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) slated to be held on February 21.

It also referred to the Congress as a "political clown" and the United Democratic Party (UDP) as an "opportunist" for playing "holier than thou" despite being part of the National People's Party (NPP)-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) government.

In an interview, VPP spokesperson Batskhem Myrboh said that the battlefield is very clear that it is going to be the VPP versus all other political parties in the upcoming ADC polls.

He said the Congress' decision to pull out of the NPP-led EC in the KHADC at the fag end of the extended term is nothing but a political drama when the reality is that the Congress could be acting on the advice of the NPP because once the elections are over, they

will be working together again.

"It (pulling out) is completely a drama. The Congress is like a political clown in the state of Meghalaya. When you look at the Congress, it is in a sorry state of affair but at the end of the day, it can be a collusion between the NPP and the Congress or it could be the

advice of the NPP also for the Congress to take that step because they realise because the Congress somehow have some appeal to the people, so let the Congress fight the

elections independently, pull out from the EC so that it may have a better image but ultimately after the election they will come together because now the fight is VPP versus all (political parties). So irrespective of whether they pull out or they don't pull out it is a matter of their strategy," Myrboh said.

He also alleged, "You see all of them are on the same boat. Even at the state level, the NPP was able to form the government in the 2023 election because it was helped by

Congress. So the Congress leadership in the state played the card so well to ensure that the NPP managed to form the government. All this was staged."

Taking a jibe at the UDP, which is heading the opposition bench in the KHADC but is a coalition partner of the NPP in the state, the VPP leader said, "You will see UDP is purely an opportunist. This opportunist party is always trying to project itself as the

"holier than thou", always criticising the government for which they have been part of. Can you believe in 1998, they have always been part of the government - except from 2013 to 2018 - so they have no moral ground when the state really lacks performance on various fronts, the Congress and the UDP, and the NPP and the HSPDP, they are all accountable. Therefore, the battlefield is very clear, it is VPP versus all."

He further alleged that the top-

pling of the UDP-led EC in the KHADC might also be a game plan.

"UDP has been part of the government, they are made chairmen, co-chairmen, vice-chairmen and when they topple the EC in the district council, you don't know what the game plan is as it is too complex and simple solution is to reject them all. To solve the complexities is to reject them all," Myrboh appealed to the people.

To a question on sitting MLAs contesting the ADC polls, the VPP spokesperson said that such decisions only reflect that they are scared.

"They believe that if they contest, people would vote for them but I believe the people would reject them all because under the leadership of the present government - meaning NPP, UDP, HSPDP - the state is not performing well in many fronts and think of entrusting them with another responsibility, they want to pull down the state further. When you are a non-performer and you want another function and responsibility to be taken there is no logic," he stated. (NNN)

## Kohima bans 'shoot-at-sight' orders for stray dogs

**DIMAPUR, Jan 5:** The Kohima district administration has banned "shoot-at-sight" orders for stray dogs. Kohima's additional deputy commissioner Rhoisetho Nguori issued an order in this regard on Saturday stating that it has come to notice that certain organisations and associations within Kohima municipal wards and villages under Kohima district issued "shoot-at-sight" orders for stray dogs.

Nguori informed all concerned that such actions are in violation of provisions of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 (PCA Act), and the Bharatiya Naya Sanhita (BNS), which prohibits the killing of animals, including stray dogs.

Acts of this nature are deemed illegal under the law, the order said, strictly prohibiting any individual, organisation, or association from engaging in such activities.

The order said the presence of any stray dogs should be reported to the office of the municipal/town council authorities in the urban areas, or to the respective village authorities/area administrative officers concerned in rural areas. The authorities concerned, with the help of the chief veterinary officer, will take care of such stray dogs as per laid down procedures of relevant laws.

The order further said strict action would be taken against those found violating this directive, under relevant provisions of the Act/law.

## B'deshi mother-daughter duo caught in Tripura

**HT Correspondent**  
**AGARTALA, Jan 5:** Tripura Police apprehended two Bangladeshi nationals, including a minor girl, in the West Chandrapur area of Dharmanagar under North Tripura district, as they attempted to cross the international border back into Bangladesh after returning from Bangalore.

Acting on a tip-off, police detained the duo from the residence of one Nasir Ali in the area. "Based on secret information, we detained two Bangladeshi nationals, including a minor girl, from Nasir Ali's house. However, five other individuals managed to flee the scene upon spotting the police," said a senior police official.

## CPI(M) trial wing to submit deputation to Tripura Guv

**AGARTALA, Jan 5:** Tripura Ganamukti Parisad (GMP), the trial wing of the CPI(M), will submit a deputation to Governor Indrasena Reddy Nallu on various issues, such as low man-days in rural job scheme and alleged corruption in an autonomous council, on January 11, a senior leader said on Sunday.

Addressing a press conference, GMP general secretary Radhacharan Debbarma said a programme has been chalked out in accordance with the decision taken in the conference of Adivasi Adhikari Rastriya Manch in Delhi on December 1.

"We want the BJP-led NDA government in Delhi to pass the Constitution (125th Amendment) Bill, 2019 at the earliest as it is pending

for several years," he said.

The Bill is intended to grant more financial and executive powers to the autonomous councils in the Sixth Schedule areas of the north-eastern region. The amendment will impact one crore tribal people in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, according to a tribal leader. Debbarma also accused Tripura Motha of turning the Tribal Autonomous Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) into a den of corruption.

"There have been no elected bodies of the village committees, like gram panchayats, since 2021. In the absence of elected bodies, leaders of Tripura Motha are siphoning off funds that are meant for development work. We want the BJP-led state

government to hold elections to the village committees as early as possible," he said. The TTAADC, constituted under the Sixth Schedule, has 587 village committees.

The former tribal council chief also lashed out at the BJP government over "shrinking man-days" under the MGNREGA, a guaranteed rural job scheme.

"The MGNREGA has generated an average of 42 man-days in the state with three months left to end the current financial year. Low man-days generation has reduced job opportunities for the rural poor," he said.

"We will organise an agitational programme on these issues on January 11 and submit a memorandum to the governor seeking his intervention", he said. (PTI)

## Meghalaya-born off for beauty pageant event in China

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Jan 5:** The reigning Miss Tourism India from Meghalaya, Irene Dkhar, has geared up to represent the country at Miss Tourism World 2025 Global Finals to be held in Guangdong, China.

The event scheduled on January 10 will see the active participation of contestants from 60 countries and regions, including the United States, France, Brazil, Venezuela, and members of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Notably, Dkhar departed from New Delhi on December 27 to join other contestants for the event.

The Miss Tourism World contest is recognised for its potential to boost the tourism and cultural industries of both the host country and the participating nations.

In a press conference held in Guangzhou on January 3, dignitaries such as Ahmed Mustafa Fahmi, Arab League Ambassador to China; Sinisha Belyan, Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to China; and Ivan Chiulu, Ambassador of Zambia to China, expressed their support for the event, which is backed by the Chinese government.

Irene Dkhar's rise to the global stage has been truly remarkable. Before claiming the title of Miss Tourism India 2024 in Jaipur, Rajasthan, she amassed a series of impressive wins, including Miss Meghalaya 2022, Miss Northeast 2022, Femina Miss India Meghalaya 2023, and Miss Grand India Meghalaya 2024.

The Miss Meghalaya Organisation has expressed its full confidence in Irene Dkhar's ability to bring the crown home, extending its best wishes for her success.

## Operation Dawn completes an eventful 2024; 2.0 likely to follow

Over 500 gm of heroin, 7 kg of ganja seized, 91 arrested in Arunachal's Naharlagun

**ITANAGAR, Jan 5:** More than 500 gm of heroin, 7 kg of cannabis and other narcotic substances have been seized alongside the arrest of 91 people by Naharlagun Police in Arunachal Pradesh in 2024, a police statement said.

The success was achieved under 'Operation Dawn' launched by Naharlagun Police, Naharlagun Superintendent of Police Mihin Gambo said in a statement on Saturday.

Naharlagun is located close to the state capital Itanagar.

"Police seized 588.42 gm of heroin, 7,042.5 gm of cannabis, 48 gm of Lorazepam, and 233.81 gm of Morphine from various peddlers. A total of 41 NDPS cases were registered during the year and 91 peddlers arrested," the SP said.

"The efforts led to a noticeable improvement compared to the previous year, as more cases were detected, and stricter action was taken against drug peddlers. These actions also resulted in the confiscation of a significantly larger quantity of contraband substances, demonstrating the effective-



ness of the initiative," Gambo said.

The crackdown on drug-related offences has had a far-reaching impact on the overall crime scenario in the region, he said.

Many thefts and burglaries, which were often linked to individuals struggling with drug addiction, have seen a sharp decline, the SP said.

As many as 152 cases of theft and

burglaries were registered in various police stations in the district last year, he added.

In addition to enforcement, the police carried out extensive awareness campaigns under Operation Dawn.

The campaigns were organised across schools, colleges, and rehabilitation centres, aiming to educate young people about the dangers of drug abuse,

the SP said.

The initiatives inspired many individuals battling addiction to seek help and begin de-addiction programme at rehabilitation facilities, Gambo added.

"Operation Dawn has not only curbed the supply of illegal drugs but also prevented countless young people from falling into addiction. The combined efforts of the police and the community have played a pivotal role in creating a safer and more secure environment in the region," he said.

Gambo expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the residents of Naharlagun for their consistent support and cooperation.

He highlighted the crucial role of community involvement in the fight against drug abuse and urged everyone to continue working together as the police prepare to launch Operation Dawn 2.0 this year.

The upcoming phase aims to build on the successes of the past year and deliver even greater results in the ongoing battle against drugs and crime, he added. (PTI)



# No welfare scheme to be shut if BJP comes to power in Delhi, will weed out corruption: PM Modi

*'Only if AAP is removed from Delhi, the double-engine of development and good governance will come'*

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday accused Delhi's AAP government of wasting a decade fighting with the Centre and urged its people to give the BJP an opportunity to turn the national capital into a city of the future.

The prime minister also assured that no public welfare scheme would be discontinued if the BJP assumed power but the party's government would weed out the corruption in their implementation.

Addressing a rally in the Rohini area, Modi dubbed the AAP government a "disaster" that had struck Delhi and asserted the BJP would usher in change.

"Only when this 'aapda (disaster)' is gotten rid of in Delhi, the double-engine of development will come in," Modi said.

The prime minister said the Centre had been developing highways in Delhi, expanding the Metro network, starting the Namu Bharat Regional Rapid Transit System, and running big hospitals.

"However, the moment you step out of a Metro station, you can see potholed roads, overflowing sewers. Some areas are such that even auto and cab drivers refuse to ply due to long traffic jams," he said.

"In the past 10 years, Delhi has witnessed a state government that is no less than an



'aapda (disaster)'. Delhiites have realised this. Only one voice is reverberating in Delhi -- 'Aapda nahi sahenge, badal kar rahenge (will not tolerate disaster, will bring change),' Modi said.

The prime minister said when the people of Delhi were grappling with COVID-19, struggling to find oxygen and medicines, the entire focus of the "aapda people" was on

building their "Sheesh Mahal".

"They made a huge budget for the 'Sheesh Mahal'. This is their truth... They do not care about the people of Delhi. That is why every Delhiite today is saying... 'we will not tolerate aapda, we will change'," he said.

Modi also accused the AAP government of spreading fear that a BJP government in Delhi would discontinue several welfare

schemes implemented by it.

The prime minister asserted a new BJP government would implement central schemes that, he claimed, had been stalled by the AAP government with renewed vigour.

"For Delhi, these people have made every season, every weather, 'aapda kaal'. The energy of Delhiites is spent in dealing with 'aapda' throughout the year," he said.

"Aapda" turned every season into an emergency, with water shortages, waterlogging and pollution, the prime minister alleged. "Therefore, only if AAP is removed from Delhi, the double-engine of development and good governance will come."

"We are in the 21st century and 25 years have passed. Two or three generations have entered their youth. The next 25 years are very important for Delhi. The next 25 years will see India emerging as a developed nation before their eyes. We all will be stakeholders in this journey," Modi said.

The national capital should be a part of this glorious journey, he added.

"In Delhi, people blessed the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections and now, in the assembly polls, are set to bless the BJP. This is a golden opportunity to win the heart of Delhi and free it of disaster ('aapda')." he said. (PTI)

# Siddaramaiah challenges Kumaraswamy to prove corruption, commission charges against govt



**DAVANGERE (KARNATAKA), Jan 5:** With Union Minister H D Kumaraswamy accusing his government of corruption and ministers of extracting commission, Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday challenged the JD(S) leader to prove his allegations with evidence.

He said allegations should not be made without documents and proof.

"Let him prove it. Ask him to prove that 60 per cent commission is taking place and there is corruption. Let him prove it. Not just making allegations, one has to prove it," Siddaramaiah told reporters here, responding to a question.

He said the opposition's job is not only to make the allegations, they should also prove it with evidence and documents.

Earlier in the day, speaking to reporters in Mysuru, Kumaraswamy targeted the Siddaramaiah-led government and accused it of corruption and extracting commission, while alleging that ministers themselves are involved in this.

"Contractors supporting them (Congress party) are themselves saying that it (commission) has crossed 60 per cent and the earlier government was better... the loot is happening at PWD or irrigation departments. While getting contracts is one part, now even for allotment of houses, it seems money has to be paid..."

Earlier, small officers were involved, but now it is happening at Vidhana Soudha. Ministers have to

be paid for release of houses...at every department percentage is fixed..." Kumaraswamy alleged as he highlighted the suicide of officials and contractors.

Asking Siddaramaiah to answer to his own conscience, the union minister further accused those around CM of indulging in looting of the state's and public resources. "...you (CM) will have to pay for it."

Responding to a question on this year's Budget priorities, the CM, who also holds the Finance portfolio, said the Budget will be presented in March and he will speak about priorities when he begins the pre-budget consultation meetings.

On the recent hike in bus fares, Siddaramaiah said, bus fares have increased during all governments, considering the salaries of employees, the increase in diesel prices, the cost of purchase of new buses and also inflation.

He said, "Bus fares were increased long ago, and as we were told that all our road transport corporations are in distress, and as there was a long standing demand, we have increased."

Questioning whether there was no hike when BJP or Kumaraswamy was in power, the CM said, "Let them say they had not increased fares. Hasn't the central government increased railway fares?"

The revised bus fares, hiked by 15 per cent across the board, came into effect at midnight on Saturday, amidst stiff criticism from opposition parties and various sections. (PTI)

# Mamata accusing BSF of allowing infiltration insult to forces: BJP's Suwendu

**KOLKATA, Jan 5:** Leader of Opposition in the West Bengal assembly, Suwendu Adhikari, wrote a letter to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, criticising her for the allegation that the BSF was allowing infiltration from Bangladesh, and said such a comment was an insult to security forces.

He also accused Banerjee of indulging in "substandard" politics to appease her vote bank. Claiming that the administration in BJP-ruled Assam worked with security agencies to stop illegal immigration, Adhikari alleged that the West Bengal government was making infiltrators a vote bank.

He emphasised that blaming the Border Security Force (BSF) for infiltration in West Bengal is "an insult to the 75,000 personnel of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and 33,000 BSF personnel in Bengal".

"Allegations and counter-allegations indeed occur in politics. But dragging security forces into it, insulting them and passing the buck for your failures to them is nothing but substandard

politics," Adhikari wrote in the letter to Banerjee.

Banerjee had on Thursday accused the Border Security Force of allowing infiltration from Bangladesh and alleged that they were doing so as part of a central government's "blueprint to destabilise" the state, a charge the BSF denied, asserting that it diligently guards the country's boundary.

Adhikari pointed out that India's borders, spanning over 15,106.7 kilometres, are protected by security personnel who risk their lives in adverse geographical conditions.

He also questioned the role of the state administration over alleged settlement of infiltrators in villages and asked why the state government opposed the need to strengthen the BSF's jurisdiction.

The BJP leader blamed the West Bengal government for "non-cooperation with BSF on border-related subjects".

The leader of the opposition alleged that the

West Bengal government was "opposing the settlement of persecuted minorities from neighbouring countries" but was "welcoming infiltrators".

On addressing the issue of influx of illegal immigrants, Adhikari claimed, "The administrative machinery in Assam sided with the security agencies, while on the other hand, the West Bengal administration worked towards making the infiltrators the vote bank."

The BJP leader highlighted the Centre's efforts to strengthen security along the country's boundary, including the completion of 591 kilometres of border fencing, the installation of floodlights and the construction of border outposts and observation towers.

Adhikari also alleged that the state government's lack of support was hindering the construction of fencing intended to prevent infiltration along the India-Bangladesh border.

He also claimed that the process of acquiring land to build 284 kilometres of fence is "pending" at the state level. (PTI)

# VHP says acquittal of Nanded blast accused 'tight slap' on Congress

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** The VHP on Sunday termed the acquittal of the 2006 Nanded blast accused a "tight slap" on the Congress' face and asked the party's top leadership to apologise to Hindu society.

The reaction came after a sessions court in Maharashtra's Nanded acquitted on Saturday all nine surviving accused in the 2006 blast case.

"The Congress' dream of proving Hindus to be terrorists in the 2006 Nanded blast case stands exposed, with the court acquitting all the persons made accused in the case during Congress rule," Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) national spokesperson Vinod Bansal said.

He claimed the Congress and the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) had already been "exposed" in the Malegaon blast case.

"After 19 years, the Nanded court acquitted all the accused and slapped the Congress hard on its face for its anti-Hindu misdeeds," Bansal said.

"At least now, the top leadership of the Congress should apologise to Hindu society," he added.

The case pertains to an explosion at the home of Laxman Rajkondwar -- allegedly a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) worker in Nanded city -- on the intervening night of April 4 and 5, 2006.

His son Naresh Rajkondwar and VHP activist Himanshu Panse were killed in the blast, allegedly while assembling an explosive device, the investigators had claimed.

The case was initially investigated by the Maharashtra ATS before being transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

According to defence lawyer Nitin Runwal, 49 prosecution witnesses were examined during the trial.

However, the prosecution could not prove that the incident was a "bomb blast" and not the explosion of a gas cylinder or some other inflammable object, he told PTI on Saturday.

The Congress was in power at the Centre and in Maharashtra at the time of the incident. (PTI)

# Days after Lalu's offer, comes a snub from Nitish

**PATNA, Jan 5:** Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Sunday snubbed the RJD, headed by his arch-rival Lalu Prasad, stating that he had forged alliances "by mistake" with the opposition party which "did nothing" while in power.

The JD(U) supremo made the remark days after Prasad, a former CM himself, had claimed that the RJD was keeping its "doors open" for the former ally, who is now back in the BJP-led NDA.

Talking to reporters in the north Bihar district of Muzaffarpur, as part of a state-wide Pragati Yatra, Kumar said, "Those who were in power before us... did they do anything? People used to fear stepping out of their homes after sunset. I had by mistake ('galti se') aligned with them a couple of times."

"What was the condition of women back then? Today you can see these self-help groups, which we gave the name Jivika. The Centre replicated our model and called it Aajivika. Did you see such confident rural women earlier," asked the longest-serving CM of the state. (PTI)

# Congress yet to recover from Mamata's expulsion: Party's former President

*Bhattacharya's comments triggered a political row, which also affected the state Congress' internal dynamics*



**KOLKATA, Jan 5:** The Congress is still grappling with the consequences of Mamata Banerjee's expulsion, which weakened its position in West Bengal, former state president of the party Pradipta Bhattacharya said.

Bhattacharya, a former MP, said the then Congress state president Somen Mitra had expelled Banerjee in 1997 following instructions from the then party chief Sitaram Kesri

due to her comments against the party line.

He claimed that he had advised Mitra against the decision but said the pressure from the high command was immense.

Bhattacharya made the comments on Saturday in Kolkata at the unveiling ceremony of a bust of Mitra, who died in 2020.

Speaking to PTI on Sunday, he said, "The expulsion weakened the

Congress, and we are yet to recover from it. But to regain strength, we must stay united and follow the direction of our central leaders like Sonia Gandhi, Rahul and Mallikarjun Kharge."

Bhattacharya, who was the state president of the Congress from January 2011 to February 2014, said the party must focus on rebuilding its base.

Banerjee, who is now a three-term chief minister, formed the TMC in 1998 after being expelled from the Congress and led it to power, uprooting the 34-year government of the CPI(M)-led Left Front in 2011.

Bhattacharya's comments triggered a political row, which also affected the state Congress' internal dynamics.

Senior Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury questioned the timing of the comments, apparently hinting at its link to the upcoming Rajya Sabha elections in the state.

TMC leader Kunal Ghosh said, "He is correct. The Congress in the state was aligned with the Left Front, which contributed to its decline." (PTI)

# Projects inaugurated by PM Modi result of collaboration between central, Delhi govts: Kejriwal

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday described the two projects inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as milestones for Delhi's infrastructure and claimed they were joint ventures between the central and the city governments.

Modi inaugurated a 13-kilometre stretch of the Delhi-Meerut Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) corridor from Sahibabad in Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad to New Ashok Nagar here and the Janakpuri West-Krishna Park Extension section of the Delhi Metro's Phase IV.

During a press conference, Kejriwal congratulated the people of Delhi and asserted that the projects were a collaboration between the city and the central governments.

Taking a dig at his critics, Kejriwal said, "These inaugurations are a reply to those who say AAP only engages in fights."

Referring to the challenges faced by his party, he claimed

AAP leaders were imprisoned and tortured but maintained their focus on governance.

"Over the past 10 years, our tenure has shown how we kept work above everything else," he said.

He also hit out at Modi, alleging that the prime minister devoted the majority of his speech to criticise the Delhi government.

Kejriwal said, "Today, the prime minister kept abusing the people of Delhi and the elected government of Delhi. I was listening to it, it felt bad. The promise made by the prime minister in 2020 -- the people of Delhi Dehat are still waiting for that to be fulfilled."

The former chief minister also urged Modi to fulfil the promises made in the BJP's election manifesto.

With elections to the 70-member Delhi Assembly due in February, Kejriwal's remarks underlined AAP's focus on development amid its continuing tussle with the Centre. (PTI)



# Congress' Bajwa proposes joint Punjab Assembly resolution to recommend Bharat Ratna for Manmohan

**CHANDIGARH, Jan 5:** Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa on Sunday wrote to Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann and Assembly Speaker Kulter Singh Sandhwan, seeking a joint resolution in the House to recommend the Bharat Ratna for former prime minister Manmohan Singh.

Bajwa proposed the joint resolution to advocate for Singh to be conferred with India's highest civilian honour in recognition of his "monumental contributions to the country's progress and his exemplary service".

He also wrote to BJP Legislative Party leader Ashwani Sharma, Shiromani Akali Dal MLA Manpreet Singh Ayali, and Bahujan Samaj Party lawmaker Nachhatar Pal, proposing that an all-party delegation meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi to push for Singh to be conferred with the honour.

Singh -- the architect of India's economic reforms -- died on December 26 at the age of 92 following age-related complications.

In his letter, Bajwa said, "I am writing to propose a collective initiative of profound national significance -- one that transcends political boundaries to honour one of India's most distinguished states-

men, Dr Manmohan Singh."

"Singh's contributions to our nation have been unparalleled. As the principal architect of India's economic liberalisation in 1991, he set the foundation for the country's transformative growth, resilience and global standing. His tenure as prime minister was marked by a steadfast focus on inclusive development, social justice and economic stability, directly impacting millions of lives across the nation," he added.

Bajwa said he proposed the joint resolution due to Singh's contributions profoundly shaping India's destiny.

"As a proud son of Punjab, Dr Singh's dedication to public service and nation-building continues to inspire us all," he said in a post on X.

"I have also proposed forming an all-party delegation to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi to advocate for this recognition. Honouring Dr Singh with the Bharat Ratna will not only celebrate his extraordinary contributions but also reaffirm our shared commitment to democracy, integrity, and excellence in public service," the Qadian MLA added in the post.

In his letter to the chief minister and the speaker, Bajwa said Singh's journey was a



testament to resilience, dedication and humility.

"As a proud son of Punjab, he upheld the values of hard work and service throughout his remarkable career. His contributions to the state are equally commendable, addressing critical challenges in agriculture, rural development, and education, and catalysing growth in Punjab as well as in the country," he said.

Bajwa added that what distinguished Singh was his unwavering commitment to the nation, consistently prioritising the greater good over political divides.

His calm demeanour, intellectual acumen and ability to foster bipartisan consensus made him a unifying force in Indian politics, he asserted.

"From advocating rural development to strengthening India's global presence, Dr

Singh has consistently demonstrated statesmanship of the highest order," Bajwa said in the letter.

"In recognition of his monumental contributions to India's progress and his exemplary service, I propose that we pass a resolution in the legislative assembly, on its very first day of reconvening, to formally recommend conferring upon Dr Manmohan Singh the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour," he said.

This resolution will serve as a unified acknowledgment of his enduring legacy and an inspiration for future generations, he added.

Bajwa asserted that this effort was not just about honouring Singh's lifetime achievements but a "demonstration of our commitment to the values of democracy, integrity and excellence in public service".

"By coming together, we send a powerful message to the people of India that we, as their representatives, can unite to celebrate those who have made exceptional contributions to our nation," he said.

"I sincerely hope for your support in this meaningful endeavour. Together, we can honour a leader whose vision and dedication have left an indelible mark on India's history," he added. (PTI)



## Govt launches 2 special categories visas for international students

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** India has launched two special category visa for international students intending to pursue higher education in academic institutions in the country.

The 'e-student visa' and 'e-student-x' visa have been introduced by the Ministry of Home Affairs and all applicants will have to use the 'Study in India' (SII) portal launched by the government, officials said.

The e-student visa facility can be availed by eligible foreign students registered on the SII portal while e-student-x visa is offered to the dependents of those holding e-student visas, they said.

The SII portal facilitates the admission process of international students who wish to pursue either long-term or short-term courses in India.

Students will need to apply for a visa separately on the portal <https://indianvisaonline.gov.in/> but the authenticity of their application will be checked by SII ID.

Hence it is mandatory for students to apply to Indian higher educational institutions through SII website, the officials said.

Students may apply for the visa after receiving an admission offer letter from any of the SII partner institutes.

The e-student visa will be granted to such foreign nationals who obtain



admission to studying in India and who wish to pursue such studies, regular, full-time, courses of under graduate, post graduation, PhD and such other formal programmes at educational institutes duly recognised by the statutory and regulatory body in India, the officials said.

Student visas are issued for up to five years, depending on the duration of the course. They can also be extended in India.

Further, those having valid e-student visas can enter India from any desired port of immigration check

post, the officials said.

The SII is a flagship project of the Ministry of Education which hosts international students seeking higher education through its 600+ partner institutes offering more than 8000+ diverse courses in disciplines such as engineering & technology, management, agriculture, sciences, arts and humanities, language studies, commerce, law, paramedical sciences covering pharmacy, nursing, and select niche courses like Buddhist Studies, Yoga, etc.

Furthermore, they are available in

different levels, from Undergraduate (Bachelors), Post-graduate (Masters), Doctoral level (PhD) and certification-based courses.

Due to the availability of an array of options (in courses), the students have the flexibility to choose the course of their interest and study in premier Indian institutes.

Furthermore, the process to get on board with SII is relatively easy and can be done through its online application submission, seeking admission to students' choice of programmes and further processing of applications for seeking admission, the officials said. Students can get started right away by completing the first step to apply, i.e. registration, by clicking on the 'Register Now' tab.

The students are required to fill in simple details such as name, country, date of birth, mobile number and email ID.

Every student aspiring to complete their higher education in India and applying to study in India must have their unique student SII ID as this ID is what will help them to access their dashboard, track the progress of college and course applications, visa/e-student visa, and other higher education in India-related processes.

No student SII ID means no chance of studying or moving to India, the officials added. (PTI)

## PM Modi to virtually inaugurate Jammu railway division

**JAMMU, Jan 5:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate the newly created Jammu railway division through virtual mode on Monday, paving the way for efficient management of train services in the northernmost region of India. With the establishment of the new railway division in Jammu, a long-standing demand of people of the region has been fulfilled. This milestone event comes ahead of the much-awaited inauguration of train services to Kashmir from Katra, with the final trial run scheduled for Tuesday.

"The prime minister will inaugurate the Jammu railway division through virtual mode from New Delhi tomorrow," an official said.

In Jammu, the event will be attended and addressed by Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and Member of Parliament Jugal Kishore Sharma. Union Minister Dr Jitendra Singh is also expected to participate.

Headquartered in Jammu, the newly created division will involve the reorganization of the Firozpur Division. It will include the following sections under its jurisdiction, including Pathankot-Jammu-Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla (423 route km), Bhogpur-Sirwal-Pathankot (87.21 route km), Batala (excluding)-Pathankot (68.17 route km) and Pathankot-Joginder Nagar (narrow gauge section, 163.72 route km).

The total length of these sections will be 742.1 kilometres. Presently, the Indian Railways operates 17 zones with 68 divisions across the country. The Railway officials said the final

jurisdiction will be determined based on the Detailed Project Report. The division will feature modern, hi-tech facilities, leveraging the full potential of Information Technology (IT), they said. With the creation of this division, the Indian Railways will now have 70 divisions under its 17 zones.

The newly established division will oversee operations on India's iconic rail projects, including the country's first cable-stayed rail bridge, the Anji Khad Bridge and the world's highest railway arch bridge over the Chenab River at Kauri. The Chenab Rail Bridge, located in Reasi district, stands 359 metres (1,178 feet) above the riverbed, making it 35 metres taller than the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

The Jammu division will also manage the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Railway Link (USBRL) project, which is now nearing completion.

The Anji Khad Bridge has a total length of 473.25 metres, including a 120-metre viaduct and a 94.25-metre central embankment.

Currently, the railway services in Jammu and Kashmir are managed by the Firozpur Division of Northern Railways.

Regarding the inauguration of train services to Kashmir from Delhi, the Commissioner of Railway Safety will conduct statutory inspections and final trials on January 7 and 8.

With the phased commissioning of train services, the Railways is expected to complete 255 km of the 272-kilometre USBRL project, leaving only a small stretch between Katra and Reasi to be finished by December. (PTI)

## Delhi IG grants relaxation in criteria for jobs to 1984 anti-Sikh riots victims

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** Lt Governor VK Saxena has approved relaxation in educational and age criteria to all 88 anti-Sikh riots victims who have applied for jobs under the Delhi government. Raj Niwas officials said on Sunday.

The applicants have been granted full relaxation in required educational qualification and extended upper age limit to 55 years for all the 88 applicants, they said.

The relaxation has been approved for their appointment as multi tasking staff in different government departments.

"Repeated representations had been made by the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, public representatives and groups of victims, who had met LG recently, in this regard," said a note from LG office.

A rehabilitation package, including provision of jobs was sanctioned by Union Home ministry on January 16, 2006, for the victims of 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

The Revenue department of Delhi government in a subsequent special drive got 72 applications out of which appointment was given to 22 applicants by obtaining age relaxation from the then LG.

In October, 2024, Saxena granted full relaxation in required educational qualification for left out 50 applicants out of total 72. The revenue department was also directed to process the cases for granting employment to the children of the applicants who surpassed the age of employment, officials said.

The department held special camps last month and invited applications for employment to family members of 1984 anti-Sikh riots victims.

A total of 199 applications, were received, of which 89 candidates were found eligible, but all these were above the age limit and a few also missed out on the required educational qualification, they said. (PTI)

## Plea in NGT seeks MP govt's assurance on safe disposal of Union Carbide waste

**BHOPAL/JABALPUR, Jan 5:** A petition has been filed in the National Green Tribunal's Bhopal bench, seeking an assurance from the Madhya Pradesh government that the Union Carbide waste disposal in Pithampur won't harm people in nearby areas.

The petition, filed by a Jabalpur-based social organisation, has urged the NGT to direct the state's chief secretary to declare on oath about the safety of people in Pithampur in Dhar district where the waste has been transported for disposal.

On the intervening night of December 2-3, 1984, methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas leaked from the Union Carbide pesticide factory in Madhya Pradesh capital Bhopal, killing at least 5,479 persons and leaving thousands with serious injuries and long-lasting health issues.

Nearly 337 tons of Union Carbide waste reached Pithampur from Bhopal on Thursday for disposal following an order of the Madhya Pradesh High Court.

The petition before the NGT seeks direction to the authorities in Dhar to submit on oath that residents in the area would not be harmed due to the disposal of the waste.

Furthermore, the petition seeks direction to the MP government to publish in Hindi and

English newspapers a specific report regarding the disposal of this waste to allay public concerns, PG Najpandey of the Nagrik Upphokta Margdarshak Manch and activist Sunil Bhargava said. The social organisation filed the petition in the NGT on Friday, Najpandey told PTI.

There is apprehension among residents because thousands of people died due to the leak of toxic methyl isocyanate gas from Union Carbide factory in December 1984, he said. "Therefore, we have moved the NGT to take cognisance of their concerns," Najpandey said.

"We don't want this toxic waste in our area," is the refrain of locals at Tarpura, a village adjacent to Pithampur's waste incineration unit where the huge quantity of waste has been brought for disposal.

The plan to dispose of the waste linked to the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy, among the worst industrial disasters in the world, has sparked off protests in the area.

The incineration of a huge quantity of toxic waste will be hazardous for humans as well as the environment, the villagers fear, even though the Madhya Pradesh government has sought to assure them that there would be no harmful consequences. (PTI)

## PM Modi to inaugurate PBD convention in Bhubaneswar on Jan 9

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** The Indian diaspora's achievements and contributions across the world and ways to further deepen their engagement with India are set to be the key focus at the three-day Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention to be held in Bhubaneswar from January 8.

India's economic growth, policy reforms and developmental trajectory in several key sectors are also likely to be showcased to woo overseas Indian investors at the convention.

A large number of overseas Indians, including top businessmen, entrepreneurs and economists, from over 50 countries are expected to participate in the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) convention.

The PBD is celebrated on January 9 to mark Mahatma Gandhi's return to India on that day in 1915.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will formally inaugurate the high-profile event on January 9.

It will feature a virtual address by chief guest Christine Carla Kangaloo, President of Trinidad and Tobago, according to the Ministry of External Affairs.

The theme of the convention is 'Diaspora's Contribution to a Viksit Bharat'.

President Droupadi Murmu will deliver the valedictory address on January 10. She will confer the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards 2025 on select members of the Indian diaspora to recognise their achievements.

India's economic growth, policy reforms and the country's developmental trajectory in several key sectors will be showcased at the convention with an aim to strengthen the country's connect with its diaspora, people familiar with the preparation for the event said.

The country will also be showcased as an attractive investment destination, they said.

This year, the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention is being organised by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in partnership with the Odisha government.

Prime Minister Modi will also inaugurate four exhibitions at the PBD convention, including one titled 'Vishwaroop Ram -- The Universal Legacy of Ramayana'.

This exhibition would present the timeless epic

of Ramayana through a curated juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary art forms, the MEA said on Sunday.

The second exhibition will be on the diaspora's contribution to technology and Viksit Bharat. It will acknowledge the contributions of the Indian diaspora to the development of technology in the world. Another exhibition would be on the spread and evolution of the Indian diaspora in the world. It will showcase rare documents of people who migrated from Mandvi in Gujarat to Muscat in Oman.

The PBD convention will have five thematic plenary sessions including one on 'Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers: Stories of Migrant Skills' and another titled 'Beyond Borders: Diaspora Youth Leadership in a Globalised World'.

The third plenary will be 'Green Connections: Diaspora's Contributions to Sustainable Development'. Another will be 'Diaspora Divas: Celebrating Women's Leadership and Influence -- Nari Shakti'.

The MEA said the Youth Pravasi Bharatiya Divas will also be held on January 8. (PTI)

## THEATRE STAMPEDE CASE

### Actor Allu Arjun appears before police, 'cancels' proposed visit to hospital

**HYDERABAD, Jan 5:** Telugu actor Allu Arjun, named as an accused in the case related to the tragic death of a woman during a stampede at the premiere of his latest film Pushpa 2, appeared before the police here on Sunday as part of his bail conditions.

The actor appeared before the Station House Officer (SHO) of Chikkadapally police station, completed the court formalities and left, police said.

Arjun, listed as accused No 11 in the case, was granted regular bail by a city court on January 3. As per the court's directives, the actor is required to appear before SHO, Chikkadapally police station on every Sunday between 10 am and 1 pm for a period of two months or till filing of charge sheet, whichever is earlier.

Additionally, the court instructed the Pushpa star not to change his residential address, without prior intimation to the court, till disposal of the case.

He was further asked not leave the country without prior permission of the court.

The incident took place on De-



ember 4, when a stampede-like situation erupted at Sandhya theatre in Hyderabad as fans gathered to catch a glimpse of the actor during the Pushpa 2 premiere. A 35-year-old woman lost her life, and her eight-year-old son sustained injuries in the chaos and is undergoing treatment at a hospital in the city.

Meanwhile, the SHO of Ramgopalpet Police Station served a notice to Allu Arjun on his proposed plan to visit the hospital (to visit the boy undergoing treatment) on Sunday asking him to "reconsider" his decision, in view of heightened public interest in this matter, and to ensure minimal disruption to hospital operations and other patients.

If he still intends to visit the hospital, then the actor's management

was asked to coordinate with hospital authorities and the police to plan his entry and exit in such a way that minimises inconvenience to the hospital inmates and the public, police said.

The police also advised him maintaining the confidentiality of his visit to "prevent any gathering of public/media at the premises" which could disturb the peaceful environs of the hospital.

The actor, however, cancelled his visit to the hospital citing "advise" from his legal team, official sources said.

Following the tragedy, a case was registered against Allu Arjun, his security team, and the theatre management at the Chikkadapally police station. The charges were filed under various sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) based on a complaint by the deceased woman's family.

Allu Arjun was arrested on December 13 in connection with the case. However, the Telangana High Court granted him interim bail on December 14, which is set to expire on January 10. (PTI)

## Spanish woman returns to India in search of biological mother

**BHUBANESWAR, Jan 5:** Sneha, a Spanish citizen, has returned to India in search of her biological mother, who had abandoned her and her brother 20 years ago.

However, 21-year-old Sneha is running out of time as she has to return to Spain on Monday for her educational commitments.

The researcher in children's education wanted to trace her roots and reached India with scanty information about her past.

Her Spanish parents Gema Vidal and Juan Josh supported her in her quest and Gema accompanied Sneha to her home state. They had adopted Sneha and her brother Somu in 2010 from an orphanage in Bhubaneswar, where they were kept after their mother Banalata Das abandoned them in 2005.

"The purpose of my journey from Spain to Bhubaneswar is to find my biological parents, especially my mother. I want to find her and meet her. I am fully prepared for the journey even if it is difficult," Sneha told PTI.

Asked if she would chide her biological mother for abandoning her,

Sneha remained mum. She was only over a year old, and her brother was just a few months old at that time. Accompanied by Gema, a yoga teacher in Zaragoza city of Spain, Sneha arrived in Bhubaneswar on December 19 last year and they have been staying in a hotel. Somu, however, could not come as he was busy with some work in Spain.

If they do not find Sneha's biological mother by Monday, they will come back in March for a longer stay.

"We have to return to Spain as Sneha has joined a training programme which should not be discontinued. If we do not get Banalata in the next 24 hours, we will come back to Bhubaneswar in March," Gema said. Banalata had abandoned Sneha and Somu at their rented house in Nayapally area in Bhubaneswar in 2005. Banalata's husband Santosh, who worked as a cook in a private firm, had earlier abandoned his family, which comprised his wife, and four children, including Sneha and Somu.

Later, Banalata also left the

rented house with another son and daughter, leaving behind Sneha and Somu. The house owner later informed the police and they were shifted to an orphanage.

In 2010, Sneha, then more than five years old, and Somu, around four years old, were legally adopted by the Spanish couple.

"Sneha is very responsible and educated. She is the joy of our house. She is our life," Gema said.

Gema had earlier revealed to Sneha and Somu about their roots in Odisha and that they were adopted. "She is well educated and conducting research, so she decided to locate her biological mother and I accompanied her to this place," Gema said.

During their frantic search in Bhubaneswar, Gema and Sneha came across a retired teacher of Rama Devi Women's University, Sneha Sudha Mishra, who helped them find out the names of her parents. "We found out about her parents' names from the house owner in Nayapally and later the names were verified with the police and the orphanage," Mishra said. (PTI)

## Cleric fears mass conversions; others flag seers' 'demand' to bar Muslims

**LUCKNOW, Jan 5:** Ahead of the Maha Kumbh, a senior cleric has written to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath expressing fears that mass conversions of Muslims will take place during the event, while other community leaders have flagged the alleged demand raised by some Hindu seers' body to keep Muslims out of the mega gathering.

Last year, the Akhil Bharatiya Akhada Parishad (ABAP) had allegedly given a call to procure goods for the Maha Kumbh exclusively from Hindu shopkeepers to ensure that purchases were made solely from the true followers of Sanatan Dharma.

Held every 12 years, the Maha Kumbh will be organised in Prayagraj from January 13 to February 26.

All India Muslim Jamaat president Maulana Shahabuddin Razvi Bareilly, who was in the spotlight recently for advising Muslims not to visit the Maha Kumbh, urged Adityanath on Friday to "thwart plans" to convert hundreds of Muslims during the event.

Speaking to PTI, Bareilly claimed he received information from reliable sources about plans to convert Muslims during the Kumbh, and as a concerned citizen, he informed the chief Minister about his apprehension.

"Now it is the responsibility of the state government to act on this," he said.

However, Bareilly, who earlier termed the alleged demand to bar Muslims from visiting the Kumbh "undemocratic" and "unconstitutional", put forward a different view on the matter in his letter to the chief minister.

"The Akhara Parishad and Naga seers held a meeting in November last year, where they talked about banning Muslims from setting up



shops at the fair premises. That is why I have advised Muslims not to go to Maha Kumbh to avoid any trouble," he said.

Maulana Kaab Rashidi, legal advisor to the Uttar Pradesh unit of Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, said perhaps this is the first time that Muslims are at the centre of discussions before the biggest religious gathering of Hindus.

On the alleged demand to keep Muslims away from the event, Rashidi said, "Such calls violate the rights enshrined in the Constitution because India is known all over the world as a

secular country. So, talking about banning Muslims from Maha Kumbh is like crushing the soul of the Constitution."

"If a festival or a gathering like the Maha Kumbh is seen through the prism of religion, the country will move on the wrong path. Muslims are an integral part of the country. How can they be kept away from the world's largest gathering of faith," Rashidi asked.

Maulana Yaseen Abbas, general secretary of the All India Shia Personal Law Board, said, "If a Muslim goes to Maha Kumbh to increase

his knowledge, what's the harm in it? Islam is not so weak that a person of the faith will be in danger just by attending a fair or by visiting a place of worship."

On Bareilly's apprehension of conversions, Abbas said, "If the foundation of someone's faith is strong, no one can convert him."

Taking a dig at Bareilly, Mohsin Raza, chairman of Uttar Pradesh Haj Committee and a former minister of state for minority welfare, said, "You must have heard RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat Ji's statement that some people want to become leaders by creating controversies. Such people are found everywhere. If there are four brothers, their temperament will differ."

"I have been to Kumbh many times, as have many Muslims. Also, many community members are involved in the arrangements for the Maha Kumbh. So, demanding to keep them away cannot be a Sanatani 'sanskar'. Our culture is known for harmony and brotherhood, so the statement to ban Muslims from Maha Kumbh can at best be someone's personal view," the former Uttar Pradesh minister said.

On Bareilly's claims on religious conversions, Raza said, "Those who have written to the chief minister were involved in illegal conversions. They must have got the information that the people they converted illegally will go to Maha Kumbh for 'ghar vaapsi'."

"Bareilly must have received such a report and that is why he is getting anxious. Whatever he is doing, he is doing to save himself."

Meanwhile, Maulana Khalid Rashid Farangi Mahli, a senior member of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board and president of the Islamic Centre of India, said the centre will not issue any advisory on Muslims attending the Maha Kumbh. (PTI)



## After 'Stree 2', will Akshay be part of Maddock Films' horror comedy universe?



**MUMBAI, Jan 5:** Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar's cameo in "Stree 2" was one of the highlights of the film and producer Dinesh Vijan on Sunday said the actor is very much a part of Maddock Films' horror comedy universe.

Akshay currently stars in the production banner's latest offering "Sky Force", which has Vijan and "Stree 2" director Amar Kaushik on board as producers.

At the trailer launch of "Sky Force", Vijan was asked whether the actor will be seen in more films from the horror universe.

In his response, the producer — who heads Maddock Films — said: "Of course! You didn't see the last shot (in 'Stree 2')."

"He's our Thanos," said Vijan, likening Akshay's character, who is the descendant of "Stree 2" antagonist Sarkata, to Marvel Universe's supervillain Thanos.

When asked to make a comment on his reappearance in the horror-comedy universe, Akshay said he didn't have anything to say.

"He (Vijan) will speak or she (Jyoti Deshpande, Jio Studios) will speak. She has to put in money, he has to produce and he (Kaushik) has to direct," he added.

"Stree 2", starring Rajkumar Rao, Shraddha Kapoor, Abhishek Banerjee, Aparshakti Khurana, and Pankaj Tripathi, was one of the most successful Hindi films of 2024 with over Rs 800 crore at box office collections.

Maddock Films recently announced that "Stree 3", the follow-up of "Stree 2", will release on August 13, 2027. (PTI)

## Akshay Kumar on his dry run at box office: You just keep working hard



**MUMBAI, Jan 5:** Akshay Kumar on Sunday said his 33-year career has been all about working hard and the Bollywood star aims to break his dry spell at the box office by continuing to do exactly that.

Most of his last releases, including 2024's line-up "Bade Miyan Chote Miyan", "Sarfire", and "Khel Khel Mein", didn't do well at the ticket window. "Stree 2" and "Singham Again", which featured the actor in a special appearance, were exceptions.

"It's not that it has happened for the first time. The best part is you keep on working hard. That is what I tell myself. If anyone talks to me about it, I say the same thing that you have to keep working hard," the actor told reporters at the trailer launch of "Sky Force" here.

Akshay said many people advise him to do "one film or maximum two films" in a year.

"... But I say if I can work, then why not? I have based my entire career on that. Many people have told me not to do content-based films, but I don't want to leave that. I want to keep working on different kinds of films," he added.

The actor said he is proud of "Sarfire", the Hindi adaptation of superhit Tamil film "Sooraiy Potru" (2020) starring Suriya, even though it didn't work.

"I still say that it ('Sarfire') was one of my best films." According to the makers, "Sky Force" is the untold story of India's first and deadliest airstrike ever. It will be released in theatres on January 24 during the Republic Day weekend.

Sandeep Kelwani and Abhishek Kapur have co-directed the film, which also marks the acting debut of Veer Pahariya.

The film revolves around IAF officer T Vijaya (Veer) who goes missing in action during the 1965 India-Pakistan War. Akshay plays his fellow IAF officer KO Ahuja who embarks on a mission to find Vijaya.

Akshay said "Sky Force" needed a new face like Veer.

"This film required him and he got the part. And that's the most important thing. We have to be true to the film. If the film requires somebody new, so why not? I love the screenplay and that's why I took part in it. It's not about what my role is or is my role bigger than him or not. It is not (like) that, (but) the film is good," he said.

Although they began as co-stars, Veer said he now considers Akshay an elder brother.

"Akshay sir was so kind and welcoming that he broke the ice in one second. From then on, we became great friends. He became an elder brother to me. He guided me throughout (the film). We worked on the scenes in different ways. I really had a blast," the newcomer said.

Produced by Maddock Films and Jio Studios, "Sky Force" also features Nimrat Kaur and Sara Ali Khan in pivotal roles. (PTI)

## Golden Globes host Nikki Glaser says she won't mention Blake Lively-Justin Baldoni feud at gala

**LOS ANGELES, Jan 5:** Comedian-actor Nikki Glaser, who is set to host the 82nd Golden Globe Awards on Sunday, says she will steer clear of poking fun at the ongoing Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni legal battle at the upcoming ceremony.

This is the comic's first time emceeing the awards gala and she said even a passing mention of this "hot-button" topic could land her in trouble. "I think the Blake Lively-Justin Baldoni thing is such a hot-button thing right now that even a mere mention of it will seem like I could be on the wrong side of things, even though I would never be."

"I also don't want to give his name any — I'm mad I even know his name, to be honest with you, so I don't need to say it anymore," Glaser, who is also nominated this year for her HBO special "Somebody You'll Die", told Yahoo Entertainment.

"It Ends With Us" co-stars Lively and Baldoni are entangled in a legal battle after she accused him of sexual harassment and running a smear campaign against her.

Baldoni, who also directed the film, has repeatedly denied all accusations and joined in a suit accusing The New York Times for libel in its story on Lively's allegations.

According to a Deadline report, Lively and her husband, Hollywood star Ryan Reynolds as well as his "Deadpool & Wolverine" co-star Hugh Jackman won't attend the Golden Globes. "Deadpool & Wolverine" is nominated in the cinematic and box office achievement category.

Reynolds and Lively's decision to skip the Globes isn't due to the latest "It Ends With Us" controversy, per sources. (PTI)



## Himesh Reshammiya announces release date of 'The Xpose' spin-off film

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** Music composer and actor Himesh Reshammiya's upcoming film, based on his character from the 2014 film "The Xpose", is slated to be released on February 7.

Titled "Badass Ravi Kumar", the new movie is an action musical entertainer which will see Reshammiya reprising his character of Ravi Kumar. Produced by Himesh Reshammiya Melodies, the film is directed by Keith Gomes. Reshammiya and Kushal Bakshi are credited for its screenplay.

Reshammiya, who has also penned the story and composed music for the film, shared the trailer of "Badass Ravi Kumar" on Instagram on Sunday.

"Badass Ravi Kumar" trailer is here, in cinemas 7th Feb, Himesh Reshammiya retro action musical, Jai Matadi, Let's Rock, 80's type ki picture give it all your love," he wrote in the caption.

The film also stars Kirti Kulhari, Prabhudeva, Johnny Lever, Sanjay Mishra, Sunny Leone, Manish Wadhwa, and Saurabh Sachdeva. In the first movie of "The Xpose" series, Reshammiya played a cop-turned-superstar named Ravi Kumar, who investigates a murder mystery. The film also starred Zoya Afroz and Sonali Raut with Irrfan Khan and Honey Singh in special roles.

The 2014 film was directed by Anant Mahadevan from a script by Reshammiya. (PTI)

## This year will be fantastic for Hindi cinema, says producer Dinesh Vijan

**MUMBAI, Jan 5:** Filmmaker Dinesh Vijan, whose production banner Maddock Films had a successful run at the box office in 2024 with "Stree 2", "Munjya" and "Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya", on Sunday said Hindi cinema is a "quick learning industry" and the new year will be a fantastic one for the filmmakers up north. Vijan is looking forward to the release of his new film "Sky Force", billed as the untold story of India's first and deadliest airstrike ever.

Days ago, Maddock Films announced a slate of new and returning titles in Vijan's ambitious horror-comedy universe, including "Stree 3", "Munjya 2", "Shakti Shalini", "Chamunda" and "Pehla Mahayudh".

At the trailer launch of "Sky Force", the producer commented on the underwhelming performance of

Bollywood in 2024, as audiences predominantly turned to Telugu films such as "Pushpa 2: The Rule" and "Kalki 2898 AD," with a few exceptions like the Hindi movies "Stree 2," "Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3," and "Singham Again." "Ups and downs tend to happen. But as long as you learn and evolve... I think evolution is happening in writing. Somewhere our strength is that we write for a year-and-a-half before we go (on floors). We don't try to put projects together. This year, I have a feeling, it will be fantastic (for Hindi cinema)," Vijan told reporters here.

The producer said he is also looking forward to the upcoming line-up of banners like Yash Raj Films and Dharma Productions.

"Everything that's happening in society happens in films and vice versa. We are a very quick learning

industry. Just Maddock Films doing well is not enough..."

"This year, I'm excited with our line-up, with Yash Raj's line-up, with Dharma's line-up. I think there'll be some fantastic films coming," he added.

Recently, Telugu film producer Naga Vamsi in a roundtable conversation said that the Hindi film industry focuses on making films for Mumbai's posh areas like Bandra and Juhu, directing his comments at veteran producer Boney Kapoor who was also part of the interview.

During the roundtable, Vamsi also said that "Mumbai didn't sleep" after "Pushpa 2" earned over ₹ 80 crore at the box office in a single day.

Reacting to Vamsi's comments, Vijan said Bollywood filmmakers don't talk enough about their achievements.

"Since the pandemic, there are five (Hindi) films which crossed ₹ 500 crore (milestone), which didn't exist (earlier). Maybe we don't speak a lot about ourselves... There might be one-two people who say that (Bollywood makes films for Bandra and Juhu)."

"But whenever I've gone to the South, they've been very encouraging. If we just start looking at it like the Indian film industry, maybe ₹ 500 crore plus ₹ 800 crore will be equal to ₹ 1,300 crore. Why don't we aim for that?" he added.

Directed by Sandeep Kewlani and Abhishek Kapur, "Sky Force" is produced by Maddock Films and Jio Studios.

Starring Akshay Kumar, Veer Pahariya, Nimrat Kaur and Sara Ali Khan, the film will hit the screens on January 24. (PTI)





# If you have commitment towards red ball, play domestic cricket: Gambhir

**SYDNEY, Jan 5:** India head coach Gautam Gambhir said on Sunday that struggling stars Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli "still have the hunger to excel" but urged all senior players, including the duo, to play domestic games and show their "commitment" towards red-ball cricket.

Known for his plain speak, the two-time World Cup hero also didn't give any assurances on whether Rohit or Kohli will be a part of the Test set-up moving forward.

Both the stars were woefully out of form during the just-concluded Test series against Australia that the visitors lost 1-3 to surrender the Border-Gavaskar Trophy as well as a spot in the World Test Championship final.

"It's not the right moment right now for me to talk about where we are going to be after five months. A lot of things change in sport. Forms change, people change, attitude changes, everything changes in sport. And we all know that five months is a long time," Gambhir said at the post-series press conference.

"So let's see before the England series (in July) what's going to happen. But whatever will happen, will happen for the best interest of Indian cricket," asserted the former opener.

Rohit scored 31 runs in five innings before dropping himself from the playing eleven and Kohli managed 190 in nine knocks, including a second innings century after India had taken a lead of more than 300. A glaring failure for Kohli was his inability to avoid being dismissed on deliveries that were bowled outside the off stump. Asked if he would like the seniors to play at least one round,



if not two, of Ranji Trophy starting January 23, Gambhir sent across a clear message.

"I would always like everyone to play domestic cricket. That is how much importance domestic cricket needs to be given. Not only one game, if they are available and they have the commitment to play red-ball cricket, everyone should play domestic cricket," Gambhir said. "As simple as it can get. If you don't give importance to do-

mestic cricket, you will never get the desired players that you want in Test cricket," he explained.

Kohli last played a Ranji Trophy match in 2012 while Rohit's most recent domestic red-ball game was in the 2015-16 season.

The tough-talking former player refused to be drawn into a discussion on the much-speculated future of Kohli and Rohit, insisting that they are the best judge when it comes to analysing their role in

Indian cricket.

"See, I can't talk about the future of any player, it's up to them as well. But yes, what I can say is that they still have the hunger, they still have the passion, they're tough people and hopefully they can continue to take Indian cricket forward," he said.

"...ultimately whatever they plan, they will plan for the best interest of Indian cricket." He wants the star duo to do

some soul searching as to where they stand.

"First of all, every individual knows where their game and hunger is. That is the most important thing for any sport and any profession.

"It is not just about the sport, how hungry you are, how passionate you are and whether the team is moving forward with your contributions or not," he pointed out. (PTI)

## Man City turn corner with successive wins in Premier League as Arsenal and Chelsea drop points

**LONDON, Jan 5:** Erling Haaland and Manchester City might just be turning the corner after the team's worst run of results under Pep Guardiola.

Haaland scored twice in a 4-1 win over West Ham on Saturday as City secured back-to-back victories in the Premier League for the first time since late October, when a shocking and unthinkable six-week meltdown began.

In that time, the defending champions played nine league games and won just once, dropping them out of the Champions League qualification spots and raising questions about Guardiola's stomach for a rebuild.

Now, City can hope for better times ahead — especially after making up ground on second-placed Arsenal and fourth-placed Chelsea after they both dropped points in draws at Brighton and Crystal Palace, respectively, on Saturday.

Still, Guardiola wasn't getting carried away.

"I'm very pleased for the result," he said, "but you cannot ask me if the old City is back. If you saw the game, we are not."

However, while the 2-0 win at Leicester last weekend was unconvincing, there were better signs against West Ham — at least in attack with Haaland looking sharp. The Norway striker headed in Savinho's cross to make it 2-0 in the 42nd minute and chipped the goalkeeper for 3-

0 in the 55th after running onto another pass from Savinho.

Either side, there was an own-goal and a strike from Phil Foden before Niclas Fullkrug pulled one back for West Ham.

"We are still not like we were, for different reasons," Guardiola said. "The result will help. We struggle but it is a release."

City stayed in sixth. Good day for LiverpoolIt was a good day for Liverpool — and the league leader didn't even play.

Arsenal was held to 1-1 at Brighton, which equalized from the penalty spot through Joao Pedro, and missed the chance to trim the gap to Liverpool to three points. Ethan Nwaneri put Arsenal ahead and, at age 17, became only the sixth player under 18 to score multiple Premier League goals.

Brighton's penalty was awarded after Arsenal defender William Saliba was adjudged to have clashed heads with Pedro as they challenged for a bouncing ball.

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta was disappointed with the call, saying: "I have never seen a decision like this in my career. I asked the boys if they have and nobody has seen it before."

Chelsea's winless run in the league extended to four matches after drawing at Palace 1-1.

Jean-Philippe Mateta equalized in the 82nd for Palace, cancelling out Cole Palmer's opener. (AP)

## Barcelona cruises into Copa del Rey last 16 after another setback to register Olmo

**MADRID, Jan 5:** Barcelona endured another setback while trying to register Dani Olmo and cruised past fourth-division club Barbastro 4-0 in the Copa del Rey.

After the Spanish league and national federation again denied Barcelona's request to register Olmo and Pau Victor for the rest of the season, Hansi Flick's team routed Barbastro in the round of 32. Robert Lewandowski scored twice and Eric Garcia and Pablo Torre added goals.

It was Barcelona's first win after consecutive losses in La Liga to end last year.

Another setback would have added to the embarrassment of not being able to register Olmo and Victor because of a missed deadline to comply with the league's financial fair-play rules. The players were only registered through the end of 2024 and Barcelona failed to reinstate them to the squad because it couldn't clear enough salary cap space.

Barcelona eventually was able to meet the financial fair-play rules but the league and the federation said on Saturday that the players can't be registered again after already having been dropped because of the missed deadline.

The club is expected to resort to the courts to try to register the players. Barcelona eliminated Barbastro at the same stage of the Copa last season.

Saturday's match was delayed for a few minutes early in the second half after Barbastro player Jaime Ara injured his head in a collision with Barcelona defender Iñigo Martínez. Ara was carried off the field on a stretcher.

Garcia put Barcelona ahead in the 21st minute, Lewandowski scored before and after halftime, Torre capped the victory in the 56th.

Sevilla eliminatedSevilla was ousted by second-division club Almeria 4-1 despite taking the lead five minutes into the match through Isaac Romero. (AP)

## Fernando makes 56 as Sri Lanka sets New Zealand 179 in the 1st ODI

**WELLINGTON, Jan 5:** Avishka Fernando scored a gritty half century in an 87-run partnership with Janith Liyanage which helped Sri Lanka to 178 as it batted first Sunday in the first one-day international against New Zealand.

Matt Henry took 4-19 from his 10 overs for New Zealand as Sri Lanka was bowled out in 43.4 overs. New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner took a wicket, effected a run out and claimed three catches from Henry's bowling.

Sri Lanka had slumped to 23-4 after being sent in on a greenish pitch at the Basin Reserve before Fernando's fifth one-day international half century and Liyanage's 36 gave some substance to the innings.

New Zealand fielded a four-pronged seam attack and Henry, Jacob Duffy and Nathan Smith all took early wickets while Santner broke Fernando and Liyanage's stubborn fifth wicket stand.

Sunday's match was played in bitterly cold, windy conditions and under the constant threat of rain. A potential sell out crowd was reduced sub-



stantially as only hardy fans turned out to watch the opener to the three-match series in wintry conditions.

After a watchful start, Sri Lanka lost the key wicket of opener Pathum Nissanka in the fifth over. Nissanka made 141 runs at an average of 47 in the three-match Twenty20 series which New Zealand won 2-1. He had made only 9 Sunday when he tried to work a ball

from Henry through midwicket but, as it seamed away, managed only to loop it to Santner at mid-off. Kusal Mendis, Nissanka's partner in a 121-run stand in the first T20, was 2 when he was bowled by Jacob Duffy off the inside edge. The ball cut back at Mendis at waist height and he was hurried in defense.

Santner produced a sharp piece of fielding to run out Kamindu Mendis (3) and captain

Charith Asalanka was caught by wicketkeeper Mitchell Hay from Smith's bowling. Asalanka was given not out by the on-field umpire but New Zealand reviewed and the replay showed the ball had just brushed the shoulder of the bat. Fernando and Liyanage steadily rebuilt the Sri Lanka innings, carrying it to 108-4 after 25 overs. The 26-year-old Fernando produced a defiant innings, reaching his half century from 52 balls with six fours and a six.

Liyanage tried to hoist a ball from Santner over the off side but skied it from a top edge and was caught by the substitute fielder Michael Bracewell falling backwards at mid-wicket. Fernando was out in the next over, driving at a ball from Smith which sliced to Glenn Phillips at backward point.

Chamindu Wickramasinghe and Wanindu Hasaranga put on 48 for the seventh wicket before Henry returned and dismissed Wickramasinghe on 22. Hasaranga made 35 from 33 balls in an innings full of adventurous strokeplay before he also fell to Henry. (AP)

## Watching cricket live from SCG was an awesome spectacle: Jim Courier

**SYDNEY, Jan 5:** Jim Courier watched cricket on TV whenever he would be Down Under before the Australian Open but sitting alongside Steve Waugh and witnessing live action at the Sydney Cricket Ground was an incredible experience for the four-time Grand Slam Champion.

Courier is a commentator with Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). He comes to Melbourne every year for season's first Grand Slam.

Watching India and Australia compete in the series-deciding fifth Test was some experience for the 54-year-old American tennis legend.

He also came, for a brief period, as a guest commentator during ABC's radio show 'Grand Stand' alongside Indian cricket legend Sunil Gavaskar.

"It's my first time watching cricket live. I have watched cricket many times on TV but this is my first time at a ground. The energy here at the ground is spectacular and when cricket nations play such a match, you feel the energy. It's an awesome spectacle," Courier told PTI in an exclusive interaction.

Courier, who competed in the 1993 Wimbledon final, is a regular feature at the SW19 but has never been to the Lord's.

"No I have never been to the Lord's. Sydney is the first cricket ground that I have ever visited. It is indeed a real thrill. It was an incredible experience as I was sitting with so many cricket legends. I was sitting earlier with Steve Waugh and he is a phenomenal human being," he said.

Did you hear about Virat Kohli, the Indian cricket superstar? "Yeah, I heard about him and here he nearly got out first ball," the two-time French and Australian open champion said, referring to the star batter's near first ball dismissal in the first innings. While the interaction on tennis was short, he did remember playing Davis Cup in Delhi and congratulated Leander Paes for entering the prestigious Hall of Fame.

"I am absolutely delighted that he is now in the 'Hall of Fame' and what an amazing career Lee has had. I have had a chance to play against him in a Davis Cup match in India and that was a highlight. He is a legend." (PTI)

## This award is significant, my story now reaching people outside my field: Deepali Deshpande

**NEW DELHI, Jan 5:** Some time before noon on Sunday, crew members of a TV channel landed at Deepali Deshpande's residence for an interview. Likewise, other media outlets are also now looking to highlight her contributions to Indian shooting that have hitherto gone unnoticed.

Nominated for this year's Dronacharya Award after having coached Olympic, World Cup and World Championship medallist shooters over many years of service, the new-found attention is a novelty for the former rifle shooter. The shooters she has helped achieve success in top global tournaments, including Swapnil Kusale, Arjun Babuta, Anjum Moudgil and Shriyanka Shadangi, recently voiced their support for their long-serving coach for the prestigious award.

She has been receiving calls and messages from family, friends, and classmates, including one from the US, who expressed her joy at "going to the same school" as Deepali. This is how things have changed in an otherwise simple life since the news of her being

nominated for the country's top prize in coaching became public.

"The main significance of this award is that your story is reaching many more people now, people outside my field, common man" Deepali told PTI during an interaction. "I started getting calls from my school friends, people like that. Common man who is otherwise not really interested in sports, know about you."

The veteran coach added, "For my family too, it means so much as they are the non sports people because, in your field almost everybody knows what you are doing. They know it all."

"One of my school friends who now lives in the US is so glad. Bal Mohan Vidya Mandir is a big school in Mumbai and my school has big names to boast. One of the mayor in a US state is from our school. They are now living everywhere." As per the requirements, Deepali has applied for the honour in the past and she doesn't feel there needs to be a change in the policy for choosing candidates for national sports awards, except for the Khel Ratna.



"Except for the Khel Ratna, I think the other awards are fine. Khel Ratna, is different because you are awarding it to someone for his extraordinary achievements over a period of four years, so a lot of people would have known about the athlete.

"So, for Khel Ratna, they can nominate people directly instead of self applying, but for other awards, the system is okay, as long as the intention behind this is good. "This way everybody gets to keep their achievements in front of

the committee. Otherwise it is not possible for everybody to know everyone. I think this system was made to make it more transparent," Deepali said.

Her views come a few days after a controversy erupted over the shocking exclusion of double Olympic-medallist Manu Bhaker for this year's Dhyana Chand Khel Ratna award. Bhaker's name though was later added to the list alongside Indian men's hockey team captain Harmanpreet Singh, chess world champion D Gukesh

and Paralympics gold medallist high jumper Praveen Kumar.

For many of her wards, she is not just a shooting coach with Olympic bronze medallist Swapnil saying that she is like his "second mother" after his podium finish in Paris. The award is a validation of not just her contributions but also the achievements of her students.

"It's a big deal also for people even remotely associated with you. Making the smallest difference to people associated with you, it's very satisfying. My students were more worried than me whether I would get it or not.

"Every year Shriyanka would be like ma'am 'you have applied, right? Please apply'. She made sure that I apply.. With them it's like we are a family as we have been together for so long.

Deepali started her coaching career in 2010 at the club level and then came in as a chief coach for the junior team in 2012, when the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) launched the junior coaching programme.

This is where she met the likes of Akhil Sheoran, Babuta,

Navdeep Singh Rathore, Moudgil and others.

Asked about her coaching philosophy, Deepali said she approaches each shooter differently as all of them are different.

"I had a 11-year daughter when I entered the junior coach programme in 2012... Akhil, Shriyanka were 15-16 years old at that time. Because I had a teenager at home, I could understand these shooters better. It also helped me with my daughter who was 11 then. "It's not that I am not a disciplinarian but one size doesn't fit all. You cannot break their spirit, we can't achieve anything that way. You have to find a different way for each one of them.

"You have to understand that it's all about them and not about you, have to keep ego aside," Deepali said. Among her wards' success in top international tournaments, Kusale won the bronze medal in the men's 50m rifle 3-positions shooting event at the 2024 Paris Olympics, becoming the first Indian to finish on the podium in this particular event at the Games. (PTI)



### Gavaskar upset after not being invited to present BGT with Border

**SYDNEY, Jan 5:** The legendary Sunil Gavaskar on Sunday expressed his displeasure after not being invited to present the trophy, named after him and Allan Border, to Australia following their win over India in the high-voltage five-match rubber.

Australia reclaimed the Border-Gavaskar trophy after 10 years with a six-wicket win over India in the fifth and final Test.

Border presented the trophy to the home team but Gavaskar, despite being at the venue at the same time, was inexplicably ignored.

"I certainly would have loved to have been there for the presentation. After all it is the Border-Gavaskar Trophy and it is about Australia and India," Gavaskar was quoted as saying by Code Sports.

"I mean, I am here on the ground. To me it should not matter that Australia won when it comes to the presentation. They played better cricket so they won. That's fine.

"Just because I am an Indian. I would have been happy to present the trophy with my good friend Allan Border," he added.

Had the Indian team won the trophy, Gavaskar would have been invited to present it to the victorious side.

Cricket Australia (CA) later confirmed that Gavaskar was aware he would have presented the award to Indian captain Jasprit Bumrah if the tourists had won the Sydney Test and retained the trophy.

"We acknowledge it would have been preferable if both Allan Border and Sunil Gavaskar had been asked to go on stage," a CA spokesperson said in a statement.

Both India and Australia have been competing for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy since 1996-1997 and the rivalry has grown to become one of the biggest in Test cricket.

The five-match series that Australia won drew record crowds at multiple venues and broke an 87-year-old attendance record at the Melbourne Cricket Ground last week. (PTI)

# Ruthless Australia knock rudderless India out of WTC final; reclaim BGT after 10 years

**SYDNEY, Jan 5:** A listless India was knocked out of the World Test Championship (WTC) final as Australia cruised to a six-wicket victory in the fifth Test here on Sunday to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy after 10 years, leaving the visitors with much to deliberate in a difficult transition phase made worse by over-the-hill batting stars.

Australia won the five-match series 3-1 and qualified for the WTC final against South Africa slated at the Lord's from June 11 to 15.

While Australia would be eyeing a second successive WTC mace, it would be the first time since the event's inception that India won't be in the finals. The team had finished runner-up in the previous two summit clashes.

On Sunday, the target of 162 could have been trickier for Australia had India's new Test captain Jasprit Bumrah been in a position to bowl despite painful back spasms. But once Virat Kohli led the team out, it was as clear as the Sydney skyline that defending the total would be next to impossible.

Bumrah deservedly walked away with the player of the series honour for his astonishing haul of 32 wickets in five matches. But it was hardly a consolation for the shambolic team performance that India managed, showing resilience only in brief phases.

"Little frustrating but sometimes you have to respect your body, you can't fight your body. Disappointing, probably missed out on the spiciest wicket of the series," Bumrah said of his inability to bowl in the second innings during the presentation ceremony.

Prasidh Krishna (3/65 in 12 overs) and Mohammed Siraj (1/69 in 12 overs) were not a patch on Bumrah and despite multiple breakthroughs, they bowled too many poor deliveries to make it easy for the hosts to canter home in just 27 overs.

Usman Khawaja (41), Travis Head (34 not out) and debutant Beau Webster (39 not out) com-



pleted the formalities, putting an end to India's misery in a tour that has exposed all of the team's batting frailties and an unhealthy reliance on Bumrah.

Once Bumrah was ruled out after he tried some shadow bowling during the morning warm-up session and didn't feel comfortable, the writing was on the wall.

The magnificent Scott Boland (6/45) and the ever-reliable Pat Cummins (3/44) polished off the Indian tail for just 157 in 39.5 overs. If one takes out Rishabh Pant's fiery 61 and Yashasvi Jaiswal's 22, the other nine players collectively contributed a mere 74 runs.

The series would leave the men who matter in Indian cricket establishment with a lot on their minds when they deliberate on ways to get the house back in order.

With six of the completed innings yielding less than 200 runs, one doesn't need a soothsayer to tell what went wrong on the tour.

Regular skipper Rohit Sharma and batting talisman Virat Kohli flopped with technical issues troubling them throughout the season.

Jaiswal (391 runs) was the top-scorer despite three ducks followed by rookie Nitish Kumar Reddy

(298 runs), KL Rahul (276 runs) and Pant (255 runs).

As much as one wants to take a nuanced view of Rohit and Kohli's poor form but it is undeniable that both veterans are finding it increasingly difficult to stem the rot that has set in their batting.

There are a few good youngsters in the fringes and the new World Test Championship cycle would demand that they be given a chance to develop over time.

While a tough call on Kohli and Rohit is awaited, the BCCI brass also needs to seriously look at whether coach Gautam Gambhir is the right man to be in-charge across formats.

Under Gambhir, India have lost six Tests out of 10 during the season going by apart from being defeated in an ODI series in Sri Lanka.

If Kohli and Rohit are held accountable, Gambhir can't be let off merely because the team is in transition.

The head coach's head-strong approach is an open secret and it is not earning him too many friends in the dressing room.

Ravichandran Ashwin's retirement after Brisbane and Rohit's eventual call to drop himself hap-

pened in a manner that can best be described as abrupt.

Messing with a player's game-plan isn't the best way to manage as Rishabh Pant demonstrated by oscillating between too careful at times that only disrupted his natural rhythm.

But more than batting, it would be the bowling — both pace and spin that would be a huge concern for the national selection committee as well as the team management.

Bumrah's absence showed what India missed on the final day even though it was heavily tilted towards Australia.

As Glenn McGrath put it, had Bumrah not taken 32 wickets, there was no chance that India would have managed a 1-3 margin.

In Brisbane, they were saved by rain and in Melbourne, Rohit let the game drift away during the final session on day four.

It has taken Mohammed Siraj 36 Test matches to complete 100 wickets and these are not exactly great figures.

Akash Deep is still raw but has potential while Prasadidh Krishna can swing between bowling unplayable deliveries and pedestrian work.

Harshit Rana is simply not prepared for this level and would need to play loads of Ranji Trophy, Duleep Trophy and India A games to get ready for big Tests.

In the spin department, Ravindra Jadeja is now more of a batter and less of a spinner unless the wicket has something to offer from day one like it happens in India.

Washington Sundar's 12 wickets in Pune should be looked in isolation and he is also more of a batter than a competent off-spinner on batting-friendly wickets.

Only silver lining of the series is Jaiswal taking over the mantle as the next batting superstar and the raw talent exhibited by Nitish Reddy.

Reddy's bowling, if it develops, would give India a chance to play three spinners at home on decent tracks. (PTI)

## It's frustrating but you have to respect your body: Bumrah

**SYDNEY, Jan 5** Laid low by a back spasm, Jasprit Bumrah was frustrated at missing out on bowling on the "spiciest wicket of the series," but the premier India pacer emphasized that sometimes it becomes imperative for a player to respect his body.

Bumrah could not bowl on day three when India needed to defend a small 162-run target on a tricky wicket.

Australia needed just 27 overs to overhaul the target and claim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy after 10 years as they took advantage of Bumrah's absence.

"It was really frustrating but sometimes you have to respect your body, can't fight it. Disappointing, probably missed out on the spiciest wicket of the series," Bumrah said, who was named Player of the Series for his 32 wickets in the series, during the post-match presentation.

"Felt a bit of discomfort during my second spell in the first innings and had to check it out."

Resuming day three at 141 for six, India lost their remaining four wickets for 16 runs to be all out for 157 in their second innings.

Asked about the discussion in the morning, Bumrah said: "The chat this morning was about the same thing, about having belief and showing character. Lots of ifs and buts, the whole series was fought hard, we were in the game today as well, not like we were out of it, this is how Test cricket goes."

"Being in the game for longer, creating pressure, absorbing pressure and playing to the situation are all important. You have to adapt to the situations and these learnings will help us in the future."

Bumrah added that the experience of playing in Australia will help young players like Nitish Reddy and Harshit Rana in future.

"They've (youngsters) gained a lot of experience, they'll go from strength to strength. We've shown that we have a lot of talent in our group."

"Lot of the youngsters are keen, they're disappointed that we haven't won but they'll take learnings from this experience. It was a great series, congratulations to Australia, they fought really well."

Travis Head, who emerged as the highest run-scorer in the series with 446 runs, heaped praise on Bumrah.

"He's a great performer, he had an exceptional tour. It is the best individual performance I have seen in Test cricket," Head said.

Winning captain Pat Cummins described his team's 3-1 victory in the five-match series as "unreal" and expressed immense pride in regaining the trophy.

"Unreal. A few of us didn't have this Trophy. Lived up to all the hype. Just been clear with our



plans. We tried to be proactive, and ultimately, it worked out. Immensely proud," he said.

The star pacer also praised the camaraderie within the squad.

"We weren't at our best in Perth, but we had a lot of fun playing alongside each other. I love playing with these guys. Such a special group. I feel privileged to be part of such a team. Three debutants in this series fitted in well and contributed at different times."

Reflecting on his own performance, Cummins called the series "one of my most favourite Test series."

"Pretty happy with how I played. I had a fresh start coming into this series. These are the big series you prepare for. There were some keen moments when our mainstays really stood up. You need to do that to beat a side like India. Our guys put their hands up. It would go down as one of my most favourite Test series," he added.

Adjudged Player-of-the-Match for his impressive 10 for 76, Scott Boland expressed his satisfaction after playing a key role in Australia's 3-1 win.

He had replaced injured Josh Hazlewood in the squad.

"It's been a really enjoyable couple of months. I didn't think I would take too much part in the series. But I was prepared. Just got my body right, did some gym work and here I am," said Boland, who took six for 45 in the second innings.

"It was awesome, to win 3-1 against India, hasn't been done for a while. I am just happy to play the part whenever possible." (PTI)

## Kohli does not deserve place in Indian team, he didn't work hard to rectify mistakes :Pathan



**SYDNEY, Jan 5:** Lambasting Virat Kohli for neither playing domestic cricket nor working hard to iron out the technical flaws in his game, former pacer Irfan Pathan on Sunday questioned star batter's place in the side and called for an end to the superstar culture in the Indian team.

Kohli and Rohit Sharma were woefully out of form during the just-concluded Test series against Australia. The 1-3 defeat resulted in team losing out on qualifying for the World Test Championship final.

Kohli could manage only 190 runs in his nine innings in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, repeatedly offering edges to the slip cordon or keeper.

"We need to end superstar culture, we need team culture. You need to improve yourself and improve the Indian team. There were matches before this series, too, and they had an opportunity to play domes-

tic cricket, but they didn't. We need to change that culture," Pathan told Star Sports.

The former all-rounder said even the great Sachin Tendulkar played Ranji Trophy even when it wasn't required of him only because he wanted to spend that much time -- four or five days -- on the pitch.

"When was the last time Virat Kohli played domestic cricket? (the host points out that Kohli's last first-class appearance for Delhi was in 2012) It has been more than a decade."

Pathan went to the extent of saying that maybe Kohli's place should be given to a youngster, given that he has averaged less than 30 in first innings in the last five years.

"For the Indian team in 2024, in the first innings where you basically set up the match, Virat Kohli's average is 15. And if

you consider his average over the last five years, it's not even 30.

"Does the Indian team deserve its senior player? Instead, give a youngster a chance. Tell him to get ready. He will also give an average of 25-30. This is about the team, not the individuals."

Pathan also questioned if Kohli was even serious to improve.

"When we talk about Virat Kohli, he has done a lot for India. He has delivered many performances. But you are getting out from the same mistake again and again.

"You are not creating a gap between two mistakes. You are not trying to fix the technical mistake. Sunny sir is in the field. How long does it take to talk to Sunny Sir or someone?"

Australia beat India by six wickets in the fifth and final Test to regain the Border Gavaskar trophy. (PTI)

## All the right moves must be made to keep boxing in LA 2028 programme: Lovlina

**GUWAHATI, Jan 5:** With boxing's future as an Olympic sport hanging in the balance, India's star pugilist Lovlina Borgohain on Sunday asserted that "all the right moves must be made" to ensure its presence at the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

Boxing was not on the initial programme for the Los Angeles Olympics and a decision on its inclusion is awaited.

Lovlina is now part of the Athletes Commission of the newly formed Asian unit of World Boxing.

"It's a huge privilege to be on this committee as India will now have a voice in decision making," said Lovlina, pointing out that boxing's technicalities, "especially scoring and judging" needed closer and impartial introspection.

"Till now, India was just an ordinary member with very little chance to raise a protest or point out a flaw in the system. That is going to change now since we will have seven positions in the Asian body.

"That's a big plus for athletes who want to perform their best and win an Olympic medal," said Lovlina, adding that "all the right moves must be made to keep boxing in the LA 2028 programme."

Eyeing a third straight Olympic appearance in 2028 (if the sport is included in the roster) Tokyo Games bronze medallist Lovlina said she will take it one step at a time from here on.

Lovlina, who won a bronze at Tokyo Olympics in 2021 but returned empty-handed from Paris 2024, said Los Angeles was very much in her plans.

"Tokyo was during COVID times.



Paris was a real learning curve. I did my best and have no regrets that I could not win a medal. For every athlete, there are lessons to be learnt and I want to be wiser leading into LA," Lovlina told SAI Media in an interaction on the sidelines of the ASMITA Women's Under-17 football final at the SAI campus here.

India's versatile lawn bowler, Nayanmoni Saikia on Sunday, accompanied Lovlina. Nayanmoni is a multiple gold medallist at the Commonwealth Games and the Arjuna Awardee is a popular face in Assam.

Both Lovlina and Nayanmoni took part in the Fit India Sundays on Cycle mission and stressed on the "no drugs" campaign undertaken by the Union Sports Ministry.

Lovlina was the darling of the media on Sunday. Assam's 'own daughter' will

be touching 31 when Los Angeles arrives but the middleweight (75 kg) boxer is confident that she will be "stronger and more experienced" if she can convert her Paris learnings into action.

"But I am not going to rush my preparations. LA is a long way off and proper weight and injury management will be part of my core plans. Right now, I am not looking beyond the upcoming National Games in Uttarakhand and to do well for Assam is uppermost in my mind," said Lovlina.

With at least three medals, including a gold in the 2023 world championship, Lovlina said 2025 would be a challenging year with the world championships on the cards.

"It will be a target to play the World Boxing Cup Final in India later in 2025," she added. (PTI)

## There should be no excuse for not being able to play Ranji Trophy: Gavaskar tells senior players

**SYDNEY, Jan 5:** Legendary Sunil Gavaskar on Sunday urged Indian batters to play in the Ranji Trophy without offering any excuses to iron out technical deficiencies that led to their peril in two successive series against New Zealand and Australia.

Gavaskar said it was worrying to see the Indian batters churning out underwhelming efforts against New Zealand at home and in the just-concluded series against Australia Down Under.

India succumbed to the Kiwis 0-3 before surrendering to the Aussies 1-3.

"On January 23, there is the next round of the Ranji Trophy. Let's see how many players from this squad play. There should be no excuse for not being able to play," Gavaskar told Star Sports.

"If you do not play those matches, Gautam Gambhir will have to take a few tough decisions against those who are not available for the Ranji Trophy," he added.

"Gambhir should be saying: You do not have that commitment. We need commitment. You are not playing. Whatever you want to do, do it. But for Indian cricket, you cannot return to the Test squad."

Gavaskar said flaws have crept into Indian batsmen's approach because of not playing domestic cricket on available opportunities.

"What I saw were technical deficiencies. If you have been making the same mistakes, and I am not just talking about this series, I am talking about the New Zealand series as well that did you do against New Zealand in India?"

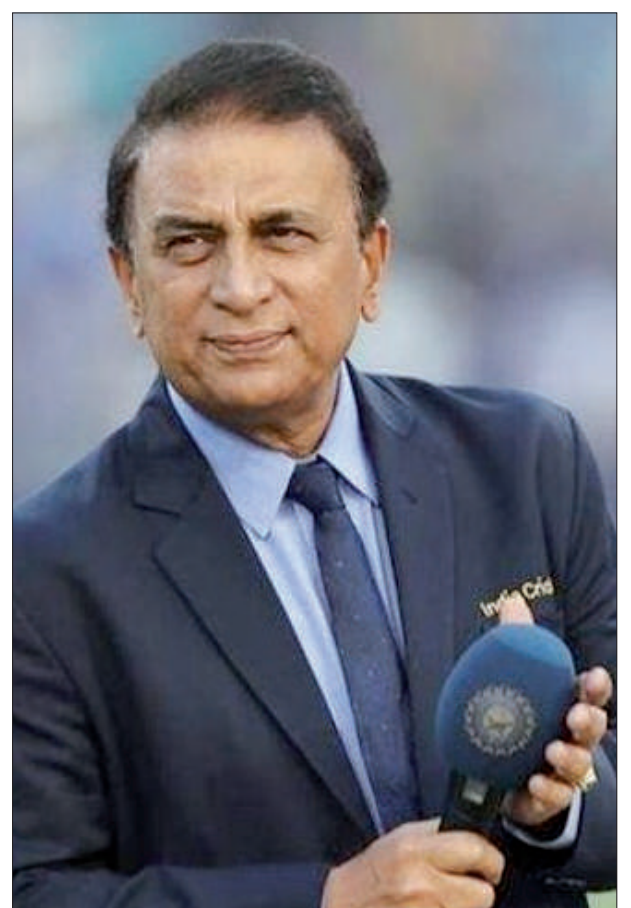
Gavaskar said domestic cricket assumes importance in view of the upcoming 2025-2027 WTC cycle.

"And that's why, now, because the next cycle will start in June, we have not qualified for the World Test Championship. From now on, we should be ready for it. If we have to take tough decisions, then we will have to take them," he said.

With the next WTC cycle in focus, Gavaskar said India should now focus more on young cricketers such as Yashasvi Jaiswal and Nitish Kumar Reddy.

"They are hungry to earn a name for India and themselves. Such players are needed. You need such players who will protect their wicket like their life," he noted.

"That's why I'm interested that on January 23, in the Ranji



Trophy matches, who will play? I want to see that. "Because at that time, there will be T20 matches against England. But those who are not playing T20, will they play Ranji Trophy matches or not?" he said. (PTI)