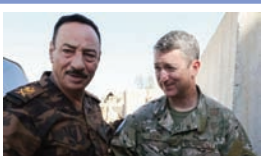


6

WORLD



● Trump fires chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, two other military officers

● Hamas frees first 2 of 6 Israeli hostages to be released in latest exchange

8

NATION



● Congress cannot wait for people to get tired of BJP: Sachin Pilot

● Action to be taken against those involved in death of Nepalese student



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# THE HILLS TIMES

Voice of the hills people

PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY FROM GUWAHATI & DIPHU

Vol .No. I

Issue No. 351

RNI-ASSENG/2023/86488

GUWAHATI, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2025

PAGES 12

PRICE ₹ 8



**Shri Narendra Modi**  
Prime Minister



सत्यमेव जयते  
অসম চৰকাৰ



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

*Commemorating remarkable  
200 years of Assam Tea*

## MEGA JHUMOIR PERFORMANCE

# Jhumoir Binandini 2025

**Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi will grace the occasion as Chief Guest**

Date: 24 February 2025 ■ Time: 4:00 PM  
Venue: Sarusajai Sports Complex, Guwahati, Assam

- Jhumoir is a vibrant and captivating form of dance of Tea Tribe and Adivasi community
- Over 8,000 artistes of the community will perform Jhumoir on the occasion

Watch the  
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# Himanta inaugurates Reliance's new Campa and Beverages bottling plant in Guwahati

The plant is among the largest beverage manufacturing units in the region

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 22: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma inaugurated the Reliance's new Campa and Beverages bottling plant here in Guwahati on Saturday.

"Reliance Consumer Products Ltd (RCPL), a leading FMCG and beverage company, has strengthened the presence of Campa's portfolio in Northeast India with the inauguration of a new bottling plant in Guwahati, Assam. Developed in collaboration with local partner Jericho, the facility was inaugurated today by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, underscoring its role in the region's industrial and economic expansion," said an official statement.

Spanning over 6 lakh sq. ft., the plant is among the largest beverage manufacturing units in the region. It boasts an initial production capacity of over 10 crore litres for carbonated soft drinks (CSD) and nearly 18 crore litres for packaged drinking water, ensuring ample supply for growing consumer demand.

Speaking at the event, Himanta said that common people can purchase Campa's products at a very affordable price.

"That is one of the big advantages with Campa Cola. While they are giving at an affordable price, they are not compromising with the quality, which is at par with other global standards," he added.

He further said that he believes that this brand will grow from strength to strength and will have an opportunity to expand more. "I wish all the best to Reliance Consumer Products Limited, as well as to Jericho. Let this journey be a very successful one and create lot of job opportunities for the people of Assam. And let this journey also reflect that an Indian brand can compete with a global brand," he said.

Elaborating on the strategic expansion, Ketan Mody, COO, Reliance Consumer Products Limited, stated, "Today marks a significant milestone as we inaugurate the Guwahati plant



in partnership with Jericho. Our operations here will generate new employment opportunities, directly contributing to local economic growth. This expansion is a key step in our strategy of reviving India's heritage brands while fostering sustainable development for the region."

The project, developed in partnership with Jericho, a well-established first-generation business house based in Guwahati, features cutting-edge manufacturing technology with two world-class bottling lines – a 600 BPM (bottles per minute) carbonated soft drink (CSD) line and a 583 BPM water production line, reinforcing efficiency and innovation in beverage production.

"The launch of this world-class Campa bottling plant in Guwahati is a proud milestone for Jericho Foods as a first-generation food and beverage business from Assam. We are committed to establishing Assam as a premier manufacturing destination, crafting superior products that enrich lives. This expansion reinforces our

dedication to excellence, innovation, and the future of food and beverage manufacturing in the region," said Ashis Agarwal, founder, Jericho Foods and Beverages LLP.

The plant will manufacture RCPL's popular beverage portfolio, including Campa Cola, Campa Orange, Campa Lemon, Power Up, and packaged drinking water under the Independence and Sure Water brands. Primarily catering to consumer demand across Assam, Northeast India, and North Bengal, the facility also has the capability to supply other markets based on demand. With an optimised SKU mix, the plant ensures a diverse range of beverages and pack sizes to meet varied consumer preferences.

With this expansion, RCPL reaffirms its commitment to providing high-quality beverages to Indian consumers while strengthening its foothold in the Northeast. The Guwahati plant is a testament to RCPL's vision of leveraging indigenous production capabilities to deliver world-class products.

# Need new legal framework to regulate 'harmful' content: I&B Ministry

NEW DELHI, Feb 22: The Information and Broadcasting Ministry is examining the existing statutory provisions and the need for a new legal framework to regulate "harmful" content amid complaints of "obscenity and violence" being shown on digital platforms.

In its reply to a parliamentary panel, the ministry said there is a growing concern in the society that the constitutional right of "freedom of expression is being misused to showcase obscene and violent content on digital platforms".

It told the Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology headed by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey that while certain provisions exist under the current laws, there is a growing demand for a stricter and effective legal framework to regulate

such harmful content.

It said, "This ministry has taken note of these developments and is in process of examining current statutory provisions and need for a new legal framework." The ministry said that many high courts and the Supreme Court, MPs and statutory bodies like the National Commission of Women have spoken on the issue, which has made headlines after the crass comments of social media influencer Ranveer Allahbadia drew wide condemnation.

Criminal cases have been registered against him, and his apology has done little to damp down the controversy. While the Supreme Court granted him protection from arrest, it also made very critical observations over his vulgar comments. (PTI)

# Moto Morini Seiemmezzo 650 gets price cut in India

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 22: Adishwar Auto Ride India (AARI) has announced a significant price revision for the Moto Morini (MM) Seiemmezzo 650 line-up in India, making premium Italian motorcycles more accessible to enthusiasts.

This strategic move aligns with AARI's 2025 vision for Moto Vault and Moto Morini, reinforcing its commitment to expanding the brand's reach and appeal in the Indian market.

initiative, AARI has introduced the MY-2025 Seiemmezzo 650S crambler and Retro Street model satanew price, enhancing their value proposition for riders who appreciate Italian design, performance, and heritage," said an official statement.

As per the statement these revised prices are applicable across all available Color options, ensuring that customers can enjoy the same premium experience at a significantly lower price.

Seiemmezzo 650 range strengthens its position as a high-value offer in the premium motorcycle segment.

Speaking on the announcement, Vikas Jhabak, managing director, AARI, said, "Moto Morini has a rich Italian legacy, and we are excited to make these exceptional motorcycles more accessible to Indian riders. This price revision aligns with our commitment to delivering premium products that offer an unbeatable combination of style, performance, and value."

"With this pricing update, the

"As part of this

"With this pricing update, the

Contd. from Page 3...

# Party can't afford to alienate

working on it," he asserted. On the party's internal preparations, the state president said a survey based on individual anti-incumbency, political scenario, and strength of opposition in each constituency has been conducted.

"In September, a survey on individual MLAs will be done. Work on strengthening the organisational base is also being done," he added. "Winning probability will be the core criteria for choosing candidates," Saikia stressed. Saikia maintained that the positive work being done by the BJP-led government will help it retain power next year. He said, "The government is seized about the implementation of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord, which ensures constitutional safeguards of political and cultural rights of the indigenous people."

On identification and deportation of illegal Bangladeshis, an important component of the Accord, Saikia said, "The absence of a deportation treaty with the neighboring country is an issue, but the government is working on getting around it." "Peace accords, the Act East Policy, and the upcoming Advantage Assam 2.0 investment summit are initiatives which have driven development in the state," the state BJP chief added. (PTI)

# Ahom organisations file FIR

traditional ritual. The complainants argued that this act has deeply hurt the religious sentiments of the Ahom community and disrespected a tradition passed down for over 600 years since the Ahoms arrived in the region.

Expressing anguish over objectionable comments made on social media regarding Me-Dam-Me-Phi, a ritual of paying homage to ancestors, the Ahom organisations demanded legal action against the Padadhikar and the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Sangha, as well as the Secretary of the Kokilaguri branch, the head of the Seva Bahini (the Sangha's volunteer wing), and those responsible for the social media remarks.

It may be mentioned that on February 18, the Jorhat unit of the Sangha had lodged several FIRs at Jorhat Police Station against the Tai Ahom Yuva Parishad, Assam, for allegedly burning copies of the Sangha's constitution.

# People gave clear verdict on genuine

started in the first cabinet meeting after the NDA government came to power for a third consecutive term. Today is a very momentous day as 20 lakh families have got their first house as part of the scheme, Shah said. "This is a rare occasion where 20 lakh beneficiaries have simultaneously experienced the joy of owning a home. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to these 20 lakh families," said Shah in the presence of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and deputy CMs Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar. While schemes take time to implement, the Fadnavis government had successfully ensured 20 lakh beneficiaries got homes under PMAY and 10 lakh beneficiaries received the first instalment in their bank accounts, Shah said.

"At this moment, I am reminded of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. When Modiji launched the Jan Dhan Yojana, Rahul baba mocked the initiative, questioning what would be deposited into these accounts. Rahul Baba, witness Modi's magic today. With just a click, the first instalment has been seamlessly transferred into the accounts of beneficiaries," the Union minister said.

Stating that he had goosebumps when CM Fadnavis called him and informed that 20 lakh beneficiaries would receive sanction letters under PMAY, Shah said the long-cherished dream of these families to own a home has been realised thanks to the combined efforts of the state and Union governments.

"If there is one state that has got the maximum number of houses under PMAY, it is Maharashtra. Besides housing, the PM has ensured every household has a toilet, which has protected their self-esteem. Beyond housing, people are getting access to toilets, solar power and gas cylinders," he said. By 2029, a total of five crore houses will come up under the scheme, of which allotment of 3.80 crore tenements is already over, the Union minister informed. "Modiji has taken a vow to make India a developed nation by 2047. A truly developed nation means progress for every citizen. When a family gets its own house, a toilet, a gas cylinder, health coverage of ₹ 5 lakh, and 5 kg of grains per person, that is the real definition of a developed nation," he said. (PTI)

# PM, 60 ambassadors to watch

He said arrangements for live streaming of the event in the tea garden areas will be made. Sarma also announced ₹25,000 as an incentive for all participants and master trainers, and ₹ 30,000 for the expert trainers. Besides, ₹ 25,000 will be paid to each tea garden to establish cultural clubs, promoting cultural activities in the tea gardens, he added. (PTI)

# Guv urges stronger university-

on research and international collaboration, advocating for a greater focus on cutting-edge research, interdisciplinary studies, and partnerships with global institutions. In tackling the issue of dropout rates, Governor Acharya highlighted several strategies, including mentorship programs, career counseling, and targeted interventions for relatively high risk students. He also underscored the role of faculty members in shaping young minds, stressing on plans to fill vacant teaching positions promptly, and improving recruitment and training processes.

Further, the Governor pointed out that the adoption of the e-SAMARTH platform could significantly enhance transparency in data management across institutions. Highlighting the importance of digital learning, Acharya hailed Assam's progress on the SWAYAM platform, encouraging further participation and the integration of online courses into university curricula.

"He (The Governor) also recognised the importance of gender inclusivity and advocated for encouraging more female participation, particularly in technical education," the statement added.

Commenting on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the Governor lauded Assam's strides in aligning with the visionary framework laid by NEP 2020. "The NEP 2020, with its emphasis on holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary education, will guide Assam toward becoming a national model for educational excellence," he stated. Advisor to Raj Bhavan Secretariat Dr Harbansh Dixit, advisor, Higher Education Government of Assam, Prof. Debaratata Das, commissioner & secretary to the Governor of Assam S S Meenakshi Sundaram, secretary Higher Education Narayan Konwar along with a host of other senior officers were present in the conference. The conference which was organised by the Raj Bhavan in association with Department of Higher Education also saw the participation of Vice Chancellors of the universities both public and private and the Principals of Autonomous colleges and renowned academicians.

# NIT Rourkela develops model

with comparatively higher concentrations of total dissolved solids and certain cations like sodium, calcium and magnesium, which may affect soil and crop productivity. If not managed properly, these conditions could lead to declining yields of potato and cucumber for this district," Sharma said.

One of the study's key findings is that important water quality indicators have been showing consistent patterns of increase or decrease over time. This suggests that some regions may experience a further decline in groundwater suitability. "The developed model can be significantly used on across the country to assess groundwater stress for irrigation purposes. By evaluating the groundwater quality, informed decisions can be taken by the authorities on degrading water resource management," he said.

"Additionally, it can provide real-time insights on water quality, enabling productive interventions to safeguard irrigation-dependent farming communities across the country," Sharma said. (PTI)

# PM should pay heed to his

for voting for quite some time, alleging that the results of electronic voting machines are doubtful, even as the Election Commission (EC) has been saying that no one has been able to prove anything wrong with EVMS. The government has repeatedly told Parliament that there is no going back to the paper-ballot system. (PTI)

# India is making significant progress in sustainable energy adoption: Union Min

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 22: Union Minister Manohar Lal Khattar on Saturday said that India is making significant progress in sustainable energy adoption.

He said this while speaking during the 16th edition of ELECRAMA which was being held in Noida.

The Union minister said that India is well positioned to become the world's third-largest economy by 2027 and a developed nation by 2047, with power driving this transformation.

"The electrical and electronics manufacturing industry will be key in scaling clean energy, advancing grid modernization, and strengthening transmission networks. With over 200 GW of renewable energy capacity installed and a target of 500 GW by 2030, India is making significant progress in sustainable energy adoption," an official statement quoted him as saying.

He further said that expanding EV infrastructure and Vehicle-to-Grid (V2G) technology will further accelerate the shift towards e-mobility, adding, "By 2030, India aims to achieve 800 GW of generation capacity, with 50% from renewables, reinforcing its role as a global clean energy leader." "I commend IEEMA for organising ELECRAMA 2025, a pivotal platform bringing together industry leaders, innovators, and policymakers to drive digital transformation and sustainability, solidifying India's position as a hub for energy innovation and economic growth," he added.

As India accelerates its journey towards Viksit Bharat 2047 and strengthens its position as a global manufacturing hub under Aatmanirbhar Bharat, the power sector plays a



crucial role in driving economic growth, energy security, and sustainability. In this evolving landscape, the Indian Electrical & Electronics Manufacturers' Association (IEEMA) commenced ELECRAMA 2025, the world's largest electrical show.

The 16th edition of ELECRAMA showcases India's capabilities in electrical and power technologies, reinforcing its role as a trusted global partner.

The event also witnessed industry visionaries like Oliver Blum, CEO, Schneider Electric; Matthias Rebellius, CEO, Siemens Smart Infrastructure; Sunil Singhvi, President, IEEMA; Vikram Gandotra, President (Elect) and chairman, ELECRAMA 2025, and Siddharth Bhutoria, vice president, IEEMA & vice chairman, ELECRAMA 2025, who shared insights on the future of the electrical and power sector.

Marking its 16th edition, ELECRAMA 2025 presents cutting-edge innovations in energy storage, electric mobility, automation, and AI-driven power systems. The event will also host high-impact B2B meetings, thought leadership sessions, and policy dialogues, fostering collaboration between global and Indian stakeholders.

# Siemens aims to boost factory capacity under Make in India initiative

NEW DELHI, Feb 22:

Siemens looks to increase its factory capacity in the country under the Make in India initiative to meet both local and global demand, Matthias Rebellius, Member of the Managing Board of Siemens AG and CEO of Smart Infrastructure said.

The global technology company looks to address both local and global needs for power generation, transmission, distribution, and rail transportation, Rebellius said in his address at the Elecrama 2025 event organised by IEEMA in Greater Noida.

Siemens has shown a strong commitment to India by investing over ₹ 9,000 crore since 2015, with an additional ₹ 1,100 crore announced

in November 2023, he said.

"We aim to enhance our factory capacities under the Make in India initiative, addressing both local and global needs for power generation, transmission, distribution, and rail transportation," Rebellius said. With over 34,000 employees and 32 factories in India, Siemens recognises the country's ambitious economic goals and role as an innovation powerhouse, the official said.

He said there are a lot of opportunities in various sectors in India. The government is focusing on digitalization to enhance energy efficiency and grid management while aiming to establish the country as a global manufacturing hub. To

meet rising energy demands, especially for clean energy, India plans to modernize its power transmission and distribution networks.

He said Infrastructure-related ministries are encouraged to come up with a 3-year pipeline of projects for investment through public-private partnerships.

"Siemens is already a reliable partner for those investments and in the Government of India's efforts towards Viksit Bharat 2047," he said. The company's product portfolio also includes locally developed solutions for low-voltage power distribution that are not only powering the future of India's electrification but are also exported to other countries. (PTI)

33 NOS ASSETS OF MULTI PURPOSE STALL OVER LUMDING DIVISION		
E-Auction is invited for Provision of Multi Purpose Stall (MPS) over Lumding Division. Auction Catalogue No.: MPS-LMG-01-25. Auction Start (All Lots): 10:00 hrs. on 07-03-2025; Rate Unit: Annual Licensing Fee; Days : 1826;		
Sl. No.	Lot No./Category	Description
AA/1	MPS-LMG-SCL-MPS-10-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	Multipurpose stall (SCLMPS-5) at PF-2 of Silchar Station
AA/2	MPS-LMG-ABSA-MPS-44-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	Multipurpose stall (ABSAMPS-2) at PF-1 of Ambassa Railway station.
AA/3	MPS-LMG-SCL-MPS-7-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	Multipurpose stall (SCLMPS-2) at PF-1 of SILCHAR Railway Station.
AA/4	MPS-LMG-LMG-MPS-56-25-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At Lumding Railway station, Middle portion of PF- 2/3.
AA/5	MPS-LMG-KWM-MPS-14-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	Multipurpose stall (KWMPS-5) at PF-2 of Kampur Railway Station.
AA/6	MPS-LMG-JMK-MPS-15-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Jamunamukh Railway Station
AA/7	MPS-LMG-LMG-MPS-60-25-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At Lumding Railway station, Middle portion of PF-5.
AA/8	MPS-LMG-MBG-MPS-35-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Maibang Railway Station.
AA/9	MPS-LMG-SCL-MPS-6-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Silchar Railway Station.
AA/10	MPS-LMG-SCL-MPS-8-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Silchar Railway Station.
AA/11	MPS-LMG-SCL-MPS-9-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-2 of Silchar Railway Station.
AA/12	MPS-LMG-KWM-MPS-12-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Kampur Railway Station.
AA/13	MPS-LMG-JGJN-MPS-21-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-2 of Jugjijan Railway Station.
AA/14	MPS-LMG-HKD-MPS-31-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Hailakandi Railway Station.
AA/15	MPS-LMG-NGAN-MPS-33-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Nagaon Railway Station.
AA/16	MPS-LMG-LMG-MPS-55-25-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At Lumding station, PF-2/3, right side of FOB, Guwahati end
AA/17	MPS-LMG-MANU-MPS-40-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-2 of MANU Railway Station.
AA/18	MPS-LMG-JGJN-MPS-41-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Jugjijan Railway Station.
AA/19	MPS-LMG-KWM-MPS-11-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Kampur Railway Station.
AA/20	MPS-LMG-KWM-MPS-13-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-2 of Kampur Railway Station.
AA/21	MPS-LMG-ABSA-MPS-30-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-2 of Ambassa Railway Station.
AA/22	MPS-LMG-LKA-MPS-47-24-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At platform-1 of Lanka Railway station.
AA/23	MPS-LMG-LMG-MPS-57-25-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At Lumding Railway station, PF-2/3, left side of FOB, Dimapur end.
AA/24	MPS-LMG-JMK-MPS-16-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Jamunamukh Railway Station.
AA/25	MPS-LMG-JMK-MPS-17-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-2 of Jamunamukh Railway Station.
AA/26	MPS-LMG-JGJN-MPS-18-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Jugjijan Railway Station.
AA/27	MPS-LMG-JGJN-MPS-20-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-2 of Jugjijan Railway Station.
AA/28	MPS-LMG-BPB-MPS-27-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At circulating cum parking area of Badarpur Station.
AA/29	MPS-LMG-NGAN-MPS-34-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At circulating area of Nagaon Railway Station.
AA/30	MPS-LMG-ABSA-MPS-28-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Ambassa Railway Station.
AA/31	MPS-LMG-BPB-MPS-26-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At circulating cum parking area of Badarpur Railway Station.
AA/32	MPS-LMG-MBG-MPS-36-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Maibang Railway Station.
AA/33	MPS-LMG-HKD-MPS-32-23-1 (Multi Purpose Stalls)	At PF-1 of Hailakandi Railway Station.

Auction Close Date/Time : At 15:50 hrs. on 07-03-2025. Initial Cooling off period is 30 minutes. Successive lots closing interval 10 minutes. Note: Prospective Participant/bidders are requested to visit e-Auction module of IREPS website [www.ireps.gov.in](http://www.ireps.gov.in) for more details.

Sr. DCM, Lumding

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# Himanta claims pvt varsity promised students high score through 'fraud' USTM chancellor arrested, taken to Sribhumi

**GUWAHATI, Feb 22:** The chancellor of the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, (USTM) Mahbabul Haque was arrested from his Guwahati residence in the early hours of Saturday, police said.

He was allegedly involved in a network that lured students with assurance of high marks through "fraud means", Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma claimed.

Haque was arrested by a team of the Sribhumi district police. He was taken to Sribhumi immediately, a police officer said.

Commenting on Haque's arrest, Sarma said, "For some time now, I have been observing a large network which promises students that they will ensure high marks for them, and ahead of medical and engineering entrance and CBSE-conducted exams, the examination centre of these students are changed to

some specific schools."

"Over 200 students under the CBSE curriculum from Goalpara, Nagaon and Kamrup districts were taken to a centre in Patharkandi in Sribhumi, hundreds of kilometres from their home, this time also. When the students did not get any opportunity to score easy marks, they created a ruckus and the issue came to the fore," the CM claimed.

Students appearing for board exams at a school in Patharkandi had raised allegations on Friday that their school authorities had assured them of external help in answering the question paper, but no such help was provided.

Sarma claimed that such fraud measures were not limited to CBSE-conducted exams alone, but happening in the medical entrance exam as well.

"This person is a big fraud, his entire background

is fraud. He had been trying to mislead the people by bringing a few intellectuals under his influence," Sarma alleged, referring to Haque.

"We will ensure that education is not transformed into business in Assam. We will take steps to prevent it," he added. Haque was embroiled in a controversy last year over his OBC certificate, which he had obtained "fraudulently" in Sribhumi district in the 1990s.

Sarma had said in August that a police case would be registered against the USTM chancellor for allegedly fraudulently obtaining the OBC certificate, which was cancelled subsequently.

The CM had also held USTM and Haque responsible for "flood jihad" against Guwahati, claiming that the water flowing down from the varsity campus, which is located on a hill adjacent to the city, leads to massive flooding. (PTI)



## Party can't afford to alienate 33 pc minority voters in 2026 Assembly polls: BJP chief



**GUWAHATI, Feb 22:** Assam BJP chief Dilip Saikia on Saturday said the party cannot "isolate 33 per cent minority voters" as it has set a target of achieving a simple majority on its own and crossing the 100-seat mark along with its al-

lies in the 2026 Assembly polls.

He said preliminary work on seat sharing with its partners, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and United People's Party, Progressive (UPPL), has already started, while the party is also conducting a survey on the performance of its sitting MLAs.

"This narrative of 'minority-majority' and politics of appeasement was created by the Congress. The BJP has always kept itself away from such politics," Saikia, who took over as the state party head last month, said during an interaction with reporters here.

Asked if the party will woo the religious minority voters in the state, the two-time MP said, "We cannot isolate 33 per cent voters from ourselves. We have to assim-

ilate them in the development narrative. For Assam to be among the top five states, all parts and people have to be equal partners in it."

Saikia said the first target for the party for the 2026 Assembly polls is achieving a simple majority on its own by crossing the halfway mark of 63 seats in the House of 126 members. "Together with our allies, our target is to win in 100 seats. As of today, we are in a winning position in 85, we need to add 15 more," he added.

Saikia said work on formulating strategy for the state polls has already started, and preliminary talks with AGP, UPPL, and other smaller parties that are part of the alliance are on. "We are sure of a thumping victory in 2026 polls and we are (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## India, Bhutan enjoy exemplary ties of friendship, cooperation: MEA

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** India and Bhutan enjoy "exemplary ties" of friendship and cooperation, based on trust, goodwill and mutual understanding at all levels, and the visit of Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay was in keeping with the tradition of regular high-level exchanges between the two countries, the MEA said on Saturday.

Tobgay paid an official visit to India from February 20 to February 21 to participate in the inaugural leadership conclave of the School of Ultimate Leadership (SOUL), which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

During the visit, Tobgay had a meeting with Modi, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said in a statement.

Minister of Railways, Informa-

tion and Broadcasting, and Electronics and Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnaw, minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Minority Affairs Kiren Rijju, minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita and other senior officials of the government of India called on the prime minister of Bhutan during his visit, it said.

"India and Bhutan enjoy exemplary ties of friendship and cooperation, based on trust, goodwill and mutual understanding at all levels," the MEA said. "The visit of the Prime Minister of Bhutan is in keeping with the tradition of regular high-level exchanges between India and Bhutan, a hallmark of the special partnership," it added.

In his keynote address at the SOUL conclave here on Friday, the

Bhutanese prime minister described Modi as his "elder brother" and "mentor", and sought his guidance to help him contribute in transforming public service in the neighbouring country.

Tobgay made liberal use of Hindi that drew applause from the audience. "Without a doubt, I see an image of an elder brother in you, who always guides me and helps me ('Nisandeh, aap mein ek bade bhai ki chhavi dekhta hun, jo sadaiv mera margdarshan karte hain aur mujhe sahayata dete hain')." he said. Tobgay termed the SOUL initiative a "brainchild of Modi", adding that it is yet another testament to his unwavering commitment to nurturing authentic leaders and empowering them to serve the great republic of India. (PTI)

## People gave clear verdict on genuine Sena: Shah

**PUNE, Feb 22:** The people of Maharashtra have given a clear verdict on which is the genuine Shiv Sena and NCP by ensuring a massive victory for the Mahayuti in the assembly polls, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said here on Saturday.

"The Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party split in June 2022 and July 2023, respectively, with a faction each of the two parties joining the BJP-led Mahayuti and the Congress-led Maha Vikas Aghadi.

The Mahayuti won 230 of the 288 Maharashtra assembly seats in the polls held in November, while the Sena and NCP factions led by Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar, respectively, fared poorly.

Speaking at an event where sanction letters were allotted to 20 lakh beneficiaries and first instalment was disbursed to 10 lakh beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Shah said he was deeply grateful to the people of Maharashtra for the stellar support in the assembly polls.

"Your blessings brought the Mahayuti to power, leading to the formation of the BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP government. By giving a historic mandate, the people of Maharashtra also delivered a clear verdict on which Shiv Sena and which NCP are genuine," Shah said. Hailing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said the second phase of the PMAY was (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## PM, 60 ambassadors to watch mega Jhumur dance tomorrow

**GUWAHATI, Feb 22:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said ambassadors of 60 countries will be coming together for the first time in the state to watch a Jhumur dance performance by over 8,000 youths from tea garden areas next week.

He also announced cash incentives for all 8,500 participants of the 'Jhumoir Binandini' programme scheduled for Monday, which will be attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"The performance by 8,500 youths will start at 5:30 pm on February 24. To witness it, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, external affairs minister Jaishankar, and ambassadors of 60 countries will be present," Sarma told reporters after reviewing the preparations at Sarusajai Indoor Stadium here.

He said though no attempt at setting a world record through the performance will be made, the fact that 60 ambassadors will be together watching it will itself be a record for the state.

"The Jhumur dance performance is our attempt to place before the world the rich music and dance traditions of our tea industry, which has completed 200 years," the CM added. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Guv urges stronger university-industry partnerships for growth



**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 22:** In a bid to enhance students practical skills, Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya on Saturday called for stronger partnerships between universities and industries.

He was speaking a conference on Higher Education in Assam 2025, at the Assam Administrative Staff College which was also attended by minister of Education, Dr Ranoj Pegu. During the conference, several key issues were addressed including disconnect between academic curricula and industry requirements.

"Governor Acharya called for

stronger partnerships between universities and industries to provide students with practical skills, internships, and vocational training, all of which are vital for enhancing employability and fostering economic growth," an official statement from the Raj Bhavan said.

Acharya, who is also the Chancellor of the state's universities, addressed the gathering with a message focused on the future of higher education in the state.

"Education is the backbone of any society's development, and higher education, in particular, serves as the foundation for a nation's intellectual, scientific, and

social progress," the Governor said. The Governor opined that review meetings provide an invaluable opportunity to track achievements, address challenges and make informed decisions that drive improvement.

"The frequent meetings promote accountability, encourage transparency, and foster collaboration which are essential for building a productive and efficient educational system," he added.

The Governor also underscored Assam's potential as an educational hub, highlighting the state's evolution from ancient Vedic learning to its present-day stature as home to prestigious universities, colleges, and institutions. He reflected on the importance of continued innovation in the higher education sector, urging the academic fraternity for adoption of modern teaching methodologies, digital platforms, and research-driven solutions to tackle contemporary challenges.

Governor Acharya further emphasised the need for inclusive education, stressing that higher education must be accessible to all students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, the Governor also laid emphasis (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Ahom organisations file FIR against Srimanta Sankardev Sangha over ritual dispute

**HT Correspondent**  
**JORHAT, Feb 22:** Two Ahom organisations lodged an FIR against the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha at Jorhat Sadar Police Station on Saturday over an alleged action taken by the Kokilaguri branch of the Sangha in Biswanath district.

The complaint pertains to disciplinary measures against a member for attending Me-Dam-Me-Phi, a religious ritual of the Ahoms, at

Kokilaguri village on January 30 this year.

In the FIR filed by the Jorhat district units of the Ahom Sabha and the Tai Ahom Yuva Parishad, Assam, the organisations stated that the Kokilaguri unit of the Sangha had imposed a fine of ₹500 on Chandra Boruah and expelled him earlier this month for participating in Me-Dam-Me-Phi, an important (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Pak to repatriate 22 Indian fishermen as they complete their sentences

**ISLAMABAD, Feb 22:** Pakistani authorities have released 22 Indian fishermen from Karachi's Malir Jail and are likely to hand them over to India on Saturday, according to a media report.

The fishermen were freed from the jail on Friday after the completion of their sentences. The Express Tribune newspaper quoted Malir Jail superintendent Arshad Shah as saying.

Faisal Edhi, chairman of the Edhi Foundation, arranged transportation for the fishermen to Lahore, from where they will continue their journey back to

India. The Edhi Foundation covered their travel expenses and provided them with gifts and cash.

Edhi also urged both governments to adopt a more compassionate approach toward fishermen who unintentionally cross maritime boundaries.

He highlighted the suffering of their families during their prolonged incarcerations and called for their immediate release and swift repatriation once their sentences were completed.

Pakistani authorities repatriate Indian fishermen through the Wagah border, where Indian au-

thorities facilitate their return to coastal communities after completing official formalities. The two countries regularly arrest rival fishermen who often cross into the waters of the other country due to poorly demarcated sea frontiers.

According to the lists of prisoners exchanged between the two countries on January 1, there were 266 Indian prisoners in Pakistan (49 civilian prisoners and 217 fishermen). The list shared by India showed that there were a total of 462 Pakistanis in Indian jails (381 civilian prisoners and 81 fishermen). (PTI)

## Poor-quality water can affect crop yields and long-term soil fertility NIT Rourkela develops model to assess groundwater quality for irrigation

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Researchers at National Institute of Technology (NIT), Rourkela have developed a model based on Machine Learning to evaluate groundwater quality for irrigation purposes.

The findings of the research, conducted in Odisha's Sundargarh district, have been published in the prestigious Water Quality Research Journal.

According to officials, the developed model can be significantly used across the country to assess groundwater stress for irrigation purposes.

Agriculture being central to the local economy and surface water sources covering only 1.21 pc of the district, groundwater is essential to meet the irrigation needs of this area. Paddy, which occupies

76 pc of the net cultivable area, requires a large amount of water, making groundwater (GW) quality an essential factor for farmers, they said.

Groundwater extraction in Sundargarh district has been increasing due to growing agricultural demand, limited surface water availability, and population growth. This has resulted in reductions in both the quantity and quality of groundwater. Poor-quality water can affect crop yields and long-term soil fertility.

According to Anurag Sharma, Assistant Professor, Civil Engineering Department, NIT Rourkela, advanced data analysis techniques were used to examine key water quality parameters and their variations across different parts of the district.



The study examined groundwater samples collected from 360 wells across Sundargarh. These samples were tested for various chemical properties, including salts

and minerals that can influence soil and crop health. Machine learning models and statistical tools were applied to predict water quality trends and understand how condi-

tions have changed from 2014 to 2021.

"The findings indicate that groundwater in the southern, south-western and eastern parts of Sundargarh district, including areas around Rangaimunda, Lephripara and Putudih is considered to be fit for irrigation. These regions showed stable groundwater quality with acceptable levels of dissolved salts and minerals along with the permissible range of Sodium Adsorption Ratio (SAR), Kelly's Ratio (KR), Percentage Sodium (Na), Permeability Index (PI) and Exchangeable Sodium Percentage (ESP)," Sharma.

"However, the western and central parts of the district, particularly Krijmikela, Talsara and Kutra, and parts of Sundargarh town, have groundwater (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## PM should pay heed to his friend Trump's remarks on paper-ballot voting: Cong

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** The Congress on Saturday asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to heed to his friend, US President Donald Trump, for using paper ballots and not machines for voting to address the concerns of the entire country on the integrity of India's electoral process.

Congress general secretary, organisation, K C Venugopal wondered why the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is feigning ignorance to what the entire world is saying and why is its government running away from transparency.

"Will PM Modi pay heed to his best friend Donald Trump's message on ballot papers and same day voting, and address the concerns of the whole nation about the integrity of our electoral process?" Venugopal asked in a post on X.

"I'm sure his best friend will also be appalled at the abnormal increase of lakhs of voters in Maharashtra, or the surgical deletions of opposition votes," he said, citing Trump's remarks at a governors' meeting.

At the meeting, Trump was heard urging governors to switch to paper ballots and same-day voting, claiming that machines are expensive.

"It is tragic that the BJP is feigning ignorance to what is evident to the entire world, that the electoral system can be severely manipulated and their attitude of running away from transparency is only confirming our suspicions about their malpractices," Venugopal said. The Congress has been demanding a return to the paper-ballot system (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



## Editor's pick

## Delhi High Court reinstates fraud claims against Reliance

By: Prashant Tewari

The resounding victory of the Central Government's legal team, led by the Attorney General of India A.R. Venkatramani reinforced by the active participation of the eminent jurist and the former Attorney General of India KK Venugopal, under the astute administrative guidance of Union Petroleum & Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, in the Delhi High Court verdict against Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL), has decisively dismantled allegations of favouritism levelled against the Modi government.

This landmark ruling categorically refutes opposition claims that the government promotes select business houses, reaffirming its commitment to transparency, fairness, and the rule of law in corporate governance and policymaking. In a landmark judgment dated February 14, 2025, the Delhi High Court delivered a decisive verdict in the case of Union of India vs Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL), addressing long-standing allegations of crony capitalism and favouritism towards major industrialists by the current government. This 79-page judgment not only exonerates the government from accusations of bias but also underscores the integrity of India's judicial system and the competence of its political and legal leadership. Background of the Case The dispute centres around the Production Sharing Contract (PSC) executed between the Union of India and Reliance Industries Ltd. in 2000, about the exploration and extraction of natural gas in the Krishna-Godavari basin.

The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas alleged that RIL had engaged in "unjust enrichment" by extracting and selling gas that had purportedly migrated from fields operated by the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) to RIL's adjacent block. The government sought compensation, contending that RIL's actions resulted in significant financial losses to the state exchequer. Details of Judgement The Delhi High Court's single judge judgment in Union of India vs. Reliance Industries Ltd. examined the allegations of unjust enrichment, contractual breaches, and fraud against RIL, ultimately dismissing them due to a lack of concrete evidence.

The court upheld the findings of the international arbitration tribunal, reaffirming that RIL operated within the bounds of the Production Sharing Contract (PSC) and could not be held liable for natural gas migration beyond its control. However, the Division Bench of the Delhi High Court has quashed an arbitral award that had dismissed the Central government's claims against Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and its foreign partners. The government had accused the conglomerate of "insidious fraud" and "unjust enrichment" amounting to over \$1.729 billion by allegedly extracting natural gas from deposits beyond its entitlement.

The Bench, comprising Justices Rekha Palli and Saurabh Banerjee, overturned the ruling of a single judge, who had, in May 2022, set aside the Petroleum Ministry's allegations. The court determined that the international arbitration award dated July 24, 2018, which had favoured the RIL-led consortium, was "contrary to public policy" in India. This decision marks a significant legal setback for RIL, as it reinstates the government's claims concerning unauthorised gas extraction.

The ruling also strengthens the government's position in regulatory disputes within the oil and gas sector. With the arbitral award nullified, the matter may now proceed further in Indian courts, potentially leading to fresh legal battles over financial liabilities and resource allocation in the country's hydrocarbon sector. Beyond the legal nuances, the judgment serves as a crucial precedent for future contracts, emphasising the importance of precision in drafting and adherence to arbitration mechanisms for dispute resolution. It underscores the independence of the judiciary in adjudicating disputes involving powerful corporate entities and government bodies, dispelling claims of crony capitalism.

The case also highlights the competence of the central government's legal representation, particularly the diligence of Attorney General A.R. Venkatramani and Union Petroleum & Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri in defending the government's stance. It further reflects the abysmally woeful performance of the RIL legal team in defending the case. Furthermore, the ruling reassures investors about India's commitment to the rule of law, ensuring that legal processes remain transparent and evidence-driven. By challenging the political narrative of undue favouritism towards industrialists, the judgment reinforces the integrity of India's governance, corporate regulations, and media responsibility in shaping public discourse.

The Delhi High Court's latest judgment in Union of India vs Reliance Industries Ltd. is a testament to the robustness of India's legal system and its capacity to adjudicate high-stakes disputes impartially. It dispels allegations of governmental bias towards prominent industrialists, affirming that decisions are grounded in evidence and legal merit. The ruling also underscores the importance of adhering to contractual obligations and the role of arbitration in resolving intricate commercial conflicts. As India continues to navigate its path towards economic growth, this judgment reinforces the principles of fairness, transparency, and the rule of law as cornerstones of its democratic ethos. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

## BJP leadership is set to use Maha Kumbh festival for electoral gains in 2027 polls

Saffron ecosystem, especially the BJP leadership always strives to turn a Hindu festival into a political controversy. Every dispute adds to its membership and helps widen its support base. This time too they have succeeded in their move to politicize Maha Kumbh Mela. Notwithstanding stampede and death of large number of pilgrims in this year's Kumbh Mela, which sullied image of the BJP government of UP and even slayed its political and administrative credibility, the saffron ecosystem has vivified its religious face.

Long ahead of holding of the festival, the saffron ecosystem and its UP and Central governments were busy creating the hype of it being the most propitious occasion for attaining salvation according to the Hindu almanac. It was advertised that the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela was special because it was the result of a rare alignment of the Sun, Moon, Jupiter, and Saturn. Besides the sacred geography of Prayagraj made this year's event especially momentous. It is held at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers and has been recognized as part of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

The saffron strategists marketed the event in a skilful manner to the maximum advantage of the big business and corporate houses and at the same time arouse the religious passion of the Hindus for political gains. The conventional Hindus took their words of being living embodiment of India's timeless traditions, history, and cultural identity, as gospel truth and rushed to Prayagraj. The saffron ecosystem and its marketing strategists were successful in their mission as crores of spiritual Hindus took dip every day in the Triveni Sangam.

With Hindutva slogan of Narendra Modi losing its charm and relevance, RSS and BJP needed some other issue and occasion to survive and for acceptability. Only last year the RSS publicly confessed that Modi has lost the ability to mobilise religious sentiments for political gains. Naturally deepening economic distress and growing disparities conjured the RSS and BJP to look for some alternate. Losing Lok Sabha election has turned RSS more desperate. LS elections had sent a strong signal that Modi can no longer carry his party's fortunes on his shoulder single-handedly.

RSS which has been on the mission to remove Modi from power and has been striving hard to build its base in the Dalits and OBCs also planned to use the occasion to reach out to this section. It had taken out nearly 8,000 students of the average age of 10 years from SC communities for "Kumbh Darshan". It was done with the aim to ensure that these students become familiar with Hindu tradi-



tions, Indian culture and are prevented from "falling prey" to religious conversions.

UP chief minister with the aim of effective marketing held the cabinet meeting at Kumbh site and took bath with his cabinet ministers January 22. Holding meeting of the state cabinet at the religious site and then taking a ritual bath "for purification of sins" virtually amounted to providing official recognition and patronage to a religious event which otherwise should have been a personal act of devotion.

How commercial interests were intertwined with the religious celebration could be seen in Gautam Adani's distributing food in a tent and sponsoring one crore copies of a collection of prayer songs. The two stampedes leaves no scope for ambiguity religion is well entrenched in the driving seat. India and Indians will have more thriving pilgrimage centers to promote the commercial interest of the saffron ecosystem and rightist forces. Look at the manner in which the rightist icon Donald Trump has been using politics to promote business. He is even against India giving space to the business interest of his own aide Musk.

True enough it was the political compulsion that forced Yogi and also both the strongmen Modi and Amit Shah to take dip in the holy Triveni. What made them scary was, BJP not losing the seats, but the danger of it losing its credibility and political relevance; the reversal of the process of political ascendancy and losing the core base of majority-Hindu voters. The BJP had got 36 seats while the

opposition INDIA alliance won 43, including 37 by Samajwadi.

In its hurry to emerge as the new face of Hindutva who had the political capability to represent the aspirations of Hindus and lead the party, UP chief minister, Yogi Adityanath forgot to adhere to the basic security measures and ethos. This has been exposed by the CPCB which in its report had said that faecal coliform and bio-

chemical oxygen demand levels did not meet the bathing criteria during monitoring carried out in the second week of January.

A bench of NGT chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava, judicial member Sudhir Agarwal, and expert member A Senthil Vel were hearing the matter on the compliance of a December order, wherein it had directed the UP government and the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to ensure that water quality in rivers Ganga and Yamuna was fit to drink and bathe in during the Kumbh. It pulled up the UP Pollution Control Board of not filing an action taken report in compliance with its December 23 order.

The CPCB report on water quality in the Ganga at Kumbh had said, "River water quality was not conforming with the primary water quality for bathing with respect to faecal coliform at all the monitored locations on various occasions. A huge number of people (are) taking a bath at Prayagraj during Maha Kumbh Mela in the river, including auspicious bathing days, which eventually leads to an increase in faecal concentration."

This CPCB report exposed the utter contempt of the RSS and BJP leadership towards the religious beliefs and commitment of Hindus and simply treats them as a tool to win the elections and come to the power. The UPPCB even tried to get exonerated of the crime by saying that it had filed a compliance report. It even tried to say that the CPCB was lying by seeking to know the exact locations from where they collected water samples. This prompted the bench to ask whether they were disputing the CPCB's report.

Realising the intensity of erosion of credibility and image from this revelation, Yogi has launched counter diatribe against the expose. Nevertheless it ought to be mentioned that a day after being reprimanded by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) for delay in submitting action taken report on maintaining water quality in Prayagraj for the Mahakumbh, the UP Pollution Control Board (UPPCB) tendered unconditional apology on Tuesday along with the report.

Yogi countering the NGT version told the state assembly only yesterday that the UPPCB has been continuously monitoring the water quality at the Sangam and it is fit for both bathing and ritual drinking (aachman). He held: "This time, 81 drains have been tapped, treating 261 MLD (million litres per day) of sewage. In January and February, faecal coliform levels at the Sangam nose were found to be within the acceptable range, below 2,500 MPN per 100 ml, according to the UP Pollution (Control) Board". He said the Maha Kumbh 2025 is being organised in a "grand" manner, while the 2013 edition suffered due to the "corruption, mismanagement", administrative negligence and chaos of the SP rule. For the 2025 event, 14 flyovers, nine permanent ghats, and seven riverfronts have been prepared. The length of temporary ghats has increased from just 4 km in 2013 to 12 km in 2025, he added.

The Kumbh Mela was being used by RSS and BJP as an opportunity for outreach, especially to build ties with sections of society which did not vote for the BJP. Undeniably this has been a very disturbing convergence of state and religion. The worst has been their blatant attempt to hide the actual number of devout Hindus who died in the stampede. It appears speaking lies and falsehood are the basic traits of the saffron ecosystem. Not only Modi or Mohan Bhagwat were accused of speaking lies. The stampede has also made bare the fact that Yogi is not far behind these leaders in speaking lies. If his claim that adequate police arrangements were in place at the Kumbh, this nature of stampede certainly would not have happened. (IPA Service)

## Sanders speech in US senate on Trump takeover is a warning to democratic party

By: W. T. Whitney Jr.

Senator Bernie Sanders spoke in the U.S. Senate last week warning of the "authoritarianism" of "modern day kings," namely President Trump and Elon Musk. He highlighted violations of the U.S. Constitution and abuse of American workers.

He vigorously defended the workers' cause, warning that people "will remember whether we stood with President Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg who in 1863 ... stated ... 'that a government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish' ... Or do we allow this country to move to a government of the billionaires, by the billionaires and for the billionaires?"

"Meanwhile, while the very rich become much richer, 60% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, 85 million are uninsured or under-insured, 25% of seniors are trying to survive on \$15,000 or less, 800,000 are homeless and we have the highest rate of childhood poverty of almost any major country on earth."

And the essence: "As modern-day kings, who believe they have the absolute right to rule, they will sacrifice, without hesitation, the well-being of working people to protect their privilege. ... Bottom line: The oligarchs, with their enormous resources, are waging a war on the working class of this country, and it is a war they are intent on winning."

That Sanders with his remarks bore down on protecting working people was consistent with his advocacy for democratic socialism. He also vigorously defended the U.S. Constitution.

"President Trump," he pointed out, "attempted to suspend all federal grants and loans - an outrageous and clearly unconstitutional act. As I hope every 6th grader in America knows, under the Constitution and our form of government the president can recommend legislation, he can support legislation, he can veto legislation, but he does not have the power to unilaterally terminate funding passed by Congress."

Elon Musk, according to Sanders, is "attempting to dismantle major agencies of the federal government which are designed to protect the needs of working families and the disadvantaged. These agencies were created by the U.S. Congress and it is Congress' responsibility to maintain them, reform them or end them. It is not Mr. Musk's responsibility.

What Mr. Musk is doing is patently illegal and unconstitutional - and must be stopped."

Additionally, Musk "proposed that 'the worst 1% of appointed judges be fired every year,' and demanded the impeachment of judges that have blocked him from accessing sensitive Treasury Department files ... Mr. Musk, you don't impeach judges who rule against you. You may or may not know this, but under the U.S. Constitution, we have a separation of powers, brilliantly crafted by the founding fathers of this country in the 1770s."

Sanders laments that the oligarchy in charge disregards formative principles and constitutionally imposed checks and balances. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, products of the American Revolution, provided the principles and restraints. In this sense the Trump government is pursuing counter-revolution.

Not all socialists realize that the new autocrats are fighting a battle that began long ago and whose outcome is still contested. A victorious political revolution, we suggest, is no short-term happening, but actually represents a process, usually a prolonged one.

The values and ideals reflected in the Declaration of Independence had taken shape over the course of decades, even centuries, while the Constitution, as approved, was far from complete. The concept of a long, multi-faceted process of change is essential.

As feudalism waned, new horizons - geographical, intellectual, and aspirational - were in sight. Onerous demands of a land-based aristocracy, subservience to the Church in Rome, and obstacles to social and economic advancement weighed heavily. Kingly rule and feudal remnants were out of sync.

The rising bourgeoisie were restless. New knowledge, the dynamism of growing cities, entrepreneurial possibilities, new religious currents, and free expression of ideas had their appeal. The new class latched on to burgeoning technologies, possibilities for political participation, and new legal resources and financing modalities. Societal institutions were in flux.

The so-called American Revolution ran its course and brought change. A people's army won the war; the king and his ministers were out. The people's representatives governed. The Constitution outlined how government would work, who would

participate, what they would do, how they would be selected, and how to avoid autocratic rule.

Revolutionary change continued. Capitalism emerged. Factories spread, production and commerce expanded, and wealth accumulated. The unleashing of productive forces fostered exploitation of factory workers, plundering of overseas resources, and enslavement of workers in the cotton economy. Revolutionary socialism arrived, assertive in thought and action.

With his speech, Bernie Sanders was addressing still unsettled issues tending to disturb this long process of change and revolution. He discussed social and economic rights not yet guaranteed to working people, and due now. Equally, he expressed support for political freedoms and constitutional provisions, each the product of that early phase of revolution.

U.S. socialists following Sanders' lead would regard constitutional violations and war on the working class with equal seriousness. Helping them along would be greater appreciation of unfulfilled revolutionary purposes, also of the long duration of struggle. Unbalanced focus on class war may be distracting or interfere with perspective.

U.S. socialists owe much to their revolutionary ancestors, whose concepts of political rights and equality still inspire. Socialists defending working-class victims rely on notions of equality and guarantees of rights conveyed by the founding documents. They themselves, when facing political repression, look to constitutional protections.

Sanders finished with an observation on tactics: "[T]his is what I do know: The worst fear that the ruling class in this country has is that Americans ... come together to demand a government that represents all of us, not just the wealthy few. Their oligarch's nightmare is that we will not allow ourselves to be divided up by race, religion, sexual orientation or country of origin and will, together, have the courage to take them on."

His plea for unity is a reminder that the idea of socialists attending to both constitutional crisis and working-class needs is incomplete. A future agenda item might center on what to do about wishful thinking. The remedy may lie in rigorous attention to the reality, as per the historical record, that goals and purposes may be undermined by opportunism and inappropriate compromise. (IPA Service)

## Points to ponder over L'affaire Lok Sabha member Shashi Tharoor

By P. Sreekumaran

The convulsions in the Congress over party MP Shashi Tharoor's fulsome praise of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) Government for the staggering growth in the start-up sector and its remarkable feat of emerging as the top state in the country in ease of business has exposed the double standards practised by the grand old party.

It all began with the Thiruvananthapuram MP lavishing praise on the Pinarayi Government for its success in establishing 2, 90,000 MSMEs since 2022. Tharoor's laudatory references came in an article he wrote for the New Indian Express. "God's Own Country was no more the Devil's Own Playground for business", Tharoor gushed borrowing Kerala's tagline for tourism promotion.

Not surprisingly, Tharoor's article drew trenchant criticism from many Congress leaders including Leader of the Opposition (LoP) V. D. Satheesan and former LoP Ramesh Chennithala. The burden of their song was that by praising the Pinarayi Government, Tharoor has given the political rival a huge propaganda advantage, with the local bodies elections in the State months away.

Tharoor, however, justified his stand by arguing that his article was based on the facts, figures and dates as well as the Global Start-up Ecosystem Report and Kerala's performance. The ranking is not released by the CPI(M), he pointed out. "We cannot bring politics in to everything, especially where public interest is concerned."

As for the LDF, both Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and State Industries Minister P. Rajiv had welcomed Tharoor's article, and praised him for appreciating the achievements of the State Government. The Congress leaders should not convert their hate for the LDF into hate for the State, Pinarayi averred.

Of course, the criticism against Tharoor has been tamped down by the intervention of the party high Command. Rahul Gandhi told Tharoor to refrain from making statements which the LDF would use to its advantage. He also asked the Congress leaders in Kerala to



stop the open war of words.

The episode has, however, exposed the double standards practised by the Congress leaders in the State. In his complaint to the High Command Tharoor has claimed that he is being unfairly singled out for criticism.

He has a point. For instance, nobody came out with critical comments when LoP V D Satheesan praised State Education Minister V. Sivankutty for his efficient conduct of Kerala Youth Festival and a sports meet. The party leaders who are critical of Tharoor maintained a deafening silence on that occasion. Nor were there any demands for taking action against Satheesan. If this is not double standards, what is? That is the million dollar question.

Again, when Satheesan and Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee president K. Sudhakaran indulged in an open, no-holds-barred verbal warfare against each other, there was no clamour for action against them. Rahul Gandhi himself had come out with appreciating comments on the LDF Government's performance in the past. Former chief minister A. K. Antony has also praised Industries Minister Elamaram Kareem in the erstwhile LDF Government for his cooperation and help in establishing defence projects in the State. This hap-

pened when Antony was the Union Defence Minister last but not the least, no chorus of criticism erupted when former President of India Pranab Mukherjee addressed an RSS-organised function on the invitation of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat.

If anything, Tharoor should be complimented for his praise of a Government led by the Congress's political rival. Criticism for the mere sake of criticism is not good. Leaders cutting across the political divide should not hesitate to appreciate the good work done by governments irrespective of their political affiliation. That is the way politics should be conducted in a democratic country. Healthy politics presupposes civility and decency towards political opponents. The politics of hate is a luxury the country cannot afford.

In an interesting development, the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), the CPI(M)'s youth wing, has invited Tharoor to speak at the start-up festival it is organising in March. A DYFI delegation led by its president A. A. Rahim called on Tharoor in New Delhi the other day to hand over the invitation. Although Tharoor appreciated the DYFI offer, he expressed his inability to attend the event because of prior commitments. (IPA Service)



## 'NE has immense potential in India transformation's into super power' Governor inaugurates Think India North East Summit 2025

**HT Bureau**  
GUWAHATI, Feb 22: Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya inaugurated the 'Think India North East Summit 2025' at IIT Guwahati on Saturday.

Speaking on the occasion, Acharya highlighted the importance of Northeast India in shaping the nation's future. He thanked Think India for organising the conference and praised its continued focus on Northeast India, emphasising the region's vital role in India's growth.

Pointing out to North East's unique heritage, biodiversity, and youth energy as key drivers for the region's emergence as a hub of development and innovation in the country's Amrit Kaal, Acharya called upon the youth of the region to take an active role in expediting the growth trajectory of the region. The Governor also exuded hope that the discussions at this summit will focus on innovation in education, sustainability in development, and new momentum in economic empowerment, which according to him will take the North East to a greater height.



Acharya further said that the government's commitment to infrastructure development, digital connectivity, and economic inclusivity are acting as a catalyst to fulfill the aspirations and enhancing the region's potential. He also lauded Northeast's rich historical and cultural legacy, which are adequately shaped by the valiance and heroics of Lachit Borpuhan, Veer Chilarai etc.

He also acknowledged the strategic importance of Northeast India as a gateway to Southeast Asia, noting that although geographical challenges had once hindered its integration with the rest of India, it continued to thrive with a vibrant academic, historical cultural and trade legacy. "Under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Northeast has witnessed remarkable

progress," Acharya added, citing significant developments that the region has been witnessing in infrastructure, connectivity, and economic growth.

The Governor concluded his speech by expressing his optimism in youth's potential of the region which according to him if wisely harnessed will act as a force-multiplier in driving progress, in Industry 4.0, particularly in areas such as Artificial Intelligence and its manifestations in healthcare services, sustainable agriculture, climate-resilient crop development, and skill development. He also expressed confidence that the youth's innovative pursuits will play a pivotal role in realizing the Northeast's full potential and contribute to India's journey towards becoming a global superpower.

The programme was attended by Director IIT Guwahati, Prof Devendra Jalihal, National Organising secretary of Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad Ashish Chauhan, Professor of IIT-G Prof Uday Shankar Dixit along with a host of other dignitaries were present in the inaugural function.

## Training on Lemon Culture and Entrepreneurship held in Kokrajhar



**HT Correspondent**  
KOKRAJHAR, Feb 22: A two-day hands-on training on Lemon Culture and Entrepreneurship Development concluded at Science College in Kokrajhar on Saturday. It was organised by the Institutional Biotech Hub of the college, the training aimed to equip UG and PG students, as well as budding

entrepreneurs, with practical knowledge on lemon cultivation and business opportunities in the sector.

The programme was part of the ongoing DBT, Govt-sponsored project under the focus area, "Scientific approaches to develop Biopesticide for controlling Citrus diseases and Standardize the prod-

ucts obtained from Citrus limon (L.) Burm f." Experts provided hands-on exposure to participants, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset among them.

A total of 25 participants, including UG and PG students and local entrepreneurs, took part in the training, which focused on scientific methods of lemon cultivation, disease management, and value-added product development.

The training programme emphasized on scientific methods of cultivation.

"We have gained knowledge and information about the scientific method of Lemon cultivation during the programme. We learnt knowledge and gathered skillful ideas on the lemon cultivation", said a participant.

## Drug peddler in police net in Dhubri's Golakganj

**HT Correspondent**  
DHUBRI, Feb 22: The Golakganj police in Dhubri arrested a drug smuggler late last night based on a tip-off. The accused, identified as Noor Haque (32), was apprehended from his residence in Ward No. 1 of Golakganj, where he had allegedly been running an illegal drug business for a long time.

According to police sources, a raid was conducted under the leadership of Golakganj Police Station in-charge Debajit Kalita. During the search, authorities recovered 37 containers suspected to be filled with brown sugar and 64 Paven Space Plus intoxicating tablets.

Following the seizure, the police took Noor Haque into custody and brought him to Golakganj Police Station for further investigation. Officials have confirmed that an inquiry is underway to trace the supply network and any possible links to larger drug syndicates. The police have reaffirmed their commitment to cracking down on illegal drug activities in the region and urged the public to report any suspicious activities to help curb the menace of drug trafficking.

## Biswanath College boasts add on course on Entrepreneurship Development

**HT Correspondent**  
BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 22: An add on course on Entrepreneurship Development was inaugurated on Saturday at Biswanath College under the aegis of the department of economics.

Chinta Mani Sharma, principal of the College inaugurated the course in a meeting chaired by Karabi Gogoi, head of the dept of economics. Dr Sharma praised the department for taking this initiative and expressed hope that the entrepreneurship development course would help the students in selecting a right way of living in the near future. He said that in the present day context, it was better to be a job provider than a job seeker. Speaking on the occasion, Naresh Thakur, coordinator, IQAC, Rajeswar Bodo, president, BCTU and Bhaben Kalita, head, Dept of education motivated the students to do entrepreneurial activities and live a meaningful life. Gogoi explained the structure of the course and the future steps that will be taken during the course. The meeting was anchored by Ashomi Kalita, assistant professor of the department, Chandramoni Sharma, Minakshi Gohain, Khagen Saikia, Heema Rani Borah, Bhagyashree Gogoi and a host of students attended the meeting.

## NYK organises youth exchange programme in Guwahati

**HT Bureau**  
GUWAHATI, Feb 22: A five-day programme on border area youth exchange, was inaugurated at the Youth Hostel in Paltan Bazaar, Guwahati, on Friday.

The programme, organized by the Nehru Yuva Kendra, aimed to promote cultural exchange and brotherhood among youths from eight northeastern states, including Assam.

The inaugural function was attended by additional district magistrate Keshio Karon Pegu, who emphasised the importance of cultural exchange in fostering unity and brotherhood among youths. "This programme will help to promote national integration and social cohesion among the youths of the northeastern region," Pegu said.

Other dignitaries present at the inaugural function included Dr Mouchumi Bora, academic dean of Arya Vidyapeeth College, Jin Jilang, retired regional director of the National Service Scheme, and Subrata Mukherjee, deputy director of the survey department, Government of India.

The programme features various activities, including educational sessions, yoga, field visits, and a quiz competition. Over twenty-five youth delegates from the northeastern states, including

Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Tripura, are participating in the programme.

The delegates will participate in various cultural programs, including traditional dance and music performances, and will also engage in discussions on various topics, including national integration, social cohesion, and youth empowerment.

The programme is being organised by the Nehru Yuva Kendra, Kamrup Metro, in collaboration with the Ministry of youth affairs and sports.

The programme aimed to promote unity and brotherhood among the youths of the northeastern region and to foster national integration and social cohesion.

In his welcome address, Dinabandhu Saha, state director of the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan, emphasised the importance of youth exchange programs in promoting national integration and social cohesion. "These programs help to promote unity and brotherhood among the youths of different regions and cultures," Saha said.

The programme will conclude on February 25 with a valedictory function, which will be attended by various dignitaries, including ministers, MPs, and MLAs.

## Sivasagar Sri Sri Siva Ratri Mela from Feb 25 -28 Minister for public health engineering, would attend the concluding function

**HT Correspondent**  
SIVASAGAR, Feb 22: The famous Sivasagar Sivaratri Mela organized on the occasion of Sivaratri in historic Sivadol would be held from Feb 25 to Feb 28.

The five-day event is expected to attract large devotees as well as vendors from across the country. Basanta Gogoi, secretary, DouL Development Committee on Saturday informed that the Mela will be inaugurated by Akhil Gogoi, MLA, Sivasagar. Transport minister Jogen Mohan, MP, Jorhat Gaurov Gogoi, Thowra MLA Sushanta Borghain, and other dignitaries would attend the function. The cultural programme on Feb 26 would be inaugurated by Ayush Garg, DC, Sivasagar. The Janaki Mahila Sanskritik Gosthi would present 'Matsya Abatar, Chari Ved Uddhar' bhaoana. Further, the souvenir would be released by Ranuj Pegu, education minister of the state while



Devabrata Saikia, leader of the opposition would attend the session on Feb 27.

## Public meeting on central budget 2025-26



**HT Correspondent**  
MORIGAOON, Feb 22: A public meeting to discuss on the central budget 2025-26 was held at Morigaon Pabitora Hut on Saturday.

The president of Morigaon Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Ramprasad Sarkar welcomed the attendees public in the meeting.

Thereafter the MLA Ramakanta Deuri spoke on the meeting at length. The spokesperson of state BJP Ranjib Kr Sarma delivered a speech on the central budget 2025-26 which impressed the attended people. He said, "The central budget prepared by the central minister Nirjala Sitaraman is a futuristic and people belonging to all classes will be benefited by the budget. The budget also included women empowerment and ensuring employment generation specially."

## Dharna in Delhi for status to Bhojpuri

**HT Correspondent**  
KHERONI, Feb 22: Under the leadership of Santosh Patel, the Bhojpuri Jan Jagran Abhiyan staged a day-long dharna at Delhi's Jantar Mantar on International Mother Language Day, demanding the inclusion of the Bhojpuri language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

The protest highlighted the cultural and linguistic significance of Bhojpuri, spoken by approximately 250 million people across 16 countries, including India, and already granted constitutional status in Mauritius and Nepal.

The demonstration saw participation from prominent Bhojpuri artists, including Assam-born singer Kalpana Patowari and actress Sharda Singh, who voiced strong support for the cause. Patwari, a long-time advocate stated, "Just as the government recog-

nised Dogri and other languages, Bhojpuri spoken globally deserves constitutional dignity."

Sharda Singh echoed the sentiment, "deep love for Bhojpuri and urging immediate governmental action".

Patel criticised the political marginalisation of Bhojpuri, noting, "Despite its ancient roots, some dismiss it as a mere dialect of Hindi to block its constitutional status." He revealed that activists have consistently petitioned the Home ministry and Prime Minister's Office since August 6, 2015 and that the government remained unresponsive to the "sentiments of 25 crore Bhojpuri speakers."

The state unit Bhojpuri Jan Jagran Abhiyan president, Dharmendra Chauhan and president of Rachnamak Nonia Sanyukta Singh, Assam, Arjun Mahato warned of escalated protests, including road blockades and Parliament sieges, if demands were ignored.

## Brahmaputra branch Bharat Vikas Parishad launched

**HT Bureau**  
GUWAHATI, Feb 22: A new branch of Bharat Vikas Parishad was launched under the name Bharat Vikas Parishad, Brahmaputra Branch on Saturday.

The installation ceremony, held at the Sewa Kendra, Bishnupur, Guwahati, was graced by revered Vikramananda Maharaj, assistant secretary, Ramakrishna Mission, Guwahati, Prof Debabrata Das,

## CBRC Tiger Reserve honoured with State Gold Medal



**HT Correspondent**  
BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 22: The Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation (CBRC) at Pakke Tiger Reserve, a pioneering facility dedicated to the rehabilitation and conservation of Asiatic Black Bears, has been awarded the State Gold Medal for its exceptional contributions to wildlife conservation, stated a press release issued by the divisional forest officer, Pakke WLS & Tiger Reserve, Seijosa, Arunachal Pradesh.

The prestigious award was received by Satyaprakash Singh IFS, divisional forest officer (DFO) & field director, Pakke Tiger Reserve, along with Dr Panjit Basumatary, representative of the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), at a ceremony held at Raj Bhawan, Itanagar. Established in 2003, CBRC is a collaborative initiative between the department of environment, forests & climate change, government of Arunachal Pradesh (Arunachal FD), and the Wildlife

Trust of India (WTI). Located at Seijosa, West Bank, Pakke Tiger Reserve, the centre serves as a crucial hub for bear conservation, rehabilitation, and welfare.

CBRC operates under a Governing Council, chaired by the principal chief conservator of forests & principal secretary, department of environment & forests, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

The DFO of Pakke Tiger Reserve functions as the Member Secretary and Project Leader, ensuring the centre adheres to Central Zoo Authority (CZA) regulations. The forest department provides statutory and logistical support, while WTI oversees project implementation. The initiative was primarily funded by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and other national agencies. One of CBRC's most remarkable achievements has been the successful rescue and rehabilitation of over 60 Asiatic Black Bear cubs back into the wild. Through meticulous care, scientific methods, and a well-structured rehabilitation process, the centre has given these rescued bears a second chance at life in their natural habitat.

## Discussion on Union Budget 2025-26 in Diphu

**HT Bureau**  
DIPHU, Feb 22: A high-level discussion on the Union Budget 2025-26 was convened on Saturday at the Arboretum-cum-Craft Centre conference hall in Diphu, organised by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

The event, led by chief executive member (CEM) of KAAC, Tuliram Ronghang, saw participation from MLAs, executive members (EMs), members of autonomous council (MACs), representatives of all political parties, intellectuals, civil society organizations, and stakeholders.

Lok Sabha MP Amarsing Tisso provided a comprehensive overview of the Union Budget presented by Union finance minister, Nirjala Sitaraman. The session focused on analysing implications for Assam's Sixth Schedule areas, particularly Karbi Anglong, and the broader Northeast region.

Addressing the media after the programme, CEM Ronghang highlighted several critical takeaways from the budget like income tax exemption for Below Poverty Line



(BPL) families earning up to ₹ 12 lakh annually across India. Additionally, tribal communities residing in Sixth Schedule areas would enjoy full income tax exemptions.

The Ministry of development of North Eastern Region (MoD-NER) allocation has been raised to ₹ 5,000 crore, signaling enhanced focus on infrastructure and welfare projects in the region. Further CEM added no taxes will be levied on agriculture and horticulture products, a move expected to benefit farmers and boost rural economies.

Ronghang emphasised that the implementation of Article 280 under the 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill would enable KAAC to access more funds and design tailored schemes for Karbi Anglong's development.

CEM Ronghang reiterated KAAC's resolve to leverage the budget's provisions for equitable growth. "This budget acknowledges the unique needs of tribal regions and the Northeast. We will ensure every rupee is utilised to uplift our people and preserve our cultural heritage," he stated.

## KAAC will address all grievances of people: CEM

**HT Correspondent**  
HOWRAGHAT, Feb 22: Continuing the public interaction programme of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), its chief executive member (CEM), Tuliram Ronghang attended a meeting at Pam Ingti village's playground under Namati Member of Autonomous Council (MAC) constituency in Karbi Anglong on Saturday.

The CEM speaking in the meeting said that KAAC would ardently listen to the problems and solve the respective grievances.

In the same meeting, the CEM felicitated Gratia Marak with a Karbi turban, a citation and cash of ₹ 50,000. Marak was the NCC commander accompanying the Prime Minister at the last Republic Day celebration in Delhi.

The meeting was attended by the chief secretary of KAAC, Siming Taru; local MAC and executive member of KAAC, Ritesh Inghe; MLAs Darsing Ronghang, Bidya Sing Englang and Rupsing Teron; MP Amarsing Tisso, and others.

## Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardev Viswavidyalaya launches PhD programme in Dhubri

**HT Correspondent**  
DHUBRI, Feb 22: In a significant step towards advancing higher education in Dhubri district, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya in Doomardah, Balajan area has launched its first-ever PhD programme on Saturday.

The initiative, spearheaded by the Dhubri unit, marked a milestone in the region's academic landscape.

Mridul Hazarika, vice chancellor Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya, addressing the gathering, emphasised the significance of launching PhD program in an area where advanced research opportunities have been historically limited. He stressed that this initiative would provide local students and scholars with access to higher education

and research prospects, eliminating the need to migrate to distant universities.

The inaugural ceremony was graced by distinguished guests, and several eminent personalities and educationists attended the event, highlighting the importance of the newly introduced doctoral programs. As part of the inauguration, a workshop was also organised on Shankari Nriya, Cuttack Nriya, and organised a workshop on academic experience on agriculture, alongside the academic expansion.

This initiative is expected to significantly enhance research opportunities and educational standards in Dhubri, paving the way for future academic advancements in the district.



# Trump fires chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, two other military officers

WASHINGTON, Feb 22: President Donald Trump abruptly fired Air Force Gen CQ Brown Jr as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Friday, sidelining a history-making fighter pilot and respected officer as part of a campaign led by his defence secretary to rid the military of leaders who support diversity and equity in the ranks.

The ouster of Brown, only the second Black general to serve as chairman, is sure to send shock waves through the Pentagon. His 16 months in the job had been consumed with the war in Ukraine and the expanded conflict in the Middle East.

"I want to thank General Charles CQ Brown for his over 40 years of service to our country, including as our current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He is a fine gentleman and an outstanding leader, and I wish a great future for him and his family," Trump posted on social media.

Brown's public support of Black Lives Matter after the police killing of George Floyd had made him fodder for the administration's wars against "wokeism" in the military. His ouster is the latest upheaval at the Pentagon, which plans to cut 5,400 civilian probationary workers starting next week and identify USD 50 billion in programs that could be cut next year to redirect those savings to fund Trump's priorities.

Trump said he's nominating re-



tired Air Force Lt Gen Dan "Razin" Caine to be the next chairman. Caine is a career F-16 pilot who served on active duty and in the National Guard, and was most recently the associate director for military affairs at the CIA, according to his military biography.

Caine's military service includes combat roles in Iraq, special operations postings and positions inside some of the Pentagon's most classified special access programs. However, he has not had key assignments identified in law as prerequisites for the job, including serving as either the vice chairman, a combatant commander or a service chief. That requirement could be waived if the "president determines such action is necessary in the national interest."

More Pentagon firings  
Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, in a statement praising both Caine

and Brown, announced the firings of two additional senior officers: Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Lisa Franchetti and Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Jim Slife.

Franchetti becomes the second top female military officer to be fired by the Trump administration. Trump fired Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Linda Fagan just a day after he was sworn in.

A surface warfare officer, Franchetti has commanded at all levels, heading US 6th Fleet and US Naval Forces Korea. She was the second woman ever to be promoted to four-star admiral, and she did multiple deployments, including as commander of a naval destroyer and two stints as aircraft carrier strike group commander.

Slife led Air Force Special Operations Command prior to becoming the service's vice chief of staff

and had deployed to the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Trump has asserted his executive authority in a much stronger way in his second term, removing most officials from the Biden administration even though many of those positions are meant to carry over from one administration to the next.

The chairman role was established in 1949 as an adviser to the president and secretary of defence, as a way to filter all of the views of the service chiefs and more readily provide that information to the White House without the president having to reach out to each individual military branch, according to an Atlantic Council briefing written by retired Maj. Gen. Arnold Punaro. The role has no actual command authority.

Trump acted despite support for Brown among key members of Congress and a seemingly friendly meeting with him in mid-December, when the two were seated next to each other for a time at the Army-Navy football game.

The firing follows days of speculation after a list of officers, including Brown, to be fired was circulated on Capitol Hill — but notably was not sent via any formal notification to either of the Republican chairmen of the House or Senate armed services committees.

Sen. Roger Wicker, GOP chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, didn't mention Caine's name in a statement Friday. (AP)

# Hamas frees first 2 of 6 Israeli hostages to be released in latest exchange

NUSEIRAT (GAZA STRIP), Feb 22: Hamas freed the first two of six Israeli hostages due to be released on Saturday even as heightened tension between the adversaries clouded the future of the fragile ceasefire deal.

The two hostages — Tal Shoham, 40, and Avera Mengistu, 38 — were put into Red Cross vehicles after being brought out onto a stage by masked and armed Hamas fighters in front of a crowd in the southern Gaza city of Rafah. Soon after, the Israeli military confirmed that the two had been brought into Israel.

A few hours later, Red Cross vehicles arrived in the central town of Nuseirat for the next handover.

The latest hostage release, to be followed by the freeing of hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel, is going ahead after tensions mounted over a grisly and heart-wrenching dispute triggered this week when Hamas initially handed over the wrong body for Shiri Bibas, an Israeli mother of two young boys abducted by militants.

The remains that Hamas transferred with her sons' bodies on Thursday were later determined to be those of an unidentified Palestinian woman. In response, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed revenge for "a cruel and malicious violation", while Hamas suggested it had been a mistake.

On Friday night, the small militant group believed to have been holding Bibas and her sons — the Palestinian Mujahedeen Brigades — said it handed over a second body. On Saturday morning, Bibas' family said Israeli forensic authorities had confirmed the remains were hers.

"For 16 months we sought certainty, and now that it's here, it brings no comfort, though we hope it marks the beginning of closure," the family said.

Difficult negotiations likely over the ceasefire's next phase. The dispute over the body's identity raised new doubt about the ceasefire deal, which has paused over 15 months of war but is nearing the end of its first phase.

Negotiations over a second phase, in which Hamas would re-



lease dozens more hostages in exchange for a lasting ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal, are likely to be even more difficult.

The six hostages being freed Saturday are the last living ones to be released under the ceasefire's first phase. The new releases brought a moment of joy and relief for families, but with the ceasefire's future uncertain, fears remain over the fate of the remaining hostages seized during the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas that killed 1,200 in Israel and ignited the war.

"This is an unforgettable moment, where all emotions are rapidly mixing together. Our Tal is with us," Shoham's family said in a statement, calling for a deal the he reached for the release of all those still captive. "There is a window of opportunity; we must not miss it."

Shoham, who also holds Austrian citizenship, was visiting his wife's family in Kibbutz Be'eri when Hamas militants stormed into the community during the October 7, 2023 attacks. Shoham's wife, two young children, and three other relatives who were abducted with him were freed in a November 2023 exchange.

Mengistu, an Ethiopian-Israeli, had been held in Gaza since entering on his own in 2014. Watching the handover on Israeli media, Mengistu's family broke out into a Hebrew song, "Here is the Light," as they saw him for the first time in more than a decade.

The others to be freed Saturday include Eliya Cohen, 27; Omer Shem Tov, 22; and Omer Wenkert, 23. All three were abducted from a music festival during the October 7 attack. Hisham Al-Sayed, 36, who also crossed into Gaza on his own years ago, is also to be returned to Israel as part of the deal.

Hundreds of Palestinian prisoners set for release  
More than 600 Palestinians

# New FBI director Kash Patel plans to relocate 1,500 employees

WASHINGTON, Feb 22: New FBI Director Kash Patel has told senior officials that he plans to relocate 1,000 employees at FBI headquarters to field offices around the country and move an additional 500 to a bureau facility in Huntsville, Alabama, according to a person with knowledge of the discussions.

The plans were communicated Friday, the same day Patel was sworn in at the White House. They reflect his long-stated determination to reduce the FBI's footprint in Washington and have more of a presence in offices in other cities.

The person who discussed Patel's vision did so on condition of anonymity to describe plans that have not been made public.

At his swearing-in ceremony, Patel called the opportunity to lead the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency the "greatest honour" of his life.

Patel was confirmed by the Senate on Thursday by a 51-49 margin, with two Republican lawmakers, Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, breaking party ranks and voting against him.

"I think he'll go down as the best ever at that position," President Donald Trump told reporters Friday ahead of the White House swearing-in, which was conducted by Attorney General Pam Bondi and attended by Republican supporters in Congress, including Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio.

Trump added that the "agents love this guy."

Patel will inherit an FBI gripped by turmoil as the Justice Department over the past month has forced out a group of senior bureau officials and made a highly unusual demand for the names of thousands of agents who participated in investigations related to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the US Capitol.

Democrats had sounded the alarm about the appointment, saying they fear Patel will operate as a loyalist for Trump and abuse the FBI's law enforcement powers to go after the president's adversaries. They've cited past comments such as his suggestion

before he was nominated that he would "come after" anti-Trump "conspirators" in the government and media.

Patel sought to assuage those concerns at his confirmation hearing last month, saying he intended to follow the Constitution and had no interest in pursuing retribution, though he also said at his swearing-in Friday that reporters had written "fake, malicious, slanderous and defamatory" stories about him.

Republicans angry over what they see as law enforcement bias against conservatives during the Democratic Biden administration, as well as criminal investigations into Trump, have rallied behind Patel as the right person for the job.

Patel has spoken of his desire to implement major changes at the FBI, including a reduced footprint in Washington and a renewed emphasis on the bureau's traditional crime-fighting duties rather than the intelligence-gathering work that has come to define its mandate over the past two decades as national security threats have proliferated.

He said Friday that the FBI's "national security mission" was equally as important as its efforts to fight violent crime and drug overdoses.

"Anyone that wishes to do harm to our way of life and our citizens, here and abroad, will face the full wrath of the DOJ and FBI," Patel said. "If you seek to hide in any corner of this country or planet, we will put on the world's largest manhunt and we will find you and we will decide your end state."

A former Justice Department counterterrorism prosecutor, Patel was selected in November to replace Christopher Wray, who was picked by Trump in 2017 and who resigned at the conclusion of the Biden administration to make way for his chosen successor.

Wray infuriated Trump throughout his tenure, including after FBI agents searched his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida in August 2022 for classified documents in one of two federal investigations that resulted in indictments against Trump that were dismissed after his election win. (AP)

# US envoy praises Zelenskyy after Trump's censure of the Ukrainian leader

KYIV, Feb 22: President Donald Trump's envoy to Ukraine and Russia said on Friday that he had held "extensive and positive discussions" with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about the three-year war with Russia and praised the Ukrainian leader as an "embattled and courageous leader of a nation at war".

Retired US Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg — who travelled to Kyiv on Wednesday and whose planned news conference with Zelenskyy on Thursday was changed at the last minute to a simple photo opportunity — struck a positive tone after what he said on the social platform X was "a long and intense day" of talks with Ukraine's senior leadership.

His comments marked a departure from recent rebukes of Zelenskyy by Trump and other senior US officials that appeared to indicate an abrupt deterioration of relations. Trump called Zelenskyy "a dictator without elections" and warned him that he'd "better move fast" to negotiate an end to the war or risk not having a nation to lead.

The possibility that vital US military aid for Ukraine was in doubt darkened the mood in Kyiv as Ukrainian forces struggle to hold back Russia's bigger army on the battlefield.

European governments, uneasy about being sidelined so far in talks between senior US and Russian officials, have jumped to shore up Zelenskyy and at the same time avoid a breakdown in transatlantic relations.

Polish President Andrzej Duda, whose country has been a vocal supporter of neighbouring Ukraine, said Zelenskyy phoned him on Friday. Duda said he told Zelenskyy "to remain committed to the course of calm and constructive cooperation" with Trump.

"We consistently believe there is no other way to stop the bloodshed and achieve lasting peace in Ukraine except with the support of the United States," Duda said he also told Zelenskyy.

"I trust that goodwill and honesty form the foundation of the U.S. negotiation strategy," Duda said on X. "I have no doubt that President Trump is guided by a deep sense of responsibility for global stability and peace."

The European Union's top defense official said Friday that the bloc plans to send a strong message of support to Ukraine next week with a new aid package to mark Monday's third anniversary of the war.

EU Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius said senior members of the bloc's executive branch are weighing how, "in a very urgent way, to send a very strong message to Ukrainians and to the world that we are standing together with Ukraine."

European policy commissioners, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and other top EU officials are traveling to Kyiv on Monday. (AP)

# IMF mission after visiting Pakistan appreciates govt's commitment to assessment

ISLAMABAD, Feb 22: An International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission after visiting Pakistan to evaluate the country's governance appreciated the government's commitment to such assessments.

A technical mission of the IMF was in Pakistan earlier this month to scrutinise the judicial and regulatory system as part of the ongoing USD 7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) to address governance and corruption vulnerabilities, Dawn News reported.

During the visit, a delegation led by Joel Turkewitz met with the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Yahya Afridi, to discuss judicial performance, governance, and reforms.

In a recent statement on its website, the IMF recalled that its scoping mission visited Islamabad from February 6 to 14 "to lay the groundwork for a Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment (GCD) at the government's request."

"The IMF appreciates the Pakistan government's commitment to this exercise and looks forward to continuing our collaboration," it said. The IMF further announced that its scoping team for the GCD

assessment will "return to Pakistan later this year to continue gathering information and exploring opportunities to strengthen governance, integrity, and economic outcomes in preparation for the eventual assessment."

The IMF noted the mission's focus was to assess governance and corruption vulnerabilities across six core state functions.

"These include fiscal governance, central bank governance and operations, financial sector oversight, market regulation, rule of law, and anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML-CFT)."

During its visit, the team engaged with the Finance Division, the Federal Board of Revenue, the State Bank of Pakistan, the Auditor General of Pakistan, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan, the Ministry of Law and Justice, and the Supreme Court, the IMF said.

"In addition, the IMF team met with a range of other stakeholders, including business associations, civil society organisations, and international development partners." (AP)

# Trump administration reverses its previous decision and reinstates legal aid for migrant children

MIAMI, Feb 22: Days after telling legal groups who help migrant children who arrive in America alone — some so young they are in diapers or their feet dangle from their chairs in court — that they must stop their work, the federal government Friday reversed itself.

The Trump administration told the groups that they can resume providing legal services to tens of thousands of unaccompanied children. The Acacia Centre for Justice said that they received notice from the government of the reversal.

The notice came after the government on Tuesday suspended the program that provides legal representation to children who have arrived in the United States across the border with Mexico without parents or legal guardians. Several organisations that offer assistance to migrant children had criticised the measure and said at the time that the minors were at risk.

The USD 200 million contract allows Acacia and its subcontractors



to provide legal representation to about 26,000 children and legal education to another 1,000,000 more.

The Friday notice from the Interior Department of Interior obtained by The Associated Press does not explain the Trump administration decision to reinstate the program. It states that it "cancels" the order to halt legal services

to migrant children.

"Acacia Centre for Justice may resume all activities," the short notice says.

Shauna Aber, executive director of Acacia said that they will continue to work with the government "to ensure that these critical services upholding the basic due process rights of vulnerable children are fully restored" and their

partners can resume their work.

She warned, however, that this is a "critical moment to ensure that no child is forced to navigate" the immigration system alone.

Acacia said that in less than 48 hours, members of the public sent more than 15,000 letters to the Congress demanding the resumption of the programme.

The programme is funded by a five-year contract, but the government can decide at the end of each year if it renews it or not. The deadline for this year's decision is in March.

Michael Lukens, the executive director of Amica Centre for Immigrant Rights, one of the subcontractors, said that despite the reversal he is still concerned.

"I'm very concerned because the attack on children is unprecedented and to even begin that is troubling," Lukens said. He said if the stop-work order had remained in place, it would have left kids across the country without due process or pro-

tection. jailed in Israel will be freed in exchange, the Palestinian prisoners media office said Friday. The prisoners set for release include 50 serving life sentences, 60 with long sentences, 47 who were released under a previous hostage-for-prisoner exchange and 445 Palestinians who were seized by Israeli troops in Gaza since the war began.

Hamas has said it will also release four more bodies next week, completing the first phase of the ceasefire. If that plan is carried out, Hamas would retain about 60 hostages, about half of whom are believed to be alive.

Hamas has said it won't release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal. Netanyahu, with the full backing of the Trump administration, says he's committed to destroying Hamas' military and governing capacities and returning all the hostages, goals widely seen as mutually exclusive.

Trump's Gaza plan adds to uncertainty

Trump's proposal to remove about 2 million Palestinians from Gaza so the US can own and rebuild it has thrown the ceasefire into further doubt. His idea has been welcomed by Netanyahu but universally rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries.

Trump said Friday that he was "a little surprised" by rejections of the proposal by Egypt and Jordan and that he would not impose it.

"I'll tell you, the way to do it is my plan. I think that's the plan that really works. But I'm not forcing it. I'm just going to sit back and recommend it," Trump said in a Fox News interview.

Israel's military offensive killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants. Israel says it has killed more than 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The offensive destroyed vast areas of Gaza, reducing entire neighborhoods to rubble. At its height, the war displaced 90 per cent of Gaza's population. Many have returned to their homes to find nothing left and no way of rebuilding. (AP)

# Kash Patel takes oath as FBI director on Bhagwat Gita

WASHINGTON, Feb 22: Kash Patel took oath as the ninth director of the FBI on the Bhagwat Gita and spoke about how a first-generation Indian kid is living the American dream, reflecting on his heritage.

The US Senate voted 51 to 49 to confirm Patel on Thursday.

Patel's family members and girlfriend were present during the oath ceremony on Friday.

The oath ceremony was administered by US Attorney General Pam Bondi in the Indian Treaty Room in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building (EEOB) on the White House campus.

She asked Patel to place his hand on the Gita and raise his right hand to take the oath.

"I am living the American dream. Anyone who thinks the American dream is dead, just look right here. You're talking to a first-generation Indian kid who's about to lead the law enforcement community, the greatest nation on God's green earth. That can't happen anywhere else," Patel, 44, said.

New York-born Patel has his roots in Gujarat. (PTI)

# Partners can resume their work.

She warned, however, that this is a "critical moment to ensure that no child is forced to navigate" the immigration system alone.

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"I'm very concerned because the attack on children is unprecedented and to even begin that is troubling," Lukens said. He said if the stop-work order had remained in place, it would have left kids across the country without due process or protection.

Some of the organisations that provide legal representation said the decision to restore funds ensures the continuation of vital protections for vulnerable children.

"We urge the administration to stay this course by exercising the remaining year services under this existing contract," said Wendy Young, president of the Kids in Need of Defense, one of the organizations that assists migrant children. (AP)



## Tripura starts using AI to identify tax evaders: CM



**AGARTALA, Feb 22:** Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Saturday said the state has been using artificial intelligence (AI) to identify tax evaders and will take action against them.

While addressing GST 'Jaagruka Abhiyan' at Prajna Bhawan, the chief minister said the tax collection plays a key role in accelerating development in the northeastern state.

"Of the state's annual budget of ₹ 27,800 crore in the 2024-25 financial year, its own revenue stands at ₹ 3,700 crore. Only ₹ 10,000 crore remained after meeting the non-plan expenditure—salary, pension, loan and interest of loan. The state needs to pay 25 per cent of its own revenue (₹ 3,700 crore) to Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAACDC) and 10 per cent to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)," he said.

Emphasising on more tax collection by preventing evasion, the chief minister said the development depends on the tax collection.

"If there is more tax, there will be more development. The government is taking all possible steps

to collect taxes to ensure the building of more infrastructure. There have been instances of tax evasion through fake input tax credits and misuse of GST Analytics & Intelligence Network (GAIN). The tax department has introduced Artificial Intelligence to prevent misuse of the existing system," he said.

The chief minister also urged the people to pay GST as they are "partners" of the state's growth momentum.

"Those who skip GST should be brought into the ambit because the fund is required to accelerate development and infrastructure building. Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to see India become 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047. It will not be possible if we fail to make each state developed by 2047," he said.

Saha also said the taxation system has been integrated after the introduction of the GST, and the department has started using AI-enabled analytics tools to identify tax evasion to take necessary steps.

"The tax evaders will have to face the law if they continue with their old practice as the system has already been strengthened," he said. (PTI)

## Six members of banned outfit arrested in Manipur

Two others held for extortion

**IMPHAL, Feb 22:** Six cadres of a banned outfit were arrested from Manipur's Imphal West district, and two members of a group were apprehended for allegedly being involved in extortion in Imphal East, police said on Saturday.

Six members of the proscribed Kangleipak Communist Party (Ibungo Ngangom) were apprehended from Koutruk Makha Leikai Church in Imphal West on Friday, a senior officer said.

The police also arrested two members of GS Organisation from Achanbigei Maning Leikai in Imphal East district for allegedly being involved in extortion from sand-laden trucks in Sekmai, Iribung, Koirengai and Patsoi areas.

They were also allegedly involved in incidents of snatching keys from truck drivers in Sekmai area. They have been identified as Ningthoujam Yamba Singh (43) and Usham Netaji Singh (35), the officer added.

Arms and ammunition were also surrendered in Churachandpur district on Saturday after joint efforts in public awareness by the local police, Assam Rifles and CRPF, another officer said.

"This is the first step towards de-weaponising the society and creating a safe and secure atmosphere where regular activities can be boosted," Churachandpur SP Prakar Pandey said in a statement. The Manipur Police also said at least two firearms and ammunition were handed over to the administrations in Kakching and Kangpokpi districts.



The surrender of arms and ammunition comes after Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla appealed to the people to surrender illegal arms and ammunition.

Security forces also recovered at least 12 firearms from Kakching Wairi area and handed them over to the Kakching Police Station, another officer said.

During an operation in Maojang village under the Moreh Police Station limits in Tengnoupal district, security forces recovered two improvised explosive devices weighing 22 kg with detonators, one 7-kg IED, one bomb of 6 kg with detonators and one bomb of 4 kg. "The IEDs, suspected to be unstable, had to be destroyed at the spot by a bomb disposal team," police said, adding that an FIR has been registered in this connection.

The Manipur Police along with central forces have been conducting search operations after ethnic violence broke out in the state in May 2023.

More than 250 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in ethnic violence between Imphal Valley-based Meiteis and adjoining hills-based Kuki-Zo groups since May two years ago. (PTI)

## Mizoram CM inaugurates bailey bridge over Tuivai river

Connecting Mizoram to Manipur

**AIZAWL, Feb 22:** Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Saturday opened a new bailey bridge over Tuivai river to connect the state with neighbouring Manipur.

The 250-metre-long bailey bridge on the NH-2 (formerly 54) will link Mizoram's Aizawl district with Manipur's Pherzawl district.

"Twenty-eight years after the last bridge collapsed, the people's government today opened the new bridge to Mizoram with Manipur," the chief minister said.

Lalduhoma said the Selling (Mizoram)-Tipaimuk (Manipur) road where the bridge was located was previously under the Border Road Organisation (BRO) and was an important road linking Manipur until the bailey bridge was swept away by flood in 1997 for the second time.



Before this, the bridge constructed by the BRO was swept away by flood in 1990.

The CM said that efforts to construct a new bailey bridge by the state PWD again in 1999 could not prosper following the declaration of the Selling-Tipaimuk road as National Highway by the Centre.

He said that the Centre is

## Calls for extended timeframe to surrender illegal weapons in Manipur

'No legal action be taken against civilian volunteers who were compelled to defend their communities'

**IMPHAL, Feb 22:** In response to Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla's appeal to the people of the strife-torn state to voluntarily surrender looted and illegally held weapons within seven days, an umbrella body of Imphal-based civil society organisations of the Meiteis on Saturday requested him to "engage formally with local youth leaders to ensure a cooperative approach in recovering arms from civilian volunteers".

In a statement, the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI) also said that the "seven-day timeframe is too short for meaningful engagement with the stakeholders and the public."

Bhalla had on February 20 urged the people of the state to surrender weapons within seven days, assuring no punitive action would be initiated against those giving up arms during this period. He, however, had asserted that "strict action" would be taken after the expiry of the deadline.

COCOMI said, "We acknowl-



edge this (governor's appeal for surrendering arms) as a necessary step under the law of the land. However, it is imperative to recognise the circumstances that led local youth to take up arms and loot weapons. This situation arose due to the incompetence of the government's security forces, which failed to protect vulnerable villages at the peak of the crisis.

Asserting that the seven-day timeframe for surrendering arms is

too short for meaningful engagement with stakeholders and the public, the committee said, "An extension of time would allow for better public understanding and cooperation, helping to prevent any misunderstanding or resistance."

It also appealed to Bhalla that no legal action be taken against civilian volunteers who were compelled to defend their communities.

## ADP urges Arunachal govt for correction of statehood bill before APFRA act implementation

HT Correspondent

**ITANAGAR, Feb 22:** The Arunachal Democratic Party (ADP) on Saturday has requested the state government to take up legislation for correction of defunct statehood bill before any enactment and implementation of APFRA 1978 in Arunachal Pradesh. Addressing the newscorner here at Arunachal Press Club (APC) the ADP President Tami Pangu informed hue and cry were not healthy signs in the peace loving state like Arunachal Pradesh.

"For last few days, months and years the APFRA has been creating hue and cry in the society and we are worried that it may create negative impact and thought in the society and it may create differences among the community and tribes of state," he said.

Before enforcing the APFRA the state government should have tried for legislation and work for correction of the defunct statehood bill which was the need of hour, he said. "It is necessary that our statehood bill is corrected in the line of Nagaland and others states where the tribal has been given proper right on their ancestral property and others inherent property. The state government should have to cautious before doing it seriously," he said.

## DCM Chowna Mein reviews small hydropower projects

HT Correspondent

**ITANAGAR, Feb 22:** Deputy Chief Minister of the State and minister-in-charge of power & hydropower, Chowna Mein convened an important meeting with the small hydropower project developers of the state to review the status of various small hydropower projects at his secretariat office on Saturday.

Mein in his remarks said that the state government was keen on developing small hydropower projects aligning with the goals of Atmanirbhar Arunachal and India's net zero goals as envisaged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He assured to provide full support to developers to help overcome challenges and solving local issues by engaging with the local communities. However, he urged the developers to expedite their works and need to demonstrate their commitment for timely commissioning of projects. Commissioner (hydropower), Sonam Chombay informed that Cumulative allocated capacity in 35 alive small hydropower projects was 570.75 MW which would bring-in a total estimated investment of Rs 7000 cr in the state and generate employment for 7500 local youths. These projects, after completion, would earn revenue in terms of free power at Rs 58.25 cr per year after commissioning.

On the occasion, deputy chief minister felicitated two power developers for timely commissioning of their projects namely, M/S Devi Energies Pvt Ltd Andhra Pradesh for Dikshi HEP(24MW) in West Kameng district and M/S Raajratna Energy Holdings Pvt Ltd, Hyderabad for Khangtang HEP (7.5 MW) in Tawang.

In the meeting, advisor to DCM Anupam Tangu, secretary to power, R K Sharma, additional PCCF, D Dalai, chief engineering (Hydropower), Atek Miyu, chief engineering (T & D), T K Tara, Director (LM), Mamta Riba and 19 Power Developers were also present on the occasion.



Enforcing the APFRA would divide the people and ignite disharmony among the people. The people of state are coexisting peacefully with each other regardless of their religion, so it's better to see that the Act does not impact so much but we fear that the matter of enforcement of said Act are dividing the people in the line of their faith and religion, he said. He also condemned the statement of chief minister Pema Khandu earlier and said that before going for any implementation of the APFRA which might have adverse affect on the demography of state and also divide the people on the line of faith and religion and may create hatred and disharmony in the society, community and tribes, the ADP president added.

## Nagaland govt only focused on political issue, ignoring youth and women: Cong

**KOHIMA, Feb 22:** AICC secretary in-charge of Nagaland, Christopher Tilak, on Saturday accused the state government of neglecting socio-economic problems, particularly concerns of youth and women, while only focusing on the unresolved Naga political issue.

Tilak was addressing a press conference here after completing the first phase of the Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee (NPCC) tour of several districts.

"There has been limited focus on socio-economic issues in Nagaland, while political concerns draw the government's attention," he alleged.

Tilak, along with NPCC president and Lok Sabha MP S Supongmeren Jamir and NPCC working president Khriedi Theunuo, started the tour on February 18 from Peren district and it culminated in Kohima on Saturday after covering Dimapur, Wokha, Mokokchung and Phek districts as part of the party's grassroots outreach programme.

Tilak highlighted the extensive engagement with various district-level party leaders, including district presidents, office bearers, assembly coordinators, and members of the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC), as well as youth and women wing leaders in the districts.

Sharing observations of the tour, Tilak said that during deliberations, the concern was that the socio-economic issues, particularly those affecting the youth and women, were largely overlooked by the state government with more focus being made towards the political issue.

"Widespread unemployment, migration, lack of basic infrastructure and poor road connectivity were major concerns in the districts we visited," he said.

Tilak claimed that many rural areas in

"The process of arms confiscation should not be limited to the looted weapons alone; it must also extend to the unaccounted number of illegal arms smuggled across the border and used by armed groups operating under the so-called Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with the Centre," it said.

"Transparency is crucial, reports on the confiscation of arms from the hills must be made public to ensure a rational and fair approach," it added.

COCOMI also sought "assurance from the governor and relevant authorities that all armed Kuki militant camps under SoO in the surrounding hill areas be shifted to other locations so that law and order is fully restored. The government must come up with a concrete, foolproof plan to secure villages, instill a sense of safety among villagers and their volunteers, and provide a firm guarantee that no further attacks will take place," it said. (PTI)

## Appeal to state govt to clarify APFRA implementation status

HT Correspondent

**ITANAGAR, Feb 22:** The Indigenous Faith and Culture Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) on Saturday has sought clarification and status of the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religious Act-1978 (APFRA) and its implementation process.

Addressing the newscorner here at Arunachal Press Club (APC) IFCSAP Spokesperson Pai Dawe said that all successive government of state has been assuring for implementation of the APFRA-1978 but they have lost confidence for decades.

"The former general secretary has filed a PIL and the courts have

## BJP budget outreach programme in Shillong

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Feb 22:** The Union minister of state for external affairs and textiles Pabitra Margherita, interacted with the media as part of the BJP's budget outreach program in Shillong on Saturday.

The minister expressed his gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and finance minister Nirmla Sitharaman for presenting a promising budget for Viksit Bharat.

Margherita briefed the media on the features of the Union Budget for 2025-26, highlighting key reforms such as zero income tax for incomes up to ₹ 12 lakh, as well as initiatives in infrastructural development, farmer welfare, education, health, and technology.

The minister placed special emphasis on the significant budget allocations for the North East and Meghalaya in particular.

The notable increase in budget allocation for programs under the Ministry of development of north eastern region (MoDoNER), including PM-DevINE, NESIDS, and NEC, would promote effective and all-round development in the North Eastern Region.

given direction for framing of rules within (6) six months and it may be a reason that hue and cry are being made. Despite trying to frame rules the state government has been announcing for its implementation which is the matter in the public domain and its matter of question," he said.

"As per direction of the court the state government should abide by it or else if someone want to oppose its better go to court. Terming the APFRA may help us to know the exact population and demographic statistic and it does not mean that it is against one religion but it will help documenting statistic.

ers often fly in helicopters, bypassing the crumbling road infrastructure, ordinary citizens have to endure the terrible condition of the roads.

He argued that if political leaders used the same roads as the general public, the situation would improve drastically.

Tilak claimed that the popularity of the Congress was growing in Nagaland, particularly after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections when the state sent a candidate of the party to the lower house of Parliament.

He credited this success to the desire for a change among the people of Nagaland, who, according to him, despite the Congress's relatively weak organisational strength, still support the party.

He said that the party's core ideology, centred around secularism and unity, continues to resonate with the people.

Tilak said that in the coming months, Congress will work to strengthen its organisational strength, particularly focusing on youth and women's participation. He also noted that the party's preparations for the 2028 state elections were underway with an aim to increase the party's representation in the assembly by securing more MLAs.

Theunuo emphasised the party's focus on unity and secularism and expressed a strong commitment to rebuilding the Congress in Nagaland.

NPCC president Jamir said that the Congress strategy for 2028 assembly polls is to remain a people-centric party, free from the power games that have marred other political groups.

The aim is to focus on community service, human resources, and grassroots-level engagement to build a better future for Nagaland, Jamir asserted. (PTI)

Memo No. FA/TR/Tender/2024-25/213

February 7, 2025.

### NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed Tenders are invited on behalf of Field Director, Manas Tiger Reserve for the year 2024-25 affixing Rs. 8.25 Court fee stamp from intending Firm/Supplier/Dealer for Procurement of School furniture (Desk & Bench) under Manas Tiger Reserve. The Tenderer must submit self-attested copy of up-to-date Firm/Dealer/Supplier Registration, GST Registration, Income Tax Return (last 3 years), Annual Turnover (last 3 years), Bank Solvency, Previous Experience if any etc. along with the tender. The date of receipt of Tender is fixed on till 27.02.2025 up to 3:00 p.m. & the Tender will be opened on 27.02.2025 at 3:30 p.m. in the O/o the Field Director, Manas Tiger Reserve. In the event of any unusual occurrence due to strike, bandh, holiday etc. the same will be received and opened on the next working day at same place and same time.

Sl. No	Description of Items	Specifications	Offered Rate (in Rs.)
1	School furniture (Desk & Bench)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Made with 0.8mm thick CR Sheet.</li> <li>Stiffeners made with 25x25 mm square tube of 1 mm wall thickness.</li> <li>Side structure made with CR Sheet press formed and welded to 50x25 mm tube of wall thickness 1.2 mm with 25mm round tube of 1.2 mm wall thickness.</li> <li>Front Modesty panels &amp; bottom shelf made with 0.8mm thick CR sheet.</li> <li>MS frame duly powder coated.</li> <li>Desk top made with 17mm thick Prelam MDF with 0.8mm PVC edge binding on all sides.</li> </ul>	Rate to be quoted per set including of GST, Transportation charges etc.

Detailed particulars of NIT & other terms & conditions may be seen in the office of the undersigned during office hours.

Sd/-Field Director,  
Manas Tiger Reserve

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/1537



## Cong leader Udit Raj receives death threats, files complaint

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Congress leader Udit Raj on Saturday filed a complaint alleging that the BSP workers have been threatening to kill him on the directions of their party supremo Mayawati.

Raj posted a picture of the complaint on X and said that he has been receiving death threats since February 18, after his remarks against Bahujan Samaj Party leader Mayawati.

On February 17, Raj launched a scathing attack on BSP chief Mayawati and said that she had "strangled the social movement" and now the time has come to strangle her.

He later clarified that he meant that people should recognise her patterns and leave her. In the complaint, he claimed that the callers have been threatening to kill him if speaks against Bahujan Samaj Party leader Mayawati.

The conversations have been recorded and were submitted as evidence, he said.

"These callers not only extended direct threats but also posted/circulated and broadcasted the same on social media, after having recorded their act of extending threats and abusing me in filthy language, manifestly in order to provoke other persons also to execute such threats," the complaint read.

Raj alleged that there is a news clip in circulation on the YouTube Channel 'Bahujan Dastak', wherein the interviewer has been exhorting the public at large to slit his throat and announced a reward of ₹ 1 Lakh for such an act.

"I have been noticing unusual movements of various strangers near my house thus posing imminent an acute threat to my life and I apprehend that any untoward incident may take place if adequate security is not provided immediately," he said, requesting the Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora to take immediate strict legal action and direct the concerned SHO to lodge an FIR immediately. (PTI)

## SC to hear AAP leader's plea against his election in 2022 bypoll tomorrow

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on Monday a plea of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Durgesh Pathak for the dismissal of a petition challenging his election from Delhi's Rajinder Nagar Assembly seat in a 2022 bypoll.

A bench headed by Justice Surya Kant is scheduled to hear the plea, in which it has sought the response of one Rajan Tiwari, who has challenged Pathak's election before the Delhi High Court.

The top court sought Tiwari's response in the matter on November 14 last year and stayed the proceedings on the election petition.

On November 4, the top court asked Pathak to file an affidavit stating that no FIR was registered against him except the one that was disclosed in the Form 26 while filing his nomination papers.

Pathak has challenged the July 8 last year order of the high court by which it had refused to dismiss Tiwari's petition. In his petition before the high court, Tiwari has challenged Pathak's election as an MLA from the Rajinder Nagar constituency here in the June 2022 bypolls, alleging that he indulged in corrupt practices.

Pathak defeated his nearest rival by a margin of 11,468 votes in the

# Congress cannot wait for people to get tired of BJP: Sachin Pilot

**MUMBAI, Feb 22:** Congress leader Sachin Pilot on Saturday said the party cannot wait for the people to get tired of the BJP but must reach out to the people, and it has been working on it.

Speaking at a media event here, he denied allegations that the Grand Old Party does not accommodate its allies, while also appearing to blame the Aam Aadmi Party for the results in the Haryana elections.

"We are in opposition for the last 11 years. I think we need to, and we must work to increase our vote share. For that the party needs to do an outreach and cannot wait for the people to get tired (of the BJP) and come to us. We, leaders and party workers, need to go to them. We are working on it," Pilot said at the ABP Network's 'Ideas of India Summit 2025' here.

The party has a roadmap, and aims to strengthen the organisation in 2025, the Congress general secretary added.

Calling the Congress' defeat in



the Haryana assembly elections unexpected, Pilot pointed out that the AAP contested all 90 seats on its own, and the difference in the vote shares of the Congress and the BJP was just 0.2 or 0.3 per cent.

It was AAP's decision to contest elections in Haryana, and the results are before everyone to see, he said.

It was wrong to say that the Congress does not know how to make a compromise for the sake of

its allies, Pilot said, adding, "We have taken everyone along and, at times, we have taken forward an alliance at our own cost."

"This is not easy because Congress is the only party that can challenge the BJP at the national level," the former Rajasthan deputy chief minister stated.

Regional leadership has its importance in politics, Pilot said, claiming that his party has given a "lot of space to other parties to

come together."

His comments came amid rumblings in the Opposition's INDIA bloc after the electoral setbacks in Haryana, Maharashtra and Delhi.

The AAP and the Congress, part of the INDIA alliance, contested the Haryana and Delhi elections separately, losing to the Bharatiya Janata Party in both the states.

On Congress targeting AAP leader and former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal during the Delhi assembly polls, Pilot said there were ideological differences between the two parties, and the AAP too opposes the Congress in Punjab.

To a question on the future of the INDIA grouping, Pilot said, "INDIA coalition is as strong today as it was when it was formed." The NDA coalition has no common minimum program and only the BJP drives its agenda, he claimed. The Congress leader also accused the government of not willing to hold dialogue with anyone. (PTI)

## Muslim man, pregnant Hindu companion assaulted on court premises in MP's Rewa

**REWA, Feb 22:** A Muslim man and his 21-year-old pregnant Hindu companion who had gone to a court in Madhya Pradesh's Rewa district to get their marriage registered were assaulted allegedly by a group of lawyers, following which a case was registered against unidentified persons, a police official said on Saturday.

Videos of Friday's incident, in which a police official can be seen taking the couple to safety, went viral on social media.

The woman said she had got married to Rajib Khan as per Islamic rituals on June 28, 2023 and was three months pregnant. "On Friday, a mob pushed me to the ground twice on the court premises. The town police inspector saved our life by taking us to safety in his four-wheeler. I don't know why these people are attacking us when my parents have no objection to our marriage," she said.

The woman said she came in contact with Khan in 2021 after he mistakenly dialled her number and the two started communicating.

"We are from different villages under the jurisdiction of the same police station," she added.

Khan said he and the woman had come to the court complex as their lawyer wanted them to sign some papers to get their marriage registered.

"I was beaten up by a group of lawyers inside my lawyer's chamber. I sustained wounds and have taken a painkiller. The group abused us and cursed my wife, saying she should die. Advocate Sharda Singh, a lady lawyer and some friends saved us," Khan said.

The couple was taken to the police station after these lawyers alerted local officials about the incident and sought safety for Khan and his companion. (PTI)

# Shivraj slams Air India over 'broken' seat; carrier orders probe

**BHOPAL/MUMBAI, Feb 22:** Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Saturday slammed Tata Group-owned Air India for allotting him a "broken and sunk" seat and described it as an "unethical" practice wherein the airline charges passengers full fare and then makes them occupy defective seats.

After Chouhan shared his experience on X, Air India apologised for the "inconvenience", and ordered a "thorough" probe into the incident.

Chouhan stated that he was travelling from Bhopal to Delhi to inaugurate a farmers' fair in Pusa, attend the Natural Farming Mission meeting in Kurukshetra, and holds discussions with representatives of the farmers' organisation in Chandigarh.

The Union minister said he had boarded the Delhi-bound Air India flight AI436 from Bhopal.

"I was allotted seat number 8C. When I reached my seat and sat down, I found that it was broken and sunk. Sitting was uncomfortable," the former Madhya Pradesh chief minister wrote on X.

When he confronted the crew over the allotment of a defective seat, he was told that the management had been apprised

## Action to be taken against those involved in death of Nepalese student



**BHUBANESWAR, Feb 22:** The Odisha government on Saturday said all those responsible for the death of a Nepalese student of a private engineering institute KIIT and the alleged assault on the pupils from the Himalayan country would not be spared.

Congress activists also held a demonstration, demanding the immediate arrest of KIIT founder Achyuta Samanta.

A large number of youth and student activists of Congress staged the protest before the main gate of the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) and burnt effigy of Samanta.

A scuffle broke out between the security personnel and the agitators when Congress workers attempted to barge into the KIIT campus.

The Congress activists held the demonstration a day after the party MLAs in the assembly demanded a judicial inquiry into the death of a 20-year-old Nepalese student and subsequently, the alleged attack on pupils from the neighbouring country.

Odisha's Higher Education Minister Suryabanshi Suraj, however, said that the state government was committed to taking stringent action in the KIIT incidents.

The government is waiting for the findings of a high-level committee, he said, adding that eight top functionaries of KIIT, including its founder, have deposed before the government panel and recorded their statement on the incidents.

Based on the findings of the committee, the government will initiate action, Suraj said.

The police are also investigating the matter and at least 10 people including, bouncers, security guards and other officials of the institute, have been arrested so far, the minister said.

He said the police took action based on the evidence from the CCTV footage.

Referring to the death of the female student, the minister said one person has been arrested on the charge of abetment to suicide and police have been verifying his involvement in harassing the student.

The police have sent a viral audio clip for the voice spectrograph test to ascertain its authenticity, the minister said, adding that if found true, a case under IT Act will also be framed against the accused.

Senior Congress leader and former Odisha chief secretary Bijay Patnaik, at a press conference here on Saturday, alleged that there was "racial discrimination" among students at KIIT as the Nepalese students alone were evicted from the campus.

The private institute's staffers also used insulting words against Nepal, which has close ties with India, he claimed.

Patnaik also wondered about the alleged "silence" of the University Grants Commission (UGC) or the central government over the KIIT incidents.

The KIIT should immediately be issued a show cause notice asking it to explain why its Deemed to be University status would not be withdrawn for the racial and discriminatory activities, he alleged.

Stating that the KIIT incidents have earned a "bad name for the state", Patnaik said foreign students and their parents will henceforth think several times before sending their wards to study in Odisha.

One special cell should be opened at the governor's house here for receiving complaints from foreign students," he said.

Patnaik alleged that the KIIT founder was a BJD MP and therefore got patronage from the previous government.

Now, the KIIT incident has come as a challenge for the new BJP government to prove that it is different from the BJD dispensation," he added. (PTI)

# Global Investors Summit will be historic from investment perspective, create new record: Yadav

The Global Investors Summit is going to create a new record and in future

**BHOPAL, Feb 22:** Madhya Pradesh's upcoming Global Investors Summit will create a new record and prove to be historic in terms of investment for the state, Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said on Saturday.

The eighth edition of the biennial GIS will be held in the state capital Bhopal on February 24-25. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to inaugurate the event.

"Tomorrow is a historic day as Prime Minister Narendra Modi is arriving in the state and will stay overnight at the Raj Bhavan (in Bhopal)," Yadav told reporters after reviewing preparations for the GIS at Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya here. He said the PM would interact with MPs, MLAs and BJP functionaries and also hold an



organisational meeting.

Prior to visiting Manav Sangrahalaya, Yadav also reviewed preparations at the Kusha Bhau Thakre International Convention Center, where Modi is scheduled to hold the organisational meeting.

"The Global Investors Summit is going to create a new record and in future, these

dates will prove to be historic in terms of investment for the state," the chief minister said, adding that the preparations are in the last phase.

The people of Bhopal and Madhya Pradesh are waiting to welcome PM Modi and investors from the world over, he said.

Answering a question, Yadav said that the vision of

the GIS is to ensure benefits to youths, the poor, women and farmers through industrial investment.

The chief minister said such big events will continue to be held in Bhopal in the future as organising them in the state capital has its own importance.

After the conclusion of the GIS, the government will organise such meets at the district level on the lines of the Regional Industry Conclaves held ahead of the Global Investors Meet, he said.

PM Modi is scheduled to arrive in Bageshwar Dham, a religious site in Chattarpur district, on Sunday to lay the foundation stone of the Medical and Science Research Institute. He will arrive in Bhopal in the evening to take part in the organisational meeting, an official said. (PTI)

## GOVT. OF ASSAM OFFICE OF THE ADDITIONAL CHIEF ENGINEER (PHE)

KARBI ANGLONG AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL, DIPHU

### EXTENSION NOTICE

This is to inform all concerned applicants that the last date for the submission of applications in response to the Situation Vacant Advertisement. No. Addl.CPHE/DIP/Estt - 73/2024 - 25 / 2126 Date 31/01/2025 has been extended. The revised last date for submission of applications is now till 4:00 PM on 26th February 2025.

The extension has been granted as the original last date of submission, 14th February 2025, coincided a day ahead with the 51st Karbi Youth Festival 2025, which may have affected the availability of potential applicants.

We encourage all interested candidates to submit their applications by the new deadline. For further details, applicants may refer to the original advertisement or contact the office.

Sd/-

Additional Chief Engineer (PHE)  
Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Diphu

Memo. No. Addl.CPHE/DIP/Estt - 73/2024 - 25 / 2100 - 2110 Date: 21/02/2025



## CAG cites loopholes in management of compensatory afforestation planning body's funds



**DEHRADUN, Feb 22:** The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has cited many loopholes in the management of compensatory afforestation funds in the forest divisions of Uttarakhand, including their diversion to inadmissible activities and delayed submission of annual plan of operations to the Centre leading to cost escalations in various cases.

The CAG's latest audit report on Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) laid recently in Uttarakhand Assembly during its ongoing budget session said ₹ 13.86 crore was diverted at the divisional level to inadmissible activities like state scheme Harela, tiger safari work, renovation of existing buildings, expenses on personal visits, court cases, purchases of 1-phones, laptops, fridges, coolers and stationery.

The state authority did not control the diversion or inadmissible expenditure from the State Compensatory Afforestation Fund, it said. The audit report on the functioning of CAMPA covers a period of 2019-2022.

According to CAMPA rules, commensurate compensatory afforestation is mandatory in case of allocation of forest land for non-forest activities like infrastructural or industrial development.

It points out that in 52 cases 188.62 hectares of forest land was diverted to user agencies for non-forest purposes where in-principle approvals were granted but permission to start work was not granted by the competent authority.

However, the user agencies started the road construction in the

forest areas without permission, it said, adding that the forest divisions did not take any cognisance of the unauthorised use of forest land and booked these as cases of forest offence.

According to CAMPA guidelines of 2009, after receipt of money, the state CAMPA shall accomplish the afforestation for which money is deposited in the Compensatory Afforestation Fund within a year or two growing seasons.

However, scrutiny of records in divisions revealed that in 37 cases, compensatory afforestation work was executed after more than eight years of getting final clearance. This resulted in a cost escalation of ₹ 11.54 crore in raising compensatory afforestation, the report said.

The implementation of compensatory afforestation activities suffered due to delayed submission of the annual plan of operations to the government of India for approval and defective planning, the audit report said.

There were instances of dysfunctional bottom-up planning and adoption of ad hoc or arbitrary approaches for the inclusion of irregular items in the Annual Plan of Operation (APO).

The release of funds was unrealistic and not commensurate with the approved APO. The state authority failed to ensure equitable and need-based funding of activities in all the implementing agencies.

There was inefficiency in funds release, not adopting of accounting procedure as per Compensatory Afforestation Fund rules, and not discharging of interest liability, the CAG report said.

The CAG has recommended that the state authority must exercise internal control and institute proper budgetary control checks for robust financial management so that misutilisation or diversion of CAMPA funds can be prevented. (PTI)

## SCCL roped in to rescue 'trapped' workers in SLBC tunnel roof collapse incident in Telangana

**HYDERABAD, Feb 22:** A 19-member team from state owned coal mining firm, Singareni Collieries Company Ltd., has left for Srisailem Left Bank Canal in Nagarkurnool district on Saturday to join rescue operations to extract workers who are feared trapped when a portion of a roof collapsed in the under construction stretch of the SLBC.

According to a top official of the company, SCCL has the expertise in rescuing people in such incidents and also has necessary equipment. The rescue team from the company is headed by a general manager level officer.

"SCCL has the necessary expertise to handle critical situations such as roof collapses. And also we have necessary equipment imported from Australia, USA and Poland. The machinery and rock cutters are so advanced that they can cut huge rocks and boulders within minutes," SCCL CMD N Balaram told PTI.



At least six workers were feared trapped when a section of a roof collapsed in the under construction stretch of the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) in Nagarkurnool district of Telangana on Saturday, police said.

The construction company's team has gone inside for assessment and it is verifying, they said.

Six to eight workers are feared trapped as per information given by the company engaged in the

work, a senior police official told PTI.

"The roof collapsed when some workers had gone inside as part of the work at 12-13 kms inside the tunnel," the official said.

Irrigation Minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy and senior officials are overseeing relief operations.

The incident happened in the ongoing construction of SLBC tunnel work on the inlet side from Srisailem, official sources said.

As per information there was an influx of water when the work was being carried out, they said.

A press release from the Chief Minister's office, without putting a number, indicated that some persons suffered injuries.

Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy directed the district Collector, Superintendent of Police and other officials to reach the place of accident to carry out relief measures, it said.

As per the directives of Chief Minister, Uttam Kumar Reddy, government adviser on irrigation Adityanath Das and other irrigation officials left for the spot in a special helicopter, it said.

Expressing concern over the accident, Union Coal Minister G Kishan Reddy enquired about the reasons for the collapse and asked officials to bring out those feared trapped to safety. He also told the officials to provide treatment to the injured (if any), a release from his office said. (PTI)

## Man held for attempted smuggling of hybrid ganja worth ₹ 1 cr

**KOCHI, Feb 22:** The Customs department has arrested a man who attempted to smuggle ₹ 1 crore worth of hybrid ganja (hydroponic weed) through the Postal Appraising Section (PAD) of Customs, officials said on Saturday.

Acting on specific intelligence that hybrid ganja was being shipped from Thailand to an unidentified recipient in Kochi via post, Customs officers visited the Postal Appraising Section and seized the contraband on February 18, an official release from Customs added.

To track down the recipient and gather concrete evidence, a special team comprising officials from the Headquarters Preventive Unit, Customs Preventive Commissionerate, Customs Postal Section, and India Post was formed. A dummy parcel was dispatched through the regular postal delivery process to lure the suspect.

Investigations revealed that the recipient had provided a fake address to receive the contraband. Consequently, Customs officers maintained surveillance at specific locations linked to the recipient.

On February 20, as a postman attempted to deliver the parcel to the given address, Customs officers moved in and arrested the suspect, a Kochi native.

A follow-up search of his residence led to the seizure of 30 grams of hydroponic weed, 50 grams of ganja, and incriminating evidence on his mobile phone, revealing details of distribution chains and a possible supply network targeting students and young individuals.

Following his voluntary statement, the accused was taken into custody and produced before a local court, which remanded him to judicial custody for 14 days, the release added.

Further investigations are underway, officials said. (PTI)

## IRS officer, kin death: Kerala police exploring all angles, one of the victims a JPSC topper

**KOCHI/RANCHI, Feb 22:** The Kerala Police on Saturday said it is probing various angles regarding the mysterious deaths of an IRS officer and his kin here and has intensified the investigation, days after the Customs official and his sister were found hanging inside their house here while their mother's body was also found there.

One of the victims, Shalini Vijay who was summoned by a court in a CBI case earlier, was a state government officer in Jharkhand. A Personnel department official in Ranchi said there was no information about her since 2020 after she went to Kerala on vacation.

The deceased have been identified as Maneesh Vijay (43), an IRS officer and additional commissioner with Central Excise and Customs in Kochi, his sister Shalini Vijay, and their mother, Shakuntala Agarwal.

According to police sources, Shalini had recently received court summons directing for her appearance in Jharkhand on February 15 in connection with a case investigated by the Central

Bureau of Investigation. She was an accused in the case pertaining to alleged irregularities in her appointment in the Jharkhand government service, sources added.

She was the topper of the first batch of the Jharkhand Public Service Commission (JPSC) and her last posting was in Garhwa as district social welfare officer, the official in Ranchi said.

While Maneesh and Shalini were found hanging, Shakuntala was discovered dead on her bed with the body draped in a white cloth, and flowers sprinkled over it.

According to Kerala police, preliminary findings suggest the siblings died by suicide. However, the exact cause of their mother's death can be ascertained only after an autopsy, a senior officer said. Police have found Maneesh had purchased flowers on February 14. They also found an entry in his diary dated February 15, instructing that certain documents be handed over to his younger sister, who is currently in Dubai, the officer said. Police added that their younger sister

is expected to arrive in Kochi on Saturday, following which the autopsy will be conducted.

While investigators are exploring all angles, they have not yet established a direct link between the deaths and the case.

"If the mother's death is found to be natural, the siblings' suicides could be due to grief. Right now, our focus is to confirm the cause of death through the autopsy," said an officer.

Maneesh Vijay was residing at the Central Excise Staff Quarters at Kakkannadu, here.

The officer had been on leave for a few days, but when he failed to return to work, colleagues visited his residence on Thursday night.

Upon detecting a foul smell, they looked through an open window and spotted one body hanging. Police were immediately alerted, and upon entering the house, they found a second body hanging in another room.

Subsequent searches led to the recovery of another body lying on the bed in another room, police said. (PTI)

## Kolkata 'murders': Husbands of two deceased women likely to be arrested

**KOLKATA, Feb 22:** The husbands of the two women whose bodies along with that of a girl were found in their Kolkata residence are likely to be arrested, a senior officer said.

The decision to apprehend the husbands, who were also siblings, was taken after post-mortem reports suggested that the two women and the girl were murdered, dismissing speculations that the three died by suicide.

The three members of the family were found dead inside their Tangra residence, while three others were injured after their car crashed into a Metro Rail pillar in the city on early Wednesday. One of the injured persons told the police about the deaths in their family.

Two brothers - Pranay and Prasun Dey - lived in that house in the eastern part of Kolkata with their wives Sudeshna and Romi, respectively. Pranay's son and Prasun's daughter were the other occupants of the house.

The three injured have been undergoing treatment in a hospital here.

"The brothers will be arrested once they are discharged from the hospital. We are in touch with the hospital authorities. One arrest will likely be made on Saturday," the officer told PTI.

One of the two brothers, whose condition has improved "enough to be discharged from the hospital" on Saturday, would likely be held during the day, he said.

The post-mortem reports raised questions about who was behind the crime, and the Kolkata Police sleuths have been trying to identify those involved and the motive be-

hind the killing of the three, he said.

"We are trying to find out whether the husbands killed their wives and the girl or if others from outside the family were involved in the murders," the officer said.

The brothers had, earlier, claimed to the police that there was a suicide pact among the family members following which all consumed porridge laced with sleeping pills, he said.

The autopsy conducted on the bodies of the two women, with wrists slit and deep injury marks on their throats, suggested that they died due to the effect of the injuries which were "ante-mortem in nature". The minor girl died due to poisoning, the officer said.

"It seems that they (the brothers) were trying to mislead us. They were trying to hide something. We need to question them," he said.

The health conditions of the two brothers and the boy, who were injured in the accident, were stated to have improved, the policeman said.

The forensic team of Kolkata Police have collected samples from the bathroom, the washbasin, and rooms from where the bodies of the two women and the girl were found, the officer had said.

The police also collected footage of CCTVs installed in the Tangra house, he said, adding that "this footage will be very crucial to understand their activities before the crime occurred. We will be able to record who came to their house and what were their roles with the family in the last one week or so." (PTI)

## Gross violation of human rights, says Indian-origin billionaire's daughter on ordeal in Ugandan jail

**MUMBAI, Feb 22:** Vasundhara Oswal, daughter of Indian-origin billionaire Pankaj Oswal jailed for the kidnapping and murder of her father's former employee in Uganda, who was later found alive, claimed that her more than three-week ordeal behind bars was a gross violation of human rights.

Vasundhara (26) was falsely charged with the kidnapping and murder of Mukesh Menaria, a former employee of her father, Pankaj Oswal, last year. He was later found alive in Tanzania.

Talking to PTI on Friday, Vasundhara said, "I was detained for five days and thrown in prison for another two weeks. My human rights were grossly violated. They didn't let me take a shower and denied me food and water. My parents had to bribe police officers through lawyers to bring me food, water and basic necessities."

She claimed that at one point, she was not allowed to use the washroom as some sort of punishment.

Vasundhara was arrested on October 1, 2024, and was granted bail on October 21.

She claimed that the police searched her premises without a warrant.

"When I asked them to present a search warrant, they said, 'We are in Uganda, we can do anything, you're not in Europe anymore'. They then forced me to go to Interpol with them on the pretext of meeting their director. When I didn't want to do it the same day, a male officer picked me up and threw me inside their van," she alleged.

Vasundhara claimed she was forced to give a statement without a criminal lawyer. "We had a civil lawyer because they didn't

give us time, as they said that if I didn't give a statement, then I would be held indefinitely," she said.

Vasundhara was detained in a cell after she gave a statement and was asked to pay USD 30,000 and present her passport for a police bond.

She, however, claimed that despite submitting the necessary documents, she didn't get a police bond and was thrown back in the cell.

Vasundhara further alleged that even after producing an unconditional release order from the courts, she was detained illegally for 72 hours.

Vasundhara was later informed that she was being charged with kidnapping and attempt to murder and was taken to a lower-level magistrate court instead of a high court.

She said she was kept in a prison for persons arrested for petty crimes and later shifted to a facility housing convicted murderers and human traffickers.

"I spent the next two weeks in Nakasongola prison. And even after they found that the man (Menaria) was alive, they proceeded to keep me in prison on those charges. They found him on October 10, a week or two before I got bail," she said.

Vasundhara managed to get bail on October 21, following attempts to sabotage her application, and her passport was returned on December 10.

She claimed that the Uganda police kept the charges on her though Menaria was found alive and later reduced the charge to misdemeanour confinement after taking money from her family. (PTI)

## RailTel secures ₹ 288 cr tender to instal Kavach at 71 stations of East Central Railway

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Railway Ministry's public sector undertaking RailTel Corporation of India Ltd has been awarded the Kavach tender for 71 stations over a 502-km route under Danapur and Sonpur divisions of East Central Railway, a company's press statement said on Saturday.

"This significant achievement underscores RailTel's commitment to enhancing railway safety and operational efficiency through cutting-edge technology. The Kavach tender, valued at approximately ₹ 288 crore, is one of RailTel's largest signalling projects. Implementing this system will enhance safety and improve the East Central Railway's overall operational efficiency," the statement added.

The Kavach, an indigenous automatic train protection system, is designed to prevent train collisions by automatically applying brakes when loco pilots fail to do it. It is crucial for safe train operations as it can prevent red signal overshoots and train collisions.

According to RailTel, this advanced technology will be implemented across the East Central Railway, covering a vast network of tracks and ensuring the safety of millions of passengers.

"We are excited to have been selected for implementation of the Kavach Project in East Central Railway," RailTel Chairman and Managing Director Sanjai Kumar said.

"The Kavach system represents

a major leap forward in railway safety and we are committed to delivering this project with the highest standards of quality and efficiency. This tender win is a testament to RailTel's expertise and dedication to innovation in the railway sector," he added.

RailTel said the successful bid for the Kavach tender aligns with its strategic vision of leveraging technology to transform the Indian Railways.

"The company has been at the forefront of implementing state-of-the-art solutions to modernise the railway infrastructure and improve the passenger experience. M/s Quadrant Future Tek Ltd is the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) who will be providing the Kavach technology and equipment for this project," the statement said.

According to Kumar, "We are excited about the opportunities this project brings. Our team is fully prepared to meet the challenges and implement the indigenous Kavach technology that will set new benchmarks in railway safety and efficiency."

"RailTel Corporation of India Ltd. continues to play a pivotal role in the digital transformation of the Indian Railways. With this latest achievement, RailTel reaffirms its position as a leader in the railway technology sector and its commitment to contributing to the nation's progress," the company said. (PTI)

## Himachal Pradesh govt amends prison manual rules, ends caste-based work allotment

**SHIMLA, Feb 22:** The Himachal Pradesh government has amended all the caste-based provisions in the HP Prison Manual 2021 to ensure equality and elimination of caste-based work allocation among prisoners, an official said on Saturday.

The state government has inserted a paragraph in the manual prohibiting caste-based discrimination in prisons and correctional institutions. The newly added provision, (para 5.66) ensures that no discrimination, classification or segregation of prisoners will occur on the basis of caste, a government spokesperson said.

Whereas para 5.67 further mandates that there will be no discrimination of prisoners in allotment of any duty or work in prisons on the basis of their caste, he added.

Para 5.68 invokes the provision that prisoners will not be engaged in manual scavenging, sewer system maintenance and septic tank cleaning.

Earlier, there was a provision in

the Jail Manual allowing the employment of paid sweepers in the absence of female prisoners for cleaning tasks. This clause, previously under paragraph 21.4, has now been completely deleted.

The spokesperson said that the jail records will no longer mention the caste, community or religious affiliations of inmates of prisons. The state government has introduced these reforms through the Himachal Pradesh Prison Manual Second Amendment, 2025. Furthermore, the amended Jail Manual also provides a clear definition of habitual offenders. A person will be classified as a habitual offender if the person has been convicted or sentenced to imprisonment on more than two occasions on account of any one or more offences committed on different occasions and not constituting parts of the same transaction within a continuous period of five years, provided the convictions have not been overturned on appeal or review. (PTI)

## PM Modi on 3-day visit to MP, Bihar, Assam today

Modi will inaugurate Advantage Assam 2.0 Investment and Infrastructure Summit in Guwahati

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be on a three-day visit to Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Assam from Sunday to attend several development initiatives, including the global investors summit in Bhopal and the release of 19th instalment of cash assistance to farmers in Bhalgalpur.

In Madhya Pradesh on Sunday, Modi will lay the foundation stone of Bageshwar Dham Medical and Science Research Institute in Chhatrapur and inaugurate the investors summit on Monday, a statement said.

He will release the 19th instalment of 'PM KISAN' scheme at an event in Bhalgalpur on Monday and also inaugurate various development projects in Bihar before travelling to Assam.

He will attend the 'Jhumoir Binandini' on Monday evening and inaugurate the investment and infrastructure summit the next day.

Modi will inaugurate Advantage Assam 2.0 Investment and



Infrastructure Summit in Guwahati on Tuesday.

The PMO said the two-day Global Investors Summit (GIS) in Bhopal will serve as an important platform to establish Madhya Pradesh as a global investment hub and will include departmental summits, specialised sessions on pharma and medical devices, transport and logistics, industry, skill development, tourism and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) among others.

It will also include international

sessions focusing on the Global South countries, Latin America and the Caribbean besides special sessions for key partner countries.

It said three major industrial exhibitions will be held during the summit - the auto show, the textile and fashion expo and one on 'One District-One Product' (ODOP) to showcase the state's unique craftsmanship and cultural heritage.

Representatives from over 60 countries, officials from various international organisations and

over 300 prominent industry leaders from India and policy-makers will participate in the summit, the statement said.

Referring to the PM KISAN scheme, it added that over 9.7 crore farmers across the country will receive direct financial benefits amounting to more than ₹ 21,500 crore.

Noting that Modi has focussed on ensuring that farmers get better remuneration for their produce, it said he had launched the Central Sector Scheme for Formation and Promotion of 10,000 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPO), which help farmers collectively market and produce their agricultural products.

The programme in Bihar will mark the milestone of the formation of the 10,000th FPO in the country.

The prime minister will also inaugurate the Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Breeds in Motihari and a milk product plant in Barauni that aims to create an organ-

ised market for three lakh milk producers.

The Jhumoir Binandini in Assam will be a cultural extravaganza with 8,000 performers participating in the Jhumoir dance, a folk dance of Assam tea tribe and Scheduled Tribes of Assam that embodies the spirit of inclusivity, unity and cultural pride, and symbolises Assam's syncretic culture, it said.

The event will symbolise 200 years of the tea industry and also 200 years of industrialisation in Assam.

The investment summit in Assam will include an inaugural session, seven ministerial sessions and 14 thematic sessions.

It will also include a comprehensive exhibition illustrating the state's economic landscape, with a focus on its industrial evolution, global trade partnerships, booming industries and the vibrant MSME sector, featuring over 240 exhibitors, the statement said. (PTI)



# Not everything is fair, so keep option B ready: Taapsee Pannu's advice to new actors

**MUMBAI, Feb 22:** Hard work alone does not guarantee success in the film industry, says actor-producer Taapsee Pannu as she believes it is a common misconception that the world of movies is a fair place.

During the ABP Network's Ideas of India 2025 on Friday, the 37-year-old actor shared her thoughts on the harsh realities of the film industry.

"The idealistic thing is that with hard work you will achieve everything that isn't the case. Not everything is fair in the film industry. If you expect that things will be fair and square then that won't happen.

"It will be unfair. You will get to hear a lot of things, so keep your ego aside, otherwise, you will be disappointed, besides get used to hearing bad things. It's not about Bollywood. I'm not a victim of the industry," Pannu said. She advised aspiring talents to have a backup plan in case their efforts don't lead to success.

"I had option B. I had done engineering, had a job and I could do that. I wanted to do an MBA, so I had kept all the options ready," Pannu said.

Pannu said that actors who are "outsiders" will often find that their success depends not just on talent but largely on audience reception of their work. "Our stature depends on the audience. If the audience prefers watching hero-centric films in theatres and not ours, then how will we succeed? It's not that the industry kicks us out of the industry, they rather give us opportunities." The actor also opened up about her married life.

Pannu, who tied the knot with longtime partner badminton star Mathias Boe in 2023, said she didn't feel the need to issue a "press release" about her wedding. "I met him on the badminton court, I was in the audience, and he was playing, and it was a domestic league and that's where I met him. I've known the person I married for ten years, and now I have known him for 11 years.

"I've never tried to hide that from anyone. The thing is he is neither a cricketer nor a businessman, so maybe people were not interested in it. But whenever I was asked about him, I've always spoken about it. My marriage is going well." Pannu said she had a thoughtful approach towards her marriage and added that she tied the knot nine years after Boe proposed to her.

"I've seen many marriages that have fallen apart or not worked, and I was afraid. We are in a profession where there are so many ups and downs and I didn't want ups and downs in my personal life. So, after many trials and tests, I got married. My personal life is so stable that people think it's boring," she said. (PTI)



## Court spares Aditya Pancholi of jail term in assault case, asks him to pay ₹ 1.5 lakh to victim

**MUMBAI, Feb 22:** A sessions court in Mumbai has upheld the conviction of actor Aditya Pancholi in a 2005 parking assault case but modified the one-year jail term handed by a magistrate and ordered his release on a bond of good behaviour.

The sessions court, however, directed the 59-year-old actor to pay a compensation of Rs 1.5 lakh to assault case victim Pratik Pashine for availing the benefit of release under the Probation of Offenders Act.

The Metropolitan Magistrate (Andheri) had in November 2016 convicted the actor under IPC section 325 (voluntarily causing grievous hurt) and sentenced him to one-year simple imprisonment for assaulting Pashine over a parking dispute in 2005.

Pancholi appealed against his conviction and sentencing in the case.

Additional Sessions Judge D G Dhoble on Thursday partly allowed Pancholi's appeal against the magistrate's order and spared him of the jail term.

The sessions judge ruled that the trial court (magistrate) "has not committed any illegality, irregularity and perversity" in convicting and sentencing the accused to one-year jail term.

"The impugned judgment and order '...convicting the appellant under Section 325 IPC is hereby upheld. But instead of awarding sentence of substantial punishment, I hold that the accused is entitled to be released on probation of good conduct under Section 4 of the Probation of Offenders Act," the sessions court ruled. (PTI)

## HONOURED BEYOND WORDS: VICKY KAUSHAL AFTER PM MODI PRAISES 'CHHAAVA'

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Actor Vicky Kaushal says he feels honoured by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's praise for his historical action drama film "Chhaava".

At the inaugural function of the 98th Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Sammelan (ABMSS) on Friday, Modi said Maharashtra and Mumbai have taken Marathi films and Hindi cinema to greater heights.

"Aur in dino toh, 'Chhaava' ki dhoom machi hui hai. ('Chhaava' is making headlines everywhere right now)," Modi said about the movie, which has earned over ₹ 300 crore globally since its release in theatres last week.

"Chhaava" stars Kaushal in the role of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, who was the son of Maratha empire founder Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. "Honoured beyond words! Grateful to Hon. PM Narendra Modi ji. #Chhaava," the actor wrote on Instagram alongside a video of Modi from the event.

Rashmika Mandanna, who stars as Yesubai in the movie, posted on her Instagram Stories, "Thank you so much @narendramodi sir, it's truly an honour."

"Chhaava" is produced by producer Dinesh Vijan's Maddock Films and the banner also shared a clip of Modi on its official Instagram handle. "A historic honour! It is a great moment of pride as Honorable Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji applauds 'Chhaava' and honours Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj's sacrifice and legacy. This moment fills us with immense gratitude. @maddockfilms, #DineshVijan, @laxman.utekar, @vickykaushal09, and the entire team of the film are humbled by this special mention," the studio said. (PTI)



## Cinema an important weapon for a civilised future: German filmmaking icon Wim Wenders

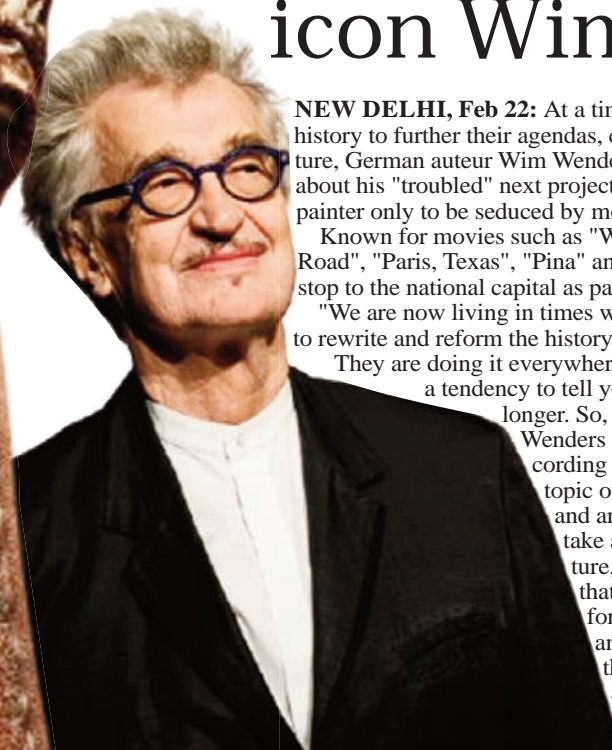
**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** At a time when governments everywhere are trying to reform history to further their agendas, cinema can be an important weapon for a civilised future, German auteur Wim Wenders said here on Friday in a masterclass where he spoke about his "troubled" next project, growing up in post-war Germany wanting to become a painter only to be seduced by moving images.

Known for movies such as "Wings of Desire", "Alice in the Cities", "Kings of the Road", "Paris, Texas", "Pina" and most recently "Perfect Days", the filmmaker made a stop to the national capital as part of his 'King of the Road - India Tour'.

"We are now living in times where people, governments all over the world, are trying to rewrite and reform the history of their countries in order to fulfill their own agendas.

They are doing it everywhere, in all parts of the world. Governments right now have a tendency to tell you their version of history so that they can stay in power longer. So, cinema is an important weapon for a civilised future."

Wenders said during a masterclass in jam-packed theatre here. According to Wenders, who wants to make a fiction film on the topic of peace next, movies contain a sense of history in them and are a "great catalogue for the future". "If we are able to take a sense of history from movies and take that to the future, we would make much less mistakes," he said, adding that he has been restoring his old movies to prepare them for a digital future. "Young people learn through reading and writing but do not learn much about the language that they are mostly exposed to, which is the language of images. And this is the language in which more lies are happening," he added. (PTI)



## It is heartbreaking, gruesome: Bhumi Pednekar on Justice Hema Committee report

**Mumbai, Feb 22:** As a woman, I feel scared, said actor Bhumi Pednekar, reacting to the Hema Committee report that exposed the harassment and sexual exploitation faced by women in the Malayalam film industry.

Speaking at the ABP Network's Ideas of India 2025, Pednekar said the findings of the report, which was released in August last year, perhaps the first instance for any film industry in India, were heartbreaking and gruesome.

"It is one part of the Indian fraternity where proper legal process was followed, there were heartbreaking gruesome details that came out. As a woman in India today, I'm scared. This is again not just about fraternity," Pednekar said.

"I'm scared when my younger cousin who lives with me in Mumbai goes to college and when she doesn't come home till 11 pm, I get nervous. There's deep conditioning of power. There's a problem when front page news is only about violence done to women. This is not one off thing, this is a regular occur-

rence," she added.

In the aftermath of an assault case on an actress involving actor Dileep in 2017, the Kerala government appointed a panel to study issues of sexual harassment and gender inequality.

The panel's 233-page report exposed the power dynamics within the Malayalam film industry, revealing the multiple layers of exploitation faced by women artists.

On a query about the casting couch in the Hindi film industry, the 35-year-old actor - who earlier worked as an assistant casting director at Yash Raj Films - said though she has not personally faced it, she acknowledged the widespread nature of such incidents within the industry.

"Before I became an actor, I was casting in an institution that was clean and organised. My casting director Abhimanyu Ray would never cast a girl without me being present in the room. Now that's the ecosystem in which I grew up.

"I was 17 when I started as a casting director in Yash Raj Films. I've

no first-hand experience of it. But does that mean it doesn't happen?

No, it does because we've had many women who have dared to come out and speak about it. I would never negate a girl's experience," she said.

The actor also addressed the glaring gender pay gap that persists in Bollywood and said it happens across all industries globally.

"The CEO of any major conglomerate, if she is a woman, will undoubtedly earn a lower salary. The pay gap is even more in the film industry," she said.

Pednekar recalled the time when she was paid way less than what her male counterpart earned for their project.

"I was offered 5 per cent of what my male counterpart got. I made this comparison because he and I had the same amount of hits. We were leading the film, and we also started at similar times, and yet he got 80 per cent more.

"I did that film because I didn't have a choice. I wanted to create an ecosystem where I can empower myself and others," she said. (PTI)





# A ricochet off Kerala's Salman Nizar's helmet brings focus on head-gears

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** A ricocheted shot off Salman Nizar's helmet nestled in the hands of Sachin Baby ensured Kerala a maiden Ranji Trophy final berth, but that moment of fortune has also placed the spotlight on this life-saving but often under-noticed cricket equipment.

This newfound focus on helmets has two layers – safety and cricketering laws.

The sturdiness of the head-gear saved Nizar's life after Gujarat's Arzan Nagwaswalla's full-blooded shot hit flush on the state emblem on his helmet.

Still, Nizar had to be carried to the hospital for scans and the positive results left the Kerala

players a relieved lot.

For a moment, the whole train of events also dragged everybody's mind back to the tragic end of Australia's Phillip Hughes. He died after being hit by a Sean Abbott bouncer during a domestic match, his helmet failing to protect the neck area which was fatally struck in 2014.

Hughes' shocking demise had sparked a change in the rules. The powers that be converged to study the quality of helmets in use. Post an extensive research, cricket law-makers Marylebone Cricket Club, under the supervision of top brains like Kumar Sangakkara and Sourav Ganguly, decide to standardise the

quality of helmets used by batters, wicketkeepers while standing up to the stumps and close-in fielders such as forward short leg or silly point.

Nizar was fielding at forward short on Friday when he copped that blow on his helmet.

Further the ICC and MCC also rewrote the rule book in 2017, making it legal, the catches off the helmet worn by a fielder, except in slip positions.

But that apart, the quality and manufacturing methods of helmets saw constant changes over the decades, from the day when former England batter Patsy Hendren wore a hat with cotton padding made by his wife in a



match. Then in the 1970s, former England captain Dennis Amiss wore a modified biker's helmet in Kerry Packer's World Series Cricket where some of the best

fast bowlers of the time had assembled.

"Probably, the arrival of some fearsome pacers in the 70s from the West Indies and Australia changed the whole scenario.

Helmets and other body guards were needed against them to protect your limbs," a former cricketer told PTI.

"But still, back in the days, facing a fast bowler without a helmet was a matter of courage and technical knowledge. So many had done that -- Viv (Richards), Sunny (Sunil Gavaskar) etc," he said.

There is this chilling footage in the documentary 'Fire in Babylon' where former West Indian fast bowler Michael Holding almost took out the head of England batter Brian Close with a vicious lifter after he came out without a helmet.

"Once the helmet, and later better helmets, came into use

then the batsmen became more brave, stood up to the fast bowlers. They knew that even an occasional hit will not be that painful," the former player added. Along with the rolling years, the methods and materials used in helmet manufacturing too underwent transformation.

"Many years back, a cricket helmet was front-open and was made of readily available shock absorbing materials. But now a lot more science goes into the making as we use carbon fibre, titanium, and high density form inside the helmet to give better protection," a top cricketering gear manufacturer in Meerut told PTI. (PTI)

# Brilliant Brentford deepens Leicester's relegation woes with club-record win



**LEICESTER, Feb 22:** Brentford hammered Leicester City 4-0 and set a club record of four consecutive away wins in the Premier League.

Thomas Frank's men were all over Leicester and were 3-0 up before halftime.

Yoane Wissa took Mikkel Damsgaard's exquisite flick and

bundled the ball in from close range after 17 minutes.

Ten minutes later, Bryan Mbuemo cut in from the right and crashed in a curling shot.

Then skipper Christian Norgaard's deft header sealed the match as a contest with 33 minutes gone.

The abject first half could have

been worse for Leicester, which saw Kristoffer Ajer's shot rebound off the post just before halftime and a Keane Lewis-Potter score disallowed for handball.

The introduction of Facundo Buonanotte with almost an hour gone gave the home side a lift but it was too late for a club that remained second from bottom on

the table and without a goal at King Power Stadium since Dec. 8.

Fábio Carvalho rounded off the scoring for Brentford near time.

It was the first time Brentford has scored three goals in the first half of an away match in the Premier League and Damsgaard said

the challenge now was to match its away form with wins at home. The London club has picked up just one point from a possible 15 at home since Dec. 21.

"It is very nice we can get the away wins, now we just need to get the home wins and add it together," the Dane said. "We are of course dreaming a little but we know how tough it is to sneak in so we take it one game at a time."

Leicester also set a record although not one it will want to boast about. No side in Premier League history has ever lost six consecutive home games without scoring in the same season.

"We have to acknowledge this is a huge step back, it is clear," coach Ruud van Nistelrooy said. "There was hope after certain performances, and in the beginning of the game with three chances, it could have changed the game. After the bright start we were never in the game again and by halftime the game was done."

"The level between Brentford and us was big. They showed they were big steps away from us at the moment."

"We all have to lift ourselves first and then lift each other. That is always the case. Everyone is going home really disappointed and gutted with the loss and disappointed with the levels we showed." (AP)

# Gulveer qualifies for World C'ships in 5000m, becomes first Indian to run distance in sub-13 min

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** India's Asian Games bronze medallist Gulveer Singh smashed the Asian Indoor 5000m record while also qualifying for the World Athletics Championships to be held later this year when he finished fourth in an indoor event in Boston, USA.

Gulveer clocked 12 minutes and 59.77 seconds to finish fourth at the Terrier DMR Challenge indoor competition in Boston on Friday and become the first Indian to run 5000m in sub 13 minutes.

His performance on the

Boston University track eclipsed the earlier Asian indoor 5000m record of 13:08.41s set by Thailand's Kieran Tuntivate in 2022.

The entry standard for the 2025 World Championships (September 13 to 21) in Tokyo is 13:01.00.

The 26-year-old Armyman also bettered his own 5000m outdoor national record of 13:11.82 by more than 12 seconds.

Indian athletics chief coach Radhakrishnan Nair, however, said Gulveer's timing may not

be considered as the outdoor national record.

"No doubt, it's an indoor national record and Asian indoor record at that. Athletes can run with faster time on outdoor tracks because of less number of turns (laps) as compared to indoor tracks."

"But, indoor timing may not be considered as outdoor national record, though Gulveer's indoor timing is better than even the outdoor," Nair said.

One lap of indoor track has a total distance of 200m whereas the length of an outdoor track is

of 400m.

"My goal here (in Boston) was to improve my personal best over the 5,000m," Gulveer said after his record-breaking performance.

"I'm happy that I've achieved a new milestone during the race. I'm also excited to have achieved the automatic entry standard for the World Athletics Championships."

USA's Olympic 1500m champion Cole Hocker sprinted home to gold with a time of 12:57.82 while Cooper Teare was second with 12:57.97. Jack

Rayner was third with a time of 12:59.43.

Gulveer also holds the national 10000m record of 27:14.88 which he had set at the Hachioji Long Distance meet in Japan last year.

Athletics Federation of India president Bahadur Singh Sagoo said early season performance of a core group of Indian distance runners based out of Colorado Springs in USA augurs well for the future.

"We are hopeful of good results in the coming outdoor season," Sagoo said. (PTI)

# Babar Azam plays for himself; Pakistan not ready to face India: Danish Kaneria

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Former Pakistan spinner Danish Kaneria has slammed Babar Azam for prioritising personal milestones over team success and expressed concerns about Pakistan's preparations ahead of their marquee Champions Trophy clash against India in Dubai on Sunday.

The former Pakistan captain, who recently lost his ODI No. 1 ranking to Shubman Gill, was blamed for his slow knock of 64 off 90 balls in the Champions Trophy opener against New Zealand. His inability to accelerate the run rate and dismissal in the crucial 34th over contributed to Pakistan's 60-run defeat, putting their title defence in jeopardy. Kaneria pointed out Pakistan's struggling batting lineup, accusing Azam of focusing more on his individual performance than the team's success.

"If we talk about Babar Azam, he is playing for himself. When he is under pressure, he focuses on keeping his stats and ICC

ranking intact," Kaneria told PTI Video. "I have scored a fifty, I have done it. But where is the intent of winning the match for your side?," Kaneria questioned.

He credited Salman Agha (42 off 28 balls) and Khushdil Shah (69; 49b) for their impactful knocks, which helped Pakistan avoid an even bigger defeat.

"Salman Ali Agha and Khushdil Shah played great knocks, if those two boys hadn't scored quickly, then Pakistan would have lost by 100 runs, instead of losing by 60 runs."

"If you play, play for the country, the country comes first. Show a little intent... But unfortunately, Babar couldn't do that," he said. The 44-year-old further expressed concerns about Pakistan's readiness for the crucial clash against India.

"The scenario is crystal clear. I don't think there is much hype this time because Pakistan is not playing good cricket. India are playing excellent cricket," Kaneria said.



He pointed to Pakistan's recent struggles, including a disappointing Tri-Nation Series campaign and a 1-1 draw against the West Indies in a home Test series. In contrast, he hailed India's strong resurgence following their Border-Gavaskar Trophy defeat in Australia, highlighting their dominant white-ball series win over England. "They had a debacle in Australia, many players were questioned. But the way they have started the year 2025,

defeating England in at home.

"You can see the form of Rohit (Sharma), (Virat) Kohli... Gill is in the form of his life, such a delightful player to watch... (Mohammed) Shami came back from injury and got a fiver against Bangladesh," he said. "On the other hand, if we talk about Pakistan, they're not able to win a series at home. Shaheen (Shah Afridi) who used to bowl at 150kph is not doing that now. We drew a series with West Indies.

There is no strategy or plan," he added. Kaneria also questioned the selection of Abrar Ahmed as Pakistan's lone specialist spinner, doubting his ability to trouble Indian batters.

"Abrar doesn't have the quality to trouble India's batsmen. He uses his fingers to give the ball a tweak, he is not a leg-spinner, doesn't get the ball to turn, gets hit for plenty. Nowhere close to the quality of a Sunil Narine or Ajantha Mendis. He can't turn the game around."

"Salman Ali Agha will play the role of an off-spinner, Khushdil Shah can also chip in with his left arm orthodox if needed," said the former leg-spinner. Kaneria also warned the Pakistan batters of the spin threat possessed by the India's trio of Axar Patel, Ravindra Jadeja and Kuldeep Yadav. "The Pakistan team says that they play spin well, but Babar Azam, who is said to be one of the best players, no doubt he is, gets stuck on left-arm spinners. (PTI)

# Ahlawat makes cut with birdie-birdie finish in Kenya, Shubhankar misses

**NAIROBI, Feb 22:** Veer Ahlawat's rounds of 70-72 gave him an even par total, allowing him to make a last minute cut at the Magical Kenya Open here.

Ahlawat started his second round very early and then had to wait for the rest of the afternoon to know whether he had made the cut.

The 28-year-old rookie, who shot a 1-under 71 in the first round after a disappointing finish with three bogeys in his last four holes, was staring at a missed cut when he came to the 17th tee in the second round.

This time Ahlawat produced two great birdies on the closing holes to move from 3-over to 1-over and give himself a chance to make the cut.

Meanwhile, fellow Indian Shubhankar Sharma, endured another tough week as he carded 71-72 and missed the cut by one.

Ahlawat, who was runner-up at the Hero Indian Open last year, bogeyed the second and the seventh and got his first birdie on the eighth.

He dropped two more shots on

the 14th and 16th and was 2-over for the tournament when he came to the 17th tee.

He birdied the 17th and added one more on 18th, which he had eagled a day earlier.

That helped him squeeze inside the cut line and earned a chance at improving his position over the weekend.

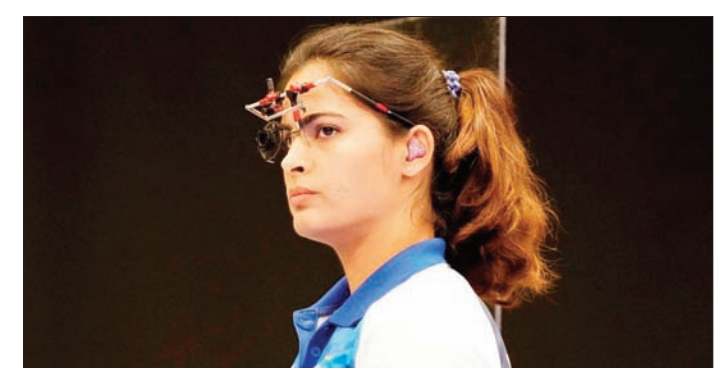
Ahlawat, who had made two cuts and missed two in four starts on DP World Tour in 2025, was making his third cut.

He was T-27 in Ras Al Khaimah and T-49 in Bahrain and missed cuts in Dubai and Qatar.

Ahlawat earned playing rights on DPWT after topping the Indian PGTI Tour's Order of Merit in 2024.

The PGTI and the DPWT have an arrangement by which the top Indian OOM gets a card to the DPWT and this is the third year of the alliance.

Sharma, however, has missed four cuts in a row on the DP World Tour and his only cut of 2025 came at the International Series in India. (PTI)



**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Ace pistol shooter Manu Bhaker will lead a 35-member Indian team in the season-opening ISSF World Cups in April in South America with almost all the shooters who featured in the Paris Olympics making the cut.

A notable member of the team is air pistol ace Saurabh Chaudhary, who returns to the national side after more than three years. Saurabh, who battled a shoulder injury and poor form following the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, recently shot a national record score in 10m air pistol qualification besides impressing in the trials. He had paired with Manu in the 10m air pistol mixed team event in Tokyo.

The international shooting season will begin with a double-leg South American sojourn, with the first World Cup (Rifle/Pistol/Shotgun) scheduled in Buenos Aires, Argentina from April 1-11, which will be followed by a second combined World Cup in Lima, Peru from April 13-22.

Manu, who was recently awarded the Dhyani Chand Khel Ratna award for her two bronze medals at the Paris Olympics in 10m women's air pistol and 10m air pistol mixed team event with Sarabjot Singh, will compete in the South American competitions in two individual events -- women's air pistol and 25m pistol. She will be accompanied by other Paris Olympians like Anish Bhanwala and Vijayveer Sidhu (men's 25m rapid-fire pistol), Esha Singh (women's 25m pistol), Aishwary Prapat Singh Tomar (men's 50m rifle 3 posi-

tions), Sift Kaur Samra and Shriyanka Sadangi (women's 50m rifle 3 positions), Arjun Babuta (men's 10m air rifle), Prithviraj Tondaiman (men's trap), Anant Jeet Singh Naruka (men's skeet) and Raiza Dhillion (women's skeet).

Ahead of the team's departure, the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) will organise a training camp at the Karni Singh Range here from March 14.

The biggest draw on the ISSF calendar this year will be the World Championships scheduled in October (shotgun) and November (rifle/pistol).

"There will be a total of three World Cup stages for each discipline while two junior World Cups, the second among them in New Delhi in September, are also scheduled. Also on the international roster this year is the 16th Asian Championships in Kazakhstan in August," said NRAI in a statement.

NRAI secretary-general Sultan Singh said it was time for the Indian shooters to raise the bar further following their success at the Paris Olympics, where the 21-member contingent bagged three bronze medals.

"A new responsibility rests on the entire shooting fraternity to raise the bar even higher. We are confident that those selected for the international season openers will come out with flying colours," said Singh.

NRAI recently announced a long list of coaches and experts to guide the Indian shooters on their journey to the 2028 LA Games with Manu's coach Jaspal Rana heading the chart. (PTI)





## Day before Pakistan clash, Kohli focuses on spin play

**DUBAI, Feb 22:** Indian superstar Virat Kohli meant business a day before the marquee clash against Pakistan in the Champions Trophy as he arrived at the ICC Academy two hours before scheduled practice time to iron out his issues against spin.

Kohli, who was troubled by the ball outside off-stump from the pacers on the Test tour of Australia, has been found vulnerable against spin in the recent ODIs he has played.

The 36-year-old fell to leg-spinner Rishad Hossain in India's opening Champions Trophy game against Bangladesh on Thursday, his sixth dismissal in a row against spinners in ODIs.

He was caught at backward point while trying to cut Hossain. In the preceding series against England at home, leg spinner Adil Rashid had got the better of Kohli.

The former India captain will have to deal with the likes of Abrar Ahmed when India takes on Pak-

istan at the Dubai International Stadium on Sunday.

Irrespective of his form, Kohli's commitment to the game remains unquestionable, and his exemplary work ethic was on full display as he arrived for training well before his teammates, who also showed up an hour earlier than the scheduled time, and was the last to leave.

It was not a surprise that the majority of the net bowlers he faced were spinners, including a couple of leg-break bowlers, as many off-

spinners and a left-arm spinner.

Pakistan have a part time left-arm spinner in Khushdil Shah, while Salman Agha bowls off-spin.

With due respect to the opposition, Indian batters would be fancying themselves against the Pakistan spin attack. The main challenge for them will come from the pace trio of Shaheen Afridi, Haris Rauf and Naseem Shah who all are under pressure after an underwhelming opening game against New Zealand.

While India are sitting comfortably after the win over Bangladesh, Pakistan find themselves in a must-win situation.

The wicket is expected to be on the slower side, bringing a battery of Indian spinners into the game.

India have five spinners in the squad, including two specialists in Kuldeep Yadav and Varun Chakravarty, while the all-rounders who bowl spin are Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Washington Sundar. (PTI)

## CT: India aim for semifinal, Pakistan eye survival in marquee clash

**DUBAI, Feb 22:** Hyped as a marquee showdown but mostly lopsided on the field, India and Pakistan lock horns in the ICC Champions Trophy here on Sunday with Rohit Sharma's men aiming to seal a semi-final spot and Mohammad Rizwan's team desperate to avoid early elimination from the tournament.

While India are on a high after claiming a measured six-wicket win over a sprightly Bangladesh, Pakistan are evidently tense after the 60-run loss in the tournament-opener against New Zealand.

The sub-continental rivals' last Champion Trophy clash was the 2017 final in which Pakistan walked away with the win and the trophy. Rizwan and Co. would look to draw inspiration from that triumph in London but would also need to scale up their performance in every department.

Though the buzz surrounding the match is nowhere close to being what it used to be at the peak of diplomatic tensions between the two countries, there is an air of quiet anticipation for the Group A clash at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium.

India will have a distinct advantage in every aspect. The side has settled in nicely while Pakistan have flown in a couple of days ago after the drubbing handed by the Black Caps in Karachi.

More often than not, an India-Pakistan clash is as much a battle of nerves as cricketing abilities and India would be in a much better space on both counts come Sunday afternoon.

For starters, skipper Rohit, whose form was a major concern in the run-up to the tournament, seems to be getting back to his best if the lucid stroke-making against Bangladesh was anything to go by.



His 41-run cameo was a crucial contribution in the tricky chase of 229 which was masterfully anchored by Shubman Gill with his eighth ODI hundred.

In contrast, Pakistan would be fretting over the form and approach of their biggest star Babar Azam. The 90-ball 64 against New Zealand in a chase of 320 has been roundly criticised for being too slow.

Azam's inability to accelerate even when the asking rate kept climbing has come under scrutiny and he would be under tremendous pressure against India.

Adding to their woes is the injury-furcated ouster of game-changing opener Fakhar Zaman from the squad. Imam ul Haq has replaced him in the side and has joined the squad here.

However, middle-order batter Khushdil

Shah's counter-attacking 69 in the tournament-opener is a positive. Shah has amusingly stated that he has no idea how he made the squad given his lean run in the recent past but Pakistan would be happy that the punt has paid off.

Pakistan would also be hoping to prove a point by getting the better of India, who refused to travel across the border for the tournament which is otherwise wholly scheduled in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi.

The man who is feeling the heat in the Indian team right now is Virat Kohli after yet again failing to convert a fairly decent start. His focus hasn't looked the same for a while but Kohli does have the knack of coming up with special efforts against Pakistan.

However, in the larger scheme of things,

it could well boil down to key defining moments from the bowlers and here too Pakistan have lots to ponder after the hammering that the Shaheen Afridi-led attack took from the Kiwis.

On the other hand, India have a fit-again and in-form Mohammed Shami, who is being brilliantly backed up by Harshit Rana. Shami's fifer against Bangladesh ensured that India did not miss injured talisman Jasprit Bumrah just yet.

All-rounder Hardik Pandya has always turned up with his best against Pakistan in major ICC tournaments. He will be hoping to make up for the 2017 Champions Trophy final disappointment where he fought as a lone warrior for India but failed to take his team over the line.

India are likely to continue with their winning combination and remain unchanged. The spin trio of Kuldeep Yadav, Ravindra Jadeja, and Axar Patel will be included once again on the tweaker-friendly surface to exploit the conditions.

**Squads:**  
**India:** Rohit Sharma (captain), Shubman Gill (vice captain), Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (wicketkeeper), Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Shami, Arshdeep Singh, Harshit Rana, Rishabh Pant (wicketkeeper), Ravindra Jadeja, Varun Chakravarty.

**Pakistan:** Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Salman Ali Agha (vice captain), Babar Azam, Fakhar Zaman, Kamran Ghulam, Saud Shakeel, Tayyab Tahir, Faheem Ashraf, Khushdil Shah, Usman Khan, Abrar Ahmed, Haris Rauf, Mohammad Hasnain, Naseem Shah, Shaheen Shah Afridi.  
Match starts at 2.30pm IST. (PTI)

## Kohli getting out to same type of bowling is a concern: Sunil Gavaskar



**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Virat Kohli's recurring dismissals due to an open-faced bat is a matter of concern as India aim to regain the Champions Trophy after 12 years, believes legendary Sunil Gavaskar.

The 36-year-old Kohli, who had a tough tour of Australia where he was repeatedly dismissed by fast bowlers in the off-side corridor, was dismissed for 22 in India's opening match of the Champions Trophy against Bangladesh on Thursday.

This marks the sixth consecutive time Kohli has been dismissed by spin in ODIs, as he had struggled against England's leg-spinner Adil Rashid too in the recent home series. "It is to a great extent due to the fact that the bat face opens up, the same thing happens when he's playing against the quicks in Australia," Gavaskar told India Today.

"The bat face is opening up, looking to play through the covers, opening the face of the bat, that gets him into trouble. So that is something that he's got to watch out for." Kohli was dismissed by wrist-spinner Rishad Hossain while trying to cut the ball, only to be caught by Soumya Sarkar at backward point.

"A couple of times before he got out, he reached for Rishad, the ball turned, the bat face opened, and luckily the bat face opened, and so there was no nick. So that is something that he'll have to tighten up on now," Gavaskar said. "But yes, I guess if you're getting out to the same kind of bowling, then you know, there is a bit of concern," he added.

Kohli, who scored 765 runs in 11 matches during the 2023 ODI World Cup, has struggled to replicate that form this year, managing only 137 runs in six innings at an average of 22.83, with just one half-century. In Tests since 2024, he has scored only 440 runs in 11 matches. India will face arch-rivals Pakistan on Sunday in Dubai in the Champions Trophy. (PTI)

## Assam para athletes shine at 23rd National Para Athletic C'ships 2025

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 22:** Assam's para athletes showcased remarkable performances at the 23rd National Para Athletic Championships 2025, held in Chennai from February 17 to 20, 2025, securing one silver and two bronze medals.

Para athlete Juri Deka won a silver medal in the 400m Women's (T-38 Category) event and also bagged a bronze medal in the 100m Women's (T-38 Category) event. Meanwhile, Ababil Ali earned a bronze medal in the 100m Men's (T-42 Category) event.

## PCB enforces no-free-pass policy for ICC Champions Trophy

**KARACHI, Feb 22:** For the first time, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is not distributing free passes for enclosures, VIP areas, or hospitality boxes during the ongoing ICC Champions Trophy, a departure from past practices for international series in Pakistan.

Typically whenever an international series is held in Pakistan, the PCB reserves tickets to be given out as free passes to some stakeholders including the media, government departments, VIPs and sponsors.

However, this time except for a few tickets given to the Chairman for his personal guests and sponsors, the PCB has not been allocated any quota for complimentary passes, an official source close to the ticketing process for the Champions Trophy said. (PTI)

## Toss won't be a factor as there is no dew, 300-325 a very good score in Dubai: Shubman Gill

**DUBAI, Feb 22:** Anything in excess of 300 is a "very good" total considering the conditions in Dubai and with no dew around, the team batting second will be under more pressure, said India vice-captain Shubman Gill on Saturday ahead of the marquee clash against arch-rivals Pakistan in the Champions Trophy.

Though India have dominated Pakistan in the world events and also in the recent past, the match continues to generate plenty of hype.

"We definitely want to play positive and aggressive cricket. 300-325 will be very good score on this wicket. The team batting well in the middle overs will have a better chance of winning." Gill told reporters on the eve of the game.

India won their tournament opener against Bangladesh but Pakistan lost to New Zealand in their first match, putting them in a must-win situation on Sunday. Dew has played a big role in Dubai in the past but Gill said it won't be a factor in the clash between the arch-rivals and the team batting second will face the heat more.

"Toss won't matter as there is no dew. Team batting second will have more pressure," added Gill, who scored an unbeaten hundred against Bangladesh. (PTI)

## Duckett stands tall with career-best 165 as England post 351/8 vs Australia

**LAHORE, Feb 22:** Ben Duckett struck a magnificent career-best 165 to power England to 351 for 8 against Australia in their Champions Trophy Group B opening match here on Saturday.

The 30-year-old Duckett, who was benched during England's disastrous T20 World Cup campaign last year, grabbed his moment on the big stage, hitting 17 boundaries and three sixes during his 143-ball knock to lead his side to their highest ever total in the Champions Trophy.

England, after being sent in to bat, were in early trouble at 43/2 inside the powerplay, but Duckett stood tall, first stitching a 158-run stand with Joe Root (68) and later forging a crucial 61-run partnership with skipper Jos Buttler (23 off 21 balls).

After his dismissal in the 48th over, Jofra Archer smashed two fours and one six in his 10-ball 21 net to prop up the total past 350-mark. Duckett's innings was meticulously planned, blending patience with aggression.

He started confidently, taking on Glenn Maxwell with a charge-down six in just the second over, setting the tone for England's recovery. Once settled, he rotated strike fluently with Root, allowing the innings to flow, before shifting gears in the latter half.

Duckett brought up his century off his second ODI ton against Australia.

The depleted Australian side struggled as their frontline spinner Adam Zampa was hit by Duckett all around the park. Even as left-arm pacer Ben Dwarshuis (3/66) took two wickets up front, their pace attack looked listless without the troika of Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood who were ruled out with injuries.

Nathan Ellis was the pick of the lot as he was excellent with his line and length even as he returned wicketless (0/51 from 10 overs).

Alex Carey played a key role, taking two catches, including a spectacular one-handed, goalkeeper-like screamer to dismiss Phil Salt (10) when he leapt with both feet off the ground, plucking it out of thin air in a stunning fashion. England debutant Jamie Smith (15) played a couple of delightful strokes before throwing his wicket away.

That brought Root to the crease as early as the sixth over, and alongside Duckett, he steaded England's innings with a 158-run partnership off 155 balls. (PTI)



## Higher allowance, closer half-yearly assessment awaits TOPS athletes this Olympic cycle

**NEW DELHI, Feb 22:** Athletes picked for the sports ministry's Target Olympic Podium Scheme will be entitled to increased allowance during training and competitions abroad but will have to undergo "physical and psychological tests" every six months as part of their evaluation process.

The core group of TOPS has been trimmed from 179 to 94 and the developmental list stood at 112 after the revamp. It was a fairly routine rejig after the completion of an Olympic cycle but grabbed attention as some sports like swimming, squash, golf and tennis did not find representation in the core list.

Only 42 of those selected in the core group are able-bodied with para-athletes occupying 52 spots, an acknowledgement of their sparkling performance in the Paris Paralympics where they fetched 29 medals, including seven gold.

Those who have made the cut will be getting USD 25 per day in addition to the monthly stipend of Rs 50,000 (core group) and Rs 25,000 (developmental group) whenever they travel abroad for training and competition.

"The core group is for the short term goal of the next Olympics, in this case Los Angeles 2028. The developmental group is for hopefuls for the Olympics after that (2032) and perhaps even the one after that (2036)," a member of the Sports Authority of India's Mission Olympic Cell (MOC) told PTI.

"This pruned list is a reflection of that goal. And those who have got



in will get additional allowance of USD 25 per day over and above the stipend and other perks they are entitled to at present.

"Athletes who have been picked will have no reason to complain and regular evaluation will ensure timely intervention if things are not going as planned," he added.

And this is where a half-yearly test of "physical and psychological parameters" will come in handy. The MOC has already decided to make the overall performance evaluation an annual instead of biennial, which was the norm in the previous cycle.

"See, there are certain things we are trying to address. One of them is injuries not coming out at the right time. A regular physical and psychological assessment will ensure that this does not happen.

"There were tests being done ear-

lier too but we are now fixing intervals at which they have to be done compulsorily," the source explained.

In the revamped core group no male boxer has made the cut, only three names from athletics have got in (27 less than the previous list), and seasoned but under-performing badminton players such as K Srikanth and Ashwini Ponappa have also missed out along with India's top-ranked men's singles tennis player Sumit Nagal.

TOPS CEO N S Jhalal has described the new core group as a "truthful, transparent and realistic" reflection of potential based on "demonstrated performances".

However, it is also to be noted that it's a dynamic selection where many names will be added as the Olympic qualification cycle kicks off.

The list is also a reflection of sports minister Mansukh Mandaviya and sports secretary Sujata Chaturvedi's push for a more performance-oriented policy towards athletes while ensuring that assistance reaches everyone who needs it.

"The idea is to maximise benefits for those who merit it. That's the thrust," the MOC member asserted.

"We are not going to impose anything on athletes. We will ask what they want from us, their calendar, planning but after that, it's the performance that will count."

A rather surprising retention in the core group is recurve archer Deepika Kumari, who has flattered to deceive in multiple Olympics and once again crumbled under pressure in the Paris Games.

Another name that might raise a few eyebrows is weightlifter Mirabai Chhanu, who finished fourth in Paris after a silver in Tokyo 2020. Both are 30 and while Deepika's fortitude in the Olympics is under scanner, Chhanu's struggle with injuries is a matter of concern.

"We haven't yet found someone who can beat Deepika. So, how can we replace her? She qualified for the Paris Olympics, reached the knockouts also, and remains the best that we have right now," the MOC member stated.

"As for Mirabai, her fitness is being monitored and this closer evaluation every six months will also help us analyse her better," he added. (PTI)

## I eat only one meal a day, my weight was touching 90kgs during recovery phase: Shami



**DUBAI, Feb 22:** Giving an insight into how he keeps match-fit even at the age of 34, Indian bowling stalwart Mohammed Shami says he prefers to eat only one meal a day and avoids sweets.

Shami has been the standout bowler for India in the ongoing Champions Trophy with the pace spearhead grabbing five wickets against Bangladesh in the marquee event in Dubai, thus becoming the fastest Indian bowler to take 200 ODI wickets.

"After 2015, I only have one meal a day. I only have dinner; no breakfast, no lunch. It is very difficult to do such a thing but once you get used to it then it becomes very easy," said Shami during an interaction with cricketer-turned-commentator Navjot Singh Sidhu on

Star Sports.

He had been sidelined from international cricket for 14 months due to an ankle injury sustained during the 2023 ODI World Cup final against Australia, which interrupted a remarkable run where he topped the tournament's wicket-taker's chart with 24 scalps.

The injury required surgery, and his recovery was further delayed by swelling on his left knee, keeping him out of international action for more than a year.

Shami said he gained quite a bit of weight during the recovery phase and had to shed nearly nine kgs to get back into shape.

"I have lost nine kgs (during rehabilitation). The most difficult thing is you have to challenge yourself. When you are in this condi-

tion... when I was at the NCA, it was a very difficult phase."

"My weight was touching 90kgs. The best thing about me is that I do not crave for delicacies. I stay away from sweets. I stay away from a lot of things, things that generally one shouldn't eat. So, I stay away from them," said Shami, who will have to shoulder a lot of responsibility in India's clash against arch-rivals Pakistan in the Champions Trophy here on Sunday.

Shami, who has claimed 55 wickets across three ODI World Cups and became the eighth Indian to reach 200 wickets in one-day cricket, added that despite his strict regimen he does enjoy his biryani once in a while.

"And, as far as the biryani is concerned, so sometimes it's okay. (PTI)