

6 NATION

- Kharge calls for nationwide campaign against MGNREGA repeal
- Pitroda inadvertently revealed Congpart of anti-India global alliance: BJP on Rahul's Germany visit

7 NORTHEAST

- Vajpayee's legacy continues to inspire politicians to ensure good governance: Nagaland minister
- Govt orders re-verification of Lada-Sarli highway land compensation

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PAGES 8

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Election Commission releases Assam's draft electoral rolls 10.56 lakh names deleted in 'Special Revision'

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: The names of 10.56 lakh voters have been deleted after the Special Revision of electoral rolls in Assam, where assembly polls would be in less than six months.

According to the integrated draft rolls released by the Election Commission on Saturday, the state has a total of 2,51,09,754 voters, excluding 93,021 D-Voters or doubtful voters. Additionally, the names of 10,56,291 voters have been deleted due to death, shifting, or multiple entries.

D-Voters are a category of voters in Assam who have been disenfranchised by the government on account of their alleged lack of proper citizenship credentials. D-Voters are determined by special tribunals under the Foreigners Act, 1946, and the person declared as a D-Voter is not given a voter card.

All related particulars, such as name, age and photograph, of D-



Voters have been carried forward to the draft electoral roll without any change.

The draft rolls were published after house-to-house verification of the Special Revision was held from November 22 to December 20.

Now, voters will be able to file claims and objections till January 22, and the final electoral rolls will be published on February 10, a statement said.

Of the 10.56 lakh, 4,78,992 names were deleted because of

deaths, 5,23,680 voters were found to have moved from their registered addresses, and 53,619 demographically similar entries were identified for correction, it said.

The verification was conducted in 61,03,103 households across the state, it added.

The exercise involved 35 District Election Officers (DEOs), 126 Electoral Registration Officers (EROs), 1,260 AEROS, 29,656 Booth Level Officers (BLOs) and 2,578 BLO Supervisors, the state-ment said.

Political parties deployed 61,533 Booth Level Agents (BLAs) to assist and monitor the process, it said.

While the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is underway in 12 states and Union Territories, including Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, where elections would be due along with Assam, a (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Draft poll rolls released for Diphu, Bokajan and Howraghat

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Dec 27: The draft photo electoral roll for 2026 for three Legislative Assembly Constituencies of Karbi Anglong district—Diphu, Bokajan and Howraghat—was released on Saturday, with January 1, 2026 fixed as the qualifying date.

The draft roll was released by the District Commissioner of Karbi Anglong, Nirola Phangchopi, at a press conference held at the District Commissioner's office conference hall here.

Briefing media persons, the DC said copies of the draft photo electoral roll would be available during office hours at the offices of the Electoral Registration Officers and the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

BJP's executive meeting held

BJP represents last light of hope: CM

'Assam assembly elections fight for protecting 'swadesh', 'swajati''

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said that the upcoming assembly elections will be a fight to protect 'swadesh' (nation) and 'swajati' (own community), along with the identity, land and culture of the people of the state.

BJP represents the last light of hope that will ensure that the state is not pushed into an abyss of darkness by infiltrators from Bangladesh, the chief minister said at the party's executive meeting here.

"The forthcoming elections are not about hopes and aspirations. It is about dedicating oneself to the cause of protecting 'swadesh' and 'swajati'. I am sure people know that the BJP is their last hope. They will vote for us, and we will win this election," Sarma said. He alleged that the "weakness

of the Congress and its politics of polarisation" led to the gradual creation of "another civilisation which now has a 1.5 crore-strong population".

"In the 2011 Census, when we see the breakup of Hindus and Muslims, we find the latter comprise 34 per cent, and if we exclude the 3 per cent Muslims of Assamese origin, we find that infiltrators comprise 31 per cent," he said. There was no census in 2021 and when it happens in 2027, the population of Muslims of Bangladeshi origin is estimated to be around 40 per cent.

"Some may say that all can co-exist as our religion welcomes and includes all, but the recent developments in Bangladesh have shown us that they believe in exclusiveness," Sarma said. The chief (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Massive rally in Itanagar against illegal immigrants



HT Correspondent

ITANAGAR, Dec 27: A massive protest rally against illegal immigration was held in Itanagar city on Saturday, with thousands of people taking to the streets to voice opposition to the presence of illegal immigrants in Arunachal Pradesh, the North East and the country as a whole.

The rally was led by the Arunachal Pradesh Indigenous Youth Organisation, along with the Indigenous Youth Force of Arunachal and the Naharlagun Youth Organisation.

Protesters marched through the city carrying torches and the national flag, raising slogans against illegal immigration and asserting unity of Arunachal Pradesh, the North East and India.

Leaders of the organisations said the rally was organised to protest what they described as provocative claims and propaganda originating from Bangladesh, including alleged assertions over parts of the North East.

They said such statements were unacceptable and called for firm action to safeguard the interests of indigenous communities.

Speaking to the media, APIYO president Taro Sonam Liyak said the time had come for people of Arunachal Pradesh, the

North East and the rest of India to remain united.

He alleged that certain actions and statements from across the border were irresponsible and urged an immediate halt to what he termed as illegal activities and propaganda.

Liyak said the movement was not directed against any religion or community, but was focused solely on the issue of illegal immigration and statements that, according to him, could disturb peace and harmony.

He condemned incidents of violence against Indians and stressed that while the people of Arunachal Pradesh believed in peace and non-violence, they would not remain silent if such actions continued.

The APIYO president urged the state government to take necessary steps to protect the interests of indigenous communities and preserve the cultural balance of Arunachal Pradesh.

He said failure to address the issue could prompt the organisations to approach central leaders in New Delhi in the coming days to press for stronger action.

The organisations reiterated their long-standing demands, including identification and deportation of illegal immigrants and stricter implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system to check (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

173 security personnel injured in Karbi Anglong violence: Assam Police

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: Altogether 173 security personnel, belonging to both Assam Police and CRPF, were injured in violence earlier this week in West Karbi Anglong district, police said on Saturday.

The situation in the trouble-torn districts of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong was limping back to normalcy with no report of any untoward incident.

"173 personnel of the Assam Police and @crpfindia were injured in the incidents on 22-23 December 2025 under Kheroni PS under West Karbi Anglong. 139 received first aid at the spot, while 33 were sent for treatment to various hospitals", the Assam Police said in a post on X.

A strict vigil is being maintained in the districts by security forces, with prohibitory orders in place and internet services suspended.

Agitators from the Karbi community had been on a hunger strike for 15 (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and Chief Minister of Assam Dr Himanta Biswa during Assam State BJP executive meeting at Guwahati on Saturday.

Amit Shah to arrive on two-day Assam visit today

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: Union Home Minister Amit Shah is scheduled to arrive here on Sunday night on a two-day visit to Assam to inaugurate several projects and address a public meeting, officials said on Saturday.

After arriving, Shah will spend the night at the state guest house in Koinadhar.

On Monday, the home minister is scheduled to pay homage to martyrs of the Assam movement against infiltrators at the newly constructed 'Swahid Smarak Kshetra' before leaving for Batadrava Than, birthplace of Vaishnav saint Srimanta Sankardeva in Nagaon district, where he will inaugurate the re-development project of the spiritual site.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had earlier said the state government has taken efforts to restore the sanctity and grandeur of Batadrava Than, which has been freed from encroachments.

"Batadrava Than, freed from encroachments, is now a shining example of what steely resolve can do for the protection of our heritage," the CM had said.

Shah will return to Guwahati where he will inaugurate a new building of the Guwahati Police Commissionerate and an integrated command and control system (ICCS) to bolster the city's security.

The ICCS will monitor over 2,000 CCTV cameras in Guwahati to bolster security and emergency response systems in the state, Sarma said.

"A major boost to Guwahati's safety. On 29th December, Adamiya @AmitShah ji is set to inaugurate Guwahati's new Police Commissionerate and an Integrated Command and Control Centre, which will monitor over 2,000 CCTVs to bolster security & emergency response systems," the chief minister said in a post on X.

On the same day, Shah will inaugurate the Jyoti Bishnu Cultural Complex, an auditorium with a 5,000 seating-capacity in Guwahati.

He is also scheduled to address a public rally at the same complex before leaving for New Delhi. (PTI)

Assam's culture turns political: BJP hits sharply at Gaurav Gogoi

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: Assam's political landscape has been sharply polarised by a fresh and intense debate over history, identity and cultural ownership, with Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma locked in a war of words that has triggered a strong backlash from the BJP.

The controversy erupted after Sarma, addressing a party meeting, dismissed the narrative of Assam being a land of "Sankar-Azan" syncretism.

The chief minister asserted that such interpretations dilute Assam's indigenous civilisational roots and overlook historical realities.

Emphasising the Vaishnavite legacy of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, Sarma declared that Assam is the land of "Sankar-Madhav", not a product of selective historical reinterpretation.

He cautioned that romanticised narratives

weaken the cultural foundation of a state that serves as India's gateway to the Northeast.

Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi responded swiftly and forcefully on social media, asserting that Assam's identity cannot be confined to a single ideological framework.

Describing the state as the land of "Sankar-Azan" alongside Madhavdeva, Bir Chilarai and Chaolong Sukapha, Gogoi invoked a broad spectrum of Assamese icons — from literary giants Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Laxminath Bezbaruah to cultural icon Bhupen Hazarika and martyrs Kushal Konwar and Kamala Miri. Declaring "this is our Axom, our Bor Axom", Gogoi said no statement from the chief minister could alter that reality.

Escalating the attack, Gogoi took personal digs at Sarma, alleging that the chief minister's politics revolved around syndicates, tolls and coal rather than culture. He said the people of Assam (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Assam launches initiative to boost healthcare for tea garden workers

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: In a major step towards strengthening healthcare delivery for the tea tribal community, Assam Health Minister Ashok Singhal on Saturday launched the state-level pilot project of the 'Swasthaban Shramik Yojana' at Julibari Tea Estate in Dibrugarh district.

The scheme, approved in the Assam Budget 2025-26, aims to provide universal, structured and quality health screening services to tea garden workers, who constitute nearly 20 per cent of the state's total population. The pilot phase will be implemented across 20 selected tea estates, including gardens in Moran, Sessa and Ghagrajan, before being expanded statewide.

Addressing the gathering, Singhal said the tea industry is the backbone of Assam's economy and the welfare of tea garden workers remains a top priority of the state government. He underlined that the scheme has been designed to address long-standing health challenges faced by the tea community through early detection, timely treatment and sustained awareness.

Health studies have consistently highlighted a high prevalence of both communicable and

non-communicable diseases among tea garden workers, including anaemia, hypertension, diabetes, tuberculosis and leprosy. The Swasthaban Shramik Yojana seeks to tackle these concerns through a comprehensive, community-based approach.

Under the programme, ASHA workers will conduct door-to-door visits and complete Community-Based Assessment Checklist (C-BAC) forms to identify health risks. Mobile Medical Units (MMUs) will visit tea estates to provide on-site diagnostic services, medical consultations and follow-up care, reducing the need for workers to travel long distances for treatment.

A key component of the scheme is the appointment of Women's Health and Wellness Ambassadors from within the tea gardens, who will spearhead awareness drives on nutrition, hygiene and preventive healthcare. In addition, Health Choupals will be organised to counsel workers on the ill effects of tobacco and alcohol consumption, which often begins at an early age in tea garden areas.

The Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) teams will also be integrated into the initiative to ensure 100 per cent health coverage for children and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Focus on language, identity and indigenous knowledge puts Northeast at the centre of national literary dialogue

Nalanda Literature Festival showcases northeast literary traditions

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: The Nalanda Literature Festival (NLF) in its first edition has emerged as a prominent platform to voices from the Northeast and other marginalised literary traditions, officials said on Saturday.

The four-day festival that has concluded recently resonated strongly with themes relevant to the Northeast, particularly discussions on language preservation, diaspora identity, indigenous knowledge systems and cultural continuity.

Scholars and writers highlighted how regions like the Northeast, with their rich oral traditions and linguistic diversity, face challenges similar to those of Indian diaspora communities in preserving language and cultural memory.

"It was a great experience as several writers and authors took part from Assam and other northeastern states in the Nalanda Literature Festival. The organizers paid great attention to rich cul-



tural heritage of our region," a participant said.

The final day of the festival on Wednesday also paid tributes to eminent Hindi writer and Jnanpith Award

laureate Vinod Kumar Shukla, who passed away on December 23 at the age of 88.

Speakers remembered him as a transformative literary figure whose mini-

malist prose reshaped modern Hindi literature and inspired generations of writers across India, including in the Northeast.

The session "Interactive Session: Heritage" drew parallels between cultural preservation efforts in the Indian diaspora and those in India's peripheral regions.

Renowned scholar Dr. Sachidanand Joshi and Mauritius-based academic Dr. Sarita Boodhoo underlined how language acts as the core of identity — a theme that struck a chord with writers and researchers working on endangered languages of the Northeast.

Another key session, "Nalanda: A Window to the World", highlighted Nalanda's legacy as a global knowledge hub rooted in dialogue and openness — values that speakers said remain relevant for culturally diverse regions like the Northeast, which have historically served as meeting points of ideas, faiths and traditions. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

NCLAT rejects insolvency plea against Jumbo Finvest, upheld NCLT order

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Appellate tribunal NCLAT has rejected Equitas Small Finance Bank's appeal to initiate insolvency proceedings against Jumbo Finvest, upholding a National Company Law Tribunal order in the matter.

Earlier, the Jaipur Bench of NCLT had rejected an insolvency plea against Jumbo Finvest, observing that it is a Financial Service Provider within the meaning of 3(17) of the Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code and is not a corporate person against whom a Section 7 application can be initiated.

This was challenged by Equitas Small Finance Bank before the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal, contending that Jumbo Finvest was registered as a financial service provider by the RBI.

The banking sector regulator on January 16, 2020, barred it from increasing the size of its balance sheet and was prohibited from accessing public funds in any form until further notice, as well as lending. It was submitted that in view of the order of the RBI, Jumbo Finvest actually is not in the business



of a financial service provider, and the protection which is envisaged in the provisions of the Code cannot be held to be applicable in the facts of the present case.

However, NCLAT said: "We are not persuaded to accept the submission that in view of the order of prohibition issued by RBI, the Respondent (Jumbo Finvest) shall lose its character and nature of the financial service provider."

NCLAT observed that Jumbo Finvest's registration was cancelled on October 14. This clearly means that it was a registered financial service provider till the date the registration was cancelled.

"We are of the view the provisions of the Code shall be applicable, and the mechanism provided in the Code for initiating CIRP against the financial service provider has to be in accordance

with the Code," said a two-member NCLAT bench comprising Justice Ashok Bhushan and Member (Technical) Barun Mitra.

Financial Service Providers (FSPs) like NBFCs, banks, and insurers were initially excluded from the standard Corporate Insolvency Resolution Process (CIRP) under IBC, but were later brought under special provisions via notifications and rules (like the FSP Rules, 2019) for systemic ones.

Now, CIRP can be initiated against them, but usually, the relevant regulator, like RBI, must file the application, not just any creditor, requiring regulator approval for resolution plans to ensure public interest and fit-and-proper management.

"Thus, we do not find any error in the order of the Adjudicating Authority rejecting the section 7 application. We make it clear that rejection of the section 7 application shall not preclude the Applicant from taking such remedy available in law with regard to its dues against the Respondent," said NCLAT. (PTI)

Blenders Pride Fashion Tour redefines craft at Kolkata finale

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: The Blenders Pride Fashion Tour concluded this year's edition in Kolkata with a visually striking showcase that sought to reimagine Indian craftsmanship through a contemporary lens.

Set against the iconic Howrah Bridge, the finale transformed the Hooghly River into an unconventional runway, marking what organisers described as a decisive step towards fashion's next phase.

The closing showcase featured an experimental collection by designer Anamika Khanna under her label AK OK, with actor Ishaan Khatter as the showstopper.

The collection moved beyond conventional design boundaries, deconstructing traditional Indian crafts such as zardozi, chikankari and mirror work, and re-assembling them through futuristic silhouettes, metallic detailing and cosmic-inspired graphics.

Presented in collaboration with the Fashion Design Council of India, the Kolkata edition challenged the idea of craftsmanship as a static tradition, instead positioning it as an evolving and adaptive force.

The show unfolded on a barge anchored midstream on the Hooghly, turning the river into a floating theatre of fashion.

The presentation opened with divers emerging onto the barge, followed by a dramatic interplay of light, smoke and sound as models appeared from within the

structure to a high-energy score.

The narrative built towards a series of bold chain-mail ensembles presented as a collective statement, followed by sculptural silhouettes in motion.

The finale reached its peak with Khatter's arrival by speedboat, culminating in a unified closing moment framed by the illuminated Howrah Bridge.

Guests were hosted aboard The Bengal Paddle vessel before being ferried to the barge.

Its museum-like interiors and the Riverine Museum housed in its former boiler room, showcasing marine artefacts and installations tracing the Hooghly's legacy, added a cultural dimension to the evening.

Debasree Dasgupta, Chief Marketing Officer, Pernod Ricard India, said the Kolkata finale captured the transformative spirit of the tour, noting that Future Is Crafted reflected the convergence of heritage and innovation.

Anamika Khanna said the collaboration offered a platform to reinterpret Indian craftsmanship for the modern world, while Ishaan Khatter described the experience as being part of a moment where fashion was actively shaped rather than merely presented.

Sunil Sethi, Chairman of FDCI, said the collaboration brought together two influential forces in Indian fashion, with the Kolkata edition celebrating creativity and culture while setting the tone for what lies ahead.

India's electronics growth shifts focus from scale to value

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: India's electronics sector is undergoing a structural transformation, moving decisively from episodic growth to a value-driven, execution-focused phase, with policymakers, industry leaders and ecosystem stakeholders aligned on building resilient and globally competitive value chains.

Discussions held through 2025 indicate that the country's electronics growth story is no longer limited to scale expansion but is increasingly centred on deeper value addition, localisation and sustainability.

Stakeholders across government, global and domestic industry, and academia have converged on priorities such as policy support and incentives, electronics value addition, skilling, academic partnerships and industry collaboration.

The semiconductor segment, in particular, has entered what industry participants describe as a shift "from intent to execution".

With policy frameworks in place, attention has turned to building competitive semiconductor value chains encompassing chip design, fabrication, advanced packaging and OSAT (outsourced semiconductor assembly and test).

Human capital development, joint research and development, and technology transfer have emerged as critical enablers in this phase.

Over the next three years, experts say disciplined execution and localisation across design, manufacturing and advanced packaging will be crucial.

A greater use of locally manufactured semiconductors and components is expected to play a central role in strengthening electronics value addition and enabling scalable manufacturing.

Industry leaders note that these measures will support the production of high-volume electronic products for domestic consumption while also enhancing India's competitiveness in global markets.

The emphasis on execution, product creation and collaborative R&D is being seen as key to ensuring the long-term success of India's electronics and semiconductor ecosystem, marking a clear inflection point in its industrial growth trajectory.

THINK Gas to reduce price of CNG under PNGRB's revised Unified Tariff framework

CHENNAI, Dec 27: Leading gas distribution company, THINK Gas formed through the merger of largest private energy player AG&P Pratham and Think Gas has welcomed the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board's revised Unified Tariff framework, expecting to significantly reduce pipeline transportation costs for CNG and PNG in regions connected to the National Gas Grid, making natural gas more affordable for households and commuters.

Commenting on the occasion, THINK Gas MD and CEO Abhilesh Gupta said, the Petroleum and Natural Gas's progressive and forward-looking reforms would directly benefit households and daily commuters by making CNG and PNG more affordable.

"This initiative reinforces PNGRB's commitment to consumer welfare and strengthens the role of natural gas as a clean, reliable and economical fuel. At THINK Gas, we are committed to passing on these benefits to consumers across our authorised areas," he said.

The revised tariff would encourage wider adoption of PNG as cooking

fuel, improve the cost competitiveness of CNG for transport users and enhance the viability of City Gas Distribution into Tier II, III and semi-urban regions, he added.

The reform aligns with India's vision to increase the share of natural gas in the energy mix from 6 per cent to 15 per cent by 2030. By promoting cleaner fuels, it also supports improved air quality, infrastructure expansion and a sustainable energy ecosystem.

THINK Gas believes the revised framework brings greater transparency, enabling faster infrastructure rollout and long-term consumer benefits. THINK Gas supplies Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) for transportation and Piped Natural Gas (PNG) to households, commercial establishments and industries. Its planned gas distribution network includes approximately 24,000 inch-km of steel pipelines, over 2,000 CNG stations and coverage of nearly 3.24 lakh square kilometres, serving more than 100 million customers, the company added. (PTI)

Top 10 coworking operators hold 2-3rd of flexible workspace stock Vestian

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: India's top seven cities have nearly 1,400 coworking centres, with 10 big operators holding two-thirds of the total 82 million square feet of flexible managed workspaces, according to Vestian.

Real estate consultant Vestian's latest report also highlighted that more than 475 coworking centres currently host Global Capability Centres (GCCs) bases.

"As India's GCC landscape continues to evolve, flexible space operators will remain indispensable partners, offering flexibility, faster speed to market, and enterprise-grade infrastructure that global companies require, to scale efficiently in a highly competitive market," said Shrinivas Rao, CEO of Vestian.

The consultant noted that the total stock of flexible workspaces has expanded to 82.3 million sq ft spread across nearly 1,400 centres in the top seven cities.

"However, the market continues to remain consolidated, with the top 10 operators controlling 67 per



cent of the total stock," it added. Bengaluru leads with 33.2 per cent share of the country's flexible space stock, followed by Delhi-NCR at 20.4 per cent and Pune at 14.7 per cent.

Hyderabad holds 12.4 per cent of the total stock, followed by Mumbai 9.2 per cent, Chennai 8.5 per cent and Kolkata just 1.6 per cent.

According to Vestian Research, India currently hosts over 1,750 GCC companies, with nearly 3,800 bases. The GCCs' share stands at more than 40 per cent in the total office space demand over the past two years.

To capitalise on the rising demand, coworking or flexible space operators have positioned themselves as strategic partners for busi-

nesses across various stages of growth.

As per Vestian's report, more than 475 out of the 1,400 flex centres across major Tier-1 cities currently host GCC bases.

Rao projected that the total stock or portfolio of flexible workspaces would exceed 100 million sq ft across Tier-1 cities by 2026.

Flexible space operators are expanding and upgrading their portfolios to meet the growing demand. The report did not mention the names of the top 10 flexible space operators.

WeWork India, Smartworks, Awfis and IndiQube Spaces are already listed on stock exchanges.

Other major players are The Executive Centre, Incuspaze, Simpliwork Offices, Table Space, Urban Vault, 91Springboard, Spring House Workspaces, BHIVE Workspace, 315Work Avenue, The Office Pass and Hanto Workspaces.

Headquartered in Chicago, Vestian has offices across the US, India, China, the UK, Sri Lanka and the Middle East. (PTI)

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10.56 lakh names

Special Revision was ordered by the EC in the northeastern state.

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar had said, "Under the Citizenship Act, there are separate provisions for citizenship in Assam. Under the supervision of the Supreme Court, the exercise of checking citizenship is about to be completed."

According to officials, the Special Revision stands somewhere between the annual special summary revision and the SIR.

The statement said the Special Revision is aimed at preparing an error-free electoral roll by facilitating enrolment of eligible un-enrolled electors, correction of clerical errors in name, age and address, removing names of deceased persons, shifting electors, and identifying and deleting multiple entries. The state has a total of 31,486 polling stations following rationalisation, it said. (PTI)

Draft poll rolls

respective Booth Level Officers. As per the draft electoral roll for 2026, Bokajan LAC has 78,627 male voters and 79,575 female voters, with no transgender voters, taking the total to 1,58,202.

Howrah LAC has 95,868 male voters, 99,110 female voters and five transgender voters, with a total electorate of 1,94,983. Diphu LAC has 92,327 male voters, 94,765 female voters and 11 transgender voters, bringing the total to 1,86,903.

Overall, the three constituencies together have 2,66,822 male voters, 2,73,249 female voters and 16 transgender voters, taking the total number of electors to 5,40,088. Phangchopi also shared a comparison with the final electoral roll published on January 6, 2025.

As per the final roll for 2025, the three LACs together had 2,60,154 male voters, 2,65,228 female voters and no transgender voters, with a total electorate of 5,25,415.

The draft roll for 2026 thus shows an increase of 6,668 male voters, 8,021 female voters and 16 transgender voters, marking an overall increase of 14,673 electors.

The DC informed that claims and objections regarding inclusion of names or correction of details in the electoral roll, with reference to the qualifying date of January 1, 2026, can be submitted in the prescribed Forms 6, 7 and 8 between December 27, 2025 and January 22, 2026. She said all claims and objections would be disposed of by February 2, 2026, and the final electoral roll would be published on February 10, 2026.

She added that claims and objections can also be filed online through the Election Commission of India portal at voters.eci.gov.in.

BJP represents last

minister said that when Dipu Das can be burnt alive in Bangladesh, "the Assamese people can well imagine what the situation in the state will be after 20 years".

"During the last Eid in Dhubri, I had to go there when beef was thrown outside people's homes and the meat was openly consumed. In Lower and central Assam, there have been instances of Hindu girls becoming victims of 'Love Jihad'. Assamese people are selling off their lands and shifting to towns and cities. These are issues that have endangered the Assamese identity," he added. Referring to Siliguri's Chicken's Neck Corridor that connects the Northeast with the rest of India, Sarma said, "Who is there on either side? There are no Hindus but only those who have come from Bangladesh."

"When they have come is irrelevant. If there is a war between India and Bangladesh -- who will these settlers support? Where does their loyalty lie?" he asked. Sarma claimed that there is no other place where the population of the indigenous people has dipped to 60 per cent of the total population.

"During my lifetime, I have seen the population of the infiltrators rise from 21 per cent to nearly 40 per cent and my children will find during their lifetime that the population of the Assamese community has come down to 30 per cent," he added.

He accused the Left parties of spreading the narrative that Assam is the land of 'Sankar-Azan' (Vaishnav saint Sankardeva and Sufi saint Azan Fakir) but this is "wrong as it is the land of 'Sankar-Madhav' (referring to Sankardeva's illustrious disciple Madhavdeva)". The CM asserted that the BJP will be the shining light for the people of Assam who see darkness ahead.

"We will have to fight relentlessly to protect our 'jati, mati and bheti' (community, land and roots)," he added.

"We will fight and definitely win. The legendary Ahom general Lachit Barphukan could defeat the Mughals when he was sick and we will defeat the forces that are threatening our identity, land and culture," Sarma added.

The Assamese are not weak or alone today as they have Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah with them, he added. (PTI)

From AFSPA to

said, calling it a defining shift in the state's history.

Targeting previous Congress governments, Sarma alleged that years of weak governance and lack of political will allowed insurgency and unrest to flourish, pushing Assam into a cycle of fear and underdevelopment. He said the people of Assam paid a heavy price during that period, with normal life disrupted and economic growth severely affected.

The Chief Minister credited the BJP-led governments under Prime Minister Narendra Modi for prioritising peace through a combination of firm security action, dialogue with insurgent groups and development-driven governance.

He said peace accords, infrastructure growth and improved governance created conditions that allowed the gradual withdrawal of AFSPA from most parts of the state.

Sarma said the lifting of AFSPA from almost all districts since 2022 is a reflection of restored normalcy and growing public confidence in the administration.

He described it as a signal of a "new Assam" where peace, stability and development go hand in hand. The Chief Minister said the transformation has helped attract investment, boost tourism and improve everyday life for citizens. He asserted that the return of peace has also strengthened Assam's position as a key state in the Northeast's growth story. Reiterating his political attack on the Congress, Sarma said the contrast between the past and present is clear, with Assam moving decisively away from decades of conflict towards a future defined by peace and progress.

173 security personnel

days, demanding the eviction of alleged illegal settlers, who mostly hail from Bihar, from the Village Grazing Reserve (VGR) and Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR) lands in the tribal belts.

They went on a rampage on Monday after police took away three agitators from the protest site during the early hours, reportedly to a Guwahati hospital as their health had deteriorated, which the administration later claimed was for their hospitalisation.

The Kheroni area in West Karbi Anglong district witnessed widespread violence on Tuesday, as one person was killed in police firing and another was burnt alive inside his house. There was an attempt to evict the settlers last year, but a petition was filed in the Gauhati High Court, which passed an interim order staying the eviction process.

Meanwhile, a tripartite meeting was held on Friday between the state government, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the protestors, with Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma assuring that the government will move the Gauhati High Court for an early order on its previous stay on eviction in grazing lands in both the districts. (PTI)

Massive rally in

illegal entry into the state. They said democratic movements would continue until concrete measures are taken to ensure the safety and security of indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh.

Assam's culture turns

would stand united to protect the rights and identity of bhumiputra, khilonjiya and Axombaaxi communities. The BJP, however, hit back sharply, accusing Gogoi of distorting history for political convenience.

Lakhimpur MLA Manab Deka said Assam's heritage, shaped by saints and heroes born on its soil, is non-negotiable.

He asserted that equating indigenous spiritual icons like Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and Chaolung Sukapha with Azan Fakir amounted to historical misrepresentation.

Cabinet minister Pijush Hazarika echoed the sentiment, calling such comparisons politically motivated and deeply offensive to Assamese identity.

Senior BJP leaders Kaushik Rai and Rupesh Gowala also weighed in, accusing Gogoi of diluting Assam's civilisational roots for electoral gains. As the exchange intensifies, the debate has brought issues of indigeneity, cultural pride and historical narrative to the forefront of Assam's political discourse, setting the stage for deeper ideological battles in the days ahead.

Assam launches initiative

adolescents, focusing on malnutrition, developmental delays and early childhood ailments.

Officials said the pilot project will be closely monitored, with feedback used to refine and scale up the scheme across Assam's tea-growing regions.

Nalanda Literature Festival

Contemporary concerns also featured prominently. The session "Beyond the Binary: Transgender Characters in Today's Literature" sparked important conversations on representation and inclusion, with speakers urging governments to formally recognise transgender and LGBTQ+ writers.

Participants noted that similar struggles for visibility are faced by writers from the Northeast in national literary spaces.

Cultural sessions celebrating food, poetry and folk traditions echoed the lived realities of India's regions beyond the mainstream.

Discussions on indigenous cuisines, oral storytelling and regional arts reinforced the need to document and protect local cultures — a priority often emphasised in the context of the Northeast.

Festival Director Ganga Kumar said the inaugural edition of NLF succeeded in reviving Nalanda's spirit as a meeting ground of ideas and cultures.

With its inclusive approach and emphasis on regional voices, Nalanda Literature Festival 2025 emerged as a significant platform that aligns closely with the cultural aspirations of the Northeast and other underrepresented regions of India.

The festival concluded with a felicitation ceremony honouring speakers, artists and contributors, marking the beginning of what organisers hope will be a sustained national dialogue rooted in diversity, heritage and shared intellectual traditions.

Claims and objections can be filed till Jan 22; final rolls to be published on February 10

Draft Electoral Rolls 2026 published across Assam districts

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 27: The integrated draft electoral rolls for Kokrajhar, Baksa and Tamulpur districts were published with January 1, 2026, as the qualifying date. Kokrajhar district includes five constituencies—Gossaigaon, Dotma (ST), Kokrajhar (ST), Baokhungri and Parbatjhora. Baksa district includes 41-Manas and 42-Baksa (ST) LACs. Eligible citizens can file claims and objections from December 27, 2025, to January 22, 2026. Special verification campaigns are scheduled for January 3-4 and 10-11. Applications can be submitted online via Voter Helpline App, Voters' Service Portal, EROs, or BLOs using Forms 6, 6B, 7 and 8. Advance enrolment is allowed for citizens turning 18 on April 1, July 1 or October 1, 2026.

Draft electoral rolls for Tamulpur district's two constituencies report a total of 4, 25,710 voters, including 2, 12,853 male and 2, 12,854 female voters. In Tamulpur LAC, there are 1, 08,362 male and 1, 07,935 female voters; in Goreswar LAC, 1, 04,491 male and 1, 04,919 female voters. Claims and objections can be submitted until January 22, 2026 and final rolls will be published on February 10.

Our Biswanath Chariali Correspondent adds: As per the revised schedule of the Election Commission of India, the Integrated Draft Photo Electoral Roll for the three assembly constituencies of Biswanath district—70 Biswanath, 71 Behali (SC) and 72 Gohpur, was released by DC and DEO Lakhinandan Saharia at a press meet. The draft lists 5, 22,174 voters: 1, 90,627 in 70 Biswanath (94,129 male, 96,498 female), 1, 58,068



in 71 Behali (SC) (78,117 male, 79,951 female) and 1, 73,479 in 72 Gohpur (86,850 male, 86,629 female).

Polling stations include 238 in 70 Biswanath (22 urban, 216 rural, 40 in tea gardens), 197 in 71 Behali (SC) (all rural, 38 in tea gardens) and 218 in 72 Gohpur (13 urban, 205 rural, 11 in tea gardens). Eligible persons who have not registered or will turn 18 by January 1, 2026, will be included. Claims and objections can be submitted using Forms 6(a), 7 and 8 until February 2, 2026. The final roll will be published on February 10. The programme was hosted by Dhiman Hazarika, DEO and attended by senior administrative officials and political representatives.

Our Margherita Correspondent adds: A meeting on the draft electoral roll was held at the Margherita Co-District Commissioner's office, chaired by

Co-DC Rahul Doley and attended by senior officials and representatives of political parties including INC, BJP, AGP and AJP. The 83rd Margherita LAC in Tinsukia has 222 polling booths and 1, 74,970 voters (86,416 male, 88,554 female), including 292 service voters, 379 D-voters and 5,043 deceased voters. Margherita Co-District has 114 polling station locations (9 urban, 105 rural). The number of polling stations increased from 200 to 222. Filing of claims and objections is open from December 27, 2025 to January 22, 2026 and the final roll will be published on February 10.

Our Jorhat Correspondent adds: Following ECI directions, the integrated draft photo electoral rolls for Jorhat district were published. Constituency-wise details: 99-Teok – 1,98,320 voters (96,986 male, 1,01,334 female), 249 polling stations; 100-Jorhat – 1,50,924

voters (72,507 male, 78,417 female), 182 polling stations; 101-Mariani – 1,69,875 voters (82,907 male, 86,967 female, 1 third-gender voter), 210 polling stations; 102-Titabar – 2,04,568 voters (98,851 male, 1,05,717 female), 245 polling stations. Draft rolls are available on jorhat.assam.gov.in and at DEO, ERO, and BLO offices. Claims, objections, corrections, deletions or changes in polling stations can be submitted using Forms 6, 7 and 8 by January 22, 2026. Final rolls will be published on February 10.

Our Tezpur Correspondent adds: The Draft Electoral Roll-2026 under Special Summary Revision was published at the District Commissioner's office by DC-cum-DEO Ananda Kumar Das in the presence of senior officials, political representatives and media. The qualifying date is January 1, 2026. Since

the final publication of 2025 rolls, 21,490 new voters were added and 15,203 shifted or deceased voters deleted, resulting in a net increase of 6,287 electors across five LACs. Total polling stations increased by 80 to 1,231. LAC-wise summary:

65-Dhekiajuli: 285 polling stations, net increase 1,019, total 2,28,501

66-Barchalla: 251 polling stations, net increase 1,587, total 1,95,744

67-Tezpur: 225 polling stations, net increase 1,068, total 1,80,885

68-Rangapara: 214 polling stations, net increase 1,575, total 1,71,965

69-Naduar: 256 polling stations, net increase 1,038, total 2,04,728

Total electors in Sonitpur district now stand at 9,81,823 (4,85,155 male, 4,96,646 female, 22 third-gender). Claims and objections can be filed from December 27, 2025, to January 22, 2026. Draft rolls are available online at https://sonitpur.assam.gov.in [https://sonitpur.assam.gov.in] and the final rolls will be published on February 10, 2026.

Our Silchar Correspondent adds: The District Administration, Cachar, under District Commissioner and District Election Officer Mridul Yadav, IAS, announced the publication of the Draft Photo Electoral Roll for all seven Assembly Constituencies—114-Lakhipur, 115-Udharbond, 116-Katigora, 117-Borkhola, 118-Silchar, 119-Sonai and 120-Dholai (SC), at a press conference on Saturday. The draft, prepared under the directions of the Election Commission of India (ECI) as part of the Special Revision under Section 21 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, uses January 1, 2026, as the qualifying date. Citizens can inspect the draft rolls at the District Election Officer's office, respective Booth Level Officers (BLOs), or online via https://voters.eci.gov.in [https://voters.eci.gov.in]. The claims and objections period runs from December 27, 2025, to January 22, 2026 with special facilitation campaigns on January 3-4 and 10-11, 2026. All claims will be disposed of by February 2, 2026, with the final electoral roll scheduled for February 10, 2026.

The Cachar district now has 14, 15,439 electors across 1,732 polling stations, comprising 7, 01,888 male voters, 7, 13,533 female voters, and 18 third-gender voters. Silchar LAC has the highest number of electors at 2, 22,351, while Lakhipur has 1, 76,612.

An extensive administrative framework, including seven Electoral Registration Officers, 14 Assistant EROs, 46 Additional Assistant EROs, 89 BLO Supervisors and 1,732 Booth Level Officers, has been deployed to facilitate voters and ensure accuracy. Citizens can appeal decisions of EROs to the District Magistrate under Section 24(a) of the RPA, and further to the Chief Electoral Officer under Section 24(b).

DC Mridul Yadav urged eligible voters, especially first-time voters, women and marginalised communities to verify their entries and submit claims or objections to ensure a clean, inclusive electoral roll. The ongoing revision reflects steady growth from 13, 93,482 electors in the final roll of January 2025 and strengthens the integrity of the electoral database.

Nagaon Quiz Carnival 2025 concludes at Nowgong Girls' College

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 27: The Nagaon Quiz Forum successfully concluded the 'Nagaon Quiz Carnival 2025' at the 'Kushilab' auditorium of Nowgong Girls' College in collaboration with the college and with special support from its NSS wing.

The event was inaugurated by Dilip Bora, principal of Ramanujan Senior Secondary School with the lighting of the ceremonial lamp and floral tributes to Dr Bhupen Hazarika and Zubeen Garg. Forum member Yoshita Sarma set the tone for the day with a creative dance performance. The programme commenced at 10 AM with the solo written quiz titled 'Pohoror Chiyahire Rodor Chithi', open to participants up to Class XII from across Assam.

Conducted by Shandilya Mahant and Anuj Shankar Devnath, the competition saw Ayan Akash

Thakur of Ramanujan Senior Secondary School securing first place, while Arjun Shivam Nath and Siddharth Senapati of Christ Jyoti School bagged second and third positions respectively. Winners received cash prizes, trophies, certificates and book packets in memory of Maheswar Sharma Borthakur and Professor Krishna Ram Bora. Consolation prizes were awarded to Debajit Bora, Darpan Barik (Ramanujan) and Barnil Bora (Navaroop Jatiya Vidyapeeth). This was followed by a musical performance by forum members Nipu Bhuyan, Ashish Saikia and Kangkan Krishna Hazarika.

At noon, the open quiz 'Ekhn Nedekha Nadir Sipare', based on the lives and works of Bhupen Hazarika and Zubeen Garg, attracted 57 teams from across the state. Dipankar Kaushik of Guwahati and Chiranjit Dutta of Mangaldoi secured first place, followed by Pratirop Bayan of Boko and Debajit Kalita of Nalbari in second position. The third prize went to Dilip Kumar Sharma of Sipajhar and Biswajit Saikia of Jorhat. The quiz was conducted by quizmasters Chandrajit Das and Nayan Jyoti Borah. Prizes were distributed by Gurukul 360 director Amitabh Borah with cash awards of ₹ 10,000, ₹ 7,000 and ₹ 5,000 for the top three teams, along with trophies, certificates and books.

The final event of the day, the prize-money general quiz 'The Spectrum' was held at 4 PM and conducted by renowned quizmaster Abhra Das. The team comprising Dr Sayan Majumdar and Dr Biswanath Bhattacharya emerged as winners, while Dr Vinay Upadhyay and Dr Jyotishman Gogoi secured second place. Jitaditya Narzary and Rajibul Awal finished third. Prizes

carrying cash awards of ₹ 10,000, ₹ 7,000 and ₹ 5,000, along with mementos and certificates were presented by Nowgong Girls' College principal Dr Kulen Chandra Das and NSS in-charge Dr Amiya Pator in the presence of senior quizsters Simanta Hazarika, Bibhuti Sharma and Hemanta Gogoi.

During the valedictory session, the forum felicitated five senior quiz personalities from the district—Mukul Prasad Borthakur, Prasenjit Bora, Biswajit Saikia, Itikar Uz Zaman and Hridoyjit Chakraborty. Assam government's 'Yuwa Lekhak Samman' awardees Sankalp Saikia and Debajit Kalita were also honoured. Poetry recitations were presented in honour of Assam Mathematics Academy's Parag Tamuly. The programme concluded with a vote of thanks by working president Amiya Kumar Baruah.

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Indian Railways to double train capacity in 48 cities, major upgrades for Guwahati



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 27: Indian Railways has launched a nationwide initiative to double the originating capacity of trains at 48 major cities by 2030, aiming to meet the rapidly rising passenger demand across the country. The plan includes expansion of coaching terminals, development of new terminals, creation of maintenance facilities and enhancement of sectional capacity to decongest major railway hubs and improve operational efficiency.

Ashwini Vaishnav, Minister of Railways, Information & Broadcasting and Electronics & Information Technology, stated that the initiative will enhance train-handling capabilities, improve punctuality and provide greater convenience to passengers while supporting long-term growth of the railway network.

Guwahati, the gateway to the North East and headquarters of Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR)

is central to the region's rail connectivity. Guwahati Railway Station handles nearly 49,000 passengers daily, rising to around 65,000 during peak seasons with over 200 trains operating each day.

To address increasing demand, NFR is implementing several major capacity enhancement projects in and around Guwahati: (1) Kamakhya-New Guwahati 3rd Line Project: Spanning 5.74 km at a cost of ₹ 467 crore, this project aims to ease congestion and improve train operations for the local population in Kamrup Metro district.

(2) Aghori-Kamakhya Double Line Project with new Saraighat Rail-cum-Road Bridge: Covering 7.062 km and costing ₹ 1,474 crore, this infrastructure upgrade will boost rail and road capacity, improve connectivity between Guwahati and North Guwahati, and support more daily commuter trains.

(3) Mega Coaching Complex at

New Guwahati: With an investment of ₹ 227 crore, the complex will feature three new pit lines, four stabling lines and two automatic washing plants, enhancing terminal capacity, coach maintenance, safety and passenger comfort.

Additionally, Guwahati Railway Station is being redeveloped into a world-class facility with a 12-storey IT park. The newly inaugurated Panbazar Road Over Bridge will improve traffic flow and support station remodelling. NFR has also electrified both pit lines at Kamakhya Junction to facilitate efficient maintenance of upcoming Vande Bharat and Amrit Bharat trains.

Through these initiatives, Northeast Frontier Railway aims to translate the national vision of Indian Railways into tangible improvements in Guwahati and the North East with a focus on modernisation, enhanced infrastructure and passenger-centric services.

10 arrested with 99 cattle in Jagiroad

HT Correspondent

JAGIROAD, Dec 27: Jagiroad police, in coordination with Nellie police, on Friday arrested 10 cattle smugglers and rescued 99 cattle during an operation conducted along National Highway-27 in Jagiroad.

The arrested persons have been identified as Asiqul Islam, Muktar Hussain, Abubakkar Siddique, Amir Hussain, Aminuddin, Shamim Ahmed, Amir Ali, Nirajul Islam, Abul Kalam and Zehirul. The police also seized three trucks used for transporting the cattle, bearing registration numbers AS 01 RC 9531, AS 02 BC 4216 and NL 01 AH 7664.

According to police sources, the cattle were being transported from Samaguri in Nagaon district to Burnihat in Meghalaya. Acting on specific inputs, the police intercepted the vehicles and rescued the cattle.

Further investigation is underway to ascertain the involvement of other persons and to trace the larger network behind the smuggling racket.

Navakanta Baruah birth centenary celebrations to begin on Dec 29

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 27: The birth centenary celebrations of eminent Assamese poet and litterateur Navakanta Baruah will commence on December 29 at his birthplace at Nagaon Natun Bazar in the town. The programme is being organised by a group of enthusiasts with a series of literary and cultural events planned to mark the occasion.

As part of the celebrations, a book titled 'Bodhiparnar Chhayat Navakanta Baruah', edited by Kumar Bhivuti will be released. The publication is a compilation of critical essays on the works of Navakanta Baruah and also features three special articles along with his last poem.

On the occasion, the Shishu Shiksha Sahitya Award 2025 will be conferred on five individuals—Manorama Bhuyan of Raha, Rumu Begum of Nagaon, Karunya Bhattacharya of Khutikhatia, Rintu Das Goswami of Bhutaigaon and Bijaya Gogoi of Raha. The programme will include recitation of Navakanta Baruah's poems, an exhibition of his literary works and the distribution of the Shishu Shiksha Sahitya Award. Several noted literary personalities, including Bipul Jyoti Saikia, Jiban Narah and Shibananda Kakati are expected to attend the function.

Navakanta Baruah, popularly known as "Ekhud Kakaidue," was a towering figure in Assamese literature. He was the recipient of several prestigious honours, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Bhushan and the Assam Valley Literary Award.

New Look Academy remembers Mirza Ghalib

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Dec 27: Premier senior secondary school New Look Academy on Saturday, organised a meeting commemorating legendary Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib alias Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan through a seminar to appreciate his life and works. Speaking on his works, senior journalist Manoj Kumar Borthakur said that it is difficult to visualise Ghalib's works set in the nineteenth century as few modern authors have explored the Islamic world steeped in oriental culture, but his intense feelings and mysticism is absolutely modern. The Western discourse on the Oriental is often through a Christian lens and hence far from the truth.

Students Kunalika Gogoi, Anshuman Chowdhury, Priyadarshini Dutta, Olympia Gogoi, Syeda Afreen Afal Hussain, Ribesagan Gogoi, Abhilekh Neog, Neeta Baruah (teacher) and Rashmi Saikia (teacher) made speeches on Ghalib and recited shayeries.

Assam gov't rolls out pilot health screening scheme for tea garden workers

Swasthaban Shramik Yojana launched in Dibrugarh

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Dec 27: Assam Health Minister Ashok Singhal on Saturday launched the state-level pilot project of the Swasthaban Shramik Yojana at Jutilbari Tea Estate in Dibrugarh, aiming to strengthen health infrastructure for the tea tribal community of the state.

The ambitious health screening initiative seeks to provide universal and quality medical services to the tea garden population, which constitutes nearly 20 per cent of Assam's total census. The scheme was approved in the 2025-26 State Budget and is being implemented as a pilot project in 20 selected tea gardens, including Moran, Sessa and Ghagrajan.

The primary objective of the scheme is to address the high prevalence of communicable and non-communicable diseases among tea garden workers. Various health studies have indicated that the community remains highly vul-



nerable to ailments such as anemia, hypertension, diabetes, tuberculosis and leprosy.

Addressing the gathering at the inaugural programme, Health Minister Ashok Singhal said that the tea industry is the backbone of Assam's economy and ensuring the comprehensive well-

being of tea garden workers is a top priority for the government. He explained that the scheme introduces a structured and systematic health screening process, under which ASHA workers will conduct door-to-door visits to fill Community-Based Assessment Checklist (C-BAC) forms, while

Mobile Medical Units (MMUs) will provide on-site diagnostic services and treatment. A key feature of the Swasthaban Shramik Yojana is the appointment of 'Women's Health and Wellness Ambassadors' from within the tea gardens to spearhead awareness campaigns on health and hygiene. The scheme also envisages the setting up of 'Health Choupals' to counsel workers against early addiction to tobacco and alcohol, which often begins before the age of 25 in tea garden areas.

In addition, teams under the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) will ensure 100 per cent health coverage for children and adolescents in tea gardens with a special focus on addressing malnutrition and developmental delays.

The pilot project is expected to serve as a model for scaling up comprehensive healthcare services across tea garden areas of the state in the coming years.

Jorhat Development Authority employee arrested in multiple torture and abuse cases



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Dec 27: Probr Baruah also known as Samiran Baruah, an employee of Jorhat Development Authority was arrested by Jorhat police near Jhanji, along the Jorhat-Sivasagar border on Friday night.

The arrest follows three cases registered against him—two at

Jorhat police station and one at Pulibor police station. Two cases were filed by his wife, alleging torture against her and their two sons, while the third was lodged by his former driver Bipul Orang, who accused Baruah of illegal confinement and physical abuse earlier this year.

Hrishkesh Hazarika, officer-in-

charge of Jorhat police, stated that Baruah was apprehended after specific information suggested he was attempting to flee to Nagaland. He was produced before a court on Saturday and remanded to judicial custody.

Baruah faces multiple charges under sections of the BNS related to cruelty, violence, illegal confinement, obscene words and criminal intimidation. He is also booked under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act. Further investigations are ongoing.

According to reports, Baruah's wife submitted complaints supported by video evidence of prolonged abuse. Bipul Orang also reportedly provided video proof of caste-based abuse and physical assault. The Jorhat district unit of ATSA has extended support to Orang and demanded stringent action against Baruah.

EDITORS PICK

Child trafficking and the test of justice

By: Dr Priyanka Saurabh

Child trafficking in India today is not just a social evil, but has become a well-organized, multi-layered, and organized criminal network. This crime takes root in fragile socio-economic structures where poverty, illiteracy, displacement, gender inequality, and administrative apathy coexist. The horror of child trafficking lies not only in the fact that children become victims of exploitation, but also in the fact that this crime skillfully exploits the limitations of the law and judicial process. Consequently, despite stringent legal provisions and international obligations, the conviction rate in child trafficking cases in India remains alarmingly low.

Calling child trafficking a "layered organized crime" isn't merely a theoretical term, but rather reflects the true nature of its mechanisms. This crime typically involves no single central operator, but rather a number of independent but complementary entities. Recruiters often operate locally, luring children or their parents with false promises of education, employment, a better life, or marriage. This is followed by transportation agents, shelter networks, document forgeries, and ultimately, exploitative individuals or organizations operating at various levels. Direct contact between these entities is minimal, making it extremely difficult to unify the entire criminal network and present it before a court.

The biggest advantage of this layered structure for criminals is that each link can portray itself as limited to a specific role. Some simply portray themselves as "facilitators," others as "brokers," and others as "employers," thus concealing their criminal intent. As a result, it becomes nearly impossible for prosecutors to prove criminal conspiracy, common intent, and organized crime. This complexity is further compounded when trafficking becomes interstate or international, where the laws, police systems, and judicial processes of different states are not coordinated.

In modern times, digital technology has made this crime even more invisible. Through encrypted social media platforms, secret messaging apps, and digital payment systems, traffickers not only control the movement of children but also quickly destroy evidence. Traditional investigative methods prove inadequate, and the burden of prosecution ultimately rests on the victim's testimony.

This is where the real problem of evidentiary challenges in child trafficking cases begins. Minor victims are often unable to speak freely due to fear, trauma, social stigma, and economic dependence. Prolonged physical and mental torture affects their memory, which naturally leads to inconsistencies, gaps, and contradictions in their testimony. Despite this, traditional judicial approaches have viewed these inconsistencies as evidence of unreliability of testimony.

Historically, the Indian justice system has often viewed child victims of trafficking as accomplices, either directly or indirectly. Particularly in cases involving sexual exploitation or illegal labor, the perception was that the victim compromised the circumstances or participated in the crime at some level. This approach has led to the need for additional corroboration of their testimony, while independent evidence is already rare in organized crime. As a result, accused individuals have been acquitted, and victims have been denied justice.

Delays in filing complaints have also been a major problem. Victims or their guardians often remain silent for long periods due to social fears, family reputation, financial insecurity, and threats from criminals. This delay is viewed with suspicion by courts, further weakening prosecutions. Furthermore, the inability to narrate the entire sequence of events, especially when the crime occurred over several months or years, has led to the rejection of victim testimony on technical grounds.

Against this backdrop, the Supreme Court's directive recognizing minors as "victim witnesses" marks a qualitative shift in the Indian criminal justice system. This directive recognizes that child trafficking victims are not accomplices to crime, but rather victims of structural exploitation. The concept of "victim witness" reconciles traditional standards for evaluating testimony with human reality and reminds courts that traumatic memory is not entirely logical or linear.

Under this judicial approach, it is no longer necessary for the victim's testimony to be completely consistent and flawless on every point. Subtle contradictions, ambiguities in the sequence of events, or discrepancies in details are viewed as natural human reactions, not as evidence of lies or fabrication. This allows the prosecution to present a broad framework of the crime based on a combined evaluation of circumstantial evidence and the victim's statement.

The status of "victim witness" also ensures that delays in filing complaints are not automatically considered a weakness in testimony. Delays are now understood as a circumstantial reality, taking into judicial account fear, social pressure, and trauma. This change is particularly significant in crimes like child trafficking, where the victim's silence itself results in the continuation of the crime.

Additionally, this approach also legitimizes amnesia and fragmented memory. In trauma-induced amnesia, victims are naturally unable to recall the full sequence of events. While this previously favored the accused, courts now have the discretion to prioritize the substance and context of testimony, rather than mere technical perfection. Thus, the concept of "victim witness" shifts the judicial process from formalism to victim-centered realism. This shift not only has the potential to increase conviction rates but also to incorporate the psychological and social dimensions of organized crime into judicial discourse. Only when the voice of the victim is heard with compassion and understanding, rather than suspicion, can the justice system truly fulfill its purpose.

Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that judicial directives alone are not sufficient. If the concept of "victim witness" is to be effective, it is equally essential to sensitize investigative agencies, train prosecutors, witness protection mechanisms, and rehabilitate victims. Without socio-economic rehabilitation, victims may be trapped in a cycle of re-exploitation, rendering judicial achievements futile.

Ultimately, the fight against child trafficking is not just a question of law, but a matter of moral and social responsibility. The Supreme Court's "Victim Witness" directive is an important milestone in this direction, signaling that justice is no longer merely a matter of procedure but also an effort to understand the victim's experience. If this approach receives strong institutional support, it could prove to be an effective weapon against layered, organized crimes like child trafficking in India and truly humanize the concept of justice.

The habit of reading books - From Scientific perspective

The profound and far-reaching impact that the habit of reading books has on the functioning and structure of the human brain has emerged as a remarkable truth in modern neuroscience research. Although the process of reading appears to be a simple connection between the eyes and letters, it is in reality an extremely complex neurological exercise for the brain that can fundamentally transform our world of thought. The human brain is not innately prepared to read; unlike our natural ability to speak or listen to language, we are not similarly equipped to read. To master reading, the brain must reconfigure its existing neural pathways anew. When a person reads a book with focused attention, a new and powerful connection is established among the brain regions that control vision, comprehend language, and retain memory. The stronger these connections become, the greater the brain's capacity for analysing information. In scientific terms, this is known as 'neuroplasticity' or neural flexibility. Because of this flexibility, the habit of reading does not merely impart knowledge; it also brings positive changes to the physical structure of the brain. The part called the 'corpus callosum', which connects the two hemispheres of the brain, is observed to be stronger and thicker in regular readers, resulting in a much higher speed of information exchange and greater efficiency in solving complex problems compared to ordinary individuals. In the current educational environment, a lack of this fundamental intellectual development is noticeable among students, the primary reason being their reluctance to read books beyond textbooks. There is no alternative to this neurological exercise for keeping the brain active.

In the present era of digital technology, the gradual decline in human attention span has become a universal problem as well as a serious challenge in the social life of Assam. In this context, analysing the importance of 'deep reading' from the perspective of neuroscience is highly necessary. When we hold a printed book and read, our brain engages in a slow, uninterrupted, and concentrated thought process. This process keeps the 'prefrontal cortex' active, the region responsible for controlling attention, judgement, and emotions. Deep reading not only helps the reader understand the meaning of words but also provides the time and mental stability needed to analyse the logic, philosophy, and complex ideas underlying those words. In contrast, when reading quickly or 'skimming' on a mobile or computer screen, the brain merely skims the surface of information instead of absorbing it deeply. As a result, our analytical thinking ability weakens, and we become incapable of delving into the depths of complex subjects. One of the main reasons for the impatience and superficial outlook observed among the younger generation in Assam is this lack of deep reading. The 'cognitive patience' or intellectual endurance required to understand complex societal issues can only be cultivated through the uninterrupted habit of reading books. The pages of a book give us time to think, something that the rapidly changing visuals of a screen do not provide.

From a psychological perspective, the habit of reading books plays a magical role in enhancing human empathy, which is essential for a healthy social life. When we read a novel, story, or biography, our brain does not distinguish significantly between real-world



experiences and imagined ones. Neuroscience research has proven that when reading descriptions of a character's joy, sorrow, or struggle, the same areas of the reader's brain activate as would in similar real-life situations. This is known as the functioning of 'mirror neurons'. Through this process, the reader becomes able to understand another person's state of mind, perspective, and circumstances without physically experiencing them. By reading books, people can step beyond their narrow boundaries and gain deep

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

insight into others' cultures, beliefs, and ways of life. It removes mental narrowness and helps acquaint one with a universal human essence. In contrast to the current atmosphere of intolerance in society, the habit of reading books can make people more sensitive, generous, and tolerant. This mental training cannot be provided by classroom teaching; it can only be acquired through the appreciation of literature. The habit of reading books is also regarded as a scientifically validated therapy for maintaining mental health and emotional balance. In today's mechanical lifestyle, stress, anxiety, and depression have become serious issues. Studies have shown that just a few minutes of concentrated reading can reduce a person's stress level by up to 68 percent. During reading, the heart rate returns to normal, and the body's muscles relax. It functions like a form of meditation that provides the brain with unique tranquility. When a reader becomes immersed in a book's story or subject matter, the brain temporarily disconnects from daily worries and problems, achieving a state of rest. This mental respite refreshes the brain and supplies new energy to face life's challenges. In the context of increasing mental instability and suicidal tendencies among Assam's youth, cultivating the habit of reading as a powerful preventive measure is essential. Screens and social media often heighten brain stimulation and disrupt sleep, whereas reading printed books calms

the mind and aids sound sleep. For mental well-being, books serve as a natural medicine free from side effects.

Although the decline in memory and brain function with advancing age is a natural biological process, the regular habit of reading can significantly slow it down. Neuroscience studies reveal that individuals who remain engaged in reading and intellectual pursuits throughout life develop a stronger 'cognitive reserve' or intellectual storehouse. This robust reserve can resist age-related neural damage and reduce the likelihood of serious conditions such as Alzheimer's or dementia. The brain, like other organs in the body, requires constant exercise to remain healthy. Each time we read something new and encounter novel words or concepts, the brain forms new neural connections or 'synapses'. These new connections compensate for the loss of older ones. In our societal system, the mental health of senior citizens is often neglected. Yet if a strong reading culture is built in society, our elderly population will be able to lead a creative and active mental life even in old age. The habit of reading books protects individuals mentally not only in the present but also for the future.

There is no substitute for the habit of reading books when it comes to the development of language and thought. The richer and more robust the vocabulary and structure of the language in which a person thinks, the greater the depth and clarity of their thought. Reading books enriches our vocabulary, enabling us to express complex feelings and ideas precisely and directly. Moreover, the habit of reading enhances our capacity for 'abstract thinking'. When reading books on science, philosophy, or sociology, we become capable of imagining and reasoning about unseen or intangible subjects. This ability distinguishes humans from other creatures. Without studying high-quality texts in one's mother tongue, true respect for and mastery over the language can never be achieved. The habit of reading is indispensable for the development of thought and reason. In a society where people abandon reading, new ideas cease to emerge, and the society becomes intellectually paralysed.

The tactile experience of holding a book— the rustle of paper, its scent, and the act of turning pages—helps keep the brain connected to reality. In the digital world, information is transient and formless, but a printed book has a specific physical existence. Research has found that information read in printed books is retained longer because the brain maps it to a particular location within the book. This is called 'spatial memory'. The gradual disappearance of the library culture that once existed in Assam's rural and urban areas is an unfortunate development. A library is not merely a place to store books; it is a centre for knowledge pursuit and mental stability. The quiet and peaceful environment required for reading books is also beneficial for mental tranquility. Such a habit increases our patience and helps maintain concentration in any task. Amid the rapid changes of technology, the stability of printed books offers our minds a refuge.

In conclusion, the habit of reading books is not merely a personal or social activity; it is a scientific foundation for the evolution of human existence. Its impact on brain structure, mental health, emotional intelligence, and social harmony is immense. For a progressive society like Assam, a generation is needed that prioritises reason over emotion and knowledge over impulse. And this wisdom and rationality can only be cultivated through uninterrupted study. We must certainly embrace the benefits of technology, but we can never deny our biological and psychological connection with books. Just as nutritious food is essential for a healthy body, the study of good books is indispensable for a healthy, strong, and creative mind. Recognising this scientific truth, we all—especially parents and the teaching community—must resolve to place books in the hands of the new generation. Only then can we dream of building an enlightened, tolerant, and advanced society. It is the light of books alone that can dispel the darkness of the human mind and lead to the discovery of true reality. *(The author is the recipient of the 'Yuba Lekhak Sanman 2025' from the Government of Assam)*

Why Book Fairs need young readers

By: Satvabrat Borah

Imagine walking into a bustling book fair, the air thick with the scent of fresh pages, stalls overflowing with colorful covers, and voices buzzing about favorite stories. It's meant to be a celebration of words, ideas, and imagination. But what if fewer and fewer people show up? What if the crowds thin out year after year? Suddenly, that vibrant event starts to feel hollow. Without a steady stream of passionate readers, especially from the younger generation, organizing a book fair begins to lose its true purpose.

Book fairs are more than just places to sell books. They are cultural gatherings where authors meet fans, publishers discover new talents, and communities bond over shared love for literature. In places like India's Guwahati or Assam Book Fair, these events have long been highlights of the year, drawing families, students, and book lovers together. Yet, in recent times, a quiet concern has emerged: young people are drifting away from books. They skim headlines on phones, scroll through endless feeds, and watch quick videos, but deep, sustained reading feels like a relic of the past. If this trend continues, book fairs risk becoming mere commercial ventures, stripped of their soul.

The numbers tell a worrying story. Globally and in India, leisure reading among youth is on the decline. Surveys show that while literacy rates climb, the habit of reading for pleasure

is slipping. In India, adults reportedly spend impressive time reading—around 10 hours a week on average, one of the highest globally—but much of this is tied to work or education, not pure enjoyment. Among the young, the picture darkens. Studies indicate that only a fraction of teenagers and young adults pick up books regularly outside of school requirements. Social media platforms, with their bite-sized content, have reshaped attention spans. Short reels and posts deliver instant gratification, making the slow reward of turning pages in a novel seem less appealing.

This shift isn't just about preference; it has real consequences. Deep reading builds empathy, critical thinking, and focus—skills that fragmented online consumption often skimps on. When young people turn primarily to screens for information and entertainment, they miss out on the immersive worlds that books offer. Sure, there are bright spots. Communities like BookTok on TikTok have sparked interest in certain titles, boosting sales for young adult fiction and self-help books. Viral recommendations can turn an obscure novel into a bestseller overnight. But even here, the engagement is often superficial: quick reviews, summaries, or aesthetic photos rather than full, thoughtful dives into the text.

In regions like Assam, efforts are underway to push back against this tide. The state government declared 2025 the "Year of Books," a bold move to revive reading culture. Book fairs expanded to multiple cities, with the flagship Guwahati

event running for days at a grand venue. Record sales—nearly 7 crore rupees—and huge crowds showed enthusiasm, especially with initiatives like honoring young writers and providing book allowances for employees. Families flocked to stalls, children explored picture books, and publishers reported brisk business. These steps highlight how book fairs can reignite interest when supported thoughtfully. They bring books within reach, host discussions, and create excitement around literature.

Still, the core challenge remains: pulling the younger generation back in. Many teens admit they rarely read for fun, citing lack of time or interest sparked by digital distractions. Parents and educators notice it too—home libraries gather dust while screens glow late into the night. Without addressing this at the roots, book fairs might attract older loyalists but struggle to inspire new ones. Publishers could end up focusing on safe, high-selling genres, while diverse voices and challenging works fade.

So, how do we turn this around? It starts small, in homes and schools. Parents reading aloud to children, even as they grow older, fosters lifelong habits. Schools can carve out time for free reading, without assignments attached, and build inviting libraries. Communities might host casual book clubs where teens discuss graphic novels, fantasy series, or trending picks from social media. Leveraging the positives of digital tools—apps for ebooks, online forums—can bridge the gap, easing the transition to physical books.

Book fairs themselves hold immense potential as catalysts. They are festive, accessible, and social. Imagine more interactive zones: author chats tailored to youth, workshops on creating comics, or tie-ins with popular online trends. Discounts for students, free entry for school groups, and collaborations with influencers could draw crowds. In Assam's recent fairs, the energy from national publishers and local talents showed what's possible when events feel inclusive and exciting.

Ultimately, book fairs thrive on readers, and readers thrive on book fairs. They feed each other in a beautiful cycle. If we neglect growing that readership, especially among the young who will carry the torch forward, these beloved events could dim. But with deliberate effort—from governments, families, schools, and the industry—we can nurture a revival. Books have the power to transform lives, offering escape, insight, and connection in ways screens often can't match. In a world overflowing with noise, the quiet magic of reading deserves protection.

Let's commit to it. Pick up a book today, share it with someone young, and visit the next fair with fresh eyes. The flame of reading isn't out—it's just waiting for more of us to fan it back to life. When readers multiply, book fairs won't just survive; they'll flourish as the heartbeats of our cultural landscape.



Thailand, Cambodia sign new ceasefire agreement to end border fighting

BANGKOK, Dec 27: Thailand and Cambodia signed a ceasefire agreement on Saturday to end weeks of fighting along their border over competing territorial claims.

The agreement took effect at noon (0500 GMT) and calls for a halt in military movements and airspace violations for military purposes.

Only Thailand has carried out airstrikes, hitting sites in Cambodia as recently as Saturday morning, according to the Cambodian Defence Ministry.

The deal also calls for Thailand, after the ceasefire has held for 72 hours, to repatriate 18 Cambodian soldiers it has held as prisoners since earlier fighting in July. Their release has been a major demand of the Cambodian side.

Within hours of the signing, Thailand's Foreign Ministry protested to Cambodia that a Thai soldier sustained a permanent disability when he stepped on an anti-personnel land mine, which it charged had been laid by Cambodian forces.

Defence ministers met at the border to sign the agreement

The agreement was signed by the countries' defence ministers, Cambodia's Tea Seiha and Thailand's Nattaphon Narkphanit, at a border checkpoint. It followed three-day lower-level talks by military officials.

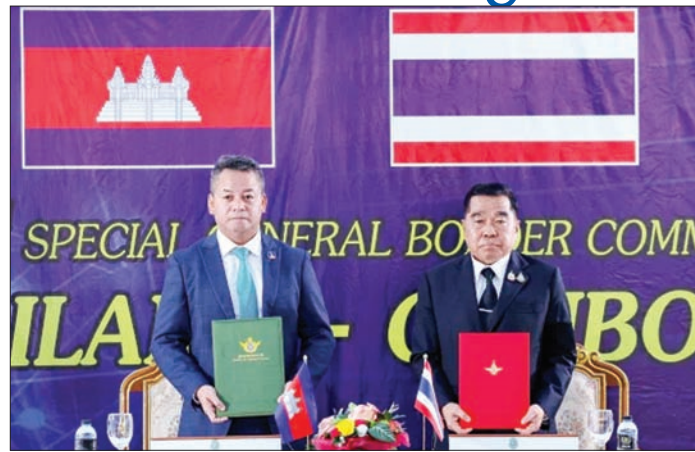
It declares that the sides are committed to an earlier ceasefire that ended five days of fighting in July and follow-up agreements.

The original July ceasefire was brokered by Malaysia and pushed through by pressure from US President Donald Trump, who threatened to withhold trade privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed. It was formalised in more detail in October at a regional meeting in Malaysia that Trump attended.

Despite those deals, the countries carried on a bitter propaganda war, and minor cross-border violence continued, escalating in early December to widespread heavy fighting.

Civilians bore the brunt of the fighting

Thailand has lost 26 soldiers and one civilian as a direct result of the combat since Dec. 7, according to officials. Thailand has also reported



44 civilian deaths.

Cambodia hasn't issued an official figure on military casualties, but says that 30 civilians have been killed and 90 injured. Hundreds of thousands of people have been evacuated on both sides of the border.

"Today's ceasefire also paves the way for the displaced people who are living in the border areas to be able to return to their homes, work in the fields, and even allow their children to be able to return to schools and resume their studies."

Cambodia's Defence Minister Tea Seiha told reporters after the signing.

Each side blamed the other for initiating the fighting and claimed to be acting in self-defence.

The agreement also calls on both sides to adhere to international agreements against deploying land mines, a major concern of Thailand.

Thai soldiers along the border have been wounded in at least 10 incidents this year by what Thailand says were newly planted Cambodian mines.

Cambodia says the mines were left over from decades of civil war that ended in the late 1990s. Following the latest injury on Saturday, Thailand's Foreign Ministry noted that the new agreement "includes key provisions on joint humanitarian demining operations to ensure the safety of military personnel and civilians in the border areas as soon as possible."

Another clause says the two sides "agree to refrain from disseminating false information or fake news."

The agreement calls for a resumption of previous measures to demarcate the border. The sides also agreed to cooperate in suppressing transnational crimes. That's primarily a reference to online scams perpetrated by organised crime that have bilked victims around the world of billions of dollars each year. Cambodia is a centre for such criminal enterprises.

Malaysia's leader hails the agreement

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was instrumental in putting together the original ceasefire, said the new agreement "reflects a shared recognition that

restraint is required, above all in the interest of civilians."

Many clauses similar to those in Saturday's agreement were included in October's ceasefire document, and were open to various interpretations and generally honoured only in part. These included provisions concerning land mines and the Cambodian prisoners.

The fragility of the new agreement was underlined by Thailand's Defence Ministry spokesperson Surasant Kongsiri in a news briefing after Saturday's signing. He said that the safe return of civilians to their homes would indicate the situation had stabilised enough to allow the repatriation of the captured Cambodian soldiers.

"However, if the ceasefire does not materialise, this would indicate a lack of sincerity on the Cambodian side to create a sure peace," he said. "Therefore, the 72-hour ceasefire beginning today is not an act of trust nor unconditional acceptance but a time frame to tangibly prove whether Cambodia can truly cease the use of weapons, provocations and threats in the area." (AP)

BNP's Tarique Rahman offers prayers at Hadi's grave amid tight security

DHAKA, Dec 27: Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) acting chairman Tarique Rahman on Saturday visited Dhaka University and offered prayers at the grave of slain student leader Sharif Osman Hadi amid heavy security.

The 60-year-old BNP leader also offered prayers at the grave of Bangladesh's national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, located beside the Dhaka University Central Mosque. The Daily Star newspaper reported.

Hadi was buried beside the grave of Nazrul Islam on December 20.

Rahman paid respects at the grave of Hadi, a spokesperson of Inqilab Moncho, who was shot dead earlier this month in an attack that has heightened political tensions ahead of national elections scheduled for February.

Traffic for both vehicles and pedestrians was halted on both sides of the road from Shahbagh towards Dhaka University during the visit, while members of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and police were deployed along the route, news portal tbsnews.net reported.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir arrived earlier at the university to accompany Rahman during the visit.

Rahman returned to Bangladesh from London on Thursday, ending a long period of self-exile that began in 2008.

Hadi (32) was a prominent figure of the July 2024 uprising that led to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government last year.

He was also a parliamentary candidate for the upcoming elections.

Hadi was shot in the head on December 12 during an election campaign in Dhaka. He was airlifted to Singapore for advanced treatment but died of his injuries on December 18. (PTI)

BNP's Tarique Rahman registers as Bangladeshi voter after 17 years abroad in self-exile

DHAKA/NEW DELHI, Dec 27: BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman on Saturday completed the formalities to enlist himself on Bangladesh's voter list and obtain a national identity (NID) card, two days after his return from over 17 years of self-exile in London.

The 60-year-old leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) visited the Election Commission (EC) office in Dhaka under tight security, where he provided fingerprints and iris scans for biometric enrollment, news portal tbsnews.net reported. He earlier submitted his voter registration application online, officials said.

"Tarique Rahman has already filled out the online form and has come to complete the registration by providing his fingerprints and iris scan," ASM Humayun Kabir, director general of the National Identity Registration Wing of the Election Commission, told reporters. He is expected to receive his NID card within 24 hours, the official said.

Rahman's daughter Zaima also completed her registration formalities for the NID card.

Foolproof security arrangements were in place around the EC office premises, with members of the Bangladesh Army, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Ansar and police deployed in and around the area.

According to a report in Bengali daily Prothom Alo, Bangladesh first introduced a voter list with photographs and biometric data in 2008 during the military-backed caretaker government led by Fakhruddin Ahmed that followed the 2007-2008 political crisis. Rahman, son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia, was a political prisoner at that time. After his release from prison, he left for London on September 11, 2008.

As the BNP leader was abroad at the time, he was not included in the voter list, and he did not return to Bangladesh during the subsequent Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League rule to register as a voter.

After the new voter list with photographs was introduced, the EC cancelled the previous voter list.

Former Election Commission official SM Asaduzzaman, who was director of public relations at the EC Secretariat when the photo voter list and NID

system were introduced, said Rahman did not sign up as a voter then, news portal bdnews24 reported. He, however, underlined that the law allows any eligible citizen to be included in the voter list at any time.

Bangladesh is going to the polls on February 12. Rahman will contest the upcoming election from his ancestral Bogura Sadar (Bogura-6) constituency, with BNP leaders already collecting his nomination papers on his behalf earlier this month.

Meanwhile, the Awami League, banned by the interim government from contesting the elections, has raised questions on the legality of including Rahman in the voters' list when the final list has already been prepared.

In an article posted on its website, the party claimed Rahman is "receiving one privilege after another, with repeated violations of the law".

"After the announcement of the election schedule, becoming a new voter is legally prohibited; yet questions have arisen about Tarique Rahman becoming a voter while that schedule was still in effect. (PTI)

Russia attacks Kyiv with missiles and drones, killing 1 and wounding many ahead of Ukraine-US talks

KYIV, Dec 27: Russia attacked Ukraine's capital with missiles and drones early Saturday morning, killing one person and wounding 27, a day before talks between Ukraine and the US, authorities said. Explosions boomed across Kyiv for hours as ballistic missiles and drones hit the city. The attack began in the early morning hours on Saturday and was continuing as the day broke.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is prepared to meet with US President Donald Trump in Florida on Sunday for further talks on ending the nearly 4-year-old war. Zelenskyy told reporters he was on a plane en route to Florida on Saturday afternoon, and would stop in Canada on the way to meet Prime Minister Mark Carney. Zelenskyy said he and Trump plan to discuss issues, including security guarantees and territorial issues in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia regions.

The Russian Defence Ministry said Saturday that it carried out a "massive strike" overnight, using "long-range precision-guided weapons from land, air and sea, including Kinzhal hypersonic aeroballistic missiles" and drones. It said it targeted energy infrastructure facilities used by Ukraine's forces and military-industrial enterprises. The ministry said the strike came in response to Ukraine's attacks on "civilian objects" in Russia.

Earlier on Saturday, the ministry said its air defences shot down seven Ukrainian drones over the Russian regions of Krasnodar and Aдыgeya overnight. Poland scrambled fighter jets and closed airports in Lublin and Rzeszow near the border with Ukraine for several hours during the Russian attacks, the country's armed forces command said on X. There was no violation of Polish airspace, it said. Civil aviation authority Pansa said the two airports had since resumed operations. It was unclear what caused the alert in Poland when the Russian attacks were focused on Kyiv, which is far from the border.

Russia targeted Ukraine with

519 drones and 40 missiles, Ukraine's air force said. The main target was energy and civilian infrastructure in Kyiv, Zelenskyy said. In some districts of the region, there is no electricity or heating because of the attacks, he added. "Today, Russia demonstrated how it responds to peace talks between Ukraine and the United States on ending Russia's war against Ukraine. They carried out massive attacks on Ukraine precisely as we move toward peace negotiations," said Zelenskyy, speaking to reporters via audio note while travelling. "That is Russia's response."

Screams as a man burns to death

More than 10 residential buildings were damaged, Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko said in a post on Telegram. People were being evacuated from under the rubble of collapsed buildings. Olena Karpenko, 52, heard a man as he burned to death in the attack. "His scream is still in my ears. I can't believe it," she said, weeping. Karpenko said she heard a sudden explosion at the nearby thermal power plant, followed by a stronger blast that shook the windows of her home. Then came the hit on her building. "I saw how the apartment was burning, there was a fire, and we heard a man's screams, begging for help," she said. Two children were among those wounded in the attack, which hit seven locations across the capital, the head of the Kyiv Military Administration, Tymur Tkachenko, said in a statement on Telegram. A body was found under the rubble of one damaged building, he said.

"In fact, the entire centre of Kyiv was under attack by drones," he said, adding that Russia was sending a message that "it is raising the stakes in this war." A fire broke out in an 18-story residential building in the Dnipro district of the city, and emergency crews rushed to the scene to contain the flames. A 24-story residential building in the Darnytsya district was also hit, Tkachenko said, and more fires broke out in the Obolonskyi and Holosiivskyi districts. (AP)

Millions of Afghans face hunger as aid cuts deepen humanitarian crisis

KABUL, Dec 27: For 10 hours a day, Rahimullah sells socks from his cart in eastern Kabul, earning about \$4.5 to \$6 per day. It's a pittance, but it's all he has to feed his family of five.

Rahimullah, who like many Afghans goes by only one name, is one of millions of Afghans who rely on humanitarian aid, both from the Afghan authorities and from international charity organisations, for survival.

An estimated 22.9 million people — nearly half the population — required aid in 2025, the International Committee for the Red Cross said in an article on its website Monday.

But severe cuts in international aid — including the halting of US aid to programmes such as food distribution run by the United Nations' World Food Programme — have severed this lifeline. More than 17 million people in Afghanistan now face crisis levels of hunger in the winter, the World Food Programme warned last week, 3 million more than were at risk more than a year ago.

The slashing in aid has come as Afghanistan is battered by a struggling economy, recurrent droughts, two deadly earthquakes and the mass influx of Afghan refugees expelled from countries such as Iran and Pakistan. The resulting multiple shocks have severely pressured resources, including of housing and food.

Tom Fletcher, the UN humanitarian chief, told the Security Council in mid-December that the situation was compounded by "overlapping shocks," including the recent earthquakes and increasing restrictions on humanitarian aid access and staff.

While Fletcher said nearly 22 million Afghans will need UN assistance in 2026, his organization will focus on 3.9 million facing the most urgent need of lifesaving help due to reduced donor contributions.

Fletcher said this winter was "the first in

years with almost no international food distribution". "As a result, only about 1 million of the most vulnerable people have received food assistance during the lean season in 2025," compared to 5.6 million last year, he said.

The year has been devastating for UN humanitarian organisations, which have had to cut thousands of jobs and spending in the wake of aid cuts. "We are grateful to all of you who have continued to support Afghanistan. But as we look towards 2026, we risk a further contraction of life-saving help — at a time when food insecurity, health needs, strain on basic services, and protection risks are all rising," Fletcher said.

The return of millions of refugees has added pressure on an already teetering system. Minister of Refugees and Repatriation Affairs Abdul Kabir said Sunday that 7.1 million Afghan refugees had returned to the country over the last four years, according to a statement on the ministry website.

Rahimullah, 29, was one of them. The former Afghan Army soldier fled to neighboring Pakistan after the Taliban seized power in 2021. He was deported back to Afghanistan two years later, and initially received aid in the form of cash as well as food.

"The assistance was helping me a lot," he said. But without it, "now I don't have enough money to live on. God forbid, if I were to face a serious illness or any other problem, it would be very difficult for me to handle because I don't have any extra money for expenses."

The massive influx of former refugees has also sent rents skyrocketing. Rahimullah's landlord has nearly doubled the rent of his tiny two-room home, with walls made half of concrete and half of mud and a homemade mud stove for cooking.

Instead of 4,500 afghanis (about \$67), he now wants 8,000 afghanis (about \$120) — a sum

Rahimullah cannot afford. So he, his wife, daughter and two young sons will have to move next month. They don't know where to.

Before the Taliban takeover, Rahimullah had a decent salary and his wife worked as a teacher. But the new government's draconian restrictions on women and girls mean women are barred from nearly all jobs, and his wife is unemployed.

"Now the situation is such that even if we find money for flour, we don't have it for oil, and even if we find it for oil, we can't pay the rent. And then there is the extra electricity bill," Rahimullah said.

In Afghanistan's northern province of Badakhshan, Sherin Gul is desperate. In 2023, her family of 12 got supplies of flour, oil, rice, beans, pulses, salt and biscuits. It was a lifesaver. But it only lasted six months. Now, there is nothing. Her husband is old and weak and cannot work, she said. With 10 children, seven girls and three boys between the ages of 7 and 27, the burden of providing for the family has fallen on her 23-year-old son — the only one old enough to work. But even he only finds occasional jobs.

"There are 12 of us... and one person working cannot cover the expenses," she said. "We are in great trouble."

Sometimes neighbours take pity on them and give them food. Often, they all go hungry.

"There have been times when we have nothing to eat at night, and my little children have fallen asleep without food," Gul said. "I have only given them green tea and they have fallen asleep crying."

Before the Taliban takeover, Gul worked as a cleaner, earning just about enough to feed her family. But the ban on women working has left her unemployed, and she said she developed a nervous disorder and is often sick. (AP)

African regional bodies reject recognition of Somaliland by Israel

NAIROBI (KENYA), Dec 27: Africa's regional governance bodies on Saturday rejected the recognition of Somalia's breakaway region of Somaliland as an independent nation by Israel a day earlier, the first by any country in more than 30 years.

Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 amid a descent into conflict and, despite having its own government and currency, had never been recognised by any nation in the world until Friday.

The African Union Chairperson, Mahmoud Ali Yousof, said any attempt to undermine Somalia's sovereignty risks peace and stability on the continent.

He said that the commission "firmly rejects any initiative or action aimed at recognising Somaliland as an independent entity, recalling that Somaliland remains an integral part of the Federal Republic of Somalia."

Somalia's federal government on Friday strongly rejected what it described as an unlawful move by Israel to recognise Somaliland, reaffirming that the northern region remains an integral part of Somalia's sovereign territory. It was not known why Israel made the declaration at this time or whether it was expecting something in return. Earlier this year, US and Israeli officials told The Associated Press that Israel had approached Somaliland about taking in Palestinians from Gaza as part of US President Donald Trump's plan at the time to resettle the territory's population. The United States has since abandoned that plan.

Netanyahu's office said on Friday that he, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar, and Somaliland's president, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, signed a joint declaration "in the spirit of the Abraham Accords."

That initiative, which started in 2020, established commercial and diplomatic ties between Israel and several Arab and Muslim-majority countries. Trump sees it as key to his plan for bringing long-term stability to the Middle East.

The foreign ministry of Egypt — a major mediator in the Israel-Hamas war — said on social media that it rejects Israel's recognition of Somaliland and stressed full support for Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. (AP)

2025: When Gen-Z street protests toppled Nepal's govt

KATHMANDU, Dec 27: Nepal witnessed a political turmoil in 2025 as massive street protests led by Gen Z against corruption, nepotism, and a social media ban escalated into violence, ultimately leading to the ouster of Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's coalition government.

The political turbulence in September led to former Chief Justice Sushila Karki taking the oath as Nepal's first woman prime minister, albeit for an interim government. She promptly announced that fresh elections would be held on March 5, 2026, a year ahead of the scheduled 2027.

Weeks before the violent protests, the atmosphere was simmering with online campaigns targeting the "Nepo babes" or "Nepo kids" — children of political elites flaunting lavish lifestyles allegedly funded by their parents' ill-gotten money through corruption.

However, what began as a digital dissent quickly escalated into a full-fledged nationwide movement. The mass Gen Z demonstrations erupted on September 8 and

9, leaving at least 77 people dead.

Angry over deaths, protesters burnt and vandalised key government buildings, including the Parliament, Prime Minister's Office and residence, Supreme Court, administrative offices and police posts across Nepal.

After Oli, the chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), was forced to quit, President Ramchandra Paudel appointed Karki as the caretaker PM on September 12.

The September protests were not the only ones that rocked the Himalayan nation. A certain section of the masses demanded restoration of the monarchy and a Hindu state, a whole decade after Nepal abolished royalty and adopted a Constitution in September 2015.

Two civilians, including a photojournalist, were killed and scores of others injured when pro-monarchists clashed with the riot police in Kathmandu on March 28.

Oli, known as pro-China, resigned on September 9, making

history as the first Nepalese prime minister not to visit India during his term, despite a scheduled visit on September 16.

He had visited China after taking over last year, in a major departure from past practices when Nepal PMs travelled to India on their first foreign visit.

Oli had met Modi in April in Bangkok on the sidelines of the 6th BIMSTEC summit.

Towards the end of the year, Nepal irked India by issuing a new Rs 100 note, featuring a map that includes Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura — territories that belong to India. In the past, India has slammed Nepal's action to incorporate these areas into the map, saying "any unilateral artificial enlargement of territorial claims is untenable."

One of the three, Lipulekh, was also dragged into a trilateral issue. Nepal objected to the resumption of border trade between India and China through Lipulekh in August.

New Delhi said that border trade between India and China through Lipulekh Pass commenced in 1954



and continued through the decades.

Disrupted in recent years due to Covid and other developments, both sides agreed to resume it now, India said, and termed the territorial claims as "neither justified nor based on historical facts and evidence."

In June, Indian pilgrims for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra were allowed to go via Nepal, the first since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Also in 2025, hydro-power con-

tinued to bind India and Nepal, and in a particular case, also involved Bangladesh. In June 2025, Nepal started exporting 40 MW electricity to Bangladesh, using the Indian transmission line, following a tri-lateral deal inked in October 2024.

Another area that remained unaffected by the diplomatic or political developments was the developmental assistance that India extended to Nepal in various ways.

Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri visited Nepal in mid-August to discuss bilateral partnership, focusing on connectivity and development cooperation.

In May, Environment Minister Bhubinder Yadav met Oli and discussed opportunities to strengthen cooperation in clean energy, biodiversity conservation and preservation of natural resources.

Earlier this month, Additional Secretary, North, Munu Mahawar, met caretaker PM Karki and offered logistic support for conducting the March 5 elections.

Nepali national Sudip Neupane was among those who died in the April terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir's Pahalgaon. His body was brought back home even as the Nepalese government condemned the terror attack in which 26 people, including Neupane, were killed.

An earthquake of 7 magnitude struck eastern Nepal right at the beginning of the year, reminding people of the 2015 tremor that killed at least 9,000 people. However, no deaths or damages were

reported.

Another staple Himalayan issue that Nepal faced this year, too, was the devastating flash floods and landslides. At least nine people were killed and 20 others, including six Chinese, went missing when a flash flood occurred in the Bhotekoshi River at Rasuwa district near the Nepal-Tibet border in July. The floods triggered by a glacial lake outburst in Tibet also damaged 10 hydro-power projects in Rasuwa.

Around 60 people were killed due to landslides and floods triggered by heavy monsoon rains between October 4 and 6.

India was among the first to send emergency relief to disaster-hit areas in Nepal, providing pre-fabricated steel bridges to help rebuild critical road infrastructure and improve connectivity.

India also continued with aiding the construction of colleges, schools, hospitals and community halls as part of the High Impact Community Development projects (HICDP) across the length and breadth of Nepal. (PTI)

'SIR will limit democratic rights'

Kharge calls for nationwide campaign against MGNREGA repeal

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Saturday said a nationwide campaign should be launched against the repeal of rural employment scheme MGNREGA, similar to the push-back against the three farm laws the government was eventually forced to withdraw.

Speaking at the Congress Working Committee meeting here, Kharge also said the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls was a "well-planned conspiracy" to limit democratic rights.

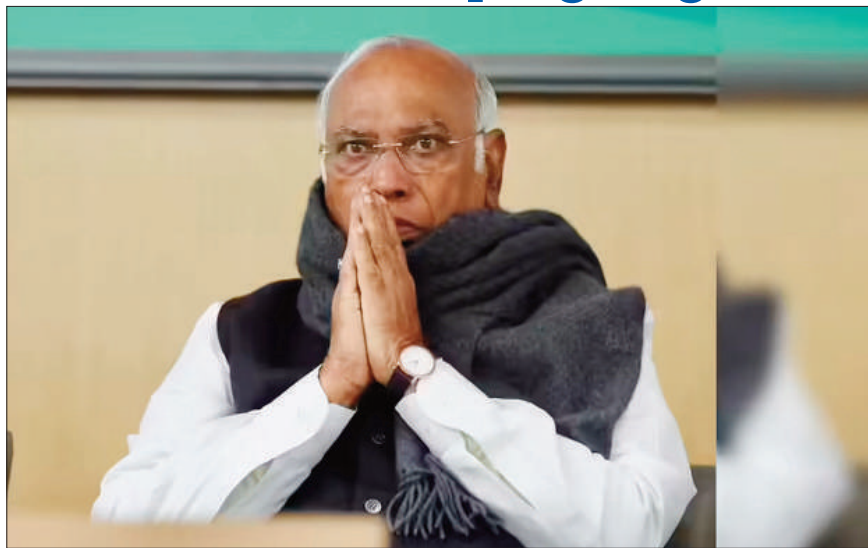
He said the CWC meeting was being held at a time when the democracy, Constitution and citizens' rights were under serious threat.

Kharge said the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was a visionary legislation of the UPA government, which was appreciated across the world. The scheme was named after Mahatma Gandhi due to the impact it had, he said.

"Repealing MGNREGA is an insult to Mahatma Gandhi," he said, calling it an attack on the Right to Work.

"The Modi government has, without any study, evaluation or consultation with states and political parties, repealed the law. The government's move should be protested against across the country," he said.

The Congress chief cited precedents, including the 2015 amendments to India's land



acquisition law that were effectively rolled back. He also quoted the three farm laws, which were first brought in as ordinances and then passed in Parliament amid opposition protests, but had to be repealed following the 2020-21 farmers' protests.

"Rahul Gandhi had predicted long ago that the farm laws would be taken back. Now, he has said that the MGNREGA would have to be brought back," Kharge said. "It is our collective responsibility to make con-

crete plans on MGNREGA and launch a nationwide public campaign."

He said people are looking towards the Congress in this "difficult situation".

On the SIR exercise, the Congress leader said it is a serious issue, and a well-planned conspiracy to limit people's democratic rights.

"Rahul ji has presented several examples and facts on 'vote chori' (vote theft). There is a collusion between the BJP and the Elec-

tion Commission. We have to ensure that the names of our voters are not deleted. We also need to ensure that the names of Dalits, tribals, extremely backward classes and minorities are not deleted or transferred to other booths. For this, our booth-level agents will have to go house to house," he said.

He called on party members to start working in states that will go to polls in 2027.

Kharge also condemned the attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, and said that the entire nation is concerned over it.

He added that the attacks on Christmas Day celebrations by "organisations linked to the BJP and RSS" have disturbed communal harmony and tainted India's image globally.

The CWC meeting, held for the first time since the Mahagathbandhan's defeat in Bihar assembly polls, is being attended by top party leaders including former party president Sonia Gandhi, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy and party general secretary K C Venugopal, among others. Party leader Shashi Tharoor was also present at the meeting.

Ahead of the meeting, the top party leaders paid tribute to former prime minister Manmohan Singh. They also observed two-minute silence to pay respects to late Congress leaders Shivraj Patil and Sriprakash Jaiswal. (PTI)

SIR hearings underway in Bengal, 32 lakh 'unmapped' voters to be covered

KOLKATA, Dec 27: The hearings under the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls were underway in West Bengal on Saturday with people queuing up in front of 3,234 centres across the state, a senior official said.

Around 32 lakh "unmapped" voters, those who are unable to establish linkage with the 2002 electoral roll, will be called for hearings in the first phase, he said.

Altogether 4,500 micro-observers have been engaged for hearings in the first phase, which began at 11 am.

Voters can submit any of 12 recognised documents, including Aadhaar, as proof of identity and address, an Election Commission official said.

However, the Aadhaar card will not be accepted as a standalone document, he said.

Those aged 85 years or above won't have to physically come to the hearing camps as EC officials will undertake the process at their residences, he said.

"The hearing process is being conducted under the supervision of over 4,500 micro-observers, with only authorised officials such as EROs, AROs, BLOs and observers permitted at the centres. People are lining up in large numbers before every camp," said the official at the office of the state Chief Electoral Officer (CEO).

No changes have been permitted once the hearing centres are finalised, as the measures aim to ensure transparency and accuracy in the revision process.

The Election Commission (EC) had, on December 16, published the state's draft electoral rolls following SIR, deleting the names of more than 58 lakh voters on various grounds, including death, migration and non-submission of enumeration forms. (PTI)

PM single-handedly destroyed MGNREGA, carried out devastating attack on states: Rahul Gandhi

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Saturday accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of "single-handedly destroying" MGNREGA without consulting his Cabinet or the states and without studying the matter, terming it an attack on the democratic structure that will ruin the rural economy.

Addressing a press conference after the crucial CWC meeting, he targeted the BJP-led NDA government over the VB-G RAM G Act, alleging that the PM carried out a devastating attack on states and the poor, "much like demonetisation".

He said the Congress has vowed that it would resist the government's action and expressed confidence that the entire opposition would be aligned with it.

"The prime minister single-handedly destroyed MGNREGA without asking his Cabinet, and without studying the matter," the former Congress chief said.

"We are going to resist it, we are going to fight it, and I am confident that the entire opposition will stand united against this action," he said, referring to the Congress' "MGNREGA Bachao Abhiyan" that it plans to launch nationwide on January 5.

In a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi later said, "There is only one purpose behind the end of MGNREGA -- to erase the right to employment for the poor, to steal economic and political power from the states, and to hand over that money to billionaire friends."

"The entire country will bear the cost of the whims of the 'lone ranger' Prime Minister. Jobs will end, and the rural economy will collapse. When villages weaken, the country will weaken," he also said.

Claiming that the UPA-era MGNREGA was not just a work programme, but a development and conceptual framework appreciated around the world, Gandhi claimed that its repeal was an attack on a rights-based approach and on the country's federal structure.

"It is a devastating attack on states and the poor people, carried out by the prime minister single-handedly, much like demonetisation. The PM single-handedly destroyed MGNREGA without asking his Cabinet, without studying the matter," he said at the press conference.

"The MGNREGA, apart from being a rights-based programme, also strengthened our panchayats. It allowed political action in the panchayats, it injected money into the panchayats, and it allowed the decision-making power at the panchayat level," Gandhi explained. (PTI)

RSP leader questions CPI(M)'s AI claim, seeks answers on gold loss case

KOLLAM (KERALA), Dec 27: Commenting on CPI(M)'s claim that a photograph depicting Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan with Sabarimala gold loss case accused Unnikrishnan Potty, was AI-generated, RSP leader Shibu Baby John on Saturday alleged that the ruling Marxist party leaders lacked knowledge of artificial intelligence (AI).

The Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) is part of the opposition UDF.

He was responding to reporters after sharing on social media a photograph showing Sabarimala gold loss case accused Unnikrishnan Potty seated along with former Devaswom Minister and CPI(M) leader Kadakampally Surendran.

When asked about the CPI(M)'s

claim that the photograph of the Chief Minister with Potty was AI-generated, John said CPI(M) leaders had no understanding of AI.

"These problems arise when a person with no knowledge of AI is appointed as party secretary. They have only heard about AI from somewhere. We don't know in which era they are living," he said. He said there were technologies available today to detect AI-generated images.

"Whatever it is, the clarification issued by the Chief Minister's Office has confirmed that such an event actually took place," he said, referring to the photograph of Potty attending a key-handover ceremony that was also attended by the chief minister.

John said the chief minister must

clarify who invited Potty to the event.

"What was the significance of that event, where only a single ambulance was donated to the police? How did Potty also attend the event? These questions must be answered first," he said.

He alleged that instead of giving answers, cases were being registered against those who raised questions.

John said he did not believe the gold loss at Sabarimala could have occurred without the political leadership's knowledge.

"Would a CPI(M) leader dare to commit such an act when Pinarayi Vijayan is governing? We also want to know whether Potty donated funds for the Global Ayyappa Summit organised by the

Travancore Devaswom Board," he said.

He ruled out any controversy over RSP MP M K Premachandran attending a tea party hosted by the Lok Sabha Speaker.

"We are proud that the prime minister said Premachandran is a parliamentarian who raises issues in Parliament after thorough study. If Pinarayi Vijayan's meeting with Narendra Modi and Amit Shah is seen as normal, then criticising Premachandran only reflects political poverty," he said.

Clarifying the photograph he posted on the social media page, in which Potty and Kadakampally Surendran are seen seated together with a police officer, John said it appeared to have been taken at the Bengaluru airport. (PTI)

SC quashes conviction in rape case, says it had 'sixth sense' that parties can be brought together

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: The Supreme Court has quashed the conviction of a man in a rape case, noting the complainant and the convict have married each other and observed that the consensual relationship between the parties was given a criminal colour owing to a misunderstanding.

A bench of Justices B V Nagarathna and Satish Chandra Sharma said that when the matter came up before the top court, after considering the facts of the case, "we had a sixth sense that the appellant and the respondent prosecutrix could be brought together once again if they decided to marry each other".

It noted the parties had married each other in July this year and had been residing together since then.

"This is one of those rare cases where, on the intervention of this court, the appellant herein, who had applied to seek suspension of his sentence, was ultimately benefited by quashing of his conviction as well as the sentence," the bench said in its December 5 verdict.

The top court delivered its verdict on an appeal by the man challenging an April 2024 Madhya

Pradesh High Court order rejecting his application seeking suspension of the sentence. A trial court had convicted the man in the case and sentenced him to rigorous imprisonment for 10 years along with a ₹ 55,000 fine.

According to the top court bench, it had interacted with the appellant and the woman in the presence of their parents and was informed that they were willing to marry each other. It had granted interim bail to the appellant, and the marriage between the parties took place in July, and their parents are happy with this development.

"Consequently, we have invoked our powers under Article 142 of the Constitution of India to do complete justice in the matter by quashing the complaint as well as the conviction and sentence passed against the appellant herein," said the bench of Justices Nagarathna and Sharma.

It said, "We think that owing to a misunderstanding, the consensual relationship between the parties was given a criminal colour and converted into an offence of false promise of marriage, whereas the parties, in fact, intended to marry each other." (PTI)



Pitroda inadvertently revealed Cong part of anti-India global alliance: BJP on Rahul's Germany visit



NEW DELHI, Dec 27: The BJP on Saturday alleged that Sam Pitroda has "inadvertently" exposed the real face of the Congress by "revealing" that it is part of an "anti-India" global alliance and Rahul Gandhi often visits abroad to participate in their events, hoping his party would return to power at the Centre with their support.

Referring to Pitroda's remarks in his latest interview with a news channel, BJP national spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi alleged that the Congress overseas department chairperson revealed that the party holds an "official position" in the Global Progressive Alliance (GPA) with Gandhi being part of its presidency.

"Rahul Gandhi's traditional family advisor and architect of his mindset and psychology, Sam Pitroda, in an interview yesterday, inadvertently exposed the real face of the Congress. He said the Congress is a part of the Global Progressive Alliance and Rahul Gandhi had recently visited Germany to take part in its meeting," the BJP Rajya Sabha MP told a press conference at the BJP headquarters here.

Trivedi alleged that GPA is associated with a network of organisations which are engaged in setting "anti-India narratives", and demanded that the Congress must explain its "role" in such a grouping.

"Rahul Gandhi has started day-dreaming of gaining power with the support of anti-India forces since he is witnessing all such possibilities ending with the Congress," he said, referring to the Congress leader's meeting with Berlin-based Hertie school president and professor Cornelia Woll during his recent visit to Germany.

Woll is one of the trustees of the Central European University, funded by US-based billionaire investor George Soros's Open Society Foundation, he alleged.

"At the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in January 2020, George Soros, while signalling out the name of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, had said that he had kept one billion dollars to re-establish civil society in the world and eliminate nationalist forces," Trivedi added.

Noting that Pitroda in his interview also stated that GPA is an alliance of 110 countries' democracy, the BJP leader said other than the "western world", only India, New Zealand, Australia and Japan in the east are "consistent vibrant democracies".

"I want a clear answer from the Congress. Which are these 110 countries which, in the disguise of democratic nations, try to damage India, the cradle of democracy in the world?" he posed. (PTI)

Over-cautionary: Manufacturer on Australia's advisory against its rabies vaccine

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Days after Australia issued an advisory against counterfeit rabies vaccine in India, a public sector manufacturer of the vaccine 'Abhayrab' clarified that the concern revolves around a specific batch identified in January 2025, and did not merit a blanket warning against it.

The vaccine manufacturer, the Indian Immunologicals Limited (IIL), said the advisory in its present form has the potential to create anxiety and mistrust among the public and healthcare practitioners. It asked the Australian government to consider reviewing its advisory.

Around a week ago, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) said Australian travellers who have been administered the anti-rabies vaccine Abhayrab in India after November 1, 2023, should consider the vaccination invalid and initiate a new course of vaccination.

The IIL has written to ATAGI, strongly refuting the "over-cautionary and misplaced reference" to a batch of vaccine manufactured in March 2024, and said it had proactively identified a packaging anomaly in one specific batch in January 2025, notified Indian regulators and law enforcement agencies, lodged a formal complaint, and worked closely with authorities to ensure swift action.

"The counterfeiting incident that has been mentioned involves Abhayrab, Batch No. KA24014 (manufacturing date: March 2024; expiry date: February 2027) was identified by us in early January 2025. This represents the first such incident in IIL's vaccine history," said the letter sent on December 25.

It further said that the Drugs Control Department, Government of NCT of Delhi, issued an advisory/notification on March 23, 2025, which was specific to Batch

No. KA24014.

This advisory was publicly available and was subsequently referenced by your office when issuing guidance for Australian travellers visiting India, the IIL pointed out in the letter.

"We would like to inform you that Abhayrab, Batch No. KA24014, manufactured by us, was distributed across various regions of India through our authorised distribution channels, and no market complaints were reported in relation to this batch.

"This goes on to affirm the quality and efficacy of our vaccine, when procured from our authorised channels. There is no instance of any other counterfeit batch in the market beyond Batch No. KA24014," the IIL stressed.

It represented an "isolated incident", and the "counterfeit batch is no longer available on the shelves", the vaccine manufacturer has clarified. (PTI)

Railways eye 2026 for 'Kavach' on Mumbai-Delhi-Kolkata route after missing 2nd deadline

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Having missed the second deadline of December 2025, Railways is now hopeful of operationalising the automatic train protection system, Kavach, on routes connecting the national capital with Mumbai and Howrah anytime in 2026 with steady progress and an aggressive approach, officials said.

Kavach is an indigenously developed Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system, which is a highly technology-intensive system. It helps loco pilots in running trains within specified speed limits by the automatic application of brakes in case they fail to do so.

According to officials, 25 per cent work on these routes has been commissioned and is in ready-to-use condition. On the remaining 75 per cent of routes, major components have already been installed, they added.

"We are doing our level best to operationalise Kavach on the Mumbai-Delhi and Delhi-Kolkata route, hoping that it will be achieved in 2026," officials said.

The Railway Ministry on August 7, 2024, said that Kavach work would be completed on the said route by March 2025. It announced the extension of the deadline from March to December 2025 on February 1, 2025, in a budget document titled 'Railways estimates for Revised Estimates 2024-25 and Budget Estimates 2025-26'.

Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw provided an update on the progress of Kavach installation on December 17 in the Lok Sabha when the Congress MP Mallu Ravi asked the specific reasons for the revised



deadline of December 2025 for the installation of 'Kavach' 4.0 on the high-density Delhi-Mumbai and Delhi-Kolkata routes and the percentage of this work completed as of November 1, 2025.

"After extensive and elaborate trials, Kavach Version 4.0 has been successfully commissioned on 738 Route km on Palwal-Mathura-Nagda section (633 Rkm) on Delhi-Mumbai route and Howrah-Bardhaman section (105 Rkm) on Delhi-Howrah route," Vaishnaw said.

He added, "Kavach implementation has been taken up in balance sections of Delhi-Mumbai and Delhi-Howrah corridors."

Updating the Lower House on the progress of Kavach components on the high-

density routes, including Delhi-Mumbai and Delhi-Howrah corridors, the minister said that Optical Fibre Cable has been laid on 7,129 km along with the installation of 800 telecom towers. He added that other Kavach components, such as Station Kavach, have been installed on 860 stations, track-side equipment on 5,672 route km and Loco Kavach on 4,154 locomotives.

Experts said that with a significant increase in train operations over the years, loco pilots need technical aids to minimise the risk of human error.

The first field trials of Kavach on the passenger trains were started in February 2016, and in July 2020, it was adopted as the National ATP system.

The Ministry claimed that it conducted a trial of the Kavach 3.2 version on the 1,465 route on South Central Railway and used the experience to launch the 4.0 version on July 16, 2024. "Kavach version 4.0 covers all the major features required for the diverse railway network. This is a significant milestone in safety for Indian Railways. Within a short period, IR has developed, tested and started deploying the Automatic Train Protection System," Vaishnaw said in its reply in the Lok Sabha.

He added that track-side Kavach implementation work has been taken up on 15,512 route km covering all Golden Quadrilateral (GQ), Golden Diagonal (GD), and High Density Network (HDN) and identified sections of Indian Railways.

He also stated that bids have been invited for equipping another 9,069 locomotives with Kavach version 4.0, as it has been progressively done in a phased manner in locomotives. Highlighting the challenges, officials said that initially, there were only three companies which were approved to install Kavach on the Indian Railways network, but now many new companies are in the process of getting approval.

"The number of companies approved to install Kavach is now over five, and we are hoping that in 2026 it may cross 20. Indian Railways needs more than 50 original equipment manufacturers to expedite the installation process, as the broad-gauge network is 78,000 km long and will continue to expand with new areas being added to the rail network," officials said. (PTI)

Vajpayee's legacy continues to inspire politicians to ensure good governance: Nagaland minister



IMPHAL, Dec 27: Nagaland Tourism Minister Temjen Imna Along on Saturday said the legacy of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee continues to inspire politicians to ensure good governance.

Along attended the Atal Smriti Sammelan organised by BJP's Manipur unit at its headquarters in Imphal and met with several legislators and party functionaries in the state.

In a post on X, the Nagaland

minister said, "Glad to attend the Atal Smriti Sammelan organised by BJP Manipur Pradesh at Thambal Sanglen, remembering the enduring vision, values, and statesmanship of Bharat Ratna Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji. His legacy continues to inspire our commitment to nation-first governance."

Speaking after the meeting with Along, former Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh said, "Had a friendly and mean-

ingful interaction, sharing thoughts on our common culture, people and the unique strength of the Northeast."

Singh also said the contribution of Vajpayee "to nation-building, infrastructure development and democratic governance has left an indelible mark on India's history".

"Today, we reaffirm our commitment to uphold the values he stood for and to work tirelessly for the welfare of the people," the ex-chief minister said. (PTI)

Veer Bal Diwas observed across Capital Complex



HT Correspondent
NAHARLAGUN, Dec 27: Veer Bal Diwas was solemnly observed in a befitting manner across the Capital Complex with a series of programmes organised to honour the supreme sacrifice and martyrdom of the Sahibzadas of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The main observance was held at the Naharlagun Gurdwara, where several religious, cultural and educational activities marked the day.

The programme began with a spiritually uplifting Prabhat Pheri, followed by Ardas and prayers. A number of meaningful activities, including a seminar, quiz, painting

and drawing competitions were organised by different Morcha Heads to engage and inspire participants. The observance concluded with Guru Ka Langar, fostering a spirit of unity and seva, along with the screening of an animated movie depicting the inspiring story of the Sahibzadas.

Minister for Law & Justice and Youth Affairs Kento Jini attended the programme and was accompanied by SOBs, corporators, Morcha Heads, ZPMs, senior leaders, IMC corporator and dedicated BJP karyakartas. The dignitaries took part in various programmes held at different locations across the Cap-

ital Complex. As part of the observance, a procession was held along the main thoroughfares of Naharlagun township. In the afternoon, a Veer Bal Diwas drawing and painting competition was organised at G-Sector Government Secondary School, Naharlagun by the State BJP Mahila Morcha.

BJP state vice president Higam Loye, BJP secretary Joram Tat and several other dignitaries attended the event and witnessed the painting competition among the student community. Around 65 students participated in both senior and junior categories and prizes were distributed on the occasion.

8 militants arrested in Manipur

IMPHAL, Dec 27: Security forces arrested eight active cadres, belonging to several factions of the banned Kangleipak Communist Party in Manipur's Imphal East and Imphal West districts, police said on Saturday. Four members of the proscribed KCP (People's War Group) were apprehended from Andro Leitanpekpham area in Imphal East district on Thursday, a senior officer said.

"One .32 pistol along with one magazine, three .32 live rounds and two radio sets were recovered from their possession," he said.

Three active cadres of the outlawed KCP (Taibanganba) were arrested from Langol Game village Zone-II area in

Imphal West district, he said. They were temporarily residing at Langol Game village relief camp, the officer said.

One cadre of the banned KCP (Ibungo Ngangom) was apprehended from a farmhouse at Langol in Imphal West district, he said. Search operations have been conducted in Manipur since ethnic violence broke out two years ago. More than 260 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in ethnic strife between Meiteis and Kuki-Zo groups since May 2023.

The Centre had, on February 13, imposed the President's rule in the state after Chief Minister N Biren Singh resigned. (PTI)

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Leaders urge people to safeguard traditional values at Langri Nyiki Sii Donyi Yullo festival in Banderdewa

Bagang, Tatu call for unity to protect indigenous culture



HT Correspondent
BANDERDEWA, Dec 27: Arunachal Pradesh Biodiversity Board (APBB) Chairman Hawa Bagang and businessman-cum-social worker Ha Tatu have appealed to the indigenous people of the state to join hands

for the protection, promotion and preservation of traditional culture and identity of tribal communities.

The appeal was made during the celebration of the 12th Langri Nyiki Sii Donyi Yullo festival at Banderdewa, where Hawa Bagang at-

tended as the chief guest and Ha Tatu as the guest of honour. Addressing the gathering, both leaders motivated the people and highlighted the need for unity among indigenous communities to safeguard their rich cultural heritage, which forms the core identity of the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh.

Chief guest Hawa Bagang said that society must be led towards a better cause, particularly for the protection of traditional values and cultural heritage. He appreciated the Nyubus and priest associations and organisations for coming together to celebrate the 12th edition of the festival. Emphasising the importance of strengthening the priesthood system, he urged the gathering to work collectively for the promotion of the indigenous movement in the state.

Bagang assured full support in pursuing issues raised by united organisations working for the promotion of indigenous culture and traditions in Arunachal Pradesh. He stated that the present government would naturally support initiatives aimed at the promotion, protection and preservation of indigenous culture and tra-

Govt orders re-verification of Lada-Sarli highway land compensation

ANYA calls off proposed bandh, seeks inclusion in re-verification team

HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, Dec 27: Following the state government's order for re-verification of land compensation under the Lada-Sarli Arunachal Frontier Highway (Package I-V), the All Nyishi Youth Association (ANYA) on Friday called off its proposed bandh, which was to be launched after the expiry of a 15-day ultimatum.

Welcoming the government's decision, ANYA president Jamru Ruja, while addressing a press conference at the Arunachal Press Club (APC), said that the re-verification process must be completed in a time-bound manner to ensure transparency and justice to genuine land-affected families.

Reiterating its demands, ANYA sought inclusion of one of its members in the re-verification committee. The association also demanded that all officers and brokers found guilty by the initial fact-finding committee be punished and that money collected through fraudulent means be recovered.

The association further called for early disbursement of compensation to genuine land-affected families, publication of the beneficiary list and immediate handing over of the project to the executing agency to ensure timely completion of the highway.



At the same time, ANYA appealed to all affected families to extend full cooperation to the re-verification committee so that the process remains transparent and credible. Reaffirming its stand against corruption, the association urged the public not to indulge in any manipulation or malpractice related to land compensation.

ANYA, however, cautioned that it would launch intensified democratic movements if any foul play is detected during the re-verification process, without any prior intimation or ultimatum.

Informing that the issue of alleged corruption in land compensation was initially raised by a social activist and the ANYA East

Kameng unit with support from NGOs and the public, the association said these efforts led to the present corrective steps. ANYA also expressed gratitude to the public for their continued support and reaffirmed its commitment to work peacefully, constructively and lawfully for the welfare of the community.

Khandu, Mein pay tribute to Guru Gobind Singh on 'Parkash Utsav'

ITANAGAR, Dec 27: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu and his deputy Chowna Mein on Saturday paid tribute to Sri Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru on the auspicious occasion of 'Parkash Utsav', remembering him as a "timeless symbol of courage, compassion and supreme sacrifice".

Describing the Sikh Guru as a towering figure in human history, Khandu said his life continues to shine as a guiding light for humanity.

In a post on X, the CM said, "On the sacred occasion of the Parkash Utsav of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, we offer our deepest shradha (reverence) and homage."

The 'Parkash Utsav' of Sri Guru Gobind Singh is observed with deep devotion across the country, commemorating the birth anniversary of the tenth Sikh Guru.

A symbol of "bravery, compassion and supreme sacrifice", his teachings urge the

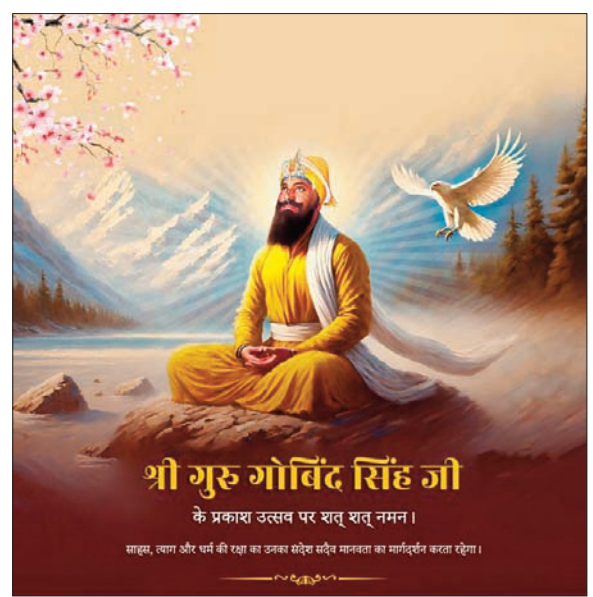
people to uphold truth, justice and righteousness and to defend the dignity of every individual, Khandu said.

He added that the "timeless vision of Sri Guru Gobind Singh inspires generations to walk the path of service, courage and selfless commitment to society".

Mein also paid homage to the revered Guru, calling him a "visionary saint-warrior" whose life embodied unmatched courage and compassion.

"He showed humanity the true meaning of standing for truth, justice and righteousness, even in the face of adversity," the deputy CM said in a social media post.

Highlighting the relevance of the Guru's teachings in present times, Mein said that the eternal message of protecting human dignity and serving society selflessly continues to guide and inspire people to walk the path of bravery, unity and seva (service). (PTI)



Mass edu movement in Tripura helped Left Front form govt: CPI (M) leader

AGARTALA, Dec 27: CPI(M) leader Jitendra Chaudhury on Saturday said the mass education movement in Tripura has played a key role in the formation of the Left Front government in the state and reshaped the socio-educational-cultural space.

Speaking at the observance of 'Jana Shiksha Andolan' here, the party's state secretary said the main objective of the movement was to set up primary schools in rural areas where "education remained neglected during princely rule spanning over 1,400 years".

"The eleven youths led by Dasharath Dev, Nripen Chakraborty and Sudhanya Debbarma had formed Jana Shiksha Andolan in 1948 and established 400 schools, most of them in tribal areas. Over the next few years, 'Jana Shiksha Andolan' gained pace and boosted the Communist movement that led to the formation of the Left Front government. It has also transformed the state's socio-cultural space, politics and education", he said.

The Left formed a government in the northeastern state for the first time in 1978.

He accused the Manikya dynasty of depriving the Tiprasa (tribal) people of basic education.

"There was no discontent between tribals and non-tribals on education till 70's. Nowadays, the Tipra Motha has been trying to change the education system by introducing the Roman script for the language (Kokborok)", he said.

Chaudhury also criticised the way the Tipra Motha Party has introduced English medium in schools run by the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC).

"No teacher has been recruited in these schools. Instead of opening new schools many faced closure. Scope for education is shrinking in the tribal council areas," he claimed.

The Leader of Opposition also criticised the BJP for "injecting Hindutva ideology in the name of National Education Policy (NEP)". (PTI)

E-AUCTION FOR THE CONTRACT OF LEASING OF SLRS AND VP'S

E-Auction for the contract of leasing of SLRs and VP's for 3 years in trains originating from Lumding Division. **Description:** Seq No. AA/1 to AA/25: Parcel Space in SLR Coach (Single Compartment) and Seq No. AB/1 to AB/5: Parcel Space in Parcel Van. **Auction Start Date & Time (All Lots) :** 11:00 hrs. on 12-01-2026. **Auction Close Date & Time :** 16:20 hrs. on 12-01-2026. **Rate Unit:** Seq No. AA/1 to AA/25: Per Trip Licensing Fee and Seq No. AB/1 to AB/5: Per Round Trip (Two Way).

Auction Catalogue No.: Lease-LMG-60-25

Seq No.	Lot No./Category	Trips/Days
AA/1	55608-SLR-F1-GHY-MNDP-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	314
AA/2	55687-SLR-F1-DLCR-SCL-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	783
AA/3	55620-SLR-F1-GHY-MNDP-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/4	55688-SLR-F1-SCL-DLCR-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	783
AA/5	15655-SLR-F1-KYQ-SVDK-25-1 (Parcel-SLR)	156
AA/6	55601-SLR-F1-GHY-LMG-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	468
AA/7	55804-SLR-F1-GHY-NBQ-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/8	55661-SLR-F1-MSSN-SCL-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	940
AA/9	55665-SLR-F1-SCL-VNGP-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/10	55689-SLR-F1-DLCR-BPB-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	783
AA/11	55690-SLR-F1-BPB-DLCR-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	783
AA/12	55676-SLR-F1-DMR-AGTL-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/13	55662-SLR-F1-SCL-MSSN-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	940
AA/14	55675-SLR-F1-AGTL-DMR-25-3 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/15	55666-SLR-F1-VNGP-SCL-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/16	55685-SLR-F1-MSSN-SCL-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	940
AA/17	55606-SLR-F1-SKHV-GHY-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	313
AA/18	55604-SLR-F1-MBO-GHY-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/19	55605-SLR-F1-GHY-SKHV-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	314
AA/20	55678-SLR-F1-DMR-SCL-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	313
AA/21	55686-SLR-F1-SCL-MSSN-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	940
AA/22	55602-SLR-F1-LMG-GHY-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	469
AA/23	55802-SLR-F1-GHY-NBQ-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/24	55810-SLR-F1-GHY-NBQ-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AA/25	55603-SLR-F1-GHY-MBO-25-2 (Parcel-SLR)	1096
AB/1	19616-19615-VP-1-KYQ-UDZ-25-1 (Parcel-Parcel Van)	157
AB/2	15662-15661-VP-1-KYQ-RNC-25-1 (Parcel-Parcel Van)	157
AB/3	15603-15604-VP-1-GHY-LEDO-25-1 (Parcel-Parcel Van)	1096
AB/4	15640-15639-VP-1-KYQ-PURI-25-1 (Parcel-Parcel Van)	156
AB/5	15634-15633-VP-1-GHY-BKN-25-1 (Parcel-Parcel Van)	156

Prospective bidders are requested to visit e-Auction leasing Module of IREPS website www.ireps.gov.in.

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Erigaisi, Gukesh in joint lead with Carlsen after five rounds of FIDE World Rapid Championships



DOHA, Dec 27: Reigning classical world champion D Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi and world No.1 Magnus Carlsen were among the leaders after the first five rounds on the opening day of the FIDE World Rapid Championships here on Thursday.

The trio shared the top spot on 4.5 points alongside Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Vladislav Artemiev.

Carlsen was in great form on day one winning the four games easily but he was held to a draw in the fifth and final round by Erigaisi late on Friday as both ended up on 4.5 points.

In the Queen's Gambit Declined, the Norwegian and the young Indian GM went for a line which quickly transitioned into an equal queen and rook endgame. Carlsen did push hard for victory but eventually reached a rook ending where he had two extra "f" and "h" pawns.

This theoretically drawn position requires precision from the weaker side which Erigaisi demonstrated, denying Carlsen the perfect score on the opening day. After an unimpressive showing in the Global Chess League in Mumbai recently, Gukesh had a great run after starting with a draw in round one. He then went on to notch up four wins to join the leaders.

Defending World Rapid champion, 18-year-old Volodar Murzin of Russia had a tough opening day and finished on just two points. He suffered his first setback as early as round two at the hands of his compatriot Rudik Makarian. He went on to lose two more games before making a comeback in round five. With 2/5, his chances of retaining the crown won in New York in 2024 appear slim.

Another slow starter was R Praggnanandhaa. The young GM, who recently secured a place in next year's Candidates tournament, won his first-round game, but then made two draws. In

round four, he suffered a loss as Black to more than 150 points lower-rated Levan Pantsulaia, ending the day on a disappointing note.

Vasyl Ivanchuk, who won the World Rapid in Doha in 2016, is also on three points, drawing four games after his first-round victory.

In the women's rapid section, Zhu Jiner holds the sole lead after winning all four of her games on Friday.

The Chinese GM dominated from the outset, securing strong positions in every encounter, including against seasoned opponents such as Armenian Grandmaster Elina Danielian and Georgia's Nana Dzagnidze. In Round 5, she will face Aleksandra Goryachkina, the former Women's World Championship challenger.

As many as seven players are trailing Zhu by half a point. Leading the chase is Nino Batsiashvili. Joining her are two former Women's World Champions Mariya Muzychuk and Antoaneta Stefanova, former women's challenger Aleksandra Goryachkina, India's D. Harika Dronavalli, Song Yuxin (who stunned the field with her run at the Women's Grand Swiss in Samarkand) and Sara Khadem.

Former Women's world champion Tan Zhongyi of China suffered a late disappointment after being in a winning position. In round three, she had a winning position against Women's Grand Swiss champion R. Vaishali, the elder sister of Praggnanandhaa.

However, in time trouble, Tan blundered, overlooking a back-rank checkmate -- a rare oversight at this level.

Defending Women's Rapid-Champion Koneru Humpy also sits on three points, with two wins and two draws.

Meanwhile, Women's World champion in classical chess, Ju Wenjun, ended the day on 3 points as well. (PTI)

Ranchi Royals to bank on home support in Season 2 of Women's HLL

RANCHI, Dec 27: Ranchi Royals will look to bank on the home support to dominate the Women's Hockey India League, while JSW Soorma will have the trophy on their minds after a close slip last season when the four-team competition begins here on Sunday. The home team is coming into the tournament following some turbulence last season when the inaugural edition winners Odisha Warriors (women's team) became Ranchi Royals after the former withdrew post Season 1. The new Ranchi Royals franchise took over their spot, retaining some key players and the core squad to represent Jharkhand in Season 2, marking a new identity for the team.

The tournament, to be played exclusively at the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Astro Turf Hockey Stadium here, will follow a double round-robin format, with each team facing the others twice in the league phase, following which the top-two sides will qualify for the final on January 10. (PTI)

Did BCCI informally look at Gambhir's red ball replacement after South Africa whitewash?

JAIPUR, Dec 27: Gautam Gambhir's record as India's white ball coach has been pretty impressive with an ICC and ACC trophy in each of the two formats but with 10 Test defeats against SENA countries, the same cannot be said when it comes to Test cricket.

It is understood that right after India's abject surrender against South Africa in the two-Test series at home last month, someone who matters in the cricket board had once again informally approached VVS Laxman to check if he would be interested in coaching the red ball team.

However, it is learnt that the legendary batter of yesteryears is happy being the 'Head of Cricket' at the Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru.

While Gambhir's contract with BCCI runs until the end of the 2027 ODI World Cup, there is every possibility that it could be revisited, depending upon India's performance in the T20 World Cup which begins in five weeks' time.

It is understood that in the BCCI corridors, the jury is still out on whether Gambhir is the right person to remain at helm of the red ball team for remaining nine Tests of the World Test Championship 2025-27 cycle.



Having drawn 2-2 in a five-Test away series in England, India have a couple of overseas assignments comprising two Tests each against Sri Lanka in August 2026, and a tour of New Zealand in October, before hosting Australia for a five-Test affair in January-February 2027.

"Gambhir does have (a) strong backing within the power corridors of Indian cricket

and obviously, if India retain the T20 World Cup or at least reach the final, he would be seamlessly continuing with his assignment. However, it would be interesting if Gambhir continues in Tests too," a BCCI source told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

"His advantage being (that there) aren't too many alternate options in red ball format since VVS Laxman isn't interested in

England ends 18-match winless streak in Australia with 4-wicket victory in the 4th Ashes test - (A)

MELBOURNE, Dec 27: England ended an 18-match winless streak in Australia and beat the home side by four wickets in the fourth Ashes test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Saturday.

England lost the first three tests to allow Australia to retain the Ashes in just 11 days of on-field action at Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide.

But England returned the favor by winning the MCG test Saturday inside two days, similar to Australia's opening win at Perth.

It was the first time the same series has had multiple two-day tests in 129 years.

The England winless streak had dated to the 2013-14 Ashes series, which Australia won 5-0. Since England won the 2010-11 Ashes 3-1, England had lost 16 matches and drawn the other two of their 18 tests Down Under over a period of nearly 15 years.

Needing 175 second-innings runs to win and 98 after the tea break, England reached its target at 178-6 to clinch the match and send thousands of its long-suffering but faithful "Barmy Army" fans into frenzied celebration.

"It's obviously been a tough tour up until now," England captain Ben Stokes said. "The way that we did it was fantastic. It showed bravery, we were courageous in the way we operated."

Stokes said a two-day result in a test match was "not ideal."

"Being brutally honest, that's not really what you want," Stokes said. "Boxing Day test match, you don't want a game finishing

That Indian side wasn't great: Cook on England's 2-2 home draw

MELBOURNE, Dec 27: Batting great Alastair Cook said England's 2-2 home series draw against Shubman Gill-led India was against "not a great Indian side", flagging concerns over the team's preparation for the Ashes, in which they are currently trailing 0-3. The five-match series against India ended in a 2-2 draw earlier this year. It was Gill's maiden assignment as Test captain and the young batter finished the series with a prolific 754 runs, including four centuries.

Cook said England's recent results had masked deeper issues, creating an illusion of progress.

"They started off with a bang, Key, McCullum and Stokes. I think McCullum won his first eight out of 10 games or something the first year. Since then it's gone downhill," Cook said on the opening day of the ongoing Boxing Day Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"This year I think their percentage of win is like just above 30 percent so it's a bit of a downward trend.

"...I like Rob Key, I like McCullum, I like how they think but I do think they've, this last little bit, they have taken our eye off the ball for the bigger series."

Citing the five-Test series against India, Cook said, "...they were talking about India, they lost, they drew India and India just got thumped by South Africa. So that Indian side wasn't a great Indian side either."

"So actually it's a reality, it's just hit this England Test team and now they're going to decide how they want to play with what players afterwards." England have lost the first three Tests of the Ashes against Australia, going down by eight wickets in Perth and Brisbane and by 82 runs at Adelaide. (PTI)



in less than two days."

England raced to 70-2 off the first 10 overs in its second innings, losing the wickets of Ben Duckett (34) and Brydon Carse (6). Scott Boland removed Zak Crawley (37) and Jacob Bethell (40), who both made valuable contributions.

Joe Root (15) and Stokes (2) fell cheaply before Jamie Smith and Harry Brook guided the visiting side to a morale-boosting win ahead of the fifth and final test beginning Jan. 4 in Sydney.

"Ten runs has never felt so far away when I got out," Stokes said. "I've been on a cou-

ple of tours before when it has not gone too well, so to end up on the right side of the result after a long period of time is a pretty special feeling."

Earlier Saturday, England bowled out Australia out for 132 in its second innings after lunch on Day 2. On an MCG pitch offering substantial sideways movement for pace bowlers, England successfully chased down a target of 175 to win after 30 wickets had fallen in 4 1-2 sessions.

The dismissal of opener Travis Head (46) was quickly followed by the departures of Usman Khawaja (0) and Alex Carey (4) in

MCG pitch fiasco: It would be 'hell' somewhere else: Stokes; KP, Kartik see selective criticism

MELBOURNE, Dec 27: England captain Ben Stokes on Saturday came down heavily on the overwhelmingly bowler-friendly Melbourne pitch on which 20 wickets fell on Day 1 of the just-concluded Boxing Day Test, saying such a track elsewhere in the world would have invoked a barrage of criticism.

Stokes' one-time team-mate Kevin Pietersen and former India cricketer Dinesh Kartik too joined him in slamming the MCG pitch, and highlighted the selective criticism of Indian decks when spinners get wickets in a heap there.

Stokes said it was not a pitch that suited the Boxing Day Test, even though his side won the match by four wickets.

"Being brutally honest, that's not really what you want. Boxing Day Test match. You don't want a game finishing in less than two days. Not ideal. But you can't change it once you start the game and you've just got to play what's in front of you," Stokes told the media after the match.

Further, Stokes indicated that if such a rain of wickets had happened elsewhere in the world then the critics would have sharpened their knives in a haste.

"But I'm pretty sure if that was somewhere else in the world, there'd be hell on. Not the best thing for games that should be played over five days. But we played a type of cricket that ended up getting the job done," he added.

Asked specifically if he was talking about spin-friendly pitches in Asia, Stokes replied rather tongue-in-cheek, "Your words, not mine." The Australian and England bowlers combined to take 20 wickets here on Friday, while the hosts were bundled out for 132 in their second innings in 34.3 overs in a little over one session on Saturday.

The irony was not lost on Pietersen either.

"India ALWAYS gets hammered when wickets fall like crazy on day 1 of a Test and so I hope that Australia gets the same scrutiny! Fair is fair!" wrote former England skipper Pietersen on X.

The decision to leave 10mm grass on the MCG deck generated massive sideways move-



ment, making batting here a lottery.

In all, 36 wickets tumbled in six sessions at Melbourne as the fourth Test ended inside two days with England winning by four wickets.

Australia stand-in captain Steve Smith said the pitch offered a "little too much".

"(It was a) tricky one... 36 wickets, over two days, probably offered just a little bit too much," he said.

"It's tough as a groundsman, he's always looking for the right sort of balance, I suppose. Last year's wicket was an outstanding one. It went to day five (and the) last session."

"In an ideal world, every wicket does that and it's exciting for everyone, but maybe if you took it (down) from 10(mm) to 8(mm), it would have been a nice challenging wicket, but maybe a little bit more even, I suppose."

"(The) groundsman are always learning and you will probably take something from that, no doubt," he added.

The entire Ashes series so far has seen action only on 13 days out of the total 20 match days.

Earlier, the first Test at Perth too ended inside two days with the Aussies clinching it by eight wickets.

"MCG have produced an ordinary pitch here. Can't believe 2 out of the 4 ashes tests could end in 2 days. For all the hype, 4 ashes tests have happened in just 13 days," voiced Karthik.

the next two overs as Australia slumped from 82-3 to 88-6 in the morning session.

Stokes (3-24) claimed the important wicket of Cameron Green (19) after lunch, caught at second slip, and Brydon Carse sliced through the tail to finish with 4-34.

"They got off to a flyer," Australia skipper Steve Smith said of England's second-innings runs chase. "If we got 50 or 60 more across both innings, we might have been there in the end."

Australia held an overall lead of 46 Friday after scoring 152, running through England for 110 in a dramatic first day.

Josh Tongue, named player of the match, claimed a career-best 5-45 to lead England's bowling attack Friday before Michael Nesar grabbed 4-45 for Australia.

Crickets Australia chief executive Todd Greenberg said Saturday that "short tests are bad for business," and said CA would consider a closer role in pitch preparation in the future.

"Historically we have taken a hands-off approach in all of our wicket preparation and allowed the staff and the conditions and those characteristics to be presented," Greenberg told SEN Radio. "But it's hard not to get more involved when you see the impact on the sport, particularly commercially."

The attendance at the MCG on Saturday was 92,045, the second-highest test crowd in Australia, only behind Friday's opening-day crowd of 94,199. Officials said 90,000 tickets had been sold for the now non-existent third day. (AP)

The observations were based on the heavy criticism Indian spinners and pitches often have to encounter when such things happen in the subcontinent.

To trace an instance, the pundits were up in arms when England failed to counter Indian spinners on turners in Ahmedabad during the 2020-21 series.

The visiting side won the first Test at Chennai, but crumbled against Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel in the next three Tests across Chhapuk and Ahmedabad when pitches offered increased assistance to spinners.

But such outpouring of anger was less visible when pitches were skewed to help pacers Down Under during the ongoing Ashes.

"This pitch is a joke... This is selling the game short... The players / Broadcasters and more importantly the fans... 26 wickets in 98 overs." Former India opener Aakash Chopra was more forthcoming in his views.

"Not a single over of spin in 1.5 days of a Test match. 27 wickets have fallen already. Imagine the meltdown if not a single over of pace was bowled for that long in the subcontinent," wrote Chopra in social media accounts.

In fact, both Australia and England entered the fourth Test without a frontline spinner, and did not even give a chance to part-timers like Travis Head or Will Jacks.

Bad for business: CA
Even Cricket Australia CEO Todd Greenberg admitted that the Melbourne pitch was not a great advertisement for Test cricket, a format that already faces several other challenges.

"As mesmerising and fascinating and enjoyable as it was to watch as a fan, we want Test cricket clearly to go for longer. I didn't sleep well last night, put it that way."

"A simple phrase I'd use is short Tests are bad for business. I can't be much more blunt than that. So I would like to see a slightly broader balance between the bat and the ball."

"I thought yesterday (Day 1) slightly favoured the ball. The batters have some ownership in some of that, it's not all around the pitch, but we've got some challenges," Greenberg told SEN. (PTI)

Patrick Dorgu's first Manchester United goal brings festive cheer after 1-0 win over Newcastle

MANCHESTER, Dec 27: Patrick Dorgu scored his first goal for Manchester United as his team defeated Newcastle 1-0 in a pulsating Premier League match on Friday.

The 21-year-old Dorgu smashed in a left-foot volley from 15 meters midway through the first half to give United its first home win in four Premier League games, and lift the club above Liverpool into fifth place.

But reigning champion Liverpool is at home to bottom club Wolves on Saturday.

"It was a good hit. I didn't know I could do that," a delighted Dorgu said. United was without talismanic captain Bruno Fernandes while several other first-team players were missing due to injury or Africa Cup of Nations duty.

The new-look side also lined up in an unusual back-four formation but it was a match for Newcastle in an even first half most notable for Dorgu's fine strike, his first in 38 appearances in a red jersey.

United was hampered by the half-time withdrawal of Mason Mount due to injury and Newcastle dominated the early moments of the second period. The bulk of the chances fell to Newcastle. Lewis Hall was unfortunate to see a long-range effort hit the bar after 62 minutes and Anthony Gordon missed the target with a good chance after a few moments later.

A late piledriver from Joelinton was also well saved by United goalkeeper Senne Lemmens.

At the other end, Diogo Dalot fired over from close in when he should have done better, but neither side could add to Dorgu's effort and United fans went home happy. (AP)

