

**6** WORLD

**8** NATION

- Pentagon prepares to deploy 1,000 more troops
- Hamas hand over two Israeli hostages in southern Gaza
- BJP leaders hail Union Budget, call it blueprint of PM Modi's vision
- Underwhelming budget; lacks vision: Tharoor

## UNION BUDGET 2025-26

# SITHARAMAN PRESENTS 'PEOPLE'S BUDGET'

Assam CM hails announcement about urea plant in Namrup

**'Historic day for Assam': Himanta**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday hailed the announcement of a urea plant in the state in the Union Budget for 2025-26, stating that it would be a "game changer" for the entire Northeast. Stating that it was a long-standing demand of the people of the state, Sarma exuded confidence the budget would add momentum to India's overall growth trajectory.

"What a historic day for Assam! #UnionBudget2025 has announced a 12.7 lakh MT urea plant in Namrup. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**People's budget to make citizens partner in development journey: PM**



**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday lauded the Union Budget as a "people's budget" that fulfils the dreams of every Indian and said that it is a "force-multiplier" that will boost consumption, investment and growth.

In televised remarks after finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Budget in the Lok Sabha, Modi highlighted a host of measures for different sectors and noted that budgets generally look to fill the government's treasury but this one seeks to put more money in people's pockets and increase their savings.

This Budget focuses on making people a partner in India's development journey, he said, describing it as a historic and important milestone on the road to the country's progress. It lays the foundation for attaining these goals, he added.

"The Budget lays a strong foundation to

**Income tax exemption level raised to ₹12 lakh**

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday announced significant income tax cuts for the middle class and unveiled a blueprint for next-generation reforms for Viksit Bharat as she treaded a fine line between fiscal prudence and providing a thrust to growth.

Individuals earning up to ₹ 12 lakh in a year will not have to pay any taxes after she raised the exemption threshold from ₹ 7 lakh. An additional ₹75,000 standard deduction is available for the salaried class. She also altered tax slabs for people earning above this threshold to help save up to ₹ 1.1 lakh in taxes for those with income up to ₹ 25 lakh in a year.

The raising of the rebate leads to 1 crore people not having to pay any tax, she said.

The overall tax slab regim will benefit 6.3 crore people, or more than 80 per cent of taxpayers. "The new structure will substantially reduce taxes on the middle class and leave more money in their hands, boosting household consumption, savings and investment," Sitharaman said presenting what was dubbed as a 'reformist' budget for the next fiscal in Lok Sabha.

The Budget for April 2025 to March 2026 fiscal (FY26) proposed to raise the foreign investment limit in insurance sector to 100 per cent from current 74 per cent and a continued spend-

ing spree on infrastructure while raising allocations for social sectors as well as providing for measures for poor, youth, farmers, and women.

All this she did while managing to stick to the fiscal consolidation roadmap, projecting a fiscal deficit of 4.4 per cent of the GDP in FY26 as against an estimated 4.8 per cent in the current year ending March 31. Commenting on the announcements, Prime Minister (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

increase savings and make citizens partners in development," Modi said, adding that its welfare initiatives for gig workers underscore the government's commitment to the dignity of labour.

He said the measures presented in the Budget for the manufacturing sector will allow Indian products to shine globally.

The tax relief will provide big benefits to the middle class and salaried employees, he said, adding the Budget announcement that those earning up to ₹ 12 lakh will have to pay no income tax will present those entering the job sector with a big opportunity.

The Prime Minister praised the "historic" decision to promote the private sector in nuclear energy, saying civil nuclear energy will ensure a significant contribution to the country's development in the future.

Stressing that the Budget has prioritised all employment generating sectors, he highlighted two key reforms, including granting infrastructure status to shipbuilding that will boost the construction of large ships in India and accelerate the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' programme.

Including hotels in 50 tourist destinations under the infrastructure category will provide a major fillip to tourism, Modi said, noting that the hospitality industry is the largest employment sector. He said the country was progressing with the mantra of 'Vikas bhi, Virasat bhi' (development as well as heritage). (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Budget 2025 gives massive boost to maritime sector: Sarba**

**'Union Budget paves way for accelerated growth in NE'**

**HT Bureau**

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Appreciating the Union Budget 2025-26, Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Saturday said that it has stressed a strong impetus to realise the huge potential of India's shipping sector.

Sonowal, who is the minister of ports, shipping, and waterways said that the forward-looking document aims at further enabling India's shipbuilding industry with spurring & innovative initiatives to drive investment, generate income for the economy, train and employ human capital and create value for the future of the country. "It is reassuring to see that the budgetary initiatives for India's marine sector are focused on unlocking its vast potential and enhancing existing assets through upgrades, modernisation, and automation," he said. He further stressed that the Budget will relinquish the dreams of Viksit Bharat by 2047.

"This strategic push is crucial in realising India's vision of becoming a \$30 trillion economy by 2047. By leveraging the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model, the scheme is designed to attract private investment, promote modernisation, and advance green technologies. These efforts will enhance India's global competitiveness, drive sustainable growth, and solidify its position as a leading Global Maritime Hub. The new incentives are projected to generate 11 lakhs of direct or indirect employment," he added.

The Union Budget proposes to set up a Maritime Development Fund (MDF) to support India's Maritime sector by providing financial assistance. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- **No personal income tax** for income up to ₹ 12 lakh under the new regime
- **New Income-Tax Bill** to be clear and simple
- **Gross market borrowings** at ₹ 14.82 lakh crore
- **FDI in the insurance** sector to be hiked to 100 per cent from 74 per cent
- **10,000 additional seats** to be added in medical colleges and hospitals next year, adding to 75,000 seats in next 5 years
- **Social Welfare Surcharge** on 82 tariff lines that are subject to a cess exempted
- **Total receipts other than borrowings** at ₹ 34.96 lakh crore; total expenditure at ₹ 50.65 lakh crore
- **Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana**

**"...this budget is the roadmap for Modi ji's Aatmanirbhar Bharat. Kudos to Hon'ble PM Narendra Modi ji & Hon'ble FM Nirmala Sitharaman ji. #ViksitBharatBudget2025"**

**- Tripura CM Manik Saha**

- **Removes seven** tariff rates
- **Fiscal deficit** at 4.4 per cent of GDP
- **New Fund of Funds**, with expanded scope and a fresh contribution of ₹ 10,000 crore to be set up

**Assam to enact new law for allowing buffalo fights: Sarma**

**JAGIROAD, Feb 1:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said his government would bring a new law to allow buffalo fights in the state.

Addressing a public meeting after inaugurating a bridge here, Sarma said the government will take the initiative to preserve the heritage of the state.

"The buffalo fight of Ahatguri is our tradition and heritage. Even the Supreme Court had recognised it as a traditional game. Following its guidelines, we will soon enact a law allowing traditional sports like buffalo fight," he said.

The state government will very soon introduce a bill in the assembly, seeking legal protection for the buffalo fight, he added. Sarma said, "With the enactment of the law, people (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Budget offers 'band-aid for bullet wounds': Opposition**

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The opposition on Saturday described the Union Budget as one offering a "band-aid for bullet wounds" and said the BJP-led Centre was only trying to woo voters in Bihar and Delhi through the announcements.

While leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said the Centre was "bankrupt of ideas" and needed a paradigm shift to solve the economic crisis, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the government was busy garnering praises for the budget when the entire country was struggling with inflation and unemployment.

Kharge -- the opposition leader in the Rajya Sabha -- claimed the budget was an attempt to "dupe" the people and described it as "nau sau choohe khake billi hajj ko chali" -- a Hindi proverb that means seeking to be pious after committing a number of sins.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced significant In-



come Tax cuts for the middle class and unveiled a blueprint for next-generation reforms as she looked to shore up a slowing economy amid global uncertainties. Prime Minister Narendra Modi lauded the "people's budget" that put more money in the hands of the common public.

The opposition, however, said the sops to the middle class had come long after they suffered the brunt of high taxes and price rise.

"A band-aid for bullet wounds! Amid

global uncertainty, solving our economic crisis demanded a paradigm shift," Gandhi said in a post on X. The Congress criticised the budget as bereft of a cure to the "illnesses" of stagnant real wages, lack of buoyancy in mass consumption, sluggish rates of private investment, and a complicated GST system that the economy was suffering from.

It accused the Modi government of appearing to offer a "bonanza" to Bihar, governed by National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partner Nitish Kumar, and "cruelly" ignoring Andhra Pradesh, another pillar of the same alliance.

In a post in Hindi on X, Kharge said the Modi government collected ₹ 54.18 lakh crore in Income Tax from the middle class in the past 10 years and exemption was now being given to those earning up to ₹ 12 lakh. "The entire country is struggling with inflation and unemployment but the Modi government is bent (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Girl dies in Guwahati, first suspected GBS death in Assam**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** A 17-year-old girl died at a private hospital here due to suspected Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), the first such case in Assam in the current season, doctors of the health facility said on Saturday.

However, there was no official confirmation from the hospital and the state health department. "The Class-12 girl was admitted to Pratiksha Hospital around 10 days ago and she was diagnosed with GBS," a paediatrician of the hospital told PTI on condition of anonymity.

GBS is a rare condition that causes sudden numbness and muscle weakness, with symptoms including severe weakness in the limbs and loose motions. "The girl's condition worsened and was put on ventilator support. It was a very severe variety of GBS and she expired last night," the doctor said. He said it is the "first known case of GBS in Assam" this season, although it is a very common bacterial disease, affecting the nervous system.

"In the last six months, no GBS case was detected. All over India, there has been a wave of GBS cases right now and it is detected in many places."

"The symptoms of the deceased were similar to those diagnosed with GBS in other parts of the country like Maharashtra, South India and West Bengal. We are fearing that there may be more such (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Ministry of DoNER allocated ₹ 5,915 cr**

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The Union Budget 2025-26 has allocated ₹ 5,915 crore for the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), which is a significant 47-per cent hike over the ongoing fiscal's allocation.

The budget 2024-25 had allocated ₹ 4,006 crore for the Ministry of DoNER.

Officials said other initiatives that will indirectly benefit the northeastern region include expansion to 120 new destinations, including enhanced connectivity for the region, under the UDAN -- the regional connectivity scheme.

There will be a focus on smaller airports and helipads in hilly and remote districts to boost regional air travel, with a target to carry four crore passengers in the next 10 years. The additional 0.5 per cent of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**'Not a single policy mention big letdown to disabled population'**

**Disability rights groups criticise Union Budget for 'negligence'**

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Disability rights organisations have strongly criticised this year's Union Budget, accusing the government of neglecting the needs of India's disabled population.

Despite a marginal increase in the overall allocation for the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), activists argue that it remains grossly insufficient.

The department of empowerment of persons with disabilities has also witnessed a modest increase in funding, with a total allocation of ₹ 1,275 crore.

The National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled (NPRD) expressed its "strong protest" against what it described as the Modi government's continued disregard for



disabled citizens. "Though a 4 per cent increase is seen in the total allocation made to the nodal department, it falls far short of what

A key concern is the significant reduction in funding for the Scheme for Implementation of the Persons with Disabilities Act (SIPDA), which supports flagship programmes like the Accessible India Campaign. The allocation has dropped from ₹ 240.39 crore in 2022-23 to ₹ 115.10 crore this year.

"The total allocations for various Central Sector Schemes/Projects have also been reduced, further exacerbating the crisis," the NPRD noted.

Additionally, the government has consistently underutilised funds meant for disability initiatives, it said. Data shows that in recent years, a significant portion of these funds remained unspent, with a staggering 93 per cent underutilisation in 2023-24 alone. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Assam online trading scam: CBI files supplementary charge sheet**

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The CBI filed a second supplementary charge sheet on Saturday against the alleged mastermind of the ₹ 400 crore ponzi scam Deepankar Barman through his company in DB Stock Consultancy where deposits of gullible investors were siphoned away in Assam, officials said.

Burman, who was arrested on October 27 from Goa, had been collecting deposits in the name of five unregulated deposit schemes promising fixed higher returns, the CBI has alleged in its chargesheet filed before a special court in Guwahati.

"Chargesheets against four accused persons viz Monalisha Das, Chabin Barman, Deepali Talukdar, and Mukesh Agrawal have already been filed and they are facing trial," a CBI spokesperson said in a statement on Saturday.

"It was alleged that the accused



persons had taken money from several clients by convincing them to guaranteed returns and gave ₹ 100 stamp paper in return as proof but since June 2024, they found the payments were irregular and many clients did not receive the payments," the statement said.

The CBI had re-registered 41 cases given by the Assam government incorporating them into 35

FIRs against the different sets of accused persons.

"Till date, chargesheets have been filed by CBI in 20 of these cases including those in cases of Ranjit Kakoty (TradingFX), Bishal Phukan/Sumi Bora (Percelex Consultancy), Deepankar Barman (DB Stock), Gopal Paul (AJRS Marketing) and others," the spokesperson said. (PTI)



# FY26 Budget unveils roadmap for transformative tax reforms

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday unveiled "transformative" tax reforms that ranged from a simpler income tax law to higher TCS threshold for remittances and income tax benefits for middle class.

Sitharaman in 2025-26 Budget promised to bring a simpler, less voluminous new law to replace six decades old law governing income tax, saying it will have the spirit of "Nyay" (justice) and will work on the principle of "trust first, scrutinize later".

She also extended the time limit to 4 years for individuals filing updated tax returns. Updated returns are filed by taxpayers who had omitted to report their correct income. Currently, such returns can

be filed within two years of the relevant assessment year.

Nearly 90 lakh taxpayers have voluntarily updated their incomes by paying additional tax.

Over the past 10 years, our government has implemented several reforms for convenience of tax payers, such as faceless assessment, tax payers charter, faster returns, almost 99 per cent returns being on self-assessment, and Vivad se Vishwas scheme.

Sitharaman in her Budget speech said the objectives of her taxation proposal are reforms in Personal Income Tax with special focus on middle class, rationalization of TDS/TCS for easing difficulties and voluntary compliance.

The Budget increased the threshold for tax deduction at

source for better clarity and uniformity. In the FY26 Budget, the limit for TDS deduction on interest for senior citizens has been doubled to ₹ 1 lakh from the present ₹ 50,000.

Similarly, the annual limit of ₹ 2.40 lakh for TDS on rent is being increased to ₹ 6 lakh. This will reduce the number of transactions liable to TDS, thus benefiting small tax payers receiving small payments, Sitharaman said.

The threshold to collect tax at source (TCS) on remittances under RBI's Liberalized Remittance Scheme (LRS) too has been increased from ₹ 7 lakh to ₹ 10 lakh.

The TCS on remittances for education purposes, where such remittance is out of a loan taken from a specified financial institution, has been exempted.

The Budget 2025-26 gave a relief to middle class with regard to tax incidence and rejigged slabs.

Sitharaman announced that annual income of up to ₹ 12 lakh will be exempt from 1-T under the new income tax regime. For salaried taxpayers, this income threshold will be ₹ 12.75 lakh after taking into account standard deduction.

As per the rejig, for people earning more than ₹ 12 lakh per annum, there will be nil tax for income up to ₹ 4 lakh, 5 per cent for income between ₹ 4 and 8 lakh, 10 per cent for ₹ 8-12 lakh, and 15 per cent for ₹ 12-16 lakh.

A 20 per cent income tax will be levied on income between ₹ 16 and 20 lakh, 25 per cent on ₹ 20-24 lakh and 30 per cent above ₹ 24 lakh per annum. (PTI)

## Union Budget 2025 will allow more people to be a part of 11 crore unique investors: NSE CEO

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Lauding the Union Budget 2025-26, Ashish Kumar Chauhan, MD & CEO, National Stock Exchange of India Limited (NSE) on Saturday asserted that it will help more people to join the pool of current 11 crore unique investors.

He further said the budget builds on India's growth momentum with strong development measures, continued fiscal prudence, increased capex and reduced tax burden.

"More and more people will join the pool of current 11 crore unique investors and will become stakeholders and beneficiaries of India's growth journey thereby supporting a virtuous cycle of economic growth, capital formation and job creation," he added. As per Chauhan, increase in disposable income enhances consumption growth and provides further wealth creation opportunities to Indian households through the markets. He further opined that the budget focuses on India's most important resource - its people.

## 'Union Budget 2025 likely to spur consumer demand'

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Union Budget 2025 is likely to spur consumer demand and savings by the middle class that has faced challenges from elevated inflation and lower income growth, said Sakshi Gupta, principal economist, HDFC Bank. She said that addressing concerns around slowing demand from the middle class, the budget rationalised personal income tax slabs across the board along with revision in the limits of the tax deducted at source.

"Beyond the sops for the common man, the budget focusses on improving the ease of doing business through a "light touch" regulatory approach. The next five-year fiscal strategy has been geared towards promoting agriculture, MSMEs, exports and promoting greater participation from the private sector in India's capacity building going forward," she added. The FM's fiscal strategy has tilted towards boosting consumption while the capex target has been kept broadly unchanged from the 2024-25 budgeted plans, she said.

Gupta also said that the counter-cyclical push provided by the budget is within its broader strategy of fiscal consolidation, targeting a fiscal deficit of 4.4% in 2025-26, adding, "Despite the revenue foregone due to the income tax changes, fiscal consolidation is achieved through compression on the expenditure side in 2025-26".

Contd. from Page 1...

## People's budget to make

He asserted that the announcements for farmers will lay the foundation for a revolution in the agricultural sector and the entire rural economy, as he highlighted that under the PM Dhan-Dhanya Krishi Yojana irrigation and infrastructure development will take place in 100 districts.

Increasing the limit of Kisan Credit Card from ₹ 3 lakh to ₹ 5 lakh will provide greater assistance to farmers, he added.

"The Budget has a 360-degree focus on manufacturing to strengthen entrepreneurs, MSMEs and small businesses, creating new jobs," the prime minister said, underlining that sectors like clean tech, leather, footwear, and toy industries have received special support under the National Manufacturing Mission. He stressed that the goal is to ensure that Indian products shine in the global market. Modi said the Budget places special emphasis on creating a vibrant and competitive investment environment in the states.

In this context, he mentioned the announcements to double the credit guarantee for MSMEs and startups besides the introduction of a scheme to provide loans up to ₹ 2 crore without guarantee for SCs, STs and first-time women entrepreneurs.

The Prime Minister said the announcements for gig workers, including their registration on the e-Shram portal for the first time, and enabling them to access healthcare and other social security schemes reflect the government's commitment to the dignity of labour. He said that regulatory and financial reforms, such as Jan Vishwas 2.0, will strengthen the commitment to minimum government and trust-based governance. This Budget not only addresses the current needs of the country but also helps in preparing for the future, Modi asserted, highlighting the initiatives for startups, including the Deep Tech Fund, Geospatial Mission and Nuclear Energy Mission. (PTI)

## Girl dies in Guwahati, first

cases in the coming days," he said. The girl hailed from Bihar and was living in Assam. "The parents wanted to take her to Delhi for advanced treatment and an air ambulance was also arranged for. However, she could not survive and died last night," a colleague of the girl's father said. A senior paediatrician surgeon, who did not wish to reveal his name, told PTI that GBS cases are detected every year throughout the state and it is not very severe usually.

"Though some patients get paralysed due to GBS, they recover with proper medication. They may not be fully normal but they can do their daily routine work on their own. So, there is no need to create any panic for GBS," he added. (PTI)

## Sitharaman presents 'people's

Narendra Modi said it is a "people's budget" that fulfils the dreams of every Indian and said that it is a "force-multiplier" that will boost consumption, investment and growth. "The Budget lays a strong foundation to increase savings and make citizens partners in development," he said.

Sitharaman's budget has proposals aimed at boosting both consumption and investment, which in turn are expected to give a flip to domestic economic activity, protecting the growth outlook amidst global uncertainties. While maintaining the thrust on infrastructure development, it also continued to provide increasing support to the MSME and the agricultural sector.

Also announced were duty cuts on intermediaries and certain life saving drugs. To balance the revenue loss, she budgeted a modest increase in capital spending at ₹ 11.21 lakh crore in the next financial year compared to a lowered ₹ 10.18 lakh crore in the current fiscal. Besides, an increase in the dividend expected from the Reserve Bank and other government-owned financial institutions will also help to contain the losses.

The budget comes against the backdrop of the Indian economy growing at its weakest pace since the pandemic and rising geopolitical risks particularly with the new US President Donald Trump threatening to impose widespread tariffs including on India.

The 6.4 per cent GDP growth estimated for the current fiscal and 6.3 to 6.8 per cent in the next is well below the 8 per cent growth needed to meet the ambitious goal of making India a developed nation by 2047.

"Our endeavour will be to keep the fiscal deficit each year such that the central government debt remains on a declining path as a percentage of the GDP," she said, projecting debt at 50 per cent of GDP by March 2031.

Other measures include a national mission to push high-yielding crops with a special focus on pulses and cotton production, a hike in the limit of subsidised credit to farmers to ₹ 5 lakh from ₹ 3 lakh, missions to push manufacturing and exports, a new policy for labour-intensive sectors like leather and footwear, and a scheme to make India a global hub for toy manufacturing.

The finance minister also announced a social security cover for nearly 1 crore gig workers and a ₹ 10,000 crore fund of funds for startups. Another major announcement was setting a target of at least 100 gigawatts of electricity from nuclear energy by 2047 and an amendment to nuclear liability regulations to allow private sector investment.

Sitharaman also announced the reduction in duties on a raft of goods including open cells, while fully exempting critical minerals such as cobalt, scraps of lithium-ion battery, lead, zinc and a few others from import duty.

She proposed a hike in the threshold of tax collected at source on remittances under the RBI's Liberalised Remittance Scheme from ₹ 7 lakh to ₹ 10 lakh, benefiting the travel and foreign exchange sectors. Students and individuals seeking medical treatment will also benefit from this.

Rationalising TDS provisions, the finance minister increased the thresholds for non-deduction across various TDS provisions broadly ranging from ₹ 5,000 to ₹ 50,000. The threshold for TDS on rent has been increased from ₹ 2.40 lakh to ₹ 6 lakh.

Apart from that, omissions of higher TDS/TCS rates are now applicable for non-filers. Commenting on the Budget, Christian de Guzman, Senior Vice President, Moody's Ratings, said: "As the government unveiled its budget for 2025-26 amid a somewhat dampened macroeconomic backdrop as compared to recent years, it has had to slow the pace of fiscal consolidation to provide firmer support to growth."

"In particular, announced tax relief measures have constrained the growth of revenue receipts, which will rise at its slowest pace since 2022-23; as such, falling expenditure as a share of GDP has borne the brunt of the projected narrowing of the fiscal deficit even as the emphasis on capital expenditure has been sustained," he said.

"Although the Union government remains on track to meet its near-term policy goals, we do not expect a sufficient improvement in the debt burden, or the proportion of the budget earmarked for debt servicing to change our broader assessment that India's fiscal strength will remain weaker than most of its investment-grade peers," he added. (PTI)

## Budget 2025 gives massive

via equity or debt securities. The initial corpus of the fund is pegged at ₹25,000 crore, wherein the Government will contribute 49%.

The remaining balance will be contributed by Major port authorities, other government entities, Central PSEs, financial institutions as well as the private sector.

The fund aims at boosting Indian flagged ships' share in the global cargo volume up to 20% by 2047. Further, indigenous fleet will reduce the dependability of foreign ships, improve the Balance of Payment and secure the strategic interests of the country. By 2030, MDF is aiming to generate up to ₹ 1.5 lakh crore investment in the shipping sector.

Furthermore, the Union Budget provided a shot-in-the-arm to India's domestic shipbuilding industry after announcing new mega shipbuilding clusters in the country. This scheme will provide direct capital support in the form of creating the breakwater along with capital dredging. It also proposes a 10-year rent holiday for the land, if not

provided at a nominal rate.

Investment is also designed to support the creation of trunk infra like roads, utilities, and sewage treatment among others. The proposed allocation of ₹ 6,100 crore aims to support India's existing shipyards in upgrading, modernising, and automating their operations, enhancing efficiency, utilisation, and overall output. The Union Budget has also extended the Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy (SBFAP) 2.0, aimed at providing direct financial subsidies to Indian shipyards. This initiative seeks to help in securing orders by offsetting operational cost disadvantages, thereby strengthening the domestic shipbuilding industry. To be financed via Budgetary support, the total outlay of the scheme is ₹18,090 crores.

Another innovative scheme announced in the budget is the Shipbreaking Credit note. This scheme incentivises Ship Scrapping by issuing a Credit Note of 40% of the scrap value which can be reimbursed to buy new Made In India ships.

Sonowal also spoke on the impact the Budget will have on the development of the Northeast region. "The Union Budget 2025-26 paves the way for accelerated growth in the Northeast by enhancing connectivity, boosting trade through inland waterways, and strengthening social welfare initiatives, ensuring inclusive and sustainable development across the region," he said.

"The extension of the Tonnage Tax Scheme to inland vessels is a game-changer for Assam's economy. By making cargo movement on National Waterway 2 more financially viable, this initiative will unlock new trade opportunities, attract investment in inland shipping, and strengthen Assam's position as a logistics hub for the Northeast," Sonowal further added.

## Ministry of DoNER allocated

borrowing will allow the states to implement electricity distribution and augment intra-state transmission, and it is expected to improve energy availability and reliability in the northeast, the officials said.

For "aatmanirbharta" (self-reliance) in urea production, the government has reopened three dormant urea plants in the eastern region. To further augment the urea supply, a plant with an annual capacity of 12.7 lakh metric tons will be set up at Assam's Namrup. This will lead to enhanced availability of urea and fertilisers for increasing agricultural productivity in the northeast.

Under the Prime Minister Dhan-Dhanya Krishi Yojana, 100 agri-districts have been covered, including some from the northeast. For the development of tourism in the northeast, a special focus has been given on Buddhist tourism circuits in the region.

Support will be given to the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the northeast to integrate with global supply chains, besides modernisation of land records and infrastructure planning using geospatial technology. This will potentially benefit urban planning and rural connectivity in the northeast, the officials said. (PTI)

## Assam to enact new law for

will be able to watch and enjoy the traditional buffalo fight."

In December last year, the Gauhati High Court scrapped an Assam government SOP of 2023 which had allowed buffalo and bulbul bird fights during the Magh Bihu festivities in the month of January every year.

The court had further held that the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was in violation of a Supreme Court judgement of May 2014. On January 15 last year, traditional bulbul bird fights were organised after a hiatus of around nine years following a new set of guidelines issued by the Assam government. Both events resumed after the state Cabinet approved the SOP in December 2023. The SOP focussed on the safety of the animals, including a ban on the use of any intoxicating drugs or sharp weapons to control the animals.

The bulbul bird fight is famously held at Hayagriva Madhav temple in Hajo of Kamrup district on the Magh Bihu day in mid-January, attracting hundreds of visitors. Likewise, the buffalo fights take place at the same time in Morigaon, Sivasagar and some Upper Assam districts, but Ahatguri in Morigaon is the most celebrated. Sarma along with his family had witnessed both buffalo and bulbul bird fights in January last year and urged the organisers to follow the SOP. (PTI)

## Budget offers 'band-aid

on garnering false praises," he said. In this "announcement-making" budget, Make in India was changed to the National Manufacturing Mission to hide its flaws, Kharge said. There was no roadmap to double farmers' income and no concession in GST rates on agricultural inputs, he added.

Former finance minister P Chidambaram said Sitharaman was "walking on the worn-out path and not willing to break free, as we did in 1991 and 2004". TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee said there was nothing for West Bengal in the budget.

"There is nothing for the common people. They have presented the budget with the upcoming Bihar elections in mind. Last time as well, all announcements were for Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. Elections in Andhra Pradesh are over, the Bihar polls are coming, so the state is in focus," the Diamond Harbour MP told reporters.

DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran called the budget a "big letdown", especially for the middle class. "The finance minister claims she is giving tax exemption up to ₹ 12 lakh but the very next line was that there is a 10 per cent tax slab for ₹ 8 to ₹ 10 lakh income." "Since elections in Bihar are coming up, there were a lot of announcements for Bihar, again fooling the state's people," he added.

Samajwadi Party supremo Akhilesh Yadav said the budget figures meant nothing when the government was unable to provide an accurate number of the people who had died or were missing in the Maha Kumbh stampede.

"Today, the number of those who died in the Maha Kumbh stampede is more important than the budget figures. The government is unable to provide the number of those who lost their lives," he told reporters outside Parliament.

The CPI(M) Politburo said in a statement that the budget was a "cruel betrayal" of the requirements of the people.

"Instead of addressing the root cause of the demand problem being faced by so many sectors of the economy, the lack of purchasing power in the hands of large sections of the population because of mass unemployment and shrinking wages, the Modi government, through the budget, is seeking to stimulate the economy by giving tax cuts to the small minority with higher incomes even as expenditures are cut," it said.

The hypocrisy of the government is symbolised by its measly allocations for a right, which is a lifeline for the rural poor, the MNREGA, it added. Former finance minister Yashwant Sinha said, "People don't have money to spend... If concession was given on GST, it would have benefited the markets and consumption increased. The concession on Income Tax will have limited benefits, I don't think that markets will benefit a lot with this." "Only six crore people are going to benefit from the concession in Income Tax. It is meagre in a big economy like ours," he added.

The CPI's National Secretariat said the budget neglected the challenges faced by the Indian economy. "Rising unemployment, inflation, increasing inequality and regional disparities are some of the major issues faced by the Indian people but the budget fails to address them," it said. (PTI)

## Disability rights groups

the NPRD added. Mental health funding has also come under scrutiny, the NPRD said. Despite repeated warnings in the Economic Survey about the growing mental health crisis, activists argue that the government has failed to take adequate action.

While some institutes received slight increases in funding, the telemental health programme saw its budget reduced from ₹ 90 crore to ₹ 79.60 crore. "The government

seems oblivious to the huge crisis that is looming," the NPRD warned.

The NPRD has announced a protest against "government apathy" to be held on February 10, in which an assembly of persons with disabilities (PwD) will demand the enactment of a Right to Pension Act, an increase in existing pension to ₹ 5,000 per month, and broader coverage for all PwDs recognised under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.

Arman Ali, Executive Director of the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), also voiced his disappointment and said the Budget "has ignored India's disabled population" despite claims of inclusivity. "Not a single policy mention, not a single financial provision is such a big letdown to a population that has constantly strived to become an integral part of the mainstream," Ali said.

He also criticised the lack of incentives for the assistive devices manufacturing industry, which he noted has the potential to be among the best in the world. "A major push has been given to the 'Made in India' toy industry, yet the booming assistive technology sector, which could empower millions of persons with disabilities, finds no mention," he said.

"Doubling the tax deduction limit for senior citizens is commendable, but why is there no parallel benefit for persons with disabilities, who face lifelong financial challenges?" he asked. Both NPRD and NCPEDP emphasised that the fight for recognition, policies, and investments in the disability sector will continue. "A Budget that ignores millions of India's disabled population is a Budget that fails in true inclusivity," Ali concluded. (PTI)

## 'Historic day for Assam'

a long-standing demand of the people of Assam," he said in a post on X. It will not only help the state achieve self-sufficiency in fertiliser availability but also better channelise the natural gas resources, he added.

"After the semiconductor plant in Jagiroad, this urea facility will be a game changer for the entire North East. On behalf of the people of Assam my heartfelt gratitude to Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi Ji and Hon'ble Finance Minister Smt @nsitharaman Ji," Sarma said.

Later in a statement, he said that the proposed urea plant is likely to entail an investment of ₹ 10,000 crore, allowing Assam to channelise its natural gas resources into fertiliser manufacturing and help reduce India's dependency on import of this key agricultural input. "Needless to say, this factory also brings with it a significant number of jobs and export potential to the state," Sarma said.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her Budget speech, said that for self-sufficiency, the government had reopened three dormant urea plants in the eastern region. "To further augment urea supply, a plant with an annual capacity of 12.7 lakh metric tons will be set up at Namrup, Assam," she added.

PSU Brahmaputra Valley Fertilizer Corp Ltd (BVFL) is the only urea-making facility in the entire eastern India. The facility started production in January 1969 as a part of the Hindustan Fertilizer Corp Ltd (HFCL).

BVFL was formed in April 2002 after hiving off the Namrup unit of HFCL. It is under the administrative control of the ministry of chemicals and fertilisers with 100 per cent shareholding by the Government of India. It is the first factory of its kind in India to use associated natural gas as basic raw material for producing nitrogenous fertiliser.

Lauding the Budget as pro-people, Sarma said the income tax proposals are remarkable for the middle-class segment of the country.

"I declared crores of people coming up to ₹ 12 lakh annually as tax-free. It will give a huge relief to the middle-class people. I thank the PM and FM for this step," he added.

Commenting on the overall Budget, the chief minister said it made provisions to harness the strength of India's demographic dividend through some "out-of-the-box measures" on skilling, innovation, digitising different languages and expanding the number of Atal Tinkering labs. "The ₹ 50 lakh crore Union Budget 2025 comes with a record ₹ 15.5 lakh crore capital expenditure provision that will give a new momentum to India's overall growth trajectory grounded in inclusive development," he added.

The CM said that the Budget has an allocation of ₹ 1.5 lakh crore in the form of 50-year interest-free loans towards infrastructure development, which will immensely benefit the state. "This facility along with the enhanced devolution totalling ₹ 44,494 crore will help accelerate and augment ongoing welfare works," he added. Sarma further said that the Budget's thrust to establish micro-enterprises as the growth engine of the nation's economy is in line with Assam's flagship focus on boosting entrepreneurship through schemes such as CM Atmanirbhar Asom Abhijan and Mahila Udayamita Asoni.

"The revision in the classification of turnover and investment of MSMEs will provide a huge fillip to the backbone of Assam's economy by opening up more job opportunities and avenues to raise capital," he added. Sarma also said that the ₹ 5 lakh to ₹ 2 crore support to first-time women, SC and ST entrepreneurs, the enhanced credit guarantee coverage and dedicated credit card for micro-enterprises are some of the exceptional policies announced in the Union Budget.

"The Gramin Credit Score framework will also help serve the credit needs of Assam's vast SHG network comprising over 30 lakh women. The Union Budget envisages adding 75,000 MBBS seats in the next five years. This again complements Assam's own target of building 24 medical colleges by 2030," he added.

The increased allocation under the National Disaster Relief Fund to ₹ 12,048 crore and the National Disaster Mitigation Fund to ₹ 3,102 crore from ₹ 2,300 crore will significantly help in boosting Assam's efforts while dealing with disasters like floods, the CM said. "The enhanced allocation for NEEPCO from ₹ 1,387 crore to ₹ 2,300 crore will also aid in boosting energy availability in the state, which will power up our plans for a Viksit Bharat," he added.

Sarma said that the Union Budget for 2025-26 brings with it a new energy that will fuel Assam's growth trajectory, provide a new thrust to the state's entrepreneurs, strengthen its farmers and plantation economy, and fulfil the aspirations of the middle class. (PTI)

## Education in Budget: AI push,

an increase of 130 per cent. In the next year, 10,000 additional seats will be added in medical colleges and hospitals towards the goal of adding 75,000 seats in the next five years," she said.

The FM also announced 10,000 fellowships will be provided for technology research in IITs and IISc over the next five years.

"Five national centres for excellence for skilling with global expertise and partnerships will be set up and 50,000 Atal Tinkering Labs will be set up in government schools in the next five years to cultivate scientific temper in young minds," she said.

Sitharaman said broadband connectivity will be provided to all government secondary schools and primary healthcare centres in rural areas.

"I had announced three centres of excellence in AI for agriculture, sustainable cities, and health in 2023. Now, a Centre of Excellence in AI for education will be set with an outlay of ₹ 500 crore," she said, in a big Artificial Intelligence (AI) push in education.

From University Grants Commission (UGC) to National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT), most bodies under the Ministry of Education have received an increased allocation. Top business schools -- Indian Institutes of Managements (IIMs), which witnessed consistent cut in their allocated budget in a push to make them self-reliant, have also received an increased allocation of ₹ 251 crore as against a revised estimate of ₹ 227 crore last year.

However, the budget granted to Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research (IISERs) has seen a drop of ₹ 137 crore. Similarly, the allocated amount for World Class Institutions, has been reduced by more than 50 per cent. Last year, the amount allocated was ₹ 1000 crore which has now been reduced to ₹ 475 crore. (PTI)



## 4th Kokrajhar Literary Festival gets underway



### HT Correspondent

**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 1:** The 4th edition of Kokrajhar Literary Festival began from Saturday with a three-day vibrant celebration of literature and culture being held at the Bodofa Cultural Complex, located along the Gaurang River in Kokrajhar.

Nagaland Legislative Assembly Speaker Shringain Longkumer, inaugurated the festival in the presence of BTR CEM Pramod Boro, cabinet minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma, Surath Narzary, Bodo Sahitya Sabha president.

This year's festival theme is "Building Bridges of Peace through Literature and Culture," emphasising the role of literature in fostering unity and dialogue.

The event will witness the participation of 157 poets and writers from India and beyond, including 9 international literary figures from Denmark, Italy, Estonia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Japan, Bhutan, and Nepal.

Additionally, 57 writers from different Indian states and 91 Assamese authors will contribute to the discussions and literary exchanges.

Throughout the three-day event, there will be 50 panel discussions covering a range of literary and cultural topics, offering a platform for meaningful discourse.

A special highlight of the festival will be "Poetry Evenings by the Fire," an intimate and creative gathering held every evening, celebrating the beauty of poetry in a unique setting.

Longkumer stated that the literary festival was a platform where writers, authors and intellectuals gather for discussions and brain-

storming of ideas. He lauded the organisers and government of Bodoland Territorial Region, and remained hopeful that the festival would be a factor for ushering of welfare and development of the society.

"I'm delighted to attend the 4th Edition of the Kokrajhar Literary Festival, at the Bodofa Cultural Complex, Kokrajhar. This year's theme, "Bridging People, Cultures, and Literature with a Message of Peace," resonated throughout the event, bringing together distinguished intellectuals and literary figures in a shared spirit of harmony. The grand festival of literary excellence was graced by 180 delegates from India and abroad, including representatives from six countries and around 30 community language speakers and writers. Their participation and insightful contributions will enrich the festival, making it a true confluence of diverse literary traditions", Boro said.

"The presence of eminent scholars, poets, and authors added immense depth to the ceremony, fostering rich exchanges on literature, language, and cultural heritage. I am grateful to all the literary stalwarts whose presence and wisdom elevated this celebration of literature and culture. Events like these reaffirm the power of words in fostering peace, unity", Boro added.

Among others, Prof Anil Boro, chairperson of the organising committee; Dipen Boro, president, ABSU; Prof Kumud Sharma, vice president, Sahitya Akademi; Shir Damodar Mauzo, Jnanpeeth Awardee; and Mrinal Talukdar, senior journalist were present in the event.

## Job fair for ex-servicemen in Guwahati

### HT Correspondent

**SILCHAR, Feb 1:** The directorate general of resettlement under Ministry of defense is going to organise a Job fair for ex-servicemen at Brahmputra Hall, Narangi Military Station, Guwahati to facilitate seamless transition of ex-servicemen into the civilian workforce.

The event is scheduled to commence at 7 am on February 7, offering a hassle-free recruitment process for veterans seeking employment opportunities.

This job fair serves as a bridge between skilled ex-servicemen and reputed employers from various industries, ensuring a dignified and rewarding second career for those who have served the nation. Ex-servicemen job seekers from Cachar and beyond are encouraged to participate and leverage this exclusive employment platform.

The Zila Sainik Welfare Office, Cachar, has urged all eligible candidates to attend the fair and explore potential career avenues. Employers from diverse sectors, including security, administration, logistics, and IT, are expected to participate, making it an unmissable event for job-seeking veterans.

For ex-servicemen looking to reinvent their careers, this job fair promises direct interaction with recruiters, on-the-spot screening, and simplified hiring procedures—a step towards a secure and fulfilling professional journey.

## Drug peddler in police net

### HT Correspondent

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 1:** Acting on a tip off, a joint team headed by the additional superintendent of police, Biswanath (crime) and Sootea police managed to apprehend a drug peddler on NH 15 at Nagsankar on Saturday evening and recovered 39 grams of heroin from his possession.

The drug peddler has been identified as Joon Ali who originally hailed from Ghahi Muslim Gaon, Sootea. According to information, the drug peddler had carried the heroin in the soap cases through an e-rickshaw. The peddler has been taken to police custody for further investigation.

## Karbi Anglong embraces Karbi Ningkan Kimi with merry-making

*New Year sees commencement of agricultural activities*

### HT Bureau

**DIPHU, Feb 1:** The Karbi Ningkan Kimi – Karbi New Year was celebrated across Karbi Anglong with enthusiasm and merry-making in Karbi villages on Saturday. The New Year – Ningkan Kimi is a vibrant festivity and cultural expression.

Ningkan Kimi holds particular significance for the Karbi tribe, signifying the commencement of agricultural activities in February. This period is regarded as the first month of the year for the Karbis. The month begins with tribesmen venturing into the jungles to select sites for agriculture. The jungle is cleared, dried for a month, and then burned before the sowing of crops begins.

In recognition of the cultural importance of Ningkan Kimi, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) declared a holiday on February 1. Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang participated in the Karbi Ningkan Kimi celebration at the Karbi Students Association (KSA) office Rongthang here.

The CEM, joined by other dignitaries, marked the celebration by cutting the Ningkan Kimi cake. Wishing everyone the Karbi Ningkan Kimi, 2025, CEM said, "I hope the New Year brings prosperity and good health to everyone. May the celebration be filled with the rich traditions and cultural



heritage for the people of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong."

The CEM said the KSA should make a strong effort to popularise the celebration.

On the sidelines of the Ningkan Kimi celebration the CEM said that the Sainik School for Karbi Anglong the CEM said that ₹ 375 crore will be funded by the Central government and to start the work for the set-up of the school a review meeting with the engineers, architect and principal secretary and principal of the School was held on Saturday. Out of 600 students, 80 % will be reserved for locals, which means students from Karbi Anglong.

Villages and towns resonated with the

spirit of the occasion, as community members engaged in various activities throughout the day. Festivities included traditional games, sports events, community meetings, and discussions, culminating in a communal feast and a cultural night in the evening.

In Diphu the celebration of Ningkan Kimi is seen in several villages.

One such village is Rongchingri of Ward No 14, where women had organised the celebration as a day for women of the village to come together once a year to engage in fun activities, laughter and merry-making.

Amphu Rongpippi, basapi - wife of the village headman led the celebration. The women folk gathered at the village ground

*Human Resource Management System software for Assam's medical college employees launched*

## Chief Minister inaugurates OPD services at Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital

### HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday inaugurated the Outpatient Department (OPD) services at Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital.

He also virtually launched the Human Resource Management System (HRMS) software for Assam's medical college employees. Additionally, he attended the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) exchange between Indus Towers, a company under Bharti Airtel Group, and the Assam Cancer Foundation for a mega programme to screen 1 crore people for cancer.

Speaking on the occasion, Sarma underscored the significance of the day, marking a pivotal moment in Assam's medical education landscape with the inauguration of its 14th medical college and hospital. Reflecting on the journey from just three medical colleges in 2006, he recalled the three-decade wait for the fourth. The establishment of colleges in Tezpur, Jorhat, and Barpeta laid the foundation for a vision of one medical college per district, with Assam now having 13 medical colleges recognised by the Indian Medical Council, with 1,700 students studying across these institutions.

With plans for Bongaigaon, Biswanath, Golaghat, Charaideo, and Morigaon, the state aims for 24 colleges by 2029. Additionally, with upcoming budgetary allocations for new institutions in Darrang, Hojai, and Hailakandi, the state continues its commitment to building a robust healthcare network to serve its 30,000 villages. He credited the rapid progress to the support of citizens and collaboration with AIIMS and IIT Guwahati, notably in de-



veloping a super-speciality hospital.

The Pragjyotishpur Medical College, constructed at a cost of ₹ 496 crore, has been designed to serve Guwahati's 25 lakh residents. As the transformation of the MMC hospital neared completion, the inauguration of a new super-speciality hospital would further enhance the city's healthcare infrastructure.

Sarma highlighted the long-standing challenges in managing human resources, particularly with regard to staff leave, employment matters, and administrative tasks, as the state witnessed a significant rise in medical colleges. To address these issues, the government developed a Human Resource Management System (HRMS) leveraging information technology to streamline data collection and enable timely decision-making. He announced the successful launch of the ₹ 2.5 crore HRMS software,

tailored for the employees of Assam's medical colleges. He also shared the opening of a facilitation centre at the Assam Medical College in Dibrugarh, where dedicated volunteers would assist and guide tea garden workers in availing themselves of essential medical services, such as blood banks, CT scans, and more. Looking ahead, he affirmed that the HRMS system would soon be expanded to other medical colleges across the state, reinforcing Assam's commitment to integrating technology for efficient healthcare administration.

It may be noted that the state government, in collaboration with the Tata Trust, has established the Assam Cancer Care Foundation, a key milestone in the battle against cancer. With 17 cancer care institutions now operational, the initiative has drastically improved access to treatment. Acknowledging the Prime Minister's role in securing vac-

ancies for cervical and uterine cancer, the chief minister highlighted the state's strengthened cancer care infrastructure. Additionally, the Assam Cancer Care Foundation's focus on early detection screenings and community outreach has culminated in the launch of a massive cancer screening programme for 1 crore people, underscoring Assam's resolute commitment to accessible cancer care.

The CM underscored that with the inauguration of the Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital on Saturday and the planned establishment of additional medical colleges by 2029, Assam is poised to emerge as a leader in healthcare. He attributed this significant advancement to the forward-thinking initiatives of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose vision has been instrumental in shaping the state's progress.

Today's event was graced by the minister of health and family welfare Ashok Singhal, MLA Ramendra Narayan Kalita, mayor of Guwahati Municipal Corporation Mrigen Sarania, commissioner & secretary of the medical education & research department Dr Siddharth Singh, director of medical education Dr Anup Kr Barman, special commissioner & special secretary of the public works building & NH department Raj Chakrabarty, Principal of the Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital Dr Basanta Kumar Baishya, CEO of Assam Cancer Care Foundation Dr (Maj Gen) Jai Prakash Prasad, project director Gautam Chintey, circle head of Indus Towers Vijay Dhekiel, professors, teachers, and key figures from the medical college, along with senior officials from the health department.

## New urea plant announcement in Namrup hailed

### HT Correspondent

**DIBRUGARH, Feb 1:** The Namrup Fertiliser Shramik Union (NFSU) on Saturday welcomed the Budget 2025 for announcing the setting up of 4th urea plant in Namrup.

Tileswar Bora, advisor of NFSU said, "It's a big day for us because after 18 years of protest, we are getting the Namrup 4th plant. We like to thank chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and our local MLA Taranga Gogoi for pressing the issue in the centre. We also like to thank Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal who always stood behind us for setting up the plant."

"We could not express our happiness. It's a historic day for us and

we are thankful to everyone who supported us for setting up of the four unit at BVFCL." Bora said.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget 2025 speech announced setting up of a new urea plant in Namrup in eastern Assam Dibrugarh aimed at augmenting the region's urea supply.

Sitharaman's announcement follows ongoing discussion between Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal and JP Nadda about expanding the Brahmaputra Valley Fertiliser Corporation Ltd (BVFCL) in Namrup.

The plant will have an annual capacity of 12.7 lakh metric tons and is part of a larger strategy to en-

hance agricultural productivity and regional economic development.

As part of ₹ 500 crore investment the initiative will include two new Nano Urea plants, which will modernise existing facilities and boost production.

The Namrup-1 unit of the BVFCL which was set up in 1969 was shut down and the Namrup-2, established in 1976 was also shut down a few years ago due to outdated technology.

The Namrup-3 unit set up in 1987, has been producing 800-900 metric tones annually and has been facing numerous challenges due to outdated machinery which has affected the production.

## Retired DFO felicitated

### HT Correspondent

**GOSSAIGAON, Feb 1:** Retired divisional forest officer (DFO) Bhanu Sinha of the renowned Kachugaon Forest Division was given a grand farewell felicitation on Saturday.

The event was held at the Kachugaon Forest Division office in Gossaigaon under the chairmanship of retired DFO PK Brahma. Sinha, who had been serving as the DFO of Kachugaon Forest Division since August 2021 and retired on Friday.

He was honored by officers and employees from various ranges of the division, as well as by several NGOs.

In his speech, Jewel Basumatary, senior assistant of Kachugaon Forest Division, praised DFO Sinha's dedication, honesty, and disciplined work ethic. He mentioned that everyone was delighted with his conduct. BBC Forest Department's OSD, Rekbuddin Ahmed, emotionally appreciated Sinha's contributions and work. The newly appointed DFO, DN Basumatary, wished the retired officer a fulfilling post-retirement life and encouraged him to remain engaged in social work.

The farewell ceremony, held in an emotional atmosphere, also saw Dipankar Lahkar from Aaranyak NGO who emphasised Sinha's experience as a valuable asset to the department. In his speech, Sinha mentioned that his parents had taught him to be humble and always avoided using harsh words, as they could hurt others.

Officials and employees from all nine ranges of Kachugaon Forest Division, along with representatives from MSB Musahari Enterprise and Aaranyak NGO, honored the retired DFO and his wife with traditional gifts, including shawls, aronai (Bodo traditional scarf), flowers, certificates of appreciation, and traditional Bodo attire. Born in Dholai, Cachar district, Bhanu Sinha started his career as a ranger in Jorhat in 1987.

## Accident claims CISF jawan

### HT Correspondent

**GOLAGHAT, Feb 1:** CISF jawan Bipul ch Gogoi died in a road accident when he was coming from the Numaligarh Refinery on his scooter bearing registration no JH 09 L 9465 to the CISF camp on Friday.

Eye witnesses stated that an unidentified vehicle hit him and fled the scene.

"Careless car parking on both side of the road in front of the refinery and lack of speed breakers aggravate accident cases in frequent manner in the locality," locals rued the fact. Police investigation is currently on.

## Judicial employees observe black day in Hojai

### HT Correspondent

**HOJAI, Feb 1:** The All Assam Judicial Employees Union of the Hojai District Committee observed Black Day for one hour (from 12 pm to 1 pm) at Srimanta Sankardev Nagar Court premises in Hojai district on Saturday.

The black day was observed in support to the call from All Assam Government NPS Employees Unions.

The Black Day was observed in demand of cancellation of the new pension policy of NPS and restoration of the old pension policy.

Talking to the reporters, Partha Pratim Sarma, chief administrative officer, Hojai Judiciary said that abiding by the call of All Assam Government NPS Employees Union, they had observed black day on Saturday in demand of cancellation of the new pension policy and restoration of old pension policy. Organising secretary Bishnu Sah said, "For a long time we have been demanding restoration of old pension policy and again we appeal to the Government of Assam to restore the old pension policy and cancel the new pension policy. Notably, all the staff of Hojai Judiciary observed the black day.

## Awareness programme on PM Vishwakarma Scheme

### HT Correspondent

**TEZPUR, Feb 1:** The Br. MSME-DFO organised a seminar to create awareness on PM Vishwakarma Scheme in Sonitpur on Friday.

It was held in association with DIC. Karabi Saikia Karan, CEO, Zilla Parishad, Sonitpur served as the chief guest on the occasion.

Acharya Sonowal, LDM-Sonitpur explained about financial benefit of the scheme. Tarun Nath, Officer, CSC, Tezpur delivered a presentation on registration process and procedure of the scheme. Victor Khanshabish, centre manager, PMV Skill Training Centre, Tezpur explained about the skill training programme under the scheme.

As many as 270 participants attended the programme. All queries raised by the participants were answered by the experts. People from various trades like basket making, barber, carpenter, garland making, fishing net making, mason, potter, blacksmith, boat maker, tailor etc. were present in the seminar.

## Four women assaulted in Margherita

### HT Correspondent

**MARGHERITA, Feb 1:** Four women from a family were brutally attacked with sharp iron rods, bamboo and wooden sticks and kicked by three men recently at Bargolai Bazaar under Margherita police station in Tinsukia.

Raja Ram Sah, the husband of one of the victims alleged that his wife Renu Devi was drying clothes outside, when his neighbours Aftab Alam (Barka), Zulfiqar Alam (Nanki), and Azaad Alam (Mangru) attacked his wife over minor altercation.

His three daughters, Neha Kumari Sah, Sandhya Kumari Sah and Kareena Kumari Sah were also assaulted severely during the incident.

The victims were initially taken to Margherita Civil Hospital for treatment but later referred to Tinsukia Civil Hospital for better medical care.

Despite lodging an FIR with Margherita police station on the day of the incident, no arrests have been made yet.

Sah urged the Margherita police and Margherita co-district commissioner to take strict action against the accused.

Meanwhile, Kailash Kumar Gupta, president of All Assam Bhojipuri Parishad Central Committee, has urged Margherita police and co-district commissioner to immediately arrest the three attackers and take strict legal action against them.





## Editor's pick

## As India-China grow close, who's driving the 'narrative'?

By: Harsh V. Pant &amp; Kalpit A Mankikar

India's Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, was recently in China on a two-day trip to discuss the future course of bilateral relations between the two countries, following an initiative by both nations to normalise ties after a military standoff spanning nearly four years.

## A Host Of Measures

Relations between the two nations were fraught after Beijing unilaterally tried to change the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 2020, which resulted in the deaths of soldiers on both sides. As a response to China's military coercion and amassing troops along the border, New Delhi responded by adopting a stringent position, that peace and tranquillity along the boundary would decide the overall relationship. This approach necessitated viewing trade, technology, and civil society interactions from a national security lens.

Consequently, nearly 300 Chinese mobile applications were banned, direct flights between India and China were halted, strict curbs were imposed on visas for Chinese nationals, and educational cooperation between universities was reviewed. In October 2024, both nations finalised patrolling arrangements for friction points in Eastern Ladakh, following which Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met at the BRICS summit in Russia. This resumption of top-level engagement has been followed by regular meetings down the hierarchy to chart the future direction.

## Focus On Trade, Economy, And People

With disengagement having been completed and the resumption of patrolling as per the respective perceptions of the border, the focus has shifted to aspects like economic engagement and people-to-people ties, which had been in a deep freeze.

The restarting of the Special Representatives (SRs) mechanism, which was tasked with ways to settle the boundary question from a political perspective under an agreement in 2003, is a welcome move. Besides, the Indian readout of Misri's trip states that the pilgrimage to Kailash Mansarovar in Tibet will resume this year. The meeting of the expert panel to confer on the resumption of sharing of hydrological data and cooperation on transnational rivers has been advanced. Interactions between media outlets and think tanks are set to resume. The pathway to restart direct air services between the two countries is also being cleared. There is also an impetus to address issues related to the economy and trade.

## Not All Is Well

However, several challenges remain and overshadow the relationship. First, while disengagement has been completed, the weaponry assembled along the border during the standoff remains in place. This raises the possibility that the disengagement has been a tactical move for the Chinese. Ahead of the Indian Army Day, Chief of Army Staff General Upenra Dwivedi cautioned that while the conditions in Eastern Ladakh were stable but sensitive, both armies were locked in a "degree of standoff".

Second, in earlier rounds in 2022, disengagement was achieved at some points after creating no-patrol zones. While that was supposed to be a temporary measure, there is no clarity on how long these no-go areas for both militaries will continue. Lastly, while military tensions are down, the strategy of cartographic warfare and weaponising of natural resources continues. Beijing recently announced plans to carve out two counties, which subsume a part of the territory of Ladakh, in Xinjiang province's Hotan prefecture. It is also constructing the world's biggest hydroelectric project on the Yarlung Zangbo river in Tibet (referred to as Brahmaputra after it enters Arunachal Pradesh). New Delhi has conveyed its concerns to Beijing on both these developments through diplomatic channels.

## Narrative Games

This brings us to the issue of trust and peace. Going further, China's use of non-conventional means to gain leverage over India is likely to queer the pitch in the pursuit of a settlement. New Delhi needs to pay close attention to the narratives emanating from Beijing's strategic class. Their notion is that India is conciliating with China from a position of vulnerability. Second, they believe that India's relenting in imposing restrictions on Chinese corporations was hurting the Indian economy more. This sentiment has been buttressed ever since the Finance Ministry's Economic Survey 2023-24 made a case for inviting Chinese capital and integrating into Chinese-led international value chains. Lastly, there are assumptions in Beijing that there is a degree of strategic mistrust between the US and India in light of recent standoffs over the Pannun and Nijjar cases, and that this could force New Delhi to look towards China. While Xi's bid to redraw boundaries may have failed, China is unlikely to stop poking around on sensitive issues through all such non-conventional means, and this can test New Delhi's cautious normalisation. (Courtesy: ORF)

## The significance of Asam Sahitya Sabha

On the Occasion of The 77<sup>th</sup> Biennial Pathsala Conference of the Assam Sahitya Sabha

Asam Sahitya Sabha, one of the oldest and most prestigious literary organizations in Assam, holds a significant place in the history of the state's culture and literature. Established in 1917, the Sabha's founding members envisioned a platform to preserve and promote Assamese literature, which was facing the threat of extinction under British colonial rule and the rise of other dominant languages. From its inception to the present day, Asam Sahitya Sabha has been instrumental in shaping the cultural and literary landscape of Assam, becoming a beacon of intellectual and artistic growth.

The primary purpose of Asam Sahitya Sabha, when it was first established, was to promote the Assamese language and literature, which were at risk of being overshadowed by English and Bengali during the colonial era. Sahitya Sabha's founding fathers understood the importance of language in preserving cultural identity. The organization set out to defend Assamese against external influences, ensuring it remained a vital medium for expression, education, and creativity in Assam. Over the years, Asam Sahitya Sabha has been a platform for prominent literary figures who have contributed to the development of Assamese literature, ranging from poetry and fiction to drama and essays.

One of the most significant impacts of the Asam Sahitya Sabha has been its role in fostering and nurturing Assamese writers and poets. Through its various literary events, conferences, and publications, it has provided a platform for both seasoned authors and emerging talents. The Asam Sahitya Sabha's annual sessions, known as "Sahitya Sabha Adhibeshan," have been a major gathering for Assamese writers and intellectuals, encouraging literary debates, discussions, and the exchange of ideas. These sessions have allowed Assamese literature to grow, evolve, and adapt to the changing socio-political landscape of the region.

The importance of Asam Sahitya Sabha is also seen in its efforts to connect literature with the everyday lives of the Assamese people. The organization has always focused on promoting literature that reflects the struggles, hopes, and dreams of the people. Whether through the portrayal of rural life, the depiction of social and political issues, or the exploration of Assamese identity, the Sabha has consistently encouraged literature that speaks directly to the people. In this way, Asam Sahitya Sabha has helped ensure that Assamese literature is not just confined to academic circles but remains relevant to the masses. In addition to fostering creativity and literary growth, Asam Sahitya Sabha has also contributed to the cultural development of Assam. The Sabha's activities go be-



yond literature, encompassing the promotion of music, art, and folklore. Many traditional Assamese art forms, including Borgeet, Satriya dance, and folk music, have found a place within the Sabha's activities, helping to preserve and promote these elements of Assamese culture. Through its initiatives, Asam Sahitya Sabha has ensured that these art forms continue to thrive and evolve, contributing to the broader cultural identity of Assam.

Asam Sahitya Sabha has also played a crucial role in social reform and activism. Throughout Assam's history, the organization has used literature as a tool for social change. Whether in the

## DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

fight for independence, the promotion of women's rights, or the advocacy for the rights of indigenous communities, Asam Sahitya Sabha has been at the forefront of social movements. The organization's commitment to addressing social issues through literature has made it an essential voice in shaping public discourse in Assam. Many of the state's most significant literary works, addressing the socio-political struggles of the time, have been produced with the Sabha's support, and they continue to serve as powerful tools for social and political change.

One of the most profound aspects of Asam Sahitya Sabha's influence is its role in preserving the Assamese language and ensuring its continued relevance in a rapidly changing world. In an era of globalization and the increasing dominance of English and Hindi, Assamese faces the threat of being marginalized. However,

Asam Sahitya Sabha has tirelessly worked to protect and promote the language, ensuring it remains a vibrant and evolving medium of communication, education, and art. The Sabha has actively worked to ensure that Assamese is taught in schools, is used in official discourse, and is represented in all forms of media. This effort has been essential in maintaining the cultural identity of Assam in the face of modern pressures.

Asam Sahitya Sabha has also been instrumental in addressing the challenges that come with the digital age. In today's world, literature is no longer confined to printed books; it has moved

to the digital realm, where online platforms, e-books, and social media offer new avenues for the dissemination of literary works. Asam Sahitya Sabha has embraced these changes, promoting Assamese literature on digital platforms and making it accessible to a global audience. By engaging with the digital world, the Sabha ensures that Assamese literature does not remain isolated but is part of the global literary conversation, allowing it to reach a wider and more diverse audience.

While its role in literature and culture is undoubtedly significant, Asam Sahitya Sabha also plays a vital role in uniting the Assamese community. The Sabha's events and conferences bring together people from all walks of life, fostering a sense of unity and shared cultural pride. By celebrating Assamese language and literature, the Sabha creates a sense of belonging

among the people of Assam, strengthening their connection to their heritage and to one another. In a state as diverse as Assam, where various ethnic groups and communities coexist, Asam Sahitya Sabha has become an important institution that promotes harmony and mutual respect.

Looking to the future, the significance of Asam Sahitya Sabha remains as strong as ever. In a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented and dominated by digital content, its role as a custodian of Assamese culture and literature is more crucial than ever. As the world becomes more interconnected, it is essential to preserve and promote regional languages and cultures. Asam Sahitya Sabha's ongoing efforts to adapt to new technologies, engage with younger generations, and continue promoting literature that speaks to the people of Assam ensure that the organization will remain a powerful force in the state's cultural and literary future.

In conclusion, Asam Sahitya Sabha's contribution to the cultural, social, and literary landscape of Assam is immense. From its role in preserving the Assamese language and promoting literature to its efforts in social reform and cultural preservation, Asam Sahitya Sabha has had a profound and lasting impact on Assam. Its continued relevance in the digital age, its commitment to preserving Assamese identity, and its role in fostering a united community ensure that Asam Sahitya Sabha will remain a central pillar of Assam's cultural and literary heritage for generations to come. (The writer is Editor in Chief of the Assamese E-magazine SAMPROTIK who can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com)

## Cross-firing in buffer zones halted - Manipur situation 'somewhat better'

By Rabindra Nath Sinha

"Somewhat better in recent days" is what regular Manipur watchers say, perhaps, for the first time in 21 months since the outbreak of ethnic violence in the north-eastern state on May 3, 2023 between Meiteis and Kuki tribes. The reference is obviously to the law and order situation and when they qualify their answer with "recent days", they obviously refer to the changes that have taken place in Raj Bhavan early January and at the secretariat around mid-January. Raj Bhavan's new occupant Ajay Bhalla is the immediate past Union home secretary who has had a six-year innings in that key post.

The change at the secretariat refers to new top boss of bureaucracy Prashant Kumar Singh who has taken over as chief secretary. What is noteworthy in the two postings by New Delhi is that both have intimate knowledge about the north-east. Bhalla belongs to the Assam-Meghalaya cadre of IAS while Prashant Singh it is return to the parent cadre of IAS, that is, Manipur where earlier he had worked for 17 years in various state government posts.

The "somewhat better" assessment derives from the two steps taken in recent weeks - extensive reshuffle involving some 70 senior officials in various disciplines and the setting up of an Integrated anti-extortion cell in the home department with officials drawn from state police, paramilitary forces and the Army. The second action plan follows an assessment that extortion is also a serious law and order issue in Manipur. Recovery of looted arms and ammunition and arrests of militants figure prominently in the priority list. Informed quarters told IPA that the blueprint for scaling up of the third and fourth action plans is being readied. The drive against illegal poppy cultivation is being stepped up; uprooting in 4.8 hectares in Senapati district was accomplished recently.

"Cross-firing has practically stopped", according to Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee president Meghchandra Singh who, however, added that instances of scattered violence are still coming to the fore; one

such incident took place at Bishnupur and the victim, a Meitei, had to be hospitalised. Senior functionaries of the Committee of Tribal Unity (Cotu) - chairman Thanglen GSKIK, secretary Lamminun and spokesperson N G Lun - while venting grievances about deployment of Central agreed, however, that "confrontation in buffer zones" has stopped.

At a meeting with the chief secretary on Thursday, Cotu office-bearers sought immediate relocation of 'designated peace camps' for valley-based insurgent groups from fringe of the hill areas predominantly occupied by the Kuki-Zo community of Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal districts. Such peace camp arrangement is viewed by Kuki-Zos as "an attempt" to trespass and annex hills areas by valley-based ultra groups. The Cotu delegation also urged the chief secretary to that a new police station is set up for the Phailengmol area of the Island block which includes 57 villages, some of which were razed by "radical Meitei mob" in the last four days of May 2023 and because of jurisdiction issues the Kangpokpi police could not take care of the "two fallen Kuki-Zo volunteers". The chief secretary was also urged to rectify police jurisdiction-related discrepancies in the interest of Kuki-Zo residents of the identified areas.

Assistant professor for sociology at Kakching Khunou College M Shantikumar Singh also agreed that in recent days the situation has shown some improvement and educational institutions were functioning normally. But, Prof Singh concurred with PCC chief Meghchandra and AITUC state secretary L Satinkumar that safe return to original residences of the over 60,000 people living in relief camps for a long time is a major challenge for the administration. The Centre is running the show with the help of the Governor who is counting on the experience and advice of the new chief secretary.

"It's an undeclared President's rule" Meghchandra told IPA. Satinkumar too shared this view and told IPA: "It appears the Centre is making full use of Article 355 of the Constitution" and chief minister Biren Singh is falling in

line. He informed that a five-member team from the Communist Party of India met Governor Bhalla some days back and demand a political solution of the intricate Manipur Problem. CPM state secretary Khetrimayum Santa told IPA for sustainable peace in strife-torn Manipur, political reconciliation is the only answer; administrative action can be more effective if a political solution is reached.

The other significant and mentioned aspect of the current Manipur situation is that the tribal organisations are continuing their 'contact programmes' with civil society organisations and political personalities not only in Manipur but also in other places, notably New Delhi. This is, of course, in addition to their interaction with Union government officials. Between January 9 and 21, a team of Kuki-Zo Council members was on their second leg of 'contact' programme and held meetings at Aizwal with representatives of tribal outfits and Mizoram chief minister Lalduhoma (January 12), with retired bureaucrats, with Kuki-Zo MLAs who were in New Delhi, with New Delhi-based civil society organisation representatives, with Union home ministry officials (January 17) and finally on January 18 with a high-ranking Army official, with whom the home ministry meeting details were shared.

According to informed sources, the home ministry officials impressed upon the Kuki-Zo Council delegation the need for stopping violence for preparing the ground for meaningful discussions on their demands. The first leg was organised on December 7, 2024 at Shillong and in Kangpokpi district. These details have been provided by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum, which is described by the organisation as a conglomerate of recognised tribes in Churachandpur district. Earlier from December 23 to 25 a fasting and prayer schedule was organised by Joint Prayer Fellowship, Lamka at Kawnpui for realising the ultimate objective of "a separate administration" (union territory with legislature) for tribals. Those who took part in this programme included, among others, Rev Taring Mama from Arunachal and Bro. Arvind Dais from Goa. (IPA Service)

## China's latest AI model DeepSeek poses a challenge to Indian developers

By Anjan Roy

The sudden emergence of a Chinese AI model has upset the settled world of Western AI industry. The Chinese had released its indigenously developed AI machine in the third week of January 2025. What followed thereafter is anarchy. Technology majors of America suffered market capitalisation loss that no one had seen before.

Nvidia, until then the darling and indomitable leader in sophisticated chip manufacturing industry, was regaining monarch. But at one go, Nvidia's market value dropped by \$500 billion. Other technology stocks, including AI major OpenAI, which had developed and released the ChatGPT machine, also suffered humiliation.

Now, the phalanx of the US technology supers, including Microsoft and Open AI, are hitting back at the Chinese AI model, DeepSeek. Overcoming the initial shock, they are now alleging that the Chinese AI modellers have stolen from the US OpenAI model and built its engine on the basis of the US developers.

At the same time, the limitations of the Chinese wunderkind is becoming more visible. This is being confirmed by the Indian technology sector leaders as well. The Chinese AI model has been trained so that it should remain within the parameters of the Chinese Communist Party guidelines on geopolitics or society.

When the Chinese model is being cheered on the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 in which protestors were killed, the Chinese model refused to answer. Instead, the DeepSeek engine said: "let us talk about something else".

Indian technology buffs also report that the Chinese model refuses to elaborate on the spat between India and China over Arunachal Pradesh. Nor are replies provided on questions relating to Tibet and its autonomous status. The answers given are apparently only within the

broad parameters of the policies of the Chinese government.

The primary reason why the release of the Chinese AI model had rattled the entire US stock market and eroded the value of its technology majors is that the model has reportedly been trained at a fraction of the costs incurred by the earlier OpenAI's Chat GPT engine.

While OpenAI spent upwards of a billion dollars, the Chinese model has been

trained at just \$5.6 million. Such cheaper models can make all the difference in the commercial aspects of the engines. They would beat hands down on the market, where the buyer would seek out such cost-effective solutions.

The entire brouhaha over the Chinese AI model has an altogether different lesson for India. After all, the OpenAI model was available and Indian tech industry players were aware of what was going on. However, not one Indian technology major had achieved anything remotely comparable to the Chinese company.

Immediately after the release of the Chinese model, the newly elected US president Donald Trump had taken note of it and said this should work as an eye-opener for the US industry. That a Chinese company could come out with such an engine when the country of origin was cut out from the market for sophis-

ticated chips and other technology products, showed the Chinese ingenuity at the game. The Chinese developers have overcome all the limitations imposed on them by the Americans by suspending supplies of key components... Despite their supply cuts, the Chinese entrepreneurs and their research teams have come up with such products. India has far better relations with the Americans and Indians are in a position of front runners in American companies. Despite that the Indian companies and technology specialists could not come up with this sort of innovation on their own.

Moreover, these developments have a special significance for the future of AI tech in Indian industry. The Open AI software or the Chinese one as well, could act to throw out the prevailing supply chains. Indian industry which is working as lower end providers of IT services and coding jobs, may find their work space eaten up by these AI models.

Some industry experts believe that the entire current day organisational structure of the IT and IT Services industry is set to change drastically. What will happen to the Indian IT products suppliers to the International majors? These experts feel that India must start thinking about what was to come and how to mitigate the adverse impact of these developments. India had been a world champion and had beaten the Chinese in the IT services sector. It now looks that the Chinese would cut the ground under the feet of the Indian ITeS industry. This could be a huge blow for the country as a whole as the ITeS industry has major macro economic impact on India. When India had witnessed growth without much contribution to jobs creation, the labour intensive ITeS industry had provided a much needed succour. If that sources dry up, it will be a major calamity. (IPA Service)





## Kolkata Diary

## The City of Joy Speaks

By: Dr. Ratan Bhattacharjee

The International Kolkata Book Fair, one of Asia's largest literary events, is held annually in Kolkata, drawing millions with its diverse range of books and rich cultural activities. From the Frankfurt Book Fair, a group of young Bengali publishers drew inspiration during their visit in 1974 and 1975. And on March 5, 1976, the first-ever Kolkata Book Fair kicked off with just 52 book stalls, established in 1976, it features international publishers, authors, and a special pavilion for a guest country, promoting cross-cultural exchange. The fair includes literary discussions, book launches, and performances, celebrating the region's vibrant literary heritage. Since 1996, barring the two years in between the fair was not held. The 48th Kolkata Book Fair inaugurated by Mamata Banerjee in the presence of German Ambassador Phillip Ackermann as Germany shines as the theme country at the book fair. India has shared a relationship with Germany from the very beginning said Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee after the inauguration on Jan 28. She also mentions that Bengal has one more great connection with Germany as the great hero Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose shared a deep connection with Germany and his daughter Anita lives there even today. Germany is a pioneer for book fairs, the Frankfurt book fair is particularly popular and inspires the book reader globally. Nowadays when book reading habit is losing its heyday, this sort of book fair all over India has a great significance. German Ambassador to India and Bhutan Philip Ackermann called the Kolkata book fair a Kumbh mela, Bengali style. He also said, Calcutta is the intellectual and artistic heart of India with its rich multicultural heritage, its museums, its mes-

merising festivals. Given the city's legacy of reading, intellectual exchange and knowledge sharing, I think there is simply no better location for a book fair. The organizers of the 48th International Book Fair are hopeful of attracting a large number of book buyers. In the Executive Committee Tridib Kumar Chatterjee is the President and Sudhanshu Sekhar Dey is General Secretary who organizes the fair for the last 48 years. This largest literary event brings together global literature and rich cultural experiences. Millions celebrate books authors and diverse cultural activities. It is the pride of the City of Joy that here we have to cross Shakespeare Sarani everyday or sit in the T.S. Eliot Park or pass evening on Vidyasagar Setu. This book fair has a Record-breaking 1,057 book stalls which featured, highest in fair's history iconic gates, and mascots Haso and Hasi are great ideas loved by the visitors. Tridib Chatterjee, President of the Publishers and Booksellers Guild, some of the pathways inside the fair premises have been named after eminent literary personalities from Germany, such as Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, Rainer Marier Rilke, and others. The inauguration ceremony featured dignitaries, including Dr Marla Stuckenberger, Regional Director of the Goethe-Institut, South Asia, and renowned writer Abul Bashir, who was honoured with the Guild Lifetime Literary Award, accompanied by a cash prize of Rs 2,00,000. Besides Germany, other foreign participants in this year's book fair include Argentina, Spain, Peru, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Nepal.

According to the organisers, the Publishers and Booksellers Guild, this would be the first time that Bangladesh has not been a participant in the International Kolkata Book Fair. Bengali literature holds a



significant place in the Kolkata book fair. It is here that we could access the works of our Bangladeshi fellows, and read Bengali writers from the other side of the border who made significant contributions to Bengali language. Song of Tagore is their national anthem like that of India. Absence of Bangladesh in the Book Fair is a big loss to Bengali book lovers. The absence of Bangladesh is regretted by Sunandan Roychowdhury of Sampark Publishing who translated and published an anthology of essays by the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina. Language and literature was the main motivation behind the birth of Bangladesh, erstwhile East Pakistan during the liberation movement. West Bengal and Bangladesh, even after the two Partitions, have always shared a close relationship. Bangladesh has long been part of the larger sociocultural entity of Bengal, and as such their absence in the book fair is a very sorry development, said Mihir Chakraborty, writer and spokesperson of the 1961-who founded Nandimukh Sansad publishing house, said barring Bangladesh from a book fair in Bengal is a violation

of the freedom of expression. Publishers like Udar Akash, Ananda Publishers, Aajkal, National Book Trust and various University stalls Iskon, Ramkrishna Mission etc are arranging many events of book release and lectures in the Guild pavilion.

**Maha Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj**  
Maha Kumbh stampede developments are horrible and thirty pilgrims are seen dead and sixty injured in Prayagraj for which judicial probe has been ordered. DIG Vaibhav Krishna says stampede took place between 1 and 2 a.m., when a huge crowd broke the barricades, which led to casualties; 25 of the victims identified, at least 36 among the 60 injured undergoing treatment. The 2025 Prayag Maha Kumbh Mela, also referred to as the 2025 Prayag Kumbh Mela, was organized from 13 January and to end on 26 February 2025, at the Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj, UP. This event marks the completion of a 12-Kumbh Mela cycle and is officially termed a Maha Kumbh Mela, spanning 45 days. Since the Kumbh Mela has been organized for ages and its commencement date is unknown, calculating the exact 144-year cycle is not certain. The Maha Kumbh Mela sym-

bolises the victory of Gods over demons. In 2025, the event started on 13 January and is expected to conclude on 26 February. The Maha Kumbh Mela is the world's largest peaceful congregation of people. This gathering contains millions of devotees immersing themselves in the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati waters of which are considered holy by the Hindus, symbolising a purification of the soul and a path to attaining Moksha or liberation.

The 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela has made preparations for the attendance of up to 40 crores (400 million) visitors.. Many tourists and pilgrims come from various countries such as Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guyana, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Mongolia, Nepal, Netherlands, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom and United States.

**India creating History in the Space**  
ISRO successfully launches NVS-02 satellite; creates history with the 100th launch from Sriharikota. The GSLV-F15 with the NVS-02 satellite lifted off from the spaceport's second launch pad at 6.23 a.m. In Kolkata people were watching the events on TV with great interest.

**Celebration of Lunar New Year**  
Millions around the world celebrate Lunar New Year and ring in the Year of the Snake Firecrackers, parades and prayers marked the Lunar New Year as millions around Asia and farther afield celebrated. Firecrackers popped, incense was offered at temples and dancers and drummers paraded in Asia and farther afield as millions around the world celebrated the Lunar New Year.

Researchers and Professionals in Kolkata worried over US Citizenship U.S. President Donald Trump de-

clares end to birthright citizenship. The decision could affect thousands of Indian professionals working in the U.S. under H-1B and other temporary visas; President threatens to impose 100% tariffs on BRICS countries if they attempt to move to non-dollar transactions. In Kolkata students and professionals expressed their grave concern.

**Publication of Ayomoy**  
A New International English Magazine Ayomoy is all set to see the light of the day in Kolkata. A group of young intellectuals, poets, writers, journalists, educators, advocates and retired officials have taken initiative for the new publication. The magazine will cover a broad spectrum of socio-political and economic news along with literary articles as a part of in depth culture studies.

**KIAS (Kolkata Indian American Society) Begins a New Journey**

Kolkata Indian American Society (KIAS) begins its glorious journey as a registered Society. The society aims at focusing on culture studies of Indian and American heritage. In many ways the two countries have a similar cultural and democratic milieu and they share similar ethos of secular ideals. The society has opened its chapter all over India and abroad including the European countries. Dr. Jill Blondin Associate Vice Provost of Global Initiatives of Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond is in direct touch with the society and encourages the members patrons and MoU partners. The society already signed MoU with VSSD College Kanpur, Prema College Nagpur and many other institutes of renown in India. The University of Rome and Craiova have agreed to join KIAS and open chapters for promoting Indian American studies. (The author is a former Affiliate Faculty Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond and a poet who can be reached at profatanbhattacharjee@gmail.com)

## The Patharughat massacre: A forgotten chapter in Assam's struggle against British colonialism

By: Dipak Kurmi

Assam, a land of lush paddy fields and enduring heritage, cradles within its heart a somber testament to colonial brutality—the Pillar of Patharughat. This unassuming memorial in the Darrang district stands as more than just a monument; it is a powerful emblem of defiance and the indomitable spirit of the Assamese peasants who, in January 1894, dared to challenge the oppressive British administration. Overshadowed by more prominent events such as the Revolt of 1857 and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Patharughat uprising remains an overlooked yet poignant chapter of India's history. The merciless killing of unarmed farmers at this site is a haunting reminder of the ruthless colonial regime and an enduring tribute to the resilience and bravery of Assam's people in their quest for justice.

**The Roots of Discontent**

Assam, a region with a rich historical legacy under the Ahom and Koch rulers, enjoyed several exemptions from land-related taxes prior to British annexation. However, the arrival of the British after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, which ended the First Anglo-Burmese War, brought with it a drastic shift in the socio-economic landscape. The British, aiming to consolidate their rule, withdrew these exemptions and imposed harsh tax regimes. The imposition of land revenue taxes became a major burden on the peasants, and with every subsequent land survey, the taxes were increased, exacerbating the financial hardships of the rural population.

Throughout the mid-19th century, the British policies of economic extraction, aimed at fueling their colonial ambitions, caused widespread distress among the peasants of Assam. The revenue hikes and increased duties on land, along with the banning of opium cultivation in 1861, led to significant unrest. Peasant uprisings erupted across the region, with notable revolts such as the Phulaguri uprising in 1861 and the Rangia and Lachima revolts in 1893. These uprisings were part of a broader resistance movement against the oppressive policies of the British Empire, though the Patharughat massacre of 1894 remains the most notorious of all.

**The Patharughat Uprising of 1894**

By 1894, the peasants of Patharughat, a small village about 17 kilometers from the district headquarters in Mangaldoi, were once again agitated by the arbitrary increase in land taxes. The region had seen previous protests, but the situation had reached a boiling point with the harsh new revenue demands. In 1868, there had been a brief uprising, but it was quelled before it could gain momentum. However, in 1894, the peasants, who had long suffered under the economic burden imposed by the British, decided to hold a Rajimel (a village assembly) to voice their grievances.

The Rajimel, which had become an important institution for local people to discuss societal issues, gained increasing popularity among the rural population. Despite initial British attempts to suppress these assemblies, the people of Assam continued to hold them, and by 1894, the Rajimel had become an effective forum for organizing resistance against colonial rule. The peasants around Patharughat called for

a Rajimel on January 26, 1894, to protest against the exorbitant land tax hikes. Handwritten posters were distributed in the surrounding areas, calling the people to gather at Patharughat and decide on a course of action.

The Rajimel, which began as a peaceful assembly, was attended by thousands of villagers, both Hindus and Muslims, united in their common cause. They collectively decided to resist paying the new land revenue and to challenge the British authorities who had failed to address their legitimate demands. The local revenue officials, in an effort to buy time, urged the peasants to wait for two more days for a visit from the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, J.D. Anderson. However, the British government perceived this act of defiance as a challenge to its authority, and in response, a police party was sent to the village to attach the properties of those who had not paid the taxes.

**The Brutal Crackdown**

The police party was met with a growing crowd of peasants, and a tense standoff ensued. Despite the peasants being unarmed, apart from bamboo sticks and clods of earth, they were determined to stand their ground. In an act of defiance, they marched towards the office of the Tehsildar in Patharughat, where Deputy Commissioner Anderson had set up camp. More than a thousand people assembled in front of the Dak Bungalow, demanding a reduction in land revenue. When Anderson and his offi-



cial refused to negotiate, the situation quickly escalated. The peasants attempted to enter the Dak Bungalow, where Anderson and his officers were stationed, to make their demands heard.

The British officers, unable to control the situation with negotiations, resorted to a brutal lathi charge. The angry peasants retaliated, and during the scuffle, Police Superintendent Barrington was wounded. In a horrifying display of British cruelty, the police opened fire on the unarmed peasants. The initial gunfire left several dead and many injured, but the crowd continued to press forward. By the end of the massacre, 140 peasants had been killed, and over 150 more had been wounded. However, the official records of the time, including the Darrang District Gazette of 1905, downplayed the scale of the violence, reporting only 15 deaths and 37 injuries.

**Aftermath and the Legacy of Patharughat**

The aftermath of the massacre was marked by extreme brutality. The British authorities did not allow the bodies of the deceased to be retrieved for days, leaving them to be scavenged by vultures and dogs. This callous treatment of the dead compounded the suffering of the families and communities affected by the massacre. The folk songs of the region still recall the

agony of the peasants and the horrific loss of life in Patharughat. These songs, passed down through generations, keep the memory of the massacre alive in the collective consciousness of the people.

The Patharughat massacre was remarkable not only for the sheer scale of brutality but also for the unity it fostered among the rural population. Both Hindus and Muslims participated in the uprising, highlighting the communal harmony that existed among the peasants, despite their religious differences. The uprising, marked by its non-violent nature, was a spontaneous and desperate response to the harsh and oppressive policies of the British government. The peasants, armed only with sticks and their resolve, were not seeking violence but justice. The fact that they did not carry traditional weapons like spears or swords, which were easily accessible to them, further underscores the peaceful intent of their protest.

**National Relevance and the Struggle for Recognition**

The Patharughat massacre is often overshadowed by larger events in India's freedom struggle, but it is no less significant. The Amrit Bazar Patrika, a prominent newspaper of the time, wrote in its editorial dated February 14, 1894, that "In the Decan the fury of ryots was directed against money-lenders, in Bengal against indigo planters, in Pabna against zamindars, but in Assam, at this moment, it is open rebellion against the government." Despite its importance, the uprising remains largely unknown outside Assam, and its sacrifice is largely unrecognized in the broader narrative of India's fight for independence.

The British government's indifference to the plight of the Assamese peasants is a tragic reminder of their colonial mindset. Patharughat, like many other uprisings in India, demonstrated the inherent cruelty of British rule and the deep injustice faced by the people of Assam. Yet, the peasants' struggle did not go in vain. Though their demands were not immediately met, the bravery and sacrifice of the Patharughat martyrs eventually contributed to a broader awareness of colonial exploitation.

A memorial at Patharughat, built by the Red Horns Division of the Indian Army, stands as a tribute to the martyrs of this tragic episode. It is the only memorial in India constructed by the Army in honor of peasants and civilians who gave their lives for a just cause. Every year on January 29th, the people of Assam gather at this memorial to pay homage to the peasants who lost their lives in the struggle against British tyranny.

The massacre at Patharughat is an important, yet often overlooked, chapter in India's colonial history. While it may not have the same national prominence as other revolts, its significance lies in the courage of the Assamese peasants who rose against injustice, unarmed and united. Their sacrifice, though forgotten by many, continues to resonate in the collective memory of the people of Assam, who remember the brutality of colonial rule and the heroism of those who dared to defy it. The Patharughat uprising is a stark reminder of the resilience of ordinary people in the face of oppression, and its legacy continues to inspire those who strive for justice and freedom. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

## Mowsam Hazarika: A poet's odyssey into life and reflection

By Monikankana Das

Mowsam Hazarika wears many hats—writer, poet, environmentalist, agricultural expert, and mentor—but beneath these layers lies a person defined by his humility, warmth, and unrelenting pursuit of creativity. When I first met him during my tenure as a Media Expert in the Department of Agriculture, where he served as Joint Director, his ability to connect with people and inspire them stood out. His life's work—both professional and artistic—is a mosaic of purpose, empathy, and passion.

**Beyond the Field: Cultivating Minds and Creativity**

Hazarika's influence stretches far beyond his official roles. He is the visionary behind the Students' Science Society, Assam, a platform dedicated to nurturing young scientific minds. As a life member of the Assam Science Society, he actively promotes scientific temper and education across the state. Yet, it is his poetic spirit that brings an intimate dimension to his multifaceted personality.

In his recently published Assamese poetry collection, Mowsam Hazarika: Nirbachita Kobita, he offers a window into his soul. This anthology of 90 poems, complemented by six translations, captures a lifetime of reflections, emotions, and observations. Through themes of love, sorrow, nostalgia, and a deep connection to nature, Hazarika creates a symphony of relatable experiences.

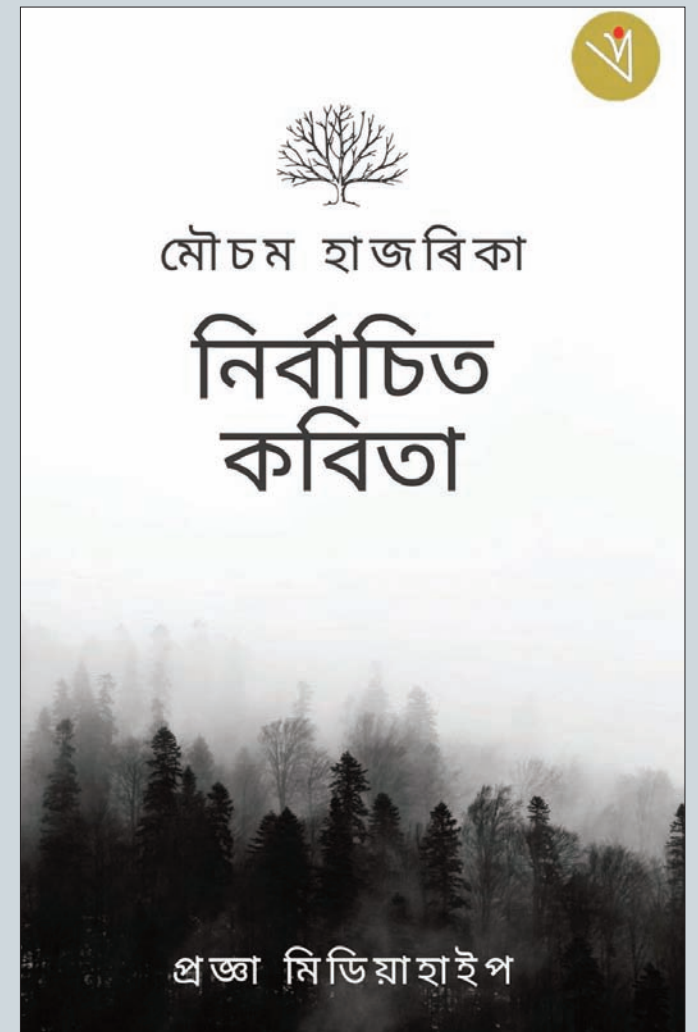
**Poetry as a Lens to Life**

Each poem in the collection is an exploration—of self, society, and the natural world. Whether painting vivid landscapes or probing complex emotions, his verses resonate with simplicity and universality. For Hazarika, poetry transcends art; it is a mirror of his inner world and a lens through which he examines life.

His ability to connect personal moments with broader societal issues is particularly striking. Poems like Politics Policy, Encounter, Flood in Guwahati, and For Bharlu reflect his deep social consciousness, transforming everyday realities into powerful, evocative art. These works challenge readers to rethink their roles in the face of modern challenges, making his poetry a call to awareness and action.

**Voices of Praise**

Renowned poets and literary figures have lauded Hazarika's contributions. Lutfa Hanum Selima Begum, in her foreword to



the collection, aptly describes it as a blend of personal truths and societal reflections. "The poet translates the real truths he observes in society into poetry," she notes, capturing the essence of his work.

Eminent poet Anis Uz Zaman writes, "The words hidden in your deep consciousness have come to life... These poems are a driving force of consciousness and inspiration." His words echo the transformative power of Hazarika's verses, which connect deeply with readers and peers alike.

Poet Nilim Kumar admires the thematic depth of the collection, particularly its focus on the interplay between humans and nature, while Bhupen Das describes the poems as thought-provoking and moving, stating, "They shake the olive trees of my thoughts."

**A Timeless Legacy in Words**

Published by Pragya Medhahye Publications and now available on Amazon, Mowsam Hazarika: Nirbachita Kobita is more than a book—it is a legacy. The inclusion of translated works ensures its reach beyond linguistic barriers, showcasing Hazarika's sensitivity and skill in preserving the

essence of his poetry across languages.

Hazarika's poetic world bridges the traditional and the contemporary. While his works are deeply rooted in Assamese culture, they carry a striking relevance to today's world, exploring themes like environmental consciousness, human connections, and societal disparities. His verses inspire readers to pause and reflect, offering clarity in a chaotic world.

**A Journey Rooted in Purpose**

Mowsam Hazarika's journey as a poet is a testament to the resilience of creativity. Amid the demands of his professional life, he has nurtured his craft, weaving moments of joy, sorrow, and introspection into enduring art. His poetry is not just an exploration of life's complexities but a celebration of its beauty and interconnectedness. In Mowsam Hazarika: Nirbachita Kobita, readers are invited to traverse this poetic landscape—a world that embraces emotion, critiques societal flaws, and honors the natural world. It is a collection that transcends mere literature, offering solace, introspection, and inspiration to generations to come.



# Pentagon prepares to deploy 1,000 more troops to bolster Trump's immigration

## 'Worst criminal aliens' to be sent to Guantanamo

WASHINGTON, Feb 1: The Pentagon is readying orders for the deployment of at least 1,000 additional active duty troops to bolster President Donald Trump's expanding crackdown on immigration, US officials said Friday.

They said roughly 500 more soldiers — largely a headquarters unit from the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum in New York — will be sent to the southwest border. And about 500 Marines will go to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where some of the detained migrants will be held.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because announcements have not been made, said there have been ongoing discussions about the deployments and the numbers could increase if additional details are worked out.

The Pentagon has been scrambling to put in motion Trump's executive orders signed shortly after he took office on January 20. The first group of 1,600 active duty troops deployed to the border last week.

The deployments reflect Trump's determination to expand the military's role in his campaign to shut down the border and send detained migrants back to their home countries. Troops going to the border are



expected to help put in place concertina wire barriers and provide needed transportation, intelligence and other support to the Border Patrol. Troops going to Guantanamo could help prepare the facility for an influx of migrants and do other support duties.

Speaking on "Fox and Friends" on Friday morning, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said he believes the U.S. can get "thousands of individuals in tents, secured in places at Guantanamo Bay."

But he also said there's the possibility that hardened criminals or violent gang members could also be housed there. As a result, he said the Defense Department is preparing detention facilities at Guantanamo

"that are basically supermax prisons" to be used to hold them temporarily.

Officials have been saying all week that there are likely to be additional troop deployments to help secure the southern border — potentially rolling out rapidly in the coming days. The eventual total deployed could be as many as 10,000.

Before Trump returned to the White House, there were already about 2,500 Guard and Reserve forces consistently deployed to the border. Officials noted that given the length of the nearly 2,000-mile border with Mexico, it will take additional forces to help put large rolls of concertina wire barriers in place and provide support to the Border

Patrol. The roughly 1,100 Army soldiers and 500 Marines ordered to deploy to the border last week have all arrived in El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, and many have already begun work.

Separately, the US military is providing military aircraft for Department of Homeland Security deportation flights for more than 5,000 detained migrants. At least some of those are expected to go to the detention center at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay.

Trump on Wednesday said his administration planned to send the "worst criminal aliens" to Guantanamo. He ordered the Pentagon to prepare to hold up to 30,000 migrants. He said some of the migrants can't be trusted to stay in their home countries once they are sent back. "Some of them are so bad that we don't even trust the countries to hold them because we don't want them coming back, so we're gonna send 'em out to Guantanamo," Trump said.

This is not the first time migrants would be held at Guantanamo. US authorities have detained migrants intercepted at sea at a facility known as the Migrant Operations Center, including people from Haiti and Cuba. (AP)

# Hamas hand over two Israeli hostages in southern Gaza

KHAN YOUNIS (GAZA STRIP), Feb 1: Hamas handed two hostages over to the Red Cross in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday as part of its ceasefire deal with Israel.

The militants released Yarden Bibas, 35, and French-Israeli Ofer Kalderon, 54, in a highly stage-managed and orderly handover to the Red Cross. Both had been abducted during the Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war.

Another hostage, American-Israeli Keith Siegel, 65, was also set to be released Saturday and was expected to be handed over to the Red Cross in Gaza City to the north.

The truce, which began Jan. 19, is aimed at winding down the deadliest and most destructive war ever fought between Israel and the Hamas militant group.

The fragile deal has held for nearly two weeks, halting the fighting and allowing for increased aid to flow into the tiny coastal territory.

A total of 33 Israeli hostages are expected to be freed in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners during the truce's initial six weeks. Israel says it has received information from Hamas that eight of those hostages were either killed in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack or have died in captivity.

Red Cross vehicles arrived Saturday in a location in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis where Hamas is set to release hostages as part of a fragile agreement that has paused fighting after more than 15 months of war.

A total of three male hostages are set to be released Saturday, expected to occur in two separate locations in the Gaza Strip, in return for the release of dozens of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

The hostages to be released, according to Hamas and Israel, are: Yarden Bibas, 35; American-Israeli Keith Siegel, 65; and French-Israeli Ofer Kalderon, 54. All were abducted during the Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war.

It will be the fourth swap of hostages for prisoners since the ceasefire began on Jan. 19. Fifteen hostages and hundreds of prisoners have already been freed in that time.

Also on Saturday, wounded Palestinians are expected to be allowed to leave Gaza for Egypt



through the Rafah crossing. It had been the only exit point for Palestinians during the war before Israel closed it in May. A European Union civilian mission was deployed Friday to prepare for the reopening of the crossing.

The reopening would mark another key step in the first phase of the ceasefire, which calls for the release of 33 hostages and nearly 2,000 prisoners, the return of Palestinians to northern Gaza and an increase in humanitarian aid to the devastated territory.

The imminent release of Bibas has brought renewed attention to — and concern for — the fate of his wife, Shiri, and their two young sons. All four were captured from Kibbutz Nir Oz.

A video of their abduction by armed men showed Shiri swaddling in a blanket her two red-headed boys — Ariel, 4, and Kfir, 9 months old at the time.

Kfir was the youngest of about 250 people taken captive on Oct. 7, and his plight quickly came to represent the helplessness and anger the hostage-taking stirred in Israel, where the Bibas family has become a household name.

Hamas has said Shiri and her sons were killed in an Israeli airstrike. Israel has not confirmed that, but a military spokesman recently acknowledged serious concern about their fates.

Yarden Bibas is believed to have been held separately from his family. Photos taken during his abduction appeared to show him wounded.

Like Bibas, Kalderon was also captured from Kibbutz Nir Oz. His two children and ex-wife, Hadas, were also taken, but they were freed during the 2023 ceasefire.

Keith Siegel, originally from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was taken hostage from Kibbutz Kfar Aza, along with his wife, Aviva

Siegel. She was released during the 2023 ceasefire and has waged a high-profile campaign to free Keith and other hostages.

The dozens of Palestinian prisoners to be released by Israel on Saturday include people serving lengthy and life sentences.

More than 100 hostages were released during a weeklong ceasefire in Nov. 2023. About 80 more hostages are still in Gaza, at least a third of them believed dead. Israel says Hamas has confirmed that eight of the 33 to be released in the first phase of the ceasefire are dead.

Israel and Hamas are set next week to begin negotiating a second phase of the ceasefire, which calls for releasing the remaining hostages and extending the truce indefinitely. The war could resume in early March if an agreement is not reached.

Israel says it is still committed to destroying Hamas, even after the militant group reasserted its rule over Gaza within hours of the latest ceasefire. A key far-right partner in Netanyahu's coalition is calling for the war to resume after the ceasefire's first phase.

Hamas says it won't release the remaining hostages without an end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

In the Oct. 7 attack that started the war, some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed. More than 47,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's retaliatory air and ground war, over half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many of the dead were militants.

The Israeli military says it killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence. It blames civilian deaths on Hamas because its fighters operate in residential neighborhoods. (AP)

# Budget answers expectations, raises questions for Gulf NRI

## Russian drone and missile attacks kill 5

DUBAI, Feb 1: Some provisions in the union budget presented on Saturday brought good news for businesses run by NRIs in the Gulf region while some questions remain unanswered.

Bhavesh Talreja, Founder and CEO, Globale Media said the Union Budget 2025 presents both opportunities and challenges for the marketing and advertising industry, with potential ripple effects on the Gulf region, given the strong economic and trade ties between India and GCC nations.

"The government's focus on increasing disposable income through revised tax structures is expected to boost consumer spending, which could lead to higher marketing and advertising investments by Indian brands, many of which have a significant presence in the Gulf," he said.

However, according to Talreja, the lack of a reduction in the 18 per cent GST on advertising services remains a missed opportunity, particularly for SMEs and digital-first brands that rely on cross-border marketing efforts.

"A tax revision could have further encouraged Indian companies to expand their advertising reach, benefiting Gulf-based digital platforms and media outlets," he said.

Talreja also said the budget's emphasis on digital infrastructure, AI innovation, and 5G expansion is a welcome move as these advancements will likely accelerate ad tech, programmatic advertising, and AI-driven marketing solutions.

"This is particularly relevant for Gulf-based media, e-commerce, and fintech sectors, where Indian technology and marketing firms are actively engaged. Additionally, the 79,000 crore Credit Guarantee Scheme for MSMEs will support Indian startups, many of which are expanding into the GCC, fostering stronger collaborations between Indian and Gulf-based ad tech and marketing firms."

Furthermore, India's increased focus on manufacturing, exports, and digital commerce is expected to enhance bilateral trade, leading to higher cross-border advertising investments and brand collaborations between Indian and Gulf businesses.

"As more Indian brands enter the Gulf market, sectors like retail, e-commerce, fintech, and travel will witness increased ad spending on GCC-based digital and media platforms, strengthening regional industry ties," said Tal-

reja. "While the budget sets a strong foundation for digital transformation, economic expansion, and entrepreneurship, a more inclusive approach towards easing tax burdens on advertising could have amplified industry growth. Nevertheless, the push for AI-driven innovation, cross-border trade, and startup expansion will further strengthen India-Gulf marketing and advertising synergies, making the region a key player in the evolving global digital economy."

Chandrashekar Bhatia, Chairman GBF Middle East UAE, hoped the new healthcare bill would be simple and easy to understand as it is focused on citizens above the age of 80 being exempted from tax.

"Till now, income up to Rs 12.75 lakh is tax-free. Apart from this, the facility of renewal return will be given for 4 years, which will give relief to taxpayers till the time limit. In this bill, punishment will be given instead of justice," Bhatia said.

He welcomed the finance minister's scheme in the field of exports, and the help for MSMEs in tariffs abroad. "But, still no good news for NRI and NRI investment," he lamented.

Kamal Vachani, Group Director and Partner, of AI Maya Group, and Regional Director, of the Electronics and Computer Software Export Promotion Council (ESC), welcomed the budget proposals to boost agricultural productivity through crop diversification, sustainable farming practices, enhancing post-harvest storage at the Panchayat and block levels.

"The plan to establish a specialised Makhana Board is a welcome move with the potential to elevate the Makhana industry and empower farmers in this field," he said.

He also said the full tax exemption for income up to 12 lakhs is a major step, which will benefit middle-income taxpayers in a big way. "It could lead to increased financial stability for a large portion of the population, particularly those in the middle-income brackets," Vachani added.

According to Vachani, the government's move to increase investment and turnover limits for MSMEs is a promising initiative. "The plan to simplify the KYC process with a revamped central KYC registry set to roll out in 2025 sounds like a positive and timely move," he said. (PTI)

KYIV, Feb 1: At least five people died overnight as Russian drone and missile strikes pounded Ukraine's towns and cities, local officials said Saturday.

Meanwhile, Moscow's troops continued their grinding advance through the country's east. A Russian missile strike on an apartment block in the Ukrainian city of Poltava killed at least four people and injured 10 more, Ukraine's emergency services reported.

Some 21 people were rescued from the five-story building, which partially collapsed following the attack, said the Poltava region's acting governor, Volodymyr Kohut. Rescue teams remain at the site.

Elsewhere, a 60-year-old woman was killed by falling debris from a downed drone in the Kharkiv region, local Gov. Oleh Synyehubov wrote on social media.

The bombardment comes as Russian forces continue their monthlong campaign to capture the key Donetsk strongholds of Pokrovsk and nearby Chasiv Yar, fighting their way across farm fields and woodland and engulfing small rural settlements. "Last night, Russia launched an attack on our cities using various types of weapons: missiles, attack drones, and aerial bombs," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on social media Saturday.

"Every such act of terror proves that we need greater support in defending against Russian terror. Every air defense system, every interceptor missile, means a life saved." The full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, which began nearly three years ago and shows no signs of ending, has killed more than 10,000 Ukrainian civilians, according to the United Nations.

Many have been evacuated from areas along the roughly 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line where Ukrainian defenses are straining to hold the bigger Russian army at bay.

Civilians have also endured hardship caused by Russian attacks on the power grid that have denied them heating and running water. Saturday's missile attack prompted emergency power grid shutdowns in seven Ukrainian regions, including Poltava, state energy company Ukrenergo said.

Ukrainian strikes also hit Russia, with air defenses intercepting nine drones across the country's Bryansk, Belgorod and Saratov regions, Russia's Defense Ministry said in a statement Saturday morning. (AP)

# Plane with 6 aboard crashes in Philadelphia, setting homes ablaze, unleashing fireball

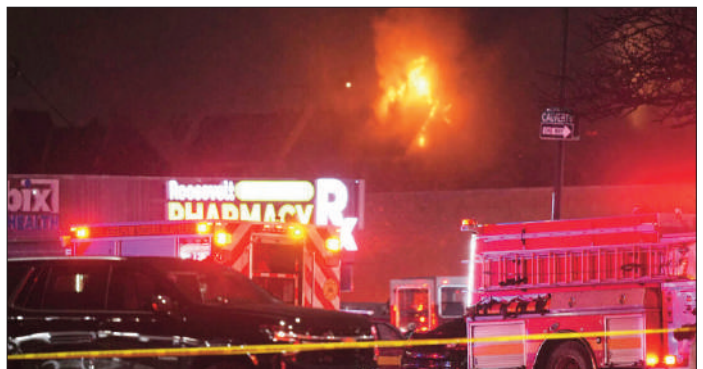
PHILADELPHIA (US), Feb 1: A medical transport jet with a child patient, her mother and four others aboard crashed into a Philadelphia neighbourhood shortly after take-off Friday evening, exploding in a fireball that engulfed several homes.

All six people aboard were from Mexico. The child had been treated in Philadelphia for a life-threatening condition and was being transported home to Mexico, according to Shai Gold, Jet Rescue Air Ambulance spokesperson. The flight's final destination was Tijuana after a stop in Missouri.

The patient and her mother were on board along with four crew members. Gold said this was a seasoned crew and that everyone involved in these flights goes through rigorous training.

"When an incident like this happens, it's shocking and surprising," Gold told the AP. "All of the aircraft are maintained, not a penny is spared because we know our mission is so critical."

Pennsylvania Gov Josh Shapiro said at a news conference late Friday that officials expect fatalities



in this "awful aviation disaster." "We know that there will be loss," he said.

The plane was registered in Mexico. Jet Rescue is based in Mexico and has operations both there and in the U.S.

The crash came just two days after the deadliest U.S. air disaster in a generation. On Wednesday night, an American Airlines jet carrying 60 passengers and four crew members collided in midair in Washington, D.C., with an Army helicopter carrying three soldiers. There were no survivors in that crash.

In Philadelphia, a doorbell camera captured footage of the plane plunging in a streak of white and exploding as it hit the ground near a shopping mall and major roadway.

"All we heard was a loud roar and didn't know where it was coming from. We just turned around and saw the big plume," said Jim Quinn, the owner of the doorbell camera.

The crash happened less than 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) from North-east Philadelphia Airport, which primarily serves business jets and charter flights.

The plane, a Learjet 55, quickly disappeared from radar after taking off from the airport at 6:06 p.m. and climbing to an altitude of 1,600 feet (487 meters). It was registered to a company operating as Med Jets, according to the flight tracking website Flight Aware.

President Donald Trump posted on social media platform Truth Social it was "so sad" to see the crash.

"More innocent souls lost," he said. "Our people are totally engaged."

A continuous stream of police vehicles and fire trucks initially poured at the crash site, taking over business parking lots as emergency workers responded. Within about an hour, the cry of sirens and shouted orders had faded into relative quiet at the edges of the closed-off area, and darkness settled in as drivers passing by peered out trying to see what was happening.

The plane crashed in a busy intersection near Roosevelt Mall, an outdoor shopping center in the densely populated neighborhood of Rhawnhurst.

One cellphone video taken by a

witness moments after the crash showed a chaotic scene with debris scattered across the intersection. A wall of orange glowed just beyond as a plume of black smoke quickly rose into the sky and sirens blared.

Michael Schiavone, 37, was sitting at his home in Mayfair, a nearby neighborhood, when he heard a loud bang and his house shook. He said it felt like a mini earthquake and when he checked his home security camera footage, he said it looked like a missile was coming down.

"There was a large explosion, so I thought we were under attack for a second," he said.

The plane's owner, Jet Rescue, provides global air ambulance services. The company flew baseball hall of fame David Ortiz to Boston after he was shot in the Dominican Republic in 2019 and was involved in transporting patients critically ill with COVID-19.

The FAA said the National Transportation Safety Board will lead the investigation. The NTSB, which investigates air crashes, said it was gathering information about the crash. (AP)

# Blockades, mass rally set in Serbia to mark 3 months since

NOVI SAD (SERBIA), Feb 1: Serbia's students will lead mass demonstrations and blockades of three bridges over the Danube river in the northern city of Novi Sad on Saturday to mark three months since a concrete canopy crashed down at a train station there, killing 15 people.

The collapse on November 1 of the huge concrete construction has sparked a wide anti-corruption movement and months of street student-led protests against the populist authorities in the Balkan country.

Many in Serbia believe that the collapse was essentially caused by government corruption in a large infrastructure project with Chinese state companies.

Critics believe graft led to a sloppy job during the reconstruction of the Novi Sad train station, poor oversight and disrespect of existing safety regulations.

Tens of thousands of people are expected to converge in Novi Sad later on Saturday for the blockades, dubbed "Three Months — Three Bridges." The blockade of one of the bridges is set to extend until Sunday.

University students have taken a

leading role in the protests that have developed into the most serious challenge in years to the country's powerful populist leader, President Aleksandar Vucic.

Persistent demonstrations forced the resignation of Prime Minister Milos Vucевич earlier this week and various concessions from the populist government as it seeks to quell growing resistance.

Thousands of people already came out on Friday evening in Novi Sad to welcome hundreds of students from Belgrade who had walked for two days to join the bridge blockades.

Students from Novi Sad put a small red carpet out for the Belgrade crowd as thousands waved and many cried, illustrating high emotions over the November accident and the feeling of solidarity and togetherness in the protests.

Apart from Novi Sad and Belgrade, daily protests and traffic blockades have been held throughout Serbia, often marred by incidents, including cars ramming into protesters.

One such incident happened in Belgrade on Friday, leaving two women injured after they were struck by a car. (AP)



# Manipur govt fully committed to fence border: CM Biren Singh

**IMPHAL, Feb 1:** Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Saturday said his government is fully committed to fencing the borders, identifying new immigrants and eradicating drugs from the state.

Speaking at a public interaction programme at Kumbi in Bishnupur district, Singh said the state government is committed to ensure that there is no further disturbance to the future generations.

"We remain steadfast in our objective to fence the border, identify new immigrants, regulate the entry of foreigners with issuing of passes and completely eradicate drugs from the state. This is a promise of BJP and the state government and we will not stop until these are achieved."

The chief minister said, "Only the BJP can save Manipur and indigenous people. No other party can save the state as all they have done is divide and destroy the state. For many years, the people of the state demanded im-



plementation of inner line permit (ILP) to protect the small population of the state but no parties gave it except BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi."

Singh said internally displaced people will not be allowed to go to insecure places.

"We have allowed some 2,000 people to return after their places have been identified as safe and secure. The remaining will be allowed to return

after detailed observation. As of now, more than 500 displaced persons have been given employment."

Singh said, "The conflict started after armed men suddenly attacked innocent public and engaged in arson of residential houses and forced people to flee from their homes. It is the government's duty to make sure those displaced return to their homes. If the government had started the conflict, it could have declared the conflict had ended. However, that is not the case."

The CM said many security personnel from BSF, Assam Rifles and police have died defending the innocent public from the attacks of the enemies who want to divide the state.

"These enemies are the armed men who want to break the state into two. We are trying to end this conflict. Meanwhile, security is being provided with the assistance of the Centre and with god's grace there has been relative peace for the last four to five months," Singh added. (PTI)

# STEM Education Lab and Vasundhara Soil Organic Carbon Detection Laboratory inaugurated in Shillong

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** The North East Centre for Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR), an autonomous institute under the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, recently inaugurated two key initiatives at its headquarters in Shillong – the STEM Education Lab and the Vasundhara Soil Organic Carbon Detection Laboratory cum Manufacturing Unit.

The STEM Education Lab, developed in collaboration with the Smart Village Movement (SVM), Meghalaya, Curiosity Gym, Mumbai, and the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, aims to transform STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education in Meghalaya, an official statement said.

This initiative will benefit around 100 schools in Shillong, equipping students with advanced learning tools such as electronics, robotics, and 3D

printing. The lab is designed to enhance experiential learning for both teachers and students by providing access to state-of-the-art equipment, structured training modules, and year-round support.

By fostering innovation and scientific curiosity, it is expected to play a vital role in strengthening the region's education ecosystem, the statement added.

The Vasundhara Soil Organic Carbon Detection Laboratory cum Manufacturing Unit was inaugurated as part of the PM-DevINE project titled "Promotion of Scientific Organic Agriculture in Northeast India," supported by the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER)

with technical assistance from the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC).

This initiative focuses on training 25,000 farmers across 250 organic-certified clusters in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur.

The Vasundhara soil testing kits, developed under this project, will enable farmers to conduct on-the-spot assessments of their soil's organic carbon content, helping them make informed decisions about organic farming inputs.

These kits will be distributed free of charge to farmers, fostering sustainable agricultural practices in the region, it further said. The event was attended by several dignitaries,

including D.P. Wahlang, chief secretary, Government of Meghalaya; Dr M. Mohanty, Head of the AI Division, Department of Science and Technology; Dr Arun Kumar Sarma, director general, NECTAR; Swapnil Tembe, IAS, secretary, Education Department & Director, School Education & Literacy, Government of Meghalaya; Mangsatbam Iboyaima Meitei, adviser (Horticulture), North Eastern Council Secretariat, Shillong; and Shaphrang Sawkmie, assistant research officer, State Council of Science Technology & Environment, Meghalaya. Officials and experts from NECTAR and the Smart Village Movement, Meghalaya, were also present.

No. DDB/BTC/GAD(SOPD)-1/2024-25/218 *Dotma, the 01<sup>st</sup> Feb. 2025.*

### PRESS NOTICE INVITING TENDER

(Tender No.GAD-01 of 2024-25)  
The undersigned invites fresh bids for 01 (One) No. of work under GAD(SOPD) for the year 2024-25 under Kokrajhar District from approved and eligible contractors registered with Public Works Department (Road/Building), Assam and Bodoland Territorial Council for execution of work for a total A.A. amount of Rs.25.00.000.00 (Rupees Twenty Five Lakh) only.

**Details may be seen at the website <http://assamtenders.gov.in> and also in the office of the undersigned during office hours.**

Sd/- Block Development Officer  
Dotma Development Block Dotma

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/1395

# Governor Parnaik extends Donggin Festival greetings

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** The Governor of Arunachal Pradesh Lt. General K.T. Parnaik, PVSM, UYSM, YSM (Retd.) has extended his warm greetings and good wishes to the people of the State on the joyous occasion of the Donggin Festival.

He wished that the vibrant celebration brings prosperity, happiness, and a bountiful harvest to the state.

The Governor said that agriculture re-

mains the backbone of Arunachal Pradesh, deeply intertwined with the lives and livelihoods of its people.

"Our community takes pride in celebrating numerous festivals that are closely linked to our agrarian practices. These festivals beautifully showcase our enduring cultural heritage and traditions, passed down through generations. Donggin Festival of the Adi community is a testament to this rich legacy, reflecting

the harmony between our people and nature. I urge every citizen, especially our youth, to actively participate in these celebrations and take pride in preserving and promoting our cultural heritage", he said. "On this auspicious occasion, I offer my prayers to the deities for peace, prosperity, and the abundance of blessings for every household and for our society as a whole", the Governor said in his message.

### INTERVIEW NOTICE

PM Shri Kendriya Vidyalaya Diphu, District : Karbi Anglong (Assam) invites eligible candidates to appear for a Walk-in-Interview in the Vidyalaya premises on 26.02.2025 (Wednesday) for the posts of PGTs (Physics, Chemistry, Computer Science, Biology, Mathematics, History, Geography, Economics, Hindi & English), TGTs (Hindi, English, Sanskrit, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies), PRTs, PRT Language (Assamese), Balvatika Teachers, Games Coach, Counsellor, Special Educator, Music Coach, Nurse, Computer Instructor and Yoga Instructor, to prepare a panel of teachers to fill vacancies purely on a part-time contractual basis for the session 2025-26 as per the schedule. Interested candidates must reach the venue before 09:00 AM on 26.02.2025. Kindly visit: <https://diphu.kvs.ac.in/> for more details, eligibility criteria, and the Bio-data form. The filled-in Bio-data form along with original and photocopies of all documents is to be brought at the time of registration. No TA/DA will be paid by the Vidyalaya for attending this walk-in interview.

**Note: If the number of candidates for any post is high, a screening test may also be conducted.**

Contact E-mail: [principal.kvdiphu2@gmail.com](mailto:principal.kvdiphu2@gmail.com)

Sd/-  
Dr. Surender Singh  
PRINCIPAL

No.GDB/15-FC/206/2022-23/580

Date 21/01/2025

### TENDER NO.12 OF 2024-25 INVITATION FOR BIDS (IFB)

Selected tenders affixing Non-refundable court fee stamp of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees Eight & Twenty Five Paise) only with at validity period of 180 (One Hundred Eighty) days which will subsequently to be covered and drawn up in the printed F-2 form are invited from the intending Registered Contractors of all categories of the Assam PWD (Bldg. & Roads) for submitting tender for the work below. The tenders will be received by the undersigned up to 2:30 PM 21-01-2024 to 10-02-2025 and will be opened on the date 10-02-2024 at 2:30 PM.

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Approx Estimated value of work	Tender Value	Earnest money 2% for GNL & 1% for ST/SC/OBC/MOBC	Cost of tender document	Time of completion
1	Const. of Community toilet No- 2 Dongargaon village Doimuguri Bathou Mandir, under 15 <sup>th</sup> -FC fund for the 2023-24 during 2024-25.	10,47,960.00	10,37,481.00	Rs. 21,000/- & Rs. 10500/-	Rs. 300/-	3 (Three month)
2	Const. of Community toilet at Gaglapara Bathou Mandir under 15 <sup>th</sup> -FC fund for the 2023-24 during 2024-25.	10,47,960.00	10,37,481.00	Rs. 21,000/- & Rs. 10500/-	Rs. 300/-	3 (Three month)
3	Const. of Community toilet at Goreswar Dev. Block office, under 15 <sup>th</sup> -FC fund for the 2023-24 during 2024-25.	10,47,960.00	10,37,481.00	Rs. 21,000/- & Rs. 10500/-	Rs. 300/-	3 (Three month)

Detailed NIT may be seen in all working days in the Office of the undersigned. Tender paper will be issued to the contractor or their authorized agent up to 11:30 AM in all working days from 21-01-2025 to 10-02-2025 in the office of the undersigned on payment in the form of Banker Cheque/Bank Draft/ Demand draft duly pledged in favour of the BDO, Goreswar Development Block.

Sd/-  
Block Development Officer  
Goreswar Dev. Block, Goreswar

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/1393

Government of India  
Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports  
Department of Youth Affairs

### NATIONAL YOUTH CORPS CALL FOR NATIONAL YOUTH VOLUNTEERS (For NYK-West Karbi Anglong)

Government of India seeks young persons for the task of executing the Digital Agricultural Mission and to help, channelizes their energies and capabilities towards Nation Building Activities by organizing them into volunteers groups. Youth shall be asked to spearhead campaigns/awareness programme about health, literacy, sanitation, gender and other social issues and may also be called upon to assist the administration in emergency or implementation of various programmes.

#### Eligibility:

- i) Education at least Undergraduates or Graduate or Post Graduate
- ii) Age between 18 and 29 years as on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2025

#### Honorarium:

Rs. 5,000.00 per month, all inclusive.

#### Duration:

For a maximum period of 3 months and minimum period of 15 days. This is neither a paid employment nor confers any legal right on the volunteer to claim employment with the Government.

#### How to Apply:

Visit the department's website: <https://nyks.nic.in> for details of the scheme, application Performa and apply to the under mentioned officer by 08/02/2025(Date)

Office of the District Youth Officer  
Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan  
Near Old Civil Hospital PO: Diphu  
District.Karbi Anglong-782460  
Assam

Sd/-  
District Youth Officer  
Nehru Yuva Kendra, Diphu  
(Additional Charge)  
Tel:03671-295086

M/No-7003433583, 8638760775, 9365727686

Email:nyk.diphu@gmail.com

Government of India  
Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports  
Department of Youth Affairs

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(Additional Charge)  
Tel:03671-295086

M/No-7003433583, 8638760775, 9365727686

Email:nyk.diphu@gmail.com



## Underwhelming budget; lacks vision: Tharoor



**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Describing the Union Budget as "underwhelming", Congress leader Shashi Tharoor slammed the BJP-led Centre on Saturday for its "short-term thinking" in targeting the voters of Delhi and Bihar, and asserted that a far more visionary approach was needed to take the country out of the morass into which it might be sinking.

In an interview to PTI at the news agency's headquarters here, Tharoor said he did not even hear the words "unemployment" and "inflation" from Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman during her budget speech.

Referring to the announcement that individuals earning up to Rs 12 lakh annually will not have to pay any income tax under the new tax regime, Tharoor said it would benefit the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and that the "freebies" for Bihar would also get it votes, but slammed the approach as "short-term thinking".

"The fact is that if you have a job and you are earning Rs 12 lakh or less, you have reasons to be happy. If you do not have a job, it is not clear from this budget where the job is going to come from. If you are living in Bihar and you are from an ally (of the BJP) party, no doubt you get the sops that will help you with the elections, which is a very curious message this government has sent," Tharoor told PTI.

"Middle-class tax cut for the Delhi voters and lots of freebies for Bihar. But this is the same party that

talks of 'one nation, one election'. I am sure that the people of Andhra Pradesh are thinking, 'if we also had an election at this time, we would have gotten lots of freebies too'," he said.

The former Union minister said this shows that it is good to have different elections in different years because then Bihar benefits more than it would have done otherwise.

"Broadly speaking, what are the major challenges facing the economy? We have a major unemployment issue, youth unemployment is at record levels and even college-educated youth are facing large levels of unemployment. What has been done for that is not clear from what we heard this morning," he said.

Asked about the announcement that individuals earning up to Rs 12 lakh annually will not have to pay any income tax under the new tax regime, the member of Parliament from Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram said if one has got a job and a salary of less than Rs 12 lakh, it will certainly improve his situation, but if one does not have a job, that person's problems have not been addressed.

"If your income is probably higher than Rs 1 lakh a month, you are very much middle class. We will have to see how much you benefit. The real problem is this government's whole approach on tax benefit, which is that it only addresses one aspect. With elections coming up in Delhi, where a substantial number of voters may benefit from it, that is clearly going to help the BJP to attract their votes," he said.

"Similarly, with a number of freebies being announced for Bihar, it will clearly get you votes, but that kind of short-term thinking is not what we need at this time. We need something far more visionary to take this country out of the morass into which it may slowly be sinking," Tharoor added. (PTI)

## BJP leaders hail Union Budget, call it blueprint of PM Modi's vision for 'Viksit Bharat'

*A middle class-focussed budget with a lot of tax reliefs: Jitendra Singh*

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The ruling BJP hailed the Union Budget on Saturday, with Home Minister Amit Shah and other senior party leaders calling it a "blueprint" of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision to make India a developed country.

Presenting the Union Budget for 2025-26 in the Lok Sabha, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman made a slew of announcements, including exempting an annual income of up to Rs 12 lakh from the income tax, and rejigged tax slabs.

In her budget speech, Sitharaman laid out a blueprint for next-generation reforms, including raising the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) limit in the insurance sector, simplifying tax laws, cutting duties on intermediaries, while providing enhanced fiscal support for welfare measures.

Hailing the budget, Shah said it covers every section, from farmers to the middle class, and every sector, from nutrition and health, start-ups to innovation and investment.

"Budget 2025 is the blueprint of the Modi government's vision towards building a developed and great India in every field," he said in a post in Hindi on X.

The budget, which covers every sector, from farmers, poor, middle class, women and children's education, nutrition and health to start up, innovation and investment, is the roadmap for "Prime Minister Modi's self-reliant India", Shah said.

"I congratulate Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for this comprehensive and visionary budget," he added.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh congratulated the finance minister



for presenting an "excellent and epoch-making budget", which he said was aligned with Modi's vision for a "Viksit Bharat".

"This budget has taken an all-inclusive approach, from empowering poor sections of our society to farmers to MSMEs to industries, and also strengthening research in advanced technologies like artificial intelligence," he said.

Singh further said the budget has taken "special care" of the middle and salaried class.

"I wholeheartedly welcome the decision to provide income-tax relief for annual incomes of up to Rs 12 lakh per annum," he said.

The defence minister said Modi's vision for making India self-reliant in the defence sector has got a "big boost" in the budget.

"Rs 6.81 lakh crore have been allocated for the Ministry of Defence for FY 25-26. The capital outlay of Rs 1.8 lakh crore on defence forces will further help in the modernisation, technological advancement and capabilities of our defence forces," he said.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president J P Nadda hailed the Union Budget as a "visionary roadmap" that embodies the aspirations of 140 crore Indians and lights the way towards Modi's vision for "Viksit Bharat".

"The Union Budget 2025 is a visionary roadmap that embodies the aspirations and dreams of 140 crore Indians, lighting the way towards PM Narendra Modiji's vision of a 'Viksit Bharat,'" he said in a post on X.

By focusing on four engines -- agriculture, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), investment and export -- the "Viksit Bharat Budget 2025" will drive the aspirations of the poor, youngsters, farmers and women, ensuring that no one is left behind on the road to progress, Nadda said.

"I express my gratitude to Prime Minister Modi, congratulate Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her team for the visionary and futuristic, growth-oriented and all-inclusive budget," he added. Union minister Jitendra Singh

said the budget reflected the government's sensitivity.

"Of course, it is a middle class-focussed budget with a lot of tax reliefs," he told PTI in the Parliament complex, when asked for a comment.

However, aspects that are not being discussed now will gradually percolate down in the mind and startle the entire world with some of the futuristic decisions, which were never expected from India, he said.

"One of them is the nuclear-energy mission announced by the finance minister and suggested by the prime minister. The nuclear-energy mission is not only going to add value to India's economy but is also going to give us a lead, ahead of several other countries," the minister said.

"This budget is sensitive and futuristic," he added.

BJP MP and the party's national spokesperson, Sambit Patra, said focused on inclusive development, the budget has laid the groundwork for "continued growth, ensuring a strong, self-reliant and prosperous Viksit Bharat".

With agriculture, MSMEs, investments and exports identified as the four growth engines, the budget will pave the way for bold reforms, innovations led by youngsters, women-led development, benefit farmers and empower all sections of the society, he said.

"Heartfelt gratitude to PM Narendra Modi and FM Nirmala Sitharaman for the Viksit Bharat Budget 2025, an ambitious roadmap that will strengthen key sectors of the economy while ensuring prosperity for all, especially the middle class," Patra said in a post on X. (PTI)

## Big wave against AAP and its leaders know it: Amit Shah

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Accusing the AAP of engaging in corruption and sheltering illegal immigrants, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said Saturday there was a big wave against the party in Delhi as it is running a "3G" government of "ghapla, ghuspaithyon ko panah and ghotala".

"The first G stands for 'ghotala wali sarkar' (a government which commits scams), the second G stands for 'ghuspaithyon ko panah dene wali sarkar' (a government that shelters intruders) and the third G stands for 'ghaple karne wali sarakar' (a government that indulges in corruption)," he said, underlining among others the issue illegal immigrants in the city.

Addressing a public meeting in Mustafabad assembly constituency, Shah claimed that Aam Aadmi Party leaders are aware of the "wave" against their party in these elections.

"People are going to sweep the AAP out with a 'jhadoo' (broom, which is also the AAP's poll symbol) this time... It's because they know there is a 3G government in Delhi," he told the gathering.

The time has come to free Delhi from this "AAP-da" (disaster), liquor mafia, scams and root out 'kattar beimaans' (outright dishonest), Shah said, appealing to people to vote for the BJP for development of Delhi.

"Don't be lazy even a bit or else those responsible for (Delhi) riots will return after getting elected... You have to decide whether you want those who threw Delhi into riots or those who saved (the city)," the home minister told the gathering. (PTI)

## Union Budget will help accelerate Bihar's growth: Nitish

**PATNA, Feb 1:** Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Saturday lauded the Union Budget, stating that it would help in accelerating the development of the state.

The JD(U) supremo asserted that announcements for the state, like a Makhana board and greenfield airports, did address the future needs of Bihar where assembly polls were due in less than a year.

"The budget is progressive (pragatisheel) and futuristic (bhavishyonmukhi). It will help accelerate the state's growth... I thank Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman," he said in a statement.

Kumar said the Makhana board would boost the cultivation of foxnuts, for which Bihar was known across the world.

"Greenfield airports would address the state's future needs. These will improve air connectivity in the state which shall now look forward to having a greater number of international flights," he said.

Kumar said the decision to enhance the capacity of IIT-Patna will cause technical education in the state to look up. He said the revised income tax slabs would provide much-needed relief to the middle class. (PTI)

## Jharkhand, its people neglected completely in Union Budget, alleges JMM-led alliance

**RANCHI, Feb 1:** The ruling JMM-led alliance on Saturday claimed that the Union Budget 2025-26 has "nothing" for Jharkhand as the state and its people were "neglected completely" by the Centre.

Despite the state's need for adequate central assistance to alleviate poverty, Jharkhand has been "sidelined", state minister and Congress leader Radha Krishna Kishore alleged.

Earlier in the day, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the budget for the 2025-26 fiscal in Parliament.

Kishore claimed, "Jharkhand has been ignored and sidelined in the budget, despite the fact that the state needs central assistance to deal with poverty here. The state is mineral rich but it has also been facing poverty."

He claimed that the kind of support Jharkhand is required from the Centre was not given.

"For me, it's a routine budget as it has nothing to strengthen the country's economic or social conditions. Many announcements have been made for Bihar only due to upcoming elections there," Kishore alleged.

JMM spokesperson Manoj Pandey claimed that "nothing has been proposed for Jharkhand" in the budget.

"The neighbouring Bihar has been given many projects but Jharkhand and its people have been neglected completely," the JMM leader said.

Bihar remained in focus in the presentation of the Union Budget for the 2025-26 fiscal with Sitharaman making several

announcements for the state, including setting up of a makhana board, financial assistance for the western Kosi canal and support for enhancing the capacity of IIT Patna.

Jharkhand's minerals contribute significantly to the country's economy but a "step-motherly treatment has been meted out" to the state, the JMM leader alleged.

"We had expected that the Centre would announce payment of its due of ₹ 1.36 lakh crore to the state. But, there is no mention of it in the budget. We want to ask why such an ignorant approach was taken towards Jharkhand," he said.

The state BJP, however, claimed that the union budget has taken care of all sections of society, particularly women, youth, students, entrepreneurs and middle-class families.

"The development-oriented budget further boosts Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Prayas' and it will help achieve the dream of 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047," Jharkhand BJP president Babul Marandi said.

The Federation of Jharkhand Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FJCCI) appreciated the budget proposals but expressed disappointment as the state is "nowhere" in Sitharaman's speech.

"Overall it is a good budget, especially for the middle class and small and medium enterprises. But, Jharkhand is nowhere in the budget, which is indeed disappointing. We hoped special package for Jharkhand in the budget," FJCCI president Paresh Gattani said. (PTI)

## Law ministry gets over ₹ 1,400 cr for carry forward expenditure on LS polls, EVMs

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The Union Budget 2025-26 has allocated more than ₹ 1,400 crore to the law ministry to meet carry forward expenditure for holding the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and purchase of new electronic voting machines for the Election Commission.

The legislative department in the law ministry is the nodal agency for the Election Commission (EC), polls, electoral laws and appointment of members to the poll panel.

According to the Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday, the law ministry has been allotted ₹ 500 crore for Lok Sabha elections, another ₹ 300 crore for identity cards for voters, and ₹ 597.80 crore for "other election expenses".

Separately, it has been allocated ₹ 18.72 crore for the purchase of new electronic voting machines (EVMs) by the election watchdog.

One control unit, at least one ballot unit and one paper trail machine make up for an EVM.

Carry forward expenses have been described by law ministry officials as a "book keeping" exercise where funds are given to agencies to meet the money spent in holding elections.

In case of parliamentary polls, the entire sum is borne by the Central government, while expenditures for assembly polls are borne by the respective state governments.

The provision for EVMs is meant for providing funds to the Election Commission (EC) for the procurement of ballot units, control units and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) units by the EC and ancillary expenditure on EVMs and destruction of obsolete EVMs.

EVMs have a life of 15 years following which they are destroyed under the supervision of EC's technical expert committee.

Announced in March last year, the Lok Sabha elections were held in seven phases in which nearly 97 crore people were eligible to vote.

Lok Sabha polls in the country have been described as the largest peace-time movement of personnel and equipment in the world. (PTI)

## Budget allots ₹ 1,024.30 cr for ministers' salaries, entertainment of state guests, ex-governors



**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The Union Budget 2025-26 has allocated ₹ 1,024.30 crore for expenses incurred by the Council of Ministers, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Prime Minister's Office, and for hospitality and entertainment of state guests. The allocated amount is a bit more than the ₹ 1,021.83 crore earmarked in 2024-25.

In the Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Lok Sabha on Saturday, a total of ₹ 619.04 crore has been allotted for the expenses of council of ministers in the coming fiscal. It was ₹ 540.95 crore in 2024-25.

This allocation is for expenditure on salaries, sumptuary and other allowances and travel by Cabinet ministers, ministers of state, and former prime ministers.

It also includes a provision for special extra session flight operations for VVIPs.

The National Security Council Secretariat has been allocated ₹ 182.75 crore, against ₹ 270.08 crore allotted in 2024-25. The provision is for meeting the administrative ex-

penses and space programme of the National Security Council Secretariat.

A total of ₹ 70.12 crore has been allotted to the office of the principal scientific advisor (₹ 65.72 crore in 2024-25) for meeting the administrative expenses of the office and the National Research Foundation.

The Cabinet Secretariat has been allocated ₹ 75.68 crore, against ₹ 73.98 crore in 2024-25, for meeting the administrative expenses of those of the Cabinet Secretariat and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has been allocated ₹ 70.91 crore (₹ 65.30 crore in 2024-25) for meeting administrative expenses.

The Budget also allotted ₹ 4 crore for hospitality and entertainment expenses, the same as that allocated in 2024-25.

This provision is for expenditure on government hospitality and entertainment of foreign state guests, official entertainment arranged at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on behalf of the vice-president and the prime minister, reception on national days, and investiture and ceremonies for presentation of credentials, among others.

The Budget also allocated ₹ 1.80 crore for expenditure on payments of secretariat assistance to former governors, the same as that allocated in 2024-25. (PTI)

## DMK mouthpiece flays a section of media for 'misinformation campaign' on Vengaiyayal crime

**CHENNAI, Feb 1:** The DMK mouthpiece Murasoli on Saturday flayed a section of media for their stance on the case related to the mixing of faeces in a drinking water tank located in the scheduled caste neighbourhood in Vengaiyayal village and alleged that certain publications have resorted to a misinformation campaign to tarnish the image of the state government.

The newspaper editorials were 'defaming the government' under the guise of investigative journalism, it said. "If they know the real culprits who mixed faeces in the drinking water tank (of the Scheduled Caste at Vengaiyayal in Pudukkottai district), then they should have informed the trial court or investigating agency," an editorial published in the Murasoli said.

"The only thing those media outlets need is to say something to tarnish the DMK government and to project themselves as human rights activists through their writing. The DMK government does not need to shield anyone. The law has taken its course," the article said.

The piece accused the publications of politicising the issue. The police investigation confirmed the suspects and the Crime Branch CID, which took up the investigation, had submitted before the

Madras High Court that a chargesheet had been filed against three persons for allegedly contaminating the drinking water by mixing human faeces in the water tank in December 2022.

"The investigation was completed after analysing all relevant evidence, including those obtained from the mobile phones of the three suspects and several others including forensic report, medical reports, and statements of witnesses. The charge sheet was filed in the court on January 20 against all three, by the CB-CID," the article said.

The police questioned a total of 389 witnesses in this case, cell phones of 196 people were seized, and 87 tower locations were examined. Besides, DNA tests were conducted on 31 people.

Further, the deleted images and videos from the seized phones have been recovered. The photographs taken from the top of the water tank, and the conversation on cell phones were also taken into account.

"The audio recordings of the accused talking to others are also the evidence. The voice samples of the people they spoke to have been collected. All this has been explained in detail by the government's lawyer," it said. (PTI)

## Will income tax relief announced in Budget be gamechanger in Delhi polls? BJP leaders hope so

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** While the Election Commission has barred the BJP-led Central government from making Delhi-specific announcements in the Union Budget, the income tax relief for the middle class is seen by many as a possible game-changer in the February 5 Assembly polls.

Presenting the Union Budget 2025-26, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that no income tax would be payable up to income of ₹ 12 lakh annually, a move that is aimed at giving a big relief to the middle class.

"I am now happy to announce that there will be no income tax payable up to income of ₹ 12 lakh (i.e. average income of ₹ 1 lakh per month other than special rate income such as capital gains) under the new regime," the finance minister said.

Delhi has 40 lakh income tax payers. With the Modi government's announcement in the Budget 2025-26, the BJP will try to win over the middle-class vote, which has been a crucial demographic in Delhi elections.

BJP leaders termed the relief a big boost for the middle class, as-



serting it will strengthen the party's support among the middle class in the national capital.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said this is an important announcement that will deepen the confidence of the middle class in the BJP.

"We have already made several announcements for the middle class in our budget, and we will continue to do more for them in the future. The income tax relief for those with an annual income of ₹ 12 lakh will have a significant impact on the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls.

"There is a large number of taxpayers in Delhi who will benefit, and this is a budgetary gift to the middle class," Sachdeva said. PTI.

Delhi goes to polls on February 5 with results to be declared on February 8. The BJP, which has been out of power since 1998, is making concerted efforts to dethrone the Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party which has been ruling Delhi since 2015.

Another BJP leader Vijender Gupta, who is contesting from the Rohini seat, said a large number of middle-class people in Delhi will directly benefit from the move,

boosting their purchasing power and driving market growth.

"It shows the BJP cares for the needs of the middle class and is going to be supported in a big way in the elections," Gupta told PTI.

On January 22, former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, whose Aam Aadmi Party is making all-out efforts to retain its stronghold for a third consecutive term, released a seven-point "manifesto" for the country's middle class, saying they have been neglected by successive governments and are a victim of "tax terrorism".

In the past, Kejriwal said that Delhiites have been paying over ₹ 1.78 lakh crore in income tax, but they don't get back much in shares of central taxes.

Subham Gupta, a resident of Delhi's Burari, welcomed the Central government's announcement, saying it will benefit a large number of middle-class families. Another resident, Surendra Arora, said the government should have also provided relief to those earning up to ₹ 15 lakh.

"In the budget, the government should have given some relief to

those earning up to ₹ 15 lakh. People earning more than ₹ 12 lakh will end up paying higher taxes," Arora said.

Last month, the Election Commission had directed the Central government to refrain from announcing any Delhi-specific schemes or initiatives in the Union Budget, citing enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi lauded the Union Budget, presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, as a "people's budget" that puts more money in the hands of people and said it is a force-multiplier that will increase investments and lead to growth.

According to the government, individuals earning up to ₹ 12 lakh annually will not have to pay any income tax under the new tax regime.

For salaried employees, this nil tax limit will be ₹ 12.75 lakh per annum, after taking into account a standard deduction of ₹ 75,000. Higher exemptions and reliefs have been effected under the new income tax regime. (PTI)



# Imported life saving drugs, medicines to become cheaper

*Knitted fabrics, smart meter costlier*

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Imported life saving drugs and medicines used in the treatment of cancer, rare and other severe chronic diseases, along with imported premium cars and motorcycles, are set to become cheaper with Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announcing cuts in customs duty in the Union Budget 2025-26.

However, certain items like interactive flat panel (touch screen) displays imported as fully built units and certain knitted fabrics will become costlier due to increase in basic customs duties.

In her speech, Sitharaman said, "To provide relief to patients, particularly those suffering from cancer, rare diseases and other severe chronic diseases, I propose to add 36 lifesaving drugs and medicines to the list of medicines fully exempted from basic customs duty (BCD)."

She further said, "I also propose to add six lifesaving medicines to the list attracting concessional customs duty of 5 per cent. Full exemption and concessional duty will also respectively apply on the bulk drugs for manufacture of the



above."

The finance minister also announced that "specified drugs and medicines under Patient Assistance Programmes run by pharmaceutical companies are fully exempt from BCD, provided the medicines are supplied free of cost to patients."

"I propose to add 37 more medicines along with 13 new patient assistance programmes," Sitharaman said. Although the government has cut duties on several imported items, including marbles,

granite and footwear, the impact was neutralised by a hike in Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess (AIDC).

Significantly, as per the budget announcement imported premium cars and other motor vehicles with CIF (cost, insurance, and freight) value more than USD 40,000 (about ₹ 35 lakh) or with engine capacity more than 3,000 cc for petrol-run vehicles and more than 2,500 cc for diesel-run vehicles or with both will become cheaper as the customs duty has been reduced

to 70 per cent from 100 per cent earlier.

Similarly, motorcycles with engine capacity of 1,600 cc and above imported in completely built unit (CBU) form will also be cheaper as tariff has been slashed to 30 per cent from 50 per cent.

Likewise, bikes with engine capacity not exceeding 1,600 cc imported as CBU will also become cheaper as tariff has been cut to 40 per cent from 50 per cent.

Motorcycles with engine capacity not exceeding 1,600 cc in imported semi knocked down (SKD) form and completely knocked down (CKD) form will also become cheaper as customs duties have been cut on these items too.

There will also be reduction in prices of imported motorcycles with engine capacity of 1,600cc and above in SKD form following a cut in custom duty to 20 per cent from 25 per cent and the same imported in CKD form will now attract 10 per cent duty, down from 15 per cent.

The budget also announced reduction in customs duty on imported parts of electronic toys to 20

per cent from 25 per cent and that of synthetic flavouring essences and mixtures, used in food and drink industries to 20 per cent from 100 per cent.

Similarly, articles of Jewellery, goldsmiths' and silversmiths' ware and ethernet switches of carrier grade will also become cheaper.

On the other hand, smart meters, solar cells, imported footwear, imported candles and tapers; imported yachts and other vessels will become costlier as cut in import duties on these items have been offset by an increase in AIDC.

PVC Flex Films, PVC Flex Sheets, PVC Flex Banner will also become costlier due to imposition of 7.5 per cent AIDC.

Certain imported knitted fabrics are also like to be costlier as the custom duty structure on it has been changed to 20 per cent or ₹115/kg, whichever is higher.

Interactive Flat Panel Displays which are imported as completely built units will also become costlier as the duty has been hiked to 20 per cent from 10 per cent earlier. (PTI)

## At Kumbh, Adityanath praises saints for acting responsibly post-stampede; hits out at Sanatan Dharma opponents

**PRAYAGRAJ (UP), Feb 1:** In his first visit to the Maha Kumbh after the January 29 stampede, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath Saturday praised the saints for "acting with such restraint" that day as he took a veiled potshot at political opponents, saying they tried to besmirch the glory of the mega event so that it "becomes a matter of great global embarrassment".

He said this soon after conducting an aerial survey of pilgrim management measures at the Maha Kumbh venue ahead of the February 3 Basant Panchami Amrit snan.

After landing in Prayagraj, he directly headed to Sangam Nese, the site of the stampede, to inspect it. He was briefed by Mela Officer Vijay Kiran Anand and DIG Vaibhav Krishna about the incident.

According to official figures, 30 people died and at least 60 were injured in the stampede on Mauni Amavasya.

"On the Mauni Amavasya day during the Amrit Snan, a tragedy unfolded here, and I must compliment the saints and seers on how, under testing circumstances, they acted with such restraint. Faced with the challenge that was there in front of all of us, as some 'punyatma' (blessed souls) became victims of a 'hadsa' (accident). But the saints acted in much the same way then as a family elder reacts when their family is confronted with some problem," Adityanath said while addressing a meeting of saints at the Maha Kumbh.

"The family elders remain patient whenever their family faces some challenge. Instead, the elders negotiate the challenge and ensure that the problem is resolved. You must have seen that some opponents of Sanatan Dharma were trying to test the patience of the saints so that the issue (stampede ahead of big Mauni Amavasya Amrit snan) becomes a matter of great global embarrassment," he said.

The opposition has been criticising Adityanath's government's handling and management of the Maha Kumbh and has demanded that the Kumbh management be handed over to the Army.

It has also alleged that the government was concealing figures, a charge that ran parallel to some media reports about more than one stampede taking place at the Maha Kumbh on Wednesday.

"I would thus like to greatly appreciate all the saints that the saints paid homage to the blessed souls who lost their lives and also performed their religious obligations towards Ma Ganga and to ensure that the Maha Kumbh continued," Adityanath said.

He was referring to the seers and all the 13 Akharas agreeing to postpone their early morning snan on Mauni Amavasya and taking the dip only when the crowd pressure decreased.

The seers also regularly appealed to the devotees to guard against panic and not to concentrate on taking a dip only at Sangam Nese.

Adityanath credited the saints for their actions and admitted that they have played a big role in the huge pilgrim turnout at the Maha Kumbh since January 13, when the Maha Kumbh that would continue till February 26 began.

"We would also have to guard against those who are trying to mislead (masses) - on all issues pertaining to Sanatan and never feel shy of conspiracy. And this is not just about now, but this trend has been continuing since the days of the Ram Janambhooni agitation. The respected saints had witnessed their behaviour and character then and now too. We need to guard against such people. Till the time there is respect for saints, the Sanatan Dharma will remain, and this Dharma is essential for the survival of mankind," he said.

"In the last 19 days, as many as 32 crore devotees have visited the Maha Kumbh. All those who have visited here are singing paens about Sanatan Dharma, the arrangements, and other things. This is not praise of any individual but of the eternal Sanatan," Adityanath said.

He also reviewed the preparations for the upcoming Basant Panchami Amrit Snan and issued necessary instructions to ensure proper arrangements.

On his way back from the incident site, he interacted with thousands of devotees, personally approaching the barricades to check on their well-being.

The devotees greeted him with chants of "Har Har Mahadev," "Jai Shri Ram," and "Jai Ganga Maiya", a government statement said. (PTI)

## Defence outlay pegged at ₹ 6.81 lakh crore for 2025-26

*9.53 pc increase over current fiscal*



**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** India on Saturday set aside ₹ 6,81,210 crore as defence outlay for 2025-26 over the current fiscal's allocation of ₹ 6.22 lakh crore amid the military's push for modernisation in the face of security challenges from China and Pakistan.

Out of the total allocation, ₹ 1,80,000 crore has been earmarked to the armed forces for capital expenditure that largely includes purchasing new weapons, aircraft, warships and other military hardware.

The defence ministry said the total defence budget of ₹ 6.81 lakh crore is an increase of 9.53 per cent over the outlay made for the current financial year.

On the capital outlay, the defence ministry said ₹ 1,48,722.80 crore is planned to be spent on "modernisation budget" to procure new military hardware and remaining ₹ 31,277 crore is for expenditure on research and development and to create infrastructural assets.

It said ₹ 1,11,544 crore that is 75 per cent of the modernisation budget has been earmarked for procurement through domestic sources. Twenty-five per cent of domestic share that is ₹ 27,886 crore has been provisioned for procurement through domestic private industries.

The capital outlay for the armed forces in the next fiscal is 4.65 per cent higher than the budgetary estimate ₹ 1.72 lakh crore in 2024-25. The revised capital outlay for 2024-25 has been estimated at ₹ 1,59,500 crore.

The overall capital outlay has been put at ₹ 1,92,387 crore out of which an amount of ₹ 12,387 has been kept for defence services.

For the next fiscal, the revenue expenditure that accounts for day-to-day operating costs and salaries has been pegged at ₹ 4,88,822 crore that included ₹ 1,60,795 crore for pensions.

The allocation for the defence budget is estimated at 1.91 per cent of the projected GDP in 2025-26.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh welcomed the overall allocation for the defence budget saying Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of making India self-reliant in defence sector has got a big boost.

The capital outlay of 1,80,000 crore for defence forces will further help in the modernisation, technological advancement and capabilities of our defence forces, he said.

This budget will further strengthen the security and ensure the prosperity of the country and take a "big leap" in realising the vision of Viksit Bharat (developed India), he said.

Under capital expenditure, ₹ 48,614 crore has been set aside for aircraft and aero engines while ₹ 24,390 crore is allocated for the naval fleet.

An amount of ₹ 63,099 crore has been set aside for other equipment.

A separate allocation of ₹ 4,500 crore has been made for naval

dockyard projects.

"In the current geopolitical scenario where the world is witnessing a changing paradigm of modern warfare, Indian armed forces need to be equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and have to be transformed into a technologically-advanced combat-ready force," the defence ministry said referring to the capital outlay.

In order to improve the border infrastructure and facilitate the movement of armed forces personnel through tough terrains, ₹ 7,146 crore has been allocated to the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) under capital head.

The allocation is 9.74 percent higher than the budget estimate of 2024-25.

The financial provision made for BRO will not only promote strategic interest of the nation in border areas by constructing tunnels, bridges and roads such as LGG-Damteng-Yangtse in Arunachal Pradesh, Asha-Cheema-Anita in J and K and Birdhwal-Puggal-Bajju in Rajasthan, but will also boost socio-economic development.

According to budget documents, the revenue allocation for the armed forces was ₹ 3,11,732 crore, which is 45.76 per cent of the total outlay.

The defence ministry said the government has been continuously allocating a higher amount for "sustainability and operational preparedness" of the armed forces since 2022-23.

Accordingly, a significant jump of 24.25 per cent has been made for it in 2025-26 in comparison to the budgetary estimate of the current fiscal.

"This allocation will address the requirement due to additional deployment of the forces in the border areas, hiring of vessels, increase in expenditure on longer sea deployment of ships and increase in flying hours for the aircraft," the ministry said in a statement.

Under the salary head of revenue expenditure, ₹ 1,97,317 crore has been allocated to take care of pay and allowances of the three services and any further requirement will be addressed during mid-year review, it said.

The budgetary allocation to the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has been increased to ₹ 26,816 crore from ₹ 23,855 crore in 2024-25.

Out of this, a major share of ₹ 14,923 crore has been allocated for capital expenditure and to fund the R&D projects.

"This will financially strengthen the DRDO in developing new technologies with special focus on fundamental research and hand-holding of the private parties through development-cum-production partners," the ministry said.

It said the increased allocation under the capital head of DRDO will further provide adequate financial resources in funding the projects to be taken up in collaboration with private parties. (PTI)

## Suspected GBS deaths in Maharashtra rise to 4, case tally at 140; E.coli found in water sample

**PUNE, Feb 1:** The number of suspected deaths in Maharashtra due to Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), a rare nerve disorder, have risen to four, while the tally of cases recorded in the state so far stood at 140, health officials said.

A 36-year-old man died due to "trauma to the respiratory system due to pneumonia" at Yashwantrao Chavan Memorial Hospital in the neighbouring Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation limits on Thursday.

The fourth suspected victim was a 60-year-old man from the Dhayari area off Sinhgad Road here who died on Friday.

The man was admitted to the hospital on January 27 following loose motions and weakness in the lower limbs. He died due to cardiac arrest, according to the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) health department.

According to state health officials, of 140 suspected patients, 98 were diagnosed as confirmed GBS cases.

## Bird flu outbreak in Chhattisgarh's Raigarh; 17,000 chickens, quails culled

**RAIGARH, Feb 1:** At least 17,000 chickens and quails were culled in Chhattisgarh's Raigarh after avian influenza or bird flu was detected at a state-run poultry farm in the district, officials said on Saturday.

The authorities have stepped up vigil within a 10 km radius of the affected area, they said.

After some chickens were recently found dead at the poultry farm in Chakradhar Nagar here, samples were sent to the Bhopal-based National Institute of High-Security Animal Diseases (NIHSAD) for testing, an official release stated.

The tests confirmed the H5N1 virus on Friday night, following which Raigarh Collector Kartikeya Goel convened an emergency meeting with senior officials to devise a strategy to deal with the situation, it said.

An official said that as per the standard procedure, personnel from the municipal corporation and veterinary and health departments conducted a joint operation overnight, culling 5,000 chickens and 12,000 quails and destroying 17,000 eggs and poultry feed on the farm.

He said the concerned departments were activated to ensure the situation was brought under control before sunrise and the infection did not spread outside that area.

He added that the affected premises were sanitised.

The affected poultry farm was sealed, and the 1 km radius of the farm has been declared an 'infected zone' and the 10 km radius 'surveillance zone', the official said. (PTI)

Following the increase in GBS cases in Nanded, Kirkatwadi, Dhayari, and other localities on Sinhgad Road, the Pune Municipal Corporation has been collecting water samples from borewells and wells for investigations.

"Yesterday, we collected samples from private borewells and wells in the GBS-affected areas of Sinhgad Road. In one of the samples, E-Coli bacteria was found," said PMC water supply department chief Nandkishor Jagtap.

Two days ago, a meeting was held of operators of private tube wells and borewells, and they were instructed to use bleaching powder solutions provided by PMC to ensure the bacteria is contained, Jagtap said.

"Our chemists gave them a demonstration on how to mix the solutions in the water. The borewell point in the Nanded area, which provides 30 to 40 tankers to nearby housing societies, has been issued a notice to use bleaching powder solutions, failing which action will be taken," he informed. (PTI)

cases.

"A total of 26 patients are from Pune city, 78 from newly added villages in the PMC area, 15 from Pimpri Chinchwad, 10 from Pune Rural, and 11 are from other districts," said the official release.

No fresh case was reported on Friday.

Most of the cases recorded in the state are from Pune and surrounding areas. A total of 160 water samples from different parts of Pune city were sent to the Public Health Laboratory for chemical and biological analysis, and samples from eight water sources were found contaminated.

An official said Escherichia coli or E.coli bacteria was found in one of the samples obtained from private borewells in the Sinhgad Road area. He said E.coli in water is a sign of faecal or animal waste contamination, and the prevalence of bacteria can lead to GBS infection.

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The total Budget allocation for the ministry for 2025-26 stands at ₹ 2,541.06 crore, marking a substantial increase from the revised estimate of ₹ 850.36 crores in 2024-2025.

Presenting her eighth straight Union Budget, Sitharaman said the government will promote homestays by extending Mudra loans, and improve connectivity to tourist spots to enhance accessibility.

"The state governments will be responsible for providing land to build essential infrastructure. To further boost tourism, hotels in the key destinations will be included in the harmonised infrastructure list, ensuring better access to financing and development support," she said. Outlining the broader roadmap, Sitharaman said, "We will facilitate employment-led growth by organising intensive skill development programmes for our youth, including institutes of hospi-

## Top 50 tourist destinations to be developed in partnership with states: Sitharaman

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday said the top 50 tourist destinations in the country will be developed in partnership with states in a "challenge mode", as she emphasised tourism as a driver of employment-led growth and unveiled a series of initiatives aimed at bolstering infrastructure, skill development and ease of travel.

The Ministry of Tourism has been earmarked a significant increase in its Budget allocation for the 2025-26 fiscal, with a focus on enhancing tourism infrastructure, promoting domestic and international travel, and ensuring the safety of tourists, particularly women.

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tal management."

States that demonstrate effective destination management -- including maintaining tourist amenities, cleanliness, and marketing efforts -- will receive performance-linked incentives, the finance minister said. The government will also introduce streamlined e-visa facilities and visa fee waivers for select tourist groups to attract international visitors, she said.

Reaffirming the focus on spiritual and heritage tourism set in the Budget last July, Sitharaman highlighted the special initiatives for sites associated with Gautama Buddha's life.

Medical tourism, under the 'Heal in India' initiative, will also receive a boost through public-private partnerships (PPPs), capacity building, and relaxed visa norms. (PTI)

## Former CEC Navin Chawla who ushered in reforms for third gender passes away

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Former chief election commissioner (CEC) Navin Chawla, who ushered in a key reform for third gender voters, passed away on Saturday, he was 79.

Condoning the passing of Chawla, the Election Commission said he led many reforms, including enabling third gender voters to exercise a preference to vote in a new category of 'Other', instead of being compelled to vote as 'Male' or 'Female'.

The poll body recalled in a statement that Chawla as the 16th CEC advocated for constitutional reforms to bring on par the process of removal of election commissioners with that of the CEC.

"His leadership and commitment to the electoral process will continue to inspire us at the Election Commission of India," the statement said.

Another former CEC, S Y Quraishi, told PTI that he met Chawla some 10 days back when the latter had informed him that he was getting admitted to hospital for a brain surgery.



"He passed away this morning at Apollo Hospital," Quraishi said, adding that he was cheerful when they last met.

Chawla was a 1969-batch officer of Indian Administrative Services (IAS), AGMUT cadre.

"Sad to know about passing of Shri Navin Chawla, former Chief Election Commissioner of India. May his soul rest in peace," Quraishi wrote on X.

A former bureaucrat, Chawla was the election commissioner (EC) between 2005 and 2009, and

then chief election commissioner from April 2009 to July 2010.

Chawla had a controversial tenure in the poll body, with the then opposition BJP accusing him of being partisan.

In 2009, CEC N Gopalaswami recommended to the government to remove Chawla, who was an election commissioner at the time.

The recommendation, on which the government did not act, was based on a petition filed by the BJP which complained against Chawla's "partisan" functioning.

In 2006, he then leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha, L K Advani, and 204 MPs submitted a petition to the then president APJ Abdul Kalam, seeking the removal of Chawla as an election commissioner for alleged partisanship.

The BJP also took the matter to the Supreme Court.

Born on July 30, 1945, Chawla did his schooling from The Lawrence School, Sanawar, before moving to St Stephen's College here.

He was assigned a number of responsibilities during the course of his civil service career.

Although there were occasional stints in other union territories, his work life remained largely in Delhi.

He became a Union secretary before being appointed an EC. He oversaw the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

Chawla was also known as the biographer of Mother Teresa. The biography titled "Mother Teresa" was first published in the UK in 1992, and has seen many transla-

tion and editions since then.

He also co-authored "Faith and Compassion: The Life and Work of Mother Teresa" with photographs by Raghu Rai. It was published in the UK in 1997.

As CEC, Chawla recommended to the law ministry a constitutional amendment to bring on par the process of removal of election commissioners with that of the CEC -- by impeachment by two-thirds of MPs present and voting.

Citing two previous episodes, including the demand by his predecessor for his removal, Chawla wrote to the then prime minister Manmohan Singh and urged the government for an early amendment to give protection to election commissioners.

The system for removal of CEC and ECs has remained unchanged though.

Chawla also pushed for allowing third gender persons to register themselves as voters in 'Others' or 'O' category, which is now the norm as EC identifies voters as 'Male', 'Female' and 'Others' or third gender. (PTI)



# Ibrahim Ali Khan's acting debut film 'Nadaaniyan' to release on Netflix

**MUMBAI, Feb 1:** Ibrahim Ali Khan, son of actors Saif Ali Khan and Amrita Singh, is making his acting debut with romantic drama film "Nadaaniyan", which will be released on Netflix, the streamer announced Saturday.

Directed by debutante filmmaker Shauna Gautam and produced by Karan Johar, Apoorva Mehta and Somen Mishra, the film also stars Khushi Kapoor in the lead.

"Nadaaniyan", which captures the magic, madness and innocence of first love, is a story of Piya (Kapoor), a bold and spirited girl from South Delhi, and Arjun (Ibrahim), a determined middle-class boy from Noida. As their two completely different worlds collide, they embark on a journey filled with mischief, heart, and the sweet messiness of first love.

Ruchikaa Kapoor Sheikh, Director of Original Films, Netflix India, said "Nadaaniyan" will take the audiences on an emo-

tional rollercoaster ride.

"We're thrilled to expand our roster of romantic comedies and offer viewers a glimpse into the world of young adults—one story at a time," Kapoor Sheikh said. Producers of Dharmatic Entertainment, the digital arm of Johar's banner Dharma Productions, said they are thrilled to partner with Netflix on "Nadaaniyan".

"Love has always been at the heart of our storytelling, and with 'Nadaaniyan', we're celebrating it in its purest, most youthful form. It's a story of connection, chaos and relationships that perfectly capture the essence of young love. Netflix, with its unparalleled reach, is the ideal platform to bring this vibrant and

young romantic drama to audiences around the world." The streamer has yet to announce the release date of the movie.

Actors Mahima Chaudhary, Suniel Shetty, Dia Mirza and Jugal Hansraj will also feature in "Nadaaniyan". (PTI)



# Pheiroijam, Gracy and Chayanika crowned 21<sup>st</sup> Livon Mega Miss NE

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Amidst a glamorous evening filled with elegance and cultural pride at the ITA Cultural Complex in Guwahati, Pheiroijam Christina Devi from Imphal, Manipur, Gracy Nandy from Shillong, Meghalaya, and Chayanika Handique from Karbi Anglong, Assam, were equally crowned as winners of the 21st Livon Mega Miss North East 2025. With no runners-up, the trio will share equal privileges and responsibilities, representing the region's exceptional talent and beauty.

The event, conceptualized by fashion entrepreneur Abhijeet Singha, produced by Mega Entertainment, and marketed by Mega Activation, has long been the premier platform for empowering young women in Northeast India. This milestone edition attracted immense enthusiasm during its eight-city audition tour and culminated in an intensive grooming and training camp in Guwahati for 57 finalists.

Pheiroijam Christina Devi, a BA English student at Royal Global University, Guwahati, hails from Imphal, Manipur. Gracy Nandy, from Shillong, Meghalaya, is a second-year BA student at St. Edmund's College. Chayanika Handique, pursuing her BSc from Diphu Government College in Karbi Anglong, Assam, credits her homemaker mother for inspiring her journey. The winners received a prize package worth over ₹50,000, travel opportunities, professional representation by Mega Entertainment, brand engagements, public relations advisory from Life's Purple, the official PR Partner, and the chance to represent India at prestigious international platforms.

The Grand Finale, graced by Fran Zafrá, Mister International 2024, celebrated the talent and cultural richness of Northeast India. The evening concluded with the winners embarking on a transformative journey of self-discovery and recognition, inspiring a new generation to dream big.



# Shahid-starrer 'Crew' raises ₹ 41.13 crore in two days

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Shahid Kapoor-starrer "Deva" has collected ₹ 5.78 crore nett at the domestic box office on its first day, the makers said on Saturday.

Produced by Roy Kapur Films in collaboration with Zee Studios, the action thriller movie made its debut in theatres across the country on Friday. "Bhasad toh abhi shuru huyi hai! #Deva in cinemas now, book your tickets," Zee Studios posted on Instagram, along with a banner, stating that the movie earned ₹ 5.78 crore in net box office collection (NBOC) on the opening day.

Directed by Rosshan Andrews, known for Malayalam blockbusters such as "Salute" and "Kayamkulam Kochunni", "Deva" is billed as an "action-packed roller-coaster ride full of thrill and drama".

In the movie, Kapoor is essaying the role of a brilliant but defiant police officer. It also stars Pooja Hegde in the role of a journalist.

Actors Pavail Gulati and Kubbra Sait round out the cast of the film. (PTI)

# Shabana Azmi's series 'Dabba Cartel' release on Netflix from February 28

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Streaming service Netflix on Friday announced that its latest thriller drama series "Dabba Cartel", featuring Shabana Azmi, Nimisha Sajayan, Shalini Pandey, Anjali Anand, and Jyotika, will make its debut on February 28. Set in the Mumbai suburbs of Thane, the series is created by Shibani Akhtar, Vishnu Menon, Gaurav Kapur and Akanksha Seda. Netflix said in a press release.

Directed by Hitesh Bhatia, the show follows five ordinary women and how their low-key dabba service spirals into an unexpected venture: a high-stakes drug delivery operation. "Dabba Cartel" marks an exciting new chapter for us as we collaborate with Netflix. This series is a dramatic tale of five everyday middle-class women reluctantly starting a drug cartel that ends up colliding with a massive pharma scandal that is under investigation," said producers Ritesh Sidhwani and Farhan Akhtar of Excel Entertainment. Written by Vishnu Menon and Bhavna Kher, the series will also feature Gajraj Rao, Sai Tamhankar, Jisshu Sengupta, Lilete Dubey and Bhupendra Singh Jadawat.

Monika Shergill, Vice-President Content, Netflix India, said "Dabba Cartel" marks the streaming service's first series collaboration with Excel Entertainment.

"This is a story that follows five women from diverse backgrounds who transform a simple idea into a game-changing enterprise. At its core, Dabba Cartel explores the contrast of ambition and greed set in a middle-class housing society. (PTI)

# 'LUCIFER 2' IS MORE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL: PRITHVIRAJ SUKUMARAN

**MUMBAI, Feb 1:** Sequels often rely on recreating the elements that made the first film successful but Prithviraj Sukumaran steered clear of this approach with "L2: Empuraan", the highly anticipated follow-up to his 2019 hit "Lucifer".

The actor-director said he wanted to explore new ground with "L2: Empuraan", which will take forward the story of Mohanlal's Stephen Nedumpally aka Khureshi-Ab'raam, a mysterious politician-don. The movie is the second part in the "Lucifer" franchise.

"Lucifer 2' has an intricate plot that will keep you hooked. When you make a sequel to a very iconic and popular successful film, the easy thing to do would be to repeat the same thing.

"Like, take all the cinematic highs of 'Lucifer' and redress them, and again, package them differently and present it and it will most likely work. But we didn't want to do that with this," Sukumaran told PTI in an interview.

The first part of the political action thriller, which came out in 2019, turned out to be the highest-grossing Malayalam movie of that year.

Sukumaran said the franchise is very special for him and that's why he didn't want to take a "safe" ap-

proach to the sequel.

"A lot of the character arcs in 'Lucifer 2' might surprise you. You might not like them, it might not be what you're expecting as you walk into the theatre. But this is the honest progression of the narrative and there is a progression to part three as well." Sukumaran said the sequel holds greater national and international appeal than its predecessor.

"Lucifer 2' is a way more national and international scale in terms of its plot when compared to 'Lucifer 1'. It's the reason why we wanted 'Lucifer 2' to have a proper Hindi release.

"Almost 30 to 40 per cent of the film happens in a fictional place in North India, and about 20 to 30 per cent of the film is in Hindi. And the Hindi portions will remain in Hindi in all languages like Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada versions." Before directing "Lucifer", Sukumaran was slated to helm "City of God" in 2011. However, his commitment to Mani Ratnam's "Raavanan" prevented him from taking on the project.

He, however, praised Lijo Jose Pellissery, who directed "City of God", as one of the finest filmmakers in the Malayalam industry.

"L2: Empuraan" marks the third collaboration between Sukumaran

and Mohanlal after "Lucifer" and "Bro Daddy".

Sukumaran said his relationship with Mohanlal goes back to the long-standing association between their families in Trivandrum.

"My mom used to take him to school. Mohanlal sir and my mother's side of the family knew each other way before he became an actor. So, my initial memory of Mohanlal sir is from when I was a baby," he recalled.

Sukumaran said he was amazed by Mohanlal's readiness to fully embrace the creative process, despite his illustrious career spanning over four decades.

"All the intimidation that you would feel about Mohanlal sir, is only till you meet him," he said.

Going forward, Sukumaran said he wants to direct diverse stories.

"The next film will most likely not have anything to do with these three films I've done so far," he said.

Produced by Lyca Productions and Aashirvad Cinemas, "L2: Empuraan" will be out in cinemas on March 27 in Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi.

Actors Tovino Thomas, Manju Warrier, Indrajith Sukumaran, and others will be reprising their roles in the sequel. (PTI)





# AUSTRALIA HANDS SRI LANKA ITS BIGGEST LOSS IN TEST CRICKET



**GALE (SRI LANKA), Feb 1:** Australia wrapped up the first test against Sri Lanka with a session and a day to spare, handing the hosts their biggest defeat in test cricket on Saturday.

Sri Lanka were skittled out for 247 in their second innings, succumbing to an innings-and-242-run drubbing. Their previous heaviest test defeat was an innings-and-239-run loss to India in Nagpur in 2017.

Spinners Matthew Kuhne-

mann and Nathan Lyon ran riot, sharing 16 wickets between them as they dismantled Sri Lanka's fragile batting lineup in both innings.

Kuhnemann, who had already snared a five-wicket haul in the first innings, finished with figures of nine for 149 — his best in test cricket.

Sri Lanka's resistance was feeble at best. They lost eight wickets in a session before lunch and another seven be-

tralia stamped their authority with smart bowling and exceptional fielding.

Dinesh Chandimal was the lone warrior in the first innings, scoring 72, while Jeffrey Vandersay, batting at number nine, brought up a counterattacking half-century in the second innings. His blistering 53 off 47 balls, laced with seven fours and two sixes, was a stark reminder that the pitch had no demons — application was all that was required.

Sri Lanka had hoped Vandersay would delay the inevitable and help them avoid their worst defeat, but with just four runs needed to surpass that unwanted record, he perished recklessly.

Sri Lanka's batting was a disaster — lacking partnerships, discipline, and smart shot selection. With just two half-centuries in the entire game, Sri Lanka's fragile batting unit is bound to face serious questions. Changes are expected ahead of the second test, which begins in

Galle on Thursday.

Captain Dhananjaya de Silva had spoken of reclaiming the Warne-Murali Trophy, which Sri Lanka had lost in 2019. But with Australia taking an unassailable 1-0 lead, the trophy remains firmly in the visitors' grasp.

De Silva also harbored ambitions of climbing to number three in the World Test Championship standings. Instead, Sri Lanka plummeted to seventh. (AP)

## Davis Cup: Mukund and Ramkumar walk away with easy wins, India lead Togo 2-0



**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Sasikumar Mukund returned to Davis Cup action with a fluent straight-set victory while Ramkumar Ramanathan hardly broke a sweat in his match as an untroubled India took a 2-0 lead in the World Group I play-off tie against Togo, here Saturday.

Togo had promised a tough fight in the build-up, even warning the Indian skipper to not take them for granted but their performance belied the exceptional results they had enjoyed coming into this match.

There was not even a semblance of resistance from the players of the African nation, making it a pretty dull contest, watched by about 1500 fans.

The opening match of the tie went on expected lines with Liova Ayite Ajavon, languishing outside the top-1000, lacking ammunition to test the 365th ranked Mukund in his home conditions.

The 28-year-old Indian needed just one hour and 15 minutes to walk away with a 6-2 6-1 win in the opening singles at the DLTA Complex.

Ramkumar then overpowered Togo number one Thomas Setodji 6-0 6-2 in the second singles which got over in just 50 minutes. A good fight was expected from Setodji but it turned out to be another lopsided affair.

It seemed that Setodji, ranked 1256, was not at his best as he struggled to put the ball across the net. His right arm taped above and below the elbow, Setodji's returns lacked sting as he made high number of unforced errors. His returns mostly fell on net or flew over the lines.

Ramkumar lost just one point on his serve in the opening set, making high quality serves while Setodji struggled to contain his unforced errors. He netted most of his returns that kept the points

short. Captain Rohit Rajpal did not need to get up from his chair even once as his players went about their business without fuss. With 2-0 lead in the pocket, N Sriram Balaji and Rithvik Choudary Bollipalli will look to seal India's place in the World Group I by winning the third rubber on Sunday.

Mukund, who missed Davis Cup action in the 2024 season by not making himself available for matches against Pakistan and Sweden, consistently returned on the backhand side of his opponent and charged to the net to make space for winners after moving Ajavon on both flanks effortlessly.

Mukund had an easy day in office but still Ajavon defended and returned well in long rallies that were expected on a slow surface. The Togolese player was largely left to defend.

The Indian often came to the net, looking for winners, and on one such attempt made a volley error that put him down by a breakpoint in the third game. He saved the chance and continued to charge to the net.

With Mukund feeding a lot balls on the backhand side of Ajavon, the Togolese largely returned with slice shots.

Consecutive unforced errors put Ajavon down 0-40 in game four, and Mukund cashed in on the third chance to take a 3-1 lead.

There was hardly any change in tactics from Ajavon, who was now serving to stay in the set in game eight. At 15-all, his backhand slice just landed outside the line and on the next point he hit his forehead wide to give Mukund two break chances.

Mukund stayed strong in his returns and on the first set point, Ajavon hit a forehand long. In about 37 minutes, Mukund had taken the lead. (PTI)

## 15-year-old Indian amateur Kartik Singh makes history at International Series India

**GURUGRAM, Feb 1:** Indian amateur Kartik Singh made history, becoming the youngest player from the subcontinent to make the cut in an Asian Tour event at the International Series India here on Saturday.

The 15-year-old Singh carded a one-under-par 71, bringing his total to four-over at the halfway stage, comfortably inside the cut line, which fell at eight-over at the DLF Golf and Country Club.

This was Singh's second appearance in a professional tournament, having previously played just one Asian Development Tour event.

The field, featuring stars like two-time Major winner Bryson DeChambeau, home favourite Anirban Lahiri, and LIV Golf League's Joaquin Niemann, was one he could have only dreamed of. Singh, ranked world No.1 in the Under-15 amateur category, credited his familiarity with the course for his strong performance.

"It feels unreal playing with Bryson, because normally I'm looking at him on TV, and here I'm playing with him in the same tournament, so it's a great experience," he said.

"I knew this is my home course, so I definitely have that advantage and then I know if my game is at that level and if I play my game, I'm able to compete with the pros.

Reflecting on his round, Singh

added, "The experience was very good today. I played quite well, I played one under. I was four under after 11 holes, but it's okay. I mean, I'm still happy with one under par on this course.

"Yesterday was not that good, but I'm still happy that I was able to make the cut, and hopefully I can play well this weekend."

The tournament has been affected by weather with round two only finishing on Saturday afternoon, and round three starting at 3:30pm.

Singh, who has trained at the DLF Golf Academy and received constant support from his family, remained poised beyond his years.

"My family has always supported me since I started golf. My coach, 'DP' has helped me with my game, and DLF Golf Academy and Callaway have also helped me with my practice," he said.

"I was practicing elsewhere the last three weeks, so I came back on Saturday. I only played this week, like the tournament week, only the normal practice round so I wasn't able to play the course beforehand but I know it so well."

A total of 10 Indians made the cut on the challenging Gary Player-designed course, with Lahiri (-1) leading the way. No other Indian was under par, with Gaganjeet Bhullar the nearest challenger at two-over. (PTI)

## Sepp Straka leads by 3 at Pebble Beach as rough weather awaits the weekend

**PEBBLE BEACH (CALIFORNIA), Feb 1:** Sepp Straka got most of his work done before the weather started to turn Friday in the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am, posting another 7-under 65 for a three-shot lead that left Rory McIlroy, Scottie Scheffler and everyone having to chase him.

Straka, coming off a win two weeks ago in the California desert, showed a game that works just fine at sea level in less-than-ideal conditions, particularly the final hour.

Out came the mittens and beanies. Down came the temperature, accompanied by a little rain. McIlroy went from challenging for the lead to making four bogeys in a six-hole stretch, before he finished his wild back nine at Pebble Beach with a 25-foot eagle putt to salvage a 70 that left him six shots behind. Scheffler took a walk down the beach on the 18th hole, turning a potential bogey into a par when he hopped down a pair of rock ledges to the sandy soil, managed to get his ball back into play and hit 6-



iron to the green. He shot 70 and was seven behind.

Andrew Novak got his first victory on the PGA Tour, which comes with a plaque on the wall off the first tee, not a trip to the Masters. Novak teamed with billionaire investor Philippe Laffont to win the pro-am.

The weekend at Pebble Beach is only for the 79 pros — Ludvig Aberg had to withdraw with an illness that affected him

last week at Torrey Pines — and for the hardiest of players.

Gusts approaching 30 mph are in the forecast, along with spots of rain. Pebble Beach, that felicitous meeting of land and sea, is a beast in nasty weather.

"Went from zero to about 20 miles an hour pretty quickly," Straka said of his final four holes at Pebble Beach, which including missing a 3-foot par putt on the 16th for his only

bogey of the round, and a 4-iron into 30 feet for a two-putt birdie at the last.

He was at 14-under 130, three shots ahead of Russell Henley, who had a 69 at Pebble Beach, and Cam Davis of Australia, who had a 68 at Spyglass Hill. "It's going to change Pebble a lot," said Tony Finau, who had a 67 at Spyglass Hill and was in a large group at 10-under 134.

"It's unfortunate because Pebble is pure right now, really pure. The ball is bouncing and anytime that's the case at Pebble, I think it's pretty magical to play. We'll have to adjust, just adapt as we do out here and we'll just have to do that on the weekend." McIlroy was magnificent with the driver and didn't get much out of it. Still, he opened with four birdies in seven holes — the scoring stretch at Pebble — until he missed the green on the par-3 12th, hit it heavy out of fairway bunker on the 13th and was out of position off the tee at the 15th and 16th holes, all leading to bogey. (PTI)

## Either Dube has become fast or Rana a batter: Sarcastic Buttler on concussion sub

**PUNE, Feb 1:** England skipper Jos Buttler didn't hide his displeasure at how India used specialist fast bowler Harshit Rana as a like-for-like 'Concussion Sub' for all-rounders Shivam Dube, who bowls military medium, in the fourth T20I here which the hosts won by 15 runs to take an unassailable 3-1 lead in the five-match series.

Dube, who scored 53 off 34 balls on Friday, was hit on the helmet by a Jamie Overton delivery in the second-last ball of India's innings, leading to the concussion protocol being followed.

Although Dube faced the last ball, but when India came out in defence of 181, Rana walked out to field instead of him.

The concussion protocol allows a like-for-like replacement and Rana was a tearaway quick replacing medium pacer Dube, who the Chennai Super Kings use as an Impact Player in the IPL.

Rana took 3/33, each wicket at a critical juncture, as India won by 15 runs. But the move by the Indian team management (read head coach Gautam Gambhir) left the England team high and dry.

Buttler claimed that his team wasn't consulted and they would

seek clarity from match referee Javagal Srinath about what exactly constituted a like-for-like replacement in case of concussion.

"Yeah, I don't think it was like-for-like replacement. We don't agree with that. I think either Shivam Dube put on 25 miles per hour with the ball or Harshit has really improved with his batting," Buttler said in as many words, and the sarcasm wasn't lost on anyone.

As for Rana's credentials as an all-rounder, he has a hundred and a couple of fifties at the first-class level, and averages 34.

Buttler, however, admitted that even with Rana as a concussion substitute, England should have still gone on to win the match.

"I still think we should have gone on to win the match, but yeah, we disagree with the decision. We had our chances to win the game, which we could have still taken, but I'd like to just get a bit of clarity around that."

Asked if rival captains are kept in the loop about possible replacement, the stylish batter replied in the negative.

"Well, there's no consultation. I think that's something, actually, as I came out to bat. I was thinking,



'who's Harshit on for?' And they said he's the concussion replacement, which I obviously disagreed with; it's not a like-for-like replacement," added Buttler.

"So, yeah, they said that the match referee had made the decision. So, we had no say in it or any part of it. But yeah, we'll ask Javagal (Srinath) some questions just to get some clarity around it."

That Buttler was livid was understandable as Rana looked like an 'Impact Player' used in the IPL and the England skipper is contemplating asking at the toss ahead of the fifth and final T20I in Mum-

bai on Sunday whether he can field 12 players.

"Yeah, he did (seem like an Impact Player). I should have said, maybe, at the toss next game, I'll say we're going to play 12 as well."

India's bowling coach Morne Morkel said that all they did was place a name to match referee Srinath.

"We only gave a name to the match referee. After that it's out of our hands. Harshit was having dinner. He had to quickly get up and go out. I thought he did an excellent job," Morkel said. (PTI)

## Yuvraj to represent India Masters in International Masters League

**MUMBAI, Feb 1:** Two-time World Cup-winner Yuvraj Singh, one of cricket's greatest left-handers, will represent India Masters in season one of the International Masters League (IML), which will be played from February 22 to March 16 this year.

A name synonymous with glory and game-changing moments, Yuvraj was one of the chief architects of India's victory in the inaugural ICC T20 World Cup in 2007, during which he famously smashed England pacer Stuart Broad for six sixes in an over.

He also played a pivotal role in India's ICC ODI World Cup win in 2011, where he was crowned Player of the Tournament for his outstanding all-round performance.

Speaking on his return to cricket as part of the India Masters, Yuvraj said, "Taking the field with Sachin (Tendulkar) and my other teammates feels like reliving the glory days.

"Playing alongside all of them brings back so many memories. For me, the IML is a tribute to the era that defined Indian cricket, and I can't wait to create some more unforgettable memories for all the fans who have supported us over the years."

Joining Yuvraj in the IML's family are South Africa's JP Duminy and Sri Lanka's UP Tharanga.

Duminy will play for South Africa Masters, while Tharanga will represent Sri Lanka Masters.

"Representing South Africa Masters in season one of the International Masters League is a huge honour. I am looking forward to playing in a tournament that will feature the greats of the game. Cricket fans can rest assured that the cricket they will witness, will be riveting and exhilarating," Duminy said.

Tharanga added: "I look forward to representing Sri Lanka Masters in the inaugural season of the International Masters League. The IML will be a great tournament, in which old friends and rivals will take the field and produce memorable cricket." (PTI)



# Sports and youth affairs budget raised by over ₹ 350 crore, Khelo India gets biggest share

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The government's flagship Khelo India programme to scout and nurture athletes at the grassroots level was the biggest beneficiary as the allocation for sports and youth affairs was hiked substantially by ₹ 351.98 crore in the Union Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman here on Saturday.

The ambitious scheme has been allocated ₹ 1,000 crore for the financial year 2025-26. This is ₹ 200 crore more than the grant of ₹ 800 crore in 2024-25.

Overall, the Ministry for Youth Affairs

and Sports was designated ₹ 3,794.30 crore.

"This will further strengthen sports infra, boost Khelo India and expand youth-centric development initiatives, empowering the next generation of athletes and leaders," sports and youth affairs minister Mansukh Mandaviya posted on X, lauding the allocation for his ministry.

The increase is substantial considering there is no major sporting event like the Olympics, Commonwealth or Asian Games lined up in the next one year.

The assigned amount for assistance to National Sports Federations has also been hiked marginally from ₹ 340 crore to ₹ 400 crore.

India is currently pushing through with an ambitious bid to host the 2036 Olympic Games for which a letter of intent has been submitted to the International Olympic Committee.

The allocation for Sports Authority of India (SAI), the nodal body for the conduct of national camps and logistical arrangements for athletes' training, was enhanced from ₹ 815 crore to ₹ 830

crore.

SAI is also responsible for maintaining and utilising stadia across the country.

A similar hike was announced for the National Dope Testing Laboratory, which will receive ₹ 23 crore this financial year. It had been given ₹ 18.70 crore in 2024-25.

The National Anti-Doping Agency's budget was increased from ₹ 20.30 crore to 24.30 crore.

The contribution to the National Sports Development Fund, which was

created in 1998, will continue to be ₹ 18 crore for a second successive year, while the government has decided to cut the grant for incentive to sports persons from ₹ 42.65 crore to ₹ 37 crore this year.

Cuts were also announced to the funding for National Programme for Youth and Adolescent Development and Youth Hostels. However, the contribution for multilateral bodies and youth exchange programmes has been raised from ₹ 11.70 crore to ₹ 55 crore.

A ₹ 20 crore fund has been approved

for the enhancement of sports facilities in Jammu and Kashmir, which is ₹ 14 crore more than the previous year.

A massive chunk of the increased budget will be going to the National Service Scheme which will receive ₹ 450 crore, a hike of ₹ 200 crore from the previous year.

The National Service Scheme (NSS) aims to "develop character and personality of youth in schools and colleges."

It's a scheme that works towards shaping youngsters through social work and community service. (PTI)

## Sky and Samson's form in focus as India take on England in fifth T20I dead rubber

**MUMBAI, Feb 1:** The series already in their pocket, India would look to address their nagging batting woes against an England team gunning for revenge after feeling hard-done by a debatable concussion substitute when the two teams clash in the fifth and final T20 International here on Sunday.

The hosts will hope that struggling skipper Suryakumar Yadav and Sanju Samson are back among runs and adding spice to the otherwise inconsequential match is the resentment that England is carrying after the 15-run loss in the fourth game.

India's 15-run win in the fourth T20I at Pune on Friday gave the hosts an unassailable 3-1 lead in the five-match affair, but left England exasperated over the choice of the concussion replacement who played an impactful role.

Fast bowler Harshit Rana replaced all-rounder Shivam Dube after the latter copped a blow to his head while batting and the former returned 3/33 in his maiden T20I, derailing England's progress in the chase.

The choice of replacement was approved by ICC match referee Javagal Srinath at half-time leaving the visitors complaining as India had a more like-for-like replacement in Ramanuj Singh available in the dugout.

England captain Jos Buttler remembered thinking "who's Harshit on for" as he strode out to bat but his team was also guilty of suc-



cumbing to pressure and squandering a perfect start on a flat deck at the MCA Stadium to concede the series.

England were 65/1 in the seventh over chasing 182 and lost wickets in a heap once again to Indian spinners Varun Chakravarthy (2/28) and Ravi Bishnoi (3/28), with the former stretching his tally in the series to 12.

However, despite the series in bag, India's concerns remain the same -- Samson and Suryakumar's lean patch with the bat.

Samson, who missed the Vijay Hazare Trophy for Kerala, came into the series evidently lacking match practice and has struggled against the ex-

press pace of Mark Wood and Jofra Archer who have troubled the Indian opener consistently.

With only 35 runs in four matches so far, Samson's returns have been disappointing but it is unlikely that India would want to tinker with their opening combination at the top given that an all-out approach is a core principle of their T20 cricket.

World number four Suryakumar has gone without a significant score since his 75 against Bangladesh eight matches ago.

The Indian skipper has two ducks and scores of 12 and 14 to show in this series even though luck has favoured him during the

toss.

"Sky" will be keen to shrug off the string of poor performances when he returns to his home ground Wankhede Stadium here, a venue which has played an indomitable role in building his reputation as a T20 specialist.

Rinku Singh's 30 on Friday settled a lot of concerns around the swash-buckling left-hander, whose form and fitness were both in question going into the fourth match.

Hardik Pandya and Dube's fifties powered India's charge in the fourth T20I with the all-rounders filling in for the batters' failure but another batting-friendly wicket here will give the Indians a chance to make amends one

last time in the shortest format.

Sploit for choices in the bowling department, India could rest and play both their front-line pacers Arshdeep Singh and Mohammed Shami through the course of this series. But Sunday's contest could be another opportunity for the team management to test the readiness of Shami who is back after a lengthy injury-forced lay-off.

For England, it has been a series of more misses than hits but they have been outplayed generally across departments.

Harry Brook finally got a big knock on the board on Friday but his struggles persist against spin and particularly Chakravarthy, while young guns like Jacob Bethell and Jamie Smith have had their struggles on their maiden Indian sojourn.

**Teams:**

**India:** Suryakumar Yadav (c), Abhishek Sharma, Sanju Samson (wk), Tilak Varma, Axar Patel, Hardik Pandya, Washington Sundar, Varun Chakravarthy, Ravi Bishnoi, Arshdeep Singh, Mohammed Shami, Dhruv Jurel (wk), Rinku Singh, Shivam Dube, Ramandeep Singh, Harshit Rana.

**England:** Jos Buttler (c), Phil Salt (wk), Ben Duckett, Harry Brook, Liam Livingstone, Jamie Smith (wk), Adil Rashid, Brydon Carse, Jamie Overton, Gus Atkinson, Rehan Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Mark Wood, Jacob Bethell, Saqib Mahmood.

Match Starts at 7:00 PM IST. (PTI)

## Ramanuj, Nabiha, Dhyanaa bag double crown

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Ramanuj Talukdar, Nabiha Moriyam and Dhyanaa Morang bags double crown in the 8th Guwahati Open Junior Tennis Championship - 2025, organised by the Guwahati Tennis Association (GTA), at RG Baruah Sports Complex, Nehru Stadium here on Saturday.

Ramanuj Talukdar won the Boy's Singles under-18 years title defeating Chandrasekhar Mohanty 6-3, 6-2 in the final while partnering Abhiraj Kumar Dutta won the Boy's Doubles under-18 years title beating Aarush Das and Enrich Pator 6-3, 6-4 in the final. In the Girl's Singles under-18 years Nabiha Moriyam won the title defeating Kabyanjali Hazarika 6-1, 6-0 in the final while partnering Nayeem Hussain won the Girl's Doubles under-18 years title defeating Kabyanjali Hazarika and Soni Prajapati 6-1, 6-1 in the final. Dhyana Morang won the Girl's Singles under-12 years title defeating Mrigakshi Changmai 5-7, 7-5, 10-7 in the final while in the Girl's Singles under-14 years Dhyana Morang won the title beating Abhispa Gogoi 6-4, 6-2 in the final.

In the Boy's Singles under-14 years Enrich Pator won the title defeating Chandrasekhar Mohanty 6-4, 0-6, 10-6 in the final. In the Boy's Singles under-12 years Ayaan Rehman won the title beating Anirban Deka 7-5, 4-6, 10-7 in the final. In the Boy's/Girl's (Combined) Singles under 10 years Dhaniska Mahanta won the title beating Dhanush Mahanta 2-4, 5-4, 14-12 in the final.

The closing function, Kalyan Kumar Das, President of the Guwahati Tennis Association welcome the august gathering. Pradeep Timung, ACS, Director of Sports and Youth Welfare, Assam attended the function as Chief Guest while former state tennis champion Jhoola Sarma, senior sportsperson Shankar Datta Lahkar, Shyamanga Rajkhowa and Dipak Kumar Das attend as Guests-of-Honour. All the guests were felicitated by the organisers. The guests distributed the prizes to the winners and finalists of the championship. Dr. Madhurya Hazarika, Tournament Director offered the vote of thanks.



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For further details please contact concerned District Agricultural Officer or Sub Divisional Agricultural Officer.

Department of Agriculture, Assam

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