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- **Six killed after truck collides with bus in Karnataka**
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DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2025

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## Army conducts flag marches in violence-hit areas

### ● Funerals of two deceased held

# Normalcy returning to KA with no fresh incidents

DIPHU, Dec 25: An uneasy calm prevailed in violence-hit areas of West Karbi Anglong district of Assam with no fresh incident reported even as a massive posse of security personnel kept a tight vigil, officials said on Thursday.

The Karbi and Bihari communities have been at loggerheads in West Karbi Anglong district over allegations of encroachment on Village Grazing Reserve (VGR) and Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR) lands in the tribal belts by the Hindi-speaking people.

"The situation is calm now and there is no report of any violence. Our forces are on the ground and they are patrolling all sensitive areas," a senior official told PTI.

He said a huge number of personnel from Assam Police, Rapid Action Force (RAF), Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and In-



dian Army are on the ground, and monitoring the situation closely.

The official also said that the funerals of the two deceased were held peacefully on Wednesday night as per their respective customs.

the district houses people from Bihari, Bengali and Nepali communities apart from the Karbis.

Another official from the district administration said that despite the situation improving fast, prohibitory orders and mobile data suspension will remain as of now.

"We are constantly reviewing the ground situation. We will inform the public as and when a new decision is taken. Presently, we are seeing people coming out of their homes and trying to return to their normal lives," he added.

Agitators from the Karbi community had been on a hunger strike for 15 days, demanding the eviction of alleged illegal settlers, who mostly hail from Bihar, from the VGR and PGR lands in the two districts - Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong. They went on a rampage on (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

The body of specially abled youth Suresh Dey was recovered from his house-cum-shop that was set ablaze by a Karbi mob, while Athik Timung from the indigenous tribe was killed in police firing.

The worst-hit Kheroni area in

## 18 foreigners trying to enter India illegally nabbed, sent back



GUWAHATI, Dec 25: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has said that 18 foreign nationals have been nabbed in the state for illegally entering the country, and have been sent back.

He, however, did not share details like their ethnicity or where these infiltrators had come from.

"They dream of starving India & taking over Assam & Northeast. Meanwhile, in Assam, we're busy feeding development, driving growth and sending 18 illegals on an all-expense-paid exit tour back to their hell hole," Sarma said in a

post on X on Wednesday night. "Too bad for them: Assam isn't hungry, just vigilant and decisive!" Sarma said.

Assam's Sribhumi, Cachar, Dhubri and South Salmara-Mankachar districts share 267.5-km international border with Bangladesh.

There is an Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Sutarkandi in Sribhumi. Northeast has a total of three ICPs along the India-Bangladesh border, with the other two being at Dawki in Meghalaya and Akhaura in Tripura. (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Vajpayee's ideals continue to guide people: Himanta

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said the vision and ideals of former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee continue to be the guiding beacon of the people.

Vajpayee was born on this day in Gwalior in 1924 and passed away in New Delhi on August 16, 2018. The government observes his birth anniversary as Good Governance Day.

He served the country as prime minister for three terms between 1996 and 2004.

"Shraddheya Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji's life, vision & towering ideals continue to be our guiding beacon as we remain 'Atal' in delivering people-first & accountable governance for all. On his Jayanti, I offer (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Good governance not abstract ideal but daily administrative responsibility: Jitendra Singh

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: Union Minister of State for Personnel Jitendra Singh on Thursday said that good governance is not an abstract ideal but a daily administrative responsibility rooted in transparency, accountability and citizen-centric delivery.

Good governance day holds special significance as the nation commemorates the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who institutionalised the concept of probity in public life and laid the foundations of people-first governance, he said.

Singh said that while the idea of good governance was articulated earlier, it was after 2014 that it began to be implemented in letter and spirit under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, guided by the mantra of "minimum government, maximum governance".

The minister said the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) is launching five major initiatives on this good governance day, aimed at strengthening core governance processes, supporting key stakeholder groups and equipping civil servants for the challenges of a fast-evolving administrative landscape.

The first initiative is a compendium of guidelines on reservation for ex-servicemen in central government, which consolidates all existing instructions into a single, updated and user-friendly reference, according to a Personnel Ministry statement.

Singh said this step reflects the government's commitment to honouring the service of ex-servicemen by ensuring clarity, uniformity and timely (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

every positive achievement to a single family," he said.

The prime minister said his government had made Pt Deendayal Upadhyaya's Antyodaya vision its mission to ensure that government schemes reached all the poor without discrimination. "Before 2014, about 25 crore people were covered under social security schemes, while today this number has increased to 95 crore," he said.

Modi also said the day was not far off when Uttar Pradesh's defence corridor would be known globally for defence manufacturing.

PM Modi was accompanied by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Governor Anandiben Patel, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and other senior leaders.

He was warmly welcomed by people who waved the tricolour and raised slogans in his honour.

The PM said the Rashtra Prerna Sthal symbolises the ideals that have guided India on the path of self-respect, unity and service, and called for collective efforts towards nation-building.

Addressing the gathering, Modi ex-

## Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 in force

### Govt directs dist admins to deport foreigners

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said all districts have been instructed to identify suspected illegal immigrants for immediate deportation to their country of origin.

He said the district commissioners will issue expulsion orders as per the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, and then the police or the BSF will escort the suspected foreigners to the border for sending them out of the country.

"Direct Action, No Compromise. As per provisions of the Illegal Immigrants (Expulsion) Act (sic), we are identifying and issuing expulsion orders against suspected individuals," he said in a post on X.

In September, the state cabinet approved the framing of an SOP under the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 to guide the DCs and senior superintend-

ents of police to expel illegal migrants from Assam.

The move was aimed at tackling alleged illegal immigration from neighbouring countries.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday night, Sarma said that the government has already invoked the Act to identify and deport infiltrators.

"So now, our DCs have been instructed that any person, who they feel is suspicious or declared a foreigner by the tribunal, should immediately be issued an expulsion order. Then the police or the BSF will take action to send them back to Bangladesh," he added.

As per the SOP, if a DC receives such information from the police or any other source that a person is suspected to be an illegal immigrant, the official will direct the person to produce evidence of his citizenship within 10 days.

If the DC finds that the evidence submitted by the suspected illegal

immigrant is not sufficient or satisfactory to prove his citizenship of India, the official will record his opinion identifying the person as an illegal immigrant, consisting of a concise statement of facts and the findings thereof with reasons.

Accordingly, the DC shall pass an expulsion order under Section 2(a) of the Act with the direction to remove the illegal immigrant from Assam by giving 24 hours' time and by the route so specified by him.

In case of those declared foreigner by the Foreigners' Tribunals, the DC will pass an expulsion order since in their case, no identification process is necessary as they may have already exhausted remedies available by approaching the high court or the Supreme Court.

Once a person is identified as an illegal immigrant and has been ordered to remove himself, the DC will refer (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## BJP proud of our govt's opportunity to tear down wall of Art 370: Modi

LUCKNOW, Dec 25: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said the BJP took pride in having the opportunity to "tear down the wall of Article 370" and slammed the Congress' "dynastic politics", accusing it of "one family glorification".

Modi said this after inaugurating the Rashtra Prerna Sthal in Lucknow on the 101st birth anniversary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The Rashtra Prerna Sthal features 65-foot bronze statues of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Pt Deendayal Upadhyaya, and a lotus-shaped museum spread over 98,000 square feet, which Modi later visited.

Addressing a public gathering after the inauguration, Modi said, "The BJP is proud that our government had the opportunity to tear down the wall of Article 370," adding that the legacy of good governance created by the BJP-led NDA government was now being taken to new heights at both the Centre and state levels.

"We must not forget how after Independence, a tendency developed to attrib-

ute every positive achievement to a single family," he said.

The prime minister said his government had made Pt Deendayal Upadhyaya's Antyodaya vision its mission to ensure that government schemes reached all the poor without discrimination. "Before 2014, about 25 crore people were covered under social security schemes, while today this number has increased to 95 crore," he said.

Modi also said the day was not far off when Uttar Pradesh's defence corridor would be known globally for defence manufacturing.

PM Modi was accompanied by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Governor Anandiben Patel, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and other senior leaders.

He was warmly welcomed by people who waved the tricolour and raised slogans in his honour.

The PM said the Rashtra Prerna Sthal symbolises the ideals that have guided India on the path of self-respect, unity and service, and called for collective efforts towards nation-building.

Addressing the gathering, Modi ex-

pressed Christmas greetings to people in India and across the world, saying, "This festival should bring happiness into everyone's lives."

He said December 25 marks the birth anniversaries of Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Bharat Ratna Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya, adding that both leaders "protected India's identity, unity and pride and left an indelible mark on nation-building".

He also paid tributes to Maharaja Bijli Pasi on his birth anniversary.

"I bow in reverence to Mahamana Malaviya ji, Atal ji and Maharaja Bijli Pasi," the prime minister said.

The PM said the newly inaugurated Rashtra Prerna Sthal reflects the ideals guiding India on the path of self-respect, unity and service, and called for collective efforts in nation-building.

Modi also extended Christmas greetings, saying, "This festival should bring happiness into everyone's lives."

He noted that Vajpayee and Malaviya "protected India's identity, unity and pride and left an indelible mark on nation-building," and paid (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Assam govt transfers fourteen bureaucrats in state-wide reshuffle

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: The Assam government has transferred 14 IAS and state services officers with less than six months left for elections in the state.

As per an order issued by the Personnel Department on Wednesday, Kamrup Metropolitan District Commissioner Sumit Sattawan was transferred and posted as District Commissioner of Tinsukia.

Swapneel Paul, the Tinsukia DC, has been posted in Kamrup Metropolitan in place of Sattawan.

Aranyak Saikia, the staff officer to the chief secretary, has been transferred and posted as District Commissioner in Karbi Anglong, while the incumbent DC, Nirala Phangshopi, is posted as Additional Secretary in the Hill Areas Department.

Sivasagar DC Aayush Garg and Cachar DC Mridul Yadav replaced each other. Dhubri DC Dibakar Nath and Bongaigaon DC Nabadeep Pathak also swapped postings.

Masanda Magdalin Pertin, the DC of Kokrajhar and Director of Training at Bodoland Administrative Staff College, has been transferred and posted as Joint Secretary at the Finance Department.

Tamulpur DC Pankaj Chakravarty will assume her role in Kokrajhar, the order said.

Simi Karan, the Joint Secretary of the Environment & Forest and Housing & Urban Affairs Departments, will be the new DC of Tamulpur.

Inspector General of Prisons and Secretary of Home & Political Department, Pubali (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## After 17 years in exile, BNP leader Tarique Rahman returns to Dhaka to rousing welcome

DHAKA, Dec 25: Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) acting chairman Tarique Rahman returned home to a rousing welcome on Thursday after over 17 years in self-exile, a move that is expected to energise his party workers ahead of the February 12 parliamentary elections.

Rahman, the 60-year-old son of ailing former prime minister Khaleda Zia, has emerged as a leading contender for prime ministership in the polls even as the country's Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, has been trying to throw a stiff competition to the BNP in the polls.

The homecoming of the BNP heir apparent comes amid a fresh wave of unrest and political instability gripping Bangladesh following the killing of prominent youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi, who was a prominent face in last year's mass protests that forced the collapse of the Sheikh Hasina government.

Rahman, accompanied by wife Zubaida and daughter Zaima, was received at the Hazrat Shahjalal International airport in Dhaka by BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and other senior party leaders amid tight security.

BNP emerged as the forerunner to capture power in the February polls as former prime minister Hasina's Awami League party has been barred from contesting the election.

Jamaat-e-Islami, the BNP's coalition partner during its 2001-2006 tenure in power, has emerged as its main rival in the upcoming polls after the interim government blocked Awami League's participation under the country's tough Anti-Terrorism Act.

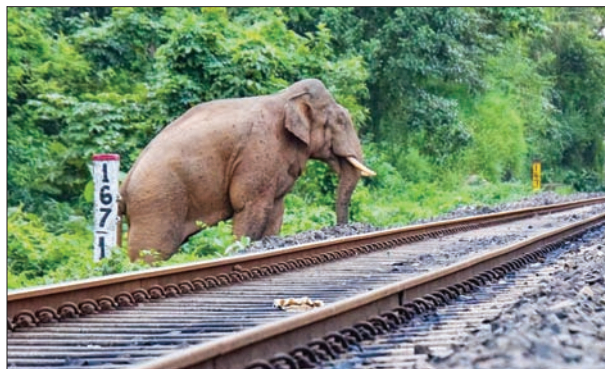
After BNP announced Rahman's plan to return from London, he had said, "like any child, he longs to be near his critically ill mother at her moment of crisis."

Rahman's return to Dhaka also comes at a time Bangladesh-India relations are on a sharp downturn. The BNP leader left the airport in a bulletproof bus. He is set to attend a mass reception with tens of thousands of his supporters waiting to greet him.

Before leaving the airport, Rahman, in a phone conversation, thanked the interim government chief, Muhammad Yunus, for the arrangements made for his security as well as for his homecoming events. "I thank you on behalf (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## AI system helps NFR save over 160 elephants from train hits in 2025

### Early alerts and speed curbs combine to protect elephants on railway tracks



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 25:

The Northeast Frontier Railway has successfully protected the lives of more than 160 elephants from potential train accidents during 2025 through a series of proactive, technol-

ogy-driven safety measures, officials said.

NFR has intensified efforts to prevent elephant dashing incidents by deploying an advanced Intrusion Detection System (IDS), an Artificial Intelligence-based technology

that uses Distributed Acoustic System principles to detect elephant movement near railway tracks.

The system sends real-time alerts to loco pilots and control rooms, enabling timely action to avert accidents.

The IDS has been commissioned across key elephant corridors in Assam and adjoining areas.

It is currently operational in four sensitive sections: the 24-km Kamakhya-Azara-Mirza stretch under Rangiya Division, the 52-km Madarihat-Nagrakata section under Alipurduar Division, the 32-km Habaipur-Lamsakhang-Patharkhola-Lumding stretch under Lumding Division and (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Unnao rape case: CBI to move SC challenging suspension of BJP leader Sengar's life sentence

# Plea filed in SC seeking stay on HC order

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: A plea has been filed in the Supreme Court challenging a Delhi High Court order suspending the jail term of expelled BJP leader Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the 2017 Unnao rape case.

The petition filed by advocates Anjale Patel and Pooja Shilpkar has sought a stay on the high court order.

They contended that the HC passed the order without considering that the trial court observed that Sengar must remain in jail for the rest of his natural life.

The HC has committed a grave error in law as well as on facts in granting bail/suspension of sentence to Sengar despite his serious criminal antecedents and his established involvement in the heinous offences of rape, they said.

"The High Court failed to appreciate the material evidence relied upon by the prosecution which clearly demonstrates the barbarity and brutality of the accused, coupled with his demonstrated



muscle power, financial influence and criminal propensity, as evidenced from the fact that even while the victim's father was under judicial custody, the accused orchestrated and executed victim's father murder to silence the family and frustrate the due course of

justice," the plea said.

On December 23, the HC suspended the jail term of Sengar, who is serving life imprisonment in the Unnao rape case, saying he has already served seven years and five months in prison. Sengar's sentence has been sus-

pending by the high court till the pendency of his appeal challenging his conviction and sentence in the rape case. He has challenged a December 2019 trial court verdict in the case.

He will, however, remain in jail since he is also serving 10 years' imprisonment in the custodial death case of the victim's father and has not been granted bail in that case.

Imposing several conditions, the HC directed Sengar, who kidnapped and raped the survivor when she was a minor, to furnish a personal bond of Rs 15 lakh with three sureties of the like amount.

It also directed him not to come within a 5-km radius of the survivor's residence in Delhi and not to threaten her or her mother. Violation of any of the conditions would lead to the cancellation of bail, the HC said.

The rape case and other connected cases were transferred to Delhi from a trial court in (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

# India-Japan Semiconductor Forum reinforces trusted technology partnership

Policy, industry leaders commit to joint roadmap at SEMICON Japan 2025

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Dec 25:** The India-Japan Semiconductor Forum, held on the sidelines of SEMICON Japan 2025, marked a key milestone in strengthening bilateral cooperation between India and Japan in building resilient, scalable and globally competitive semiconductor value chains.

The forum brought together policymakers, global industry leaders and ecosystem stakeholders, reflecting the growing strategic trust between the two technology-driven economies and its translation into concrete industry participation and long-term collaboration across the semiconductor ecosystem.

Leadership perspectives were shared by Amitesh Kumar Sinha, CEO of the India Semiconductor Mission and Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Hi-demichi Shimizu from Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Koichi Suzuki of Suzuki Motor Corporation, Ajit Manocha, President and CEO of SEMI, and Ashok Chandak, President of



SEMI India and the India Electronics and Semiconductor Association.

Speakers underlined the importance of close policy-industry alignment to develop globally competitive semiconductor capabilities.

Chandak said that combining Japan's manufacturing and process leadership with India's scale, talent base and policy momentum could

position the partnership as a major force in the global semiconductor landscape.

Deliberations focused on semiconductor policies and incentives, human capital development, skilling, academic partnerships, fabrication and advanced packaging, OSAT capabilities, and deeper engagement among industry associations.

Emphasis was placed on joint re-

search and development, technology transfer and clearly defined pathways to scalable manufacturing and design.

The forum saw active participation from leading Japanese companies including Tokyo Electron, Sony Semiconductor Solutions, KIOXIA Group, SCREEN Holdings, Advantest, HORIBA and Dai-fuku, alongside Indian firms such as Kaynes Semicon, Suchi Semicon, SignOff Semiconductors and UHP Technologies.

Participants expressed a shared commitment to convert strategic trust into execution through sustained and practical cooperation.

SEMICON Japan 2025 recorded strong global participation, hosting more than 1,200 exhibitors, over 300 experts and upwards of 125,000 visitors, reaffirming its status as a premier global platform for semiconductor innovation and collaboration.

The discussions reinforced the view that India-Japan semiconductor cooperation is not only timely but strategically significant for the future of the global value chain.

Contd. from Page 1...

## AI system helps

23-km Titabar-Mariani-Nakachari section under Tinsukia Division. These installations together cover 62.7 km of elephant corridors and 131 km of block sections. Officials said work is underway to expand the IDS across additional vulnerable stretches, including 92 km in Alipurduar, 25 km in Katihar, 174 km in Rangia, 110 km in Lumding and 12 km in Tinsukia Division. Once completed, the system will cover all elephant corridors under NFR, spanning 146.4 km with an overall block section length of 413.42 km. Apart from IDS, NFR has implemented other preventive measures such as the 'Plan Bee' system, which uses amplified honeybee sounds near level crossing gates to deter elephants from approaching tracks. Coordination with the Forest Department, night-time speed restrictions in elephant corridors, temporary speed curbs based on sightings, crew sensitisation, cautionary signage and vegetation clearance have also been strengthened. At the national level, Indian Railways has begun expanding the AI-enabled IDS to other parts of the country after its successful pilot on NFR. The expansion will cover an additional 981 route kilometres, taking total coverage to 1,122 route kilometres. Officials noted that since 2017, more than 2,000 elephants have been safely protected while crossing railway tracks across the NFR network.

## Good governance not

delivery of reservation-related benefits, while also reducing ambiguity and errors in implementation across ministries and departments. The second initiative is an AI-powered recruitment rules generator tool, integrated with the Recruitment Rules Formulation, Amendment and Monitoring System (RRFAMS) portal. The minister explained that recruitment rules are the backbone of fair recruitment and career progression, and the new AI-enabled tool will significantly reduce delays and inconsistencies by guiding users through simple questions, suggesting appropriate recruitment methods and automatically generating draft rules in the prescribed format, fully aligned with DoPT guidelines. The third launch is the mobile application for e-HRMS 2.0, available on Android and iOS, which places key human resource services directly in the hands of government employees.

Developed as a core pillar of Mission Karmayogi, e-HRMS 2.0 integrates service records and HR processes such as promotions, transfers, deputations, training and superannuation, he said.

Singh said the mobile app will reduce paperwork, speed up approvals and enhance transparency in personnel management. The fourth set of initiatives relates to new AI-enabled features on the iGOT (integrated government online training) Karmayogi platform.

These include iGOT AI Sarthi for intelligent discovery of relevant learning resources, iGOT AI Tutor for personalised in-course support, the iGOT specialisation programme offering structured learning pathways in critical domains, and an AI-based capacity building plan tool to help ministries and states systematically map roles, competencies and training needs. The fifth initiative is the Karmayogi Digital Learning Lab 2.0, a next-generation facility designed to produce high-quality digital learning content using modern technologies such as augmented reality (AR)/virtual reality (VR), gamification and interactive simulations.

The minister said the upgraded lab will enable faster and wider dissemination of best practices, reforms and critical skills across the civil services, strengthening implementation capacity on the ground.. (PTI)

## After 17 years in

of myself and my family. Specially, my sincere gratitude for the measures taken for my security," Rahman was seen telling Yunus in a video shared by BNP. Rahman is also expected to go to see his octogenarian ailing mother and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, at the Evercare hospital in Dhaka. Zia, a three-time prime minister, has been undergoing treatment at the intensive care unit (ICU) at the hospital. Around 4,000 army personnel, paramilitary Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and police in riot gear and plainclothes were deployed in Dhaka to ensure Rahman's security. "We have enforced an overt and covert security vigil," a senior police official earlier said as supporters queued in long lines on both sides of the street from the airport to the reception site.

Civil aviation authorities disallowed any use of drones near the airport and the Evercare hospital and restricted photography at the reception site. Bangladesh witnessed violent protests after the death of Hadi. His killing has also triggered some fresh strain in India-Bangladesh ties. India on Tuesday sought a thorough probe into Hadi's death. India's call for a detailed probe into the case came as unsubstantiated allegations about an Indian hand in Hadi's death triggered anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh. The relations between India and Bangladesh came under strain after the interim government headed by Muhammad Yunus came to power following the collapse of the Hasina government. India has been expressing concerns over attacks on minorities, especially Hindus, in that country. (PTI)

## BJP proud of

tributes to Maharaja Bijli Pasi. "I bow in reverence to Mahamana Malaviya ji, Atal ji and Maharaja Bijli Pasi," Modi said. He added that the Rashtra Prema Sthal reflects India's path of self-respect, unity and service. Referring to the statues of Mookerjee, Upadhyaya and Vajpayee, he said, "Their statues may be tall but the inspiration we receive from them is even higher." Quoting Vajpayee, Modi said the memorial shows that "every step, every effort must be dedicated to nation-building." He also highlighted that over 30 acres of land, earlier covered with garbage, were reclaimed in three years and congratulated Chief Minister Adityanath and his team for the efforts.

Recalling Mookerjee, Modi said he opposed "two constitutions, two flags and two prime ministers", adding that the abrogation of Article 370 strengthened India's unity. "Today, the Constitution of India is fully applicable in Jammu and Kashmir," he said. On Upadhyaya, Modi said his Antyodaya vision measured progress by the smile of the last person in the queue. "We have expanded Antyodaya through saturation, covering every needy person without discrimination. This is good governance, true social justice and true secularism," he said, noting that crises have benefited from housing, utilities, food and medical schemes. Calling December 25 "a day of good governance", Modi credited Vajpayee with laying the foundation for digital identity, telecom reforms, road connectivity and metro rail projects. He said Vajpayee would have been pleased to see India emerge as the world's second-largest mobile phone manufacturer, with Uttar Pradesh becoming the top mobile manufacturing state.

Aiming at dynasty-driven politics, Modi said several national leaders were ignored or their legacies diluted. He cited the renaming of the Andaman islands where Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose hoisted the tricolour and recalled "attempts to erase the legacy of B R Ambedkar". He alleged that the "Congress royal family" and the Samajwadi Party had done so but said the BJP ensured Ambedkar's legacy was protected.

Modi said Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who united hundreds of princely states, was also undermined after Independence, and claimed it was the BJP that restored his stature through initiatives such as the Statue of Unity and Ekta Nagar. He described dynastic politics as "driven by insecurity" and said it promoted "political untouchability", alleging that Congress and its allies treated the BJP in this manner.

He said the NDA honoured leaders across party lines, noting Bharat Ratna awards to P V Narasimha Rao and Pranab Mukherjee and national honours for Mulayam Singh Yadav and Tarun Gogoi. Modi said the NDA "corrected historical neglect" of former prime ministers through the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya. Referring to UP, Modi said the "double engine government" had transformed the state from being known for poor law and order to development, citing the Ram temple, Kashi Vishwanath Dham and Rashtra Prema Sthal. (PTI)

## Vajpayee's ideals continue

my shradhdhanjali to the great son of Maa Bharati," Sarma said in a series of posts on X. He also visited the state BJP headquarters and offered floral tributes in front of Vajpayee's portrait. "On #AtalSmritiVarsh, we recall the legacy of the great statesman, our Margdarshak, Shradhdheya Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji. At our State HQs in Guwahati, I witnessed a walkthrough exhibition on the life and times of the Bharat Ratna and paid my tributes to him," he said. (PTI)

## 18 foreigners trying

There is another ICP in the region at Darranga in Assam along the India-Bhutan border. Assam Police had earlier said that the state force and BSF would do everything possible to prevent any attempt by non-Indians to enter the country from Bangladesh as per the law after a political turmoil hit the neighbouring nation last year. However, all Indian passport holders would be allowed to return from trouble-torn Bangladesh through the entry points in the state. (PTI)

## Assam govt transfers

Gohain, has been transferred and posted as Darrang DC, while the incumbent Parag Kumar Kakaty will take charge as the new DC in Golaghat. On the other hand, Golaghat DC Pulak Mahanta has been posted as Inspector General of Prisons. Assembly elections in the state will be due in March-April. (PTI)

## Plea filed in

Uttar Pradesh on the directions of the Supreme Court on August 1, 2019. Sengar's appeal against his conviction in the case of the custodial death of the survivor's father is also pending, where he has sought suspension of sentence on the ground that he has already spent a substantial time in jail. Meanwhile, the CBI will challenge the suspension of life sentence and bail to former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar. The decision was taken after studying the orders of a division bench of the Delhi High Court in the Unnao rape case of 2017, a CBI spokesperson said in a statement. It was decided to file an SLP before the Supreme Court at the earliest against the orders of the high court, which granted bail to Sengar after suspending his life sentence, the CBI spokesperson said.

Sengar, however, will remain in jail as he is also serving a 10-year term for the custodial death of the rape survivor's father. (PTI)

## Govt directs dist

the illegal immigrant to the SSP concerned for capturing their biometrics and demographic details on the Foreigners Identification Portal. If the illegal immigrant does not remove himself despite the expulsion order, the DC, as per Section 4 of the Act, shall either keep such illegal immigrant in the 'Holding Centre' or hand him over to the BSF nearest to him for expulsion. Illegal immigrants, if detected near zero line, or within 12 hours from his/her entry in the state, will be pushed back immediately without any further process, according to the Act. (PTI)

## Normalcy returning to

Monday after police took away three agitators from the protest site during the early hours, a move which the administration later claimed was for their hospitalisation. The badly affected Kheroni area in West Karbi Anglong district witnessed massive violence on Tuesday, as one person was killed in police firing and another was burnt alive inside his house, while more than 70 others, including over 60 police personnel, were injured.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday said the demand by the Karbi people to evict alleged Hindi-speaking encroachers from grazing lands cannot be accepted immediately, because of a stay by the Gauhati High Court. An Army column was deployed and it conducted flag marches in violence-hit areas of West Karbi Anglong district in central Assam. A column of the Army usually consists of 60-80 personnel. (PTI)

## Bhilwara Energy signs pact to acquire 76 MW hydro project in Uttarakhand

**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** Diversified LNJ Bhilwara Group on Thursday said it has signed an agreement to acquire a 100 per cent stake in Mandakini Jal Urja, which is constructing a 76 MW hydro project in Uttarakhand, for an undisclosed amount.

The agreement has been signed through a group company, Bhilwara Energy, to acquire the entire equity holding from Statkraft IH Holding AS, LNJ Bhilwara Group said in a statement.

However, the acquisition is "subject to customary conditions precedent", it added.

Upon the completion of the transaction,

Bhilwara Energy will become the sole owner of Mandakini Jal Urja, which is constructing the 76 MW Phata Byung run-of-river hydroelectric project in Rudraprayag district, Uttarakhand, the group said without sharing any financial details of the deal.

Riju Jhunjhunwala, Managing Director, Bhilwara Energy, said, "This acquisition...strengthens our hydropower portfolio and reinforces our long-term approach of investing in dependable, environmentally responsible power infrastructure. We look forward to completing the transaction and accelerating the project to-

wards timely commissioning".

Fernando de Lapuerta, Executive Vice President International at Statkraft, said, "This divestment is aligned with our global strategy to streamline the international portfolio and focus on select core markets. As we exit India, we are confident that Bhilwara Energy...has the capability and long-term vision to take the Phata Byung Hydroelectric Project forward and deliver value from the asset".

New Delhi-headquartered LNJ Bhilwara Group operates in many sectors, including power, renewables, graphite, and textiles. (PTI)

## 'Birla Opus Replay' maps East India's evolving colour choices in 2025

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Dec 25:** Birla Opus Paints, part of the Aditya Birla Group, has unveiled Birla Opus Replay, a first-of-its-kind, usage-led snapshot capturing how Indian consumers chose and experienced colours through 2025, with East India emerging as one of the most expressive regions.

The insights show that homes across eastern states displayed a strong comfort with colour, moving beyond muted tones to embrace midtone-led palettes. These midtones formed the backbone of the region's interiors, while darker shades added depth and character, particularly in West Bengal.

Anchoring this palette was 'Just Woke Up', a pale-yellow shade that emerged as the most popular colour, offering a soft contrast to richer regional preferences. State-wise trends highlighted distinct personalities. Odisha recorded the highest purchase of 'Blue-Eyed Boy', a greenish-blue shade reflecting the state's deep emotional connect with cricket.

Kolkata stood out for its preference for deep greens, blue-greens and rich midtones, while Bhubaneswar leaned towards earthy neutrals balanced with moder-

ate yellow tones.

In Guwahati, consumers gravitated towards greens and cool neutrals, echoing the city's landscape and climate.

Jharkhand showed the widest experimentation across shades, with pinks gaining unexpected popularity, while Bihar saw over 25,000 consumers choosing 'Metaverse', a distinctive pink that ranked among the state's top colours of the year.

Commenting on the initiative, Inderpreet Singh, Head - Marketing, Birla Opus Paints, said the project reflects how colour shapes emotions and everyday living, aligning with the brand's ethos of "Duniya Ko Rang Do".

Srikanth SK, Head - Consumer Experience, added that the data reveals Indian consumers as both consistent and experimental, with similar patterns visible across metros, tier-2 towns and smaller markets.

Through Birla Opus Replay, Birla Opus Paints underlines its focus on understanding colour not merely as a product choice, but as an expression of lifestyle, emotion and intent, capturing how Indian homes balanced familiarity with change over the past year.

## Axis Bank launches digital cash-flow loans for small merchants

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Dec 25:** Axis Bank recently announced the launch of Digital Merchant Cash Advance Loans, an industry-first, cash-flow-based lending solution aimed at improving credit access for micro and small businesses across the country.

The fully digital product offers unsecured loans ranging from ₹2 lakh to ₹20 lakh and is designed primarily for retail merchants and small businesses.

Unlike traditional lending models, eligibility is assessed using cash-flow intelligence and other data parameters instead of conventional financial statements.

Under the new offering, customers are provided Axis Bank current account services as part of the loan journey, ensuring a seamless experience from onboarding to disbursement. The bank said applicants receive an instant credit decision within minutes, with loan amounts disbursed within a few days.

A key feature of the product is its Everyday Instalment (EDI) repayment model, under which repayments are automatically collected through daily instalments linked to actual business cash flows.

## Asian shares are mixed after US stocks drift to more records

HT Bureau

**BANGKOK, Dec 25:** Asian shares were mixed Thursday in thin holiday trading, with most markets in the region and elsewhere closed for Christmas.

In Tokyo, the Nikkei 225 lost less than 0.1% to 50,317.43. It has gained nearly 30% this year.

The dollar slipped to 155.70 Japanese yen from 155.94 yen. The euro was unchanged at \$1.1780.

Markets in mainland China advanced, with the Shanghai Composite index up 0.3%. Hong Kong's exchange was closed.

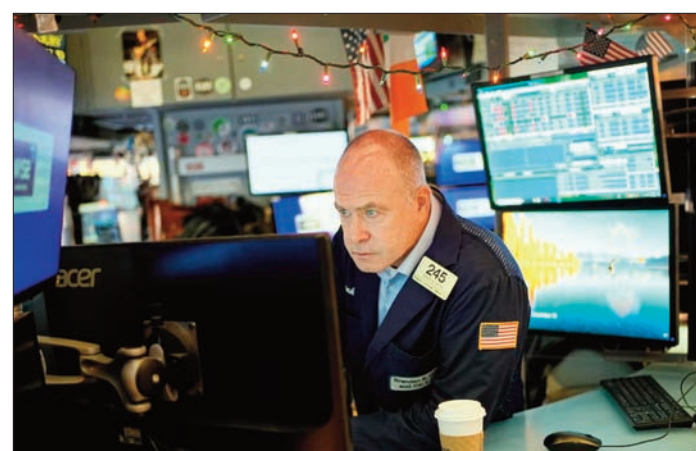
Investors were encouraged by a statement by the People's Bank of China, China's central bank, promising to ensure adequate money supply to support financing, economic growth and inflation targets. Earlier in the week, the PBOC had opted to keep its key short-term lending rates unchanged.

Shares fell in Thailand and Indonesia. On Wednesday, the S&P 500 index rose 0.3% to 6,932.05 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average added 0.6% to close at 48,731.16. The Nasdaq composite added 0.2% to 23,613.31.

Trading was extremely light as markets closed early for Christmas Eve and will be closed for Christmas on Thursday. Roughly 1.8 billion shares traded on the New York Stock Exchange on Wednesday, which is roughly a third of the average trading day.

US markets will reopen for a full day of trading on Friday, though volumes will likely remain light this week with most investors having closed out their positions for the year.

The S&P 500 is up more than 17% this year, as investors have embraced the deregulatory policies of the Trump administration and



been optimistic about the future of artificial intelligence in helping boost profits for not only technology companies but also for Corporate America.

Much of the focus for investors for the next few weeks will be on where the US economy is heading and where the Federal Reserve will move interest rates. Investors are betting the Fed will hold steady on interest rates at its January meeting.

The US economy grew at a surprisingly strong 4.3% annual rate in the third quarter, the most rapid expansion in two years, driven by consumers who continue to spend despite strong inflation. There have also been recent reports showing shaky confidence among consumers worried about high prices. The labor market has been slowing and retail sales have weakened.

The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell last week and remain at historically healthy levels despite some signs that the labor market is weakening.

US applications for jobsless

### AFFIDAVIT

I, Abdulla Wahid, S/O- Abdul Hannan, resident of Shibpur No-2, PO- Kapashbari, PS- Murajihar, Dist- Hojai, Assam, declare that Somila Begum is the actual and correct name, and Shamila Begum & Chamila Begum are the same person, i.e., my mother, due to clerical errors.

Sd/- Abdulla Wahid  
S/o- Abdul Hannan  
Shibpur, Murajihar, Hojai (Assam)  
Mateeb Uddin Ahmed

# MP Rwingwra Narzary condemns violence in West Karbi Anglong

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Dec 25:** Rajya Sabha MP Rwingwra Narzary has strongly reacted to the violence that claimed the lives of two common people in the Kheroni and Donkamokam areas of West Karbi Anglong district on December 22. The incidents which occurred under the Sixth Schedule Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council have drawn condemnation cutting across communities in the state. Expressing serious concern, Narzary described the developments as unfortunate and highly condemnable, particularly as the issue originated from a peaceful and democratic movement. He said the violence erupted in the aftermath of a peaceful protest and hunger strike launched to demand the eviction of people allegedly occupying Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR) and Village Grazing Reserve (VGR) land illegally in Kheroni. While democratic protests are a legitimate means to raise grievances, he said the turn of events leading to violence was deeply regrettable.

The MP strongly condemned the use of derogatory and provocative slogans such as "Chinese" and "Go back" directed at indige-



nous Karbi tribal people. He termed such remarks unacceptable, stating that they only deepen divisions and escalate tensions. Narzary emphasised that indigenous tribal communities have historically lived peacefully and have never troubled others without reason, while safeguarding their land, identity and rights.

Highlighting the constitutional framework, Narzary said the Sixth Schedule was incorporated into the Constitution of India to protect the interests, land and identity of tribal communities in autonomous regions. Any attempt to undermine the spirit of the Sixth Schedule or create unrest in such areas, he said, goes against the constitutional

vision of inclusive development and social harmony.

He further noted that India, along with Assam is moving forward on the path of development and transformation. In this context, Sixth Schedule areas must also progress while ensuring justice, peace and protection for indigenous communities. Violent and unpleasant incidents, he added, do not benefit any section of society and only hinder development.

Appealing for calm, MP Narzary urged all sections involved to exercise restraint and avoid actions or statements that could further inflame the situation. Through the media, he called upon all parties to engage in constructive dialogue with the government to resolve the matter amicably. He stressed that meaningful discussion and cooperation, rather than confrontation are the only effective ways to address sensitive land and identity-related issues in Sixth Schedule areas.

Calling for peace and unity, the MP expressed hope that normalcy would return to West Karbi Anglong at the earliest and that all stakeholders would work together to uphold constitutional values, communal harmony and the rights of indigenous people.

# Student bodies, tribal forum condemn Karbi Anglong violence

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, Dec 25:** The All Assam Motok Students' Union, Central Assam Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union and the Tribal Protection Forum, Assam jointly addressed a press conference at the Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha Bhavan on Wednesday, expressing serious concern over the recent violence in West Karbi Anglong district and broader issues affecting indigenous communities.

The three organisations strongly condemned the recent incident in Karbi Anglong and demanded adequate protection for the indigenous Karbi people. They expressed deep concern over the alleged influx of outsiders into the Sixth Schedule area, stating that such developments pose a serious threat to the land, identity and security of the indigenous population.

The leaders demanded strict and immediate action against those involved in the incident that led to the death of a Karbi youth. They emphasised that failure to address such incidents decisively could

further aggravate tension and unrest in the region.

During the press conference, the organisations also raised long-standing demands related to tribal rights. They warned that if tribal status is not granted to the six indigenous ethnic groups of Assam before the 2026 Assembly elections, they would launch a united protest movement against the ruling BJP. They further demanded full implementation of the Assam Accord and called for the introduction of an Inner Line Permit (ILP) system to safeguard the interests of indigenous Assamese people.

The press conference was attended by Sanjay Hazarika of the Motok Students' Union, along with Sachin Baruah, Ratul Kumar Rajbongshi, Deep Moni Bora and Dr Durlav Chamua, president of the Tribal Protection Forum, Assam and former MLA from Nagaon, among others. The speakers reiterated their commitment to protecting indigenous rights and maintaining peace through constitutional and democratic means.

# Asam Sahitya Sabha appeals for peace in West Karbi Anglong



**HT Correspondent**  
**TEZPUR, Dec 25:** The Asam Sahitya Sabha has expressed deep concern over the recent unfortunate incidents in West Karbi Anglong district, which have reportedly led to social unrest, fear and disruption of normal life. Reports of innocent people being affected and families suffering losses have triggered widespread concern across Assam.

In a press note issued on Wednesday, Asam Sahitya Sabha president Dr Basanta Kumar Goswami stated that the Karbi community is an inseparable and integral part of Assamese society. He said Assam's various

ethnic communities have long upheld a tradition of unity amidst diversity, adding that the natural beauty and cultural richness of the Karbi hills belong to everyone. Emphasising peaceful coexistence, Dr Goswami said every problem has a solution and urged that issues be resolved through dialogue and democratic means. He also appealed to the government to respect peaceful democratic protests and uphold democratic values.

Meanwhile, Asam Sahitya Sabha Principal Secretary Debojit Bora, in a separate statement, said the incidents in West Karbi Anglong had not only affected the region concerned but had deeply shaken the collective conscience of the people of Assam. He noted that in a state like Assam, known for the coexistence of multiple languages, cultures and ethnic communities, such incidents are extremely unfortunate.

Stressing that violence and unrest can never provide lasting solutions, Bora warned that such disturbances severely damage social harmony, fraternity and human values. He added that innocent civilians, particularly women, children and other vulnerable sections, often suffer the most during such situations.

The Asam Sahitya Sabha has appealed to the Assam government and the district administration to assess the situation with due seriousness and take all necessary steps to restore peace, security and normalcy in West Karbi Anglong at the earliest.

# Hojai gears up for District Day and Republic Day celebrations



**HT Correspondent**  
**HOJAI, Dec 25:** A significant preparatory meeting was held on Wednesday at the office of the Hojai District Commissioner to discuss arrangements for the upcoming Hojai District Day and the 77th Republic Day celebrations. The meeting was chaired by District Commissioner Bidhyut Bikash Bhagawati and witnessed the participation of a wide cross-section of public representatives and civil society members.

The meeting was attended by Hojai constituency MLA Ramkrishna Ghosh, Lumding

constituency MLA Shibu Mishra, Hojai Zilla Parishad Chairperson Junti Bara, Hojai BJP president Dilip Dhar, representatives of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), members of the Hojai Chamber of Commerce, leaders of various political parties and organisations, social groups, senior citizens, journalists, departmental heads and other distinguished members of Hojai civil society.

During the deliberations, District Commissioner Bhagawati invited suggestions and ideas from the participants to make the District Day celebrations vibrant, meaningful and inclusive.

Emphasis was laid on showcasing the rich cultural heritage of Hojai district, highlighting its archaeological importance, agricultural progress and initiatives related to women's empowerment. It was suggested that a cultural delegation representing the district's diversity be formed and that senior citizens, along with members of the District Demand Committee be felicitated in recognition of their contributions.

Participants also proposed organising awareness programmes in schools to educate students about the formation of Hojai district and its journey so far. The publication of a commemorative book documenting the district's history, development and achievements was also suggested as part of the District Day observance.

Appreciating the valuable inputs, the District Commissioner announced that an action committee would be constituted to ensure effective implementation of the proposed activities. He appealed to all stakeholders for sincere cooperation to make the District Day celebrations colourful, comprehensive and reflective of the district's identity.

The meeting also reviewed preparations for the 77th Republic Day celebrations, scheduled to be held on January 26, 2026. The District Administration reaffirmed its commitment to observing Republic Day with due solemnity and patriotic fervor, ensuring that both events reflect the spirit of unity, progress and pride of the Hojai district.

# Dhing College hosts awareness programmes on child marriage and safety

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, Dec 25:** The Women's Cell of Dhing College organised an awareness programme on 'Child Marriage Free India' at the college premises on Tuesday as part of its ongoing efforts to address key social and health-related issues among students.

The programme was conducted under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India and the Department of Higher Education, Government of Assam. Krishna Nath Bora, a noted social worker and secretary of the cultural organisation Arhi, attended the event as the resource person. Addressing the students, she stressed the importance of collective responsibility in eliminating child marriage and urged young people to actively spread awareness in their communities. She also appealed to parents to remain vigilant and sensitive to the issue. In his inaugural address, Principal Dr Biman Hazarika described child marriage as a serious social evil and called upon all sections of society to be aware, proactive and committed to its eradication. He emphasised the role of educational institutions in shaping informed and responsible citizens.

The programme was anchored by Anita Biswa Sarma, Secretary of the Women's Cell. Dr Punima Das Bora, Chairperson of the Women's Cell and Dr Snigdha Mahanta, Vice-Principal of the college, also addressed the gathering, highlighting the importance of legal awareness, education and empowerment in preventing child marriage. Students of Dhing College, along with office-bearers of the Students' Union, participated actively in the programme.

Earlier, the college also organised another awareness session on safe conduct and first aid for dog bites. Kangjana Devi, Counsellor at Dhing FRU, served as the resource person and provided practical guidance on safety measures, coping mechanisms and first aid response. She also informed students about government support systems and helplines, including the UMMEED portal for accessing assistance when needed.

# Assam Rifles organises National Integration Tour for Tirap youth

**HT Correspondent**  
**DIBRUGARH, Dec 25:** Under its Civic Action Programme, the Khonsa Battalion of Assam Rifles has organised a National Integration Tour for youth from Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, aimed at promoting national unity, cultural awareness and positive youth engagement. The tour will enable selected students to participate in the 26th Rashtra Katha Shivir organised by Shri Vedic Mission Trust at Village Pransla in Rajkot district of Gujarat. A total of 11 students from Wangcha Rajkumar Government College, Deomali, falling under the area of responsibility of Khonsa Battalion are taking part in the tour, which is scheduled from December 27, 2025, to January 4, 2026.

The tour was formally flagged off on Thursday from Deomali by Wanki Lowang, Minister of Geology, Mining and

Minerals, Government of Arunachal Pradesh in the presence of Assam Rifles personnel and local representatives. The initiative is designed to inculcate a sense of nationalism among the youth, foster national integration and provide exposure to India's rich cultural heritage and developmental progress. During the tour, the participants will interact with people from different regions of the country, helping them broaden their outlook and gain deeper understanding of social harmony, unity and cultural diversity.

The National Integration Tour also seeks to positively channel the energy and potential of local youth by engaging them in constructive activities, thereby discouraging vulnerability to social challenges such as drug abuse and insurgency.

# Churches witness large gatherings as people from all communities share festive spirit Christmas celebrated with unity and joy in and across the State

**HT Correspondent**  
**MARGHERITA, Dec 25:** The spirit of Christmas filled the air across Margherita Co-District on Thursday as members of the Christian community, along with residents from diverse backgrounds, came together to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ with enthusiasm, prayer, unity and brotherhood.

Large gatherings were witnessed in more than 100 churches across the co-district, where devotees participated in special prayer meetings, carol singing and festive services. The celebrations highlighted the core values of love, peace and harmony, drawing people from all sections of society irrespective of caste, creed, race, language and religion.

During the services, Pastor Indra Gurung of Iswar Prem Baptist Church in Bargolai under Margherita Co-District spoke of the deeper significance of Christmas. He said the holy day serves as a reminder to promote unity not only within the community but also in society at large, adding that the festival fosters goodwill and togetherness across the world.

Adding to the festive cheer, Margherita MLA Bhaskar Sharma distributed cakes and other gifts to churches under the 83rd Margherita Legislative Assembly Constituency and extended warm Christmas greetings to the Christian community residing in Margherita Co-District.

The 83rd Margherita Legislative Assembly Constituency, located in Tinsukia district and known for its rich cultural diversity and industrial heritage, presented a vibrant festive scene. Churches were beautifully adorned with lights, cribs and decorations, while families exchanged greetings, shared meals and extended warmth to neighbours,



reflecting the inclusive ethos of the region.

With Christmas being observed as a public holiday in Assam, the celebrations in Margherita stood as an example of the state's harmonious blend of traditions. The festivities concluded peacefully, leaving behind cherished memories and reinforcing a renewed sense of community bonding, hope and reconciliation among the residents.

**Our Kokrajhar Correspondent adds:** Along with rest of the state, the Merry Christmas was celebrated on Thursday with festivity fervor in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) districts including Kokrajhar

that marked the occasion of integration and tranquility.

The celebration began from the midnight of Wednesday with festivity like environment, being organised at various churches including Donbosco Church, Kokrajhar Town Baptist Church across the region.

In Kokrajhar, the Churches are seen decorated with beautiful lighting and reflection on the Holy Day celebration of the birth anniversary of Lord Jesus.

A mass prayer session was organised on the occasion of birth anniversary Lord Jesus Christ as Merry Christmas where thousands of devotee and followers of the Christian re-

# Police in Jorhat arrest alleged drug dealer, recover ammunition

**HT Correspondent**  
**JORHAT, Dec 25:** A Jorhat Police team led by Officer-Charge of Jorhat Police Station Hrishikesh Hazarika recovered four 7.65 mm rounds of live ammunition at a scrap godown at Cinnamara outskirts here on Thursday. The team also found several tools that could be used to break in at shops, residences and duplicate keys of two-wheelers to carry out theft. Hazarika told this newspaper that the godown owned by Sirajul Islam (30), a resident of Saraibahi, Rowrah, who is a drug dealer, has been arrested and further investigation was on in the case.

The OC added that Islam, who has been arrested earlier several times, is suspected of being involved in narcotics trade and vehicle theft racket.

Police have also seized a Bolero car from Islam.

ligion participated the prayer and worship seeking bless from Lord Jesus.

Devotee and followers of Christian religion presented a Merry Christmas Carol dance this afternoon after having mass prayer on the occasion at Kokrajhar Town Baptist Church, Kadamtala. Devotees performed singing songs with traditional music instruments which have created devotion attractions among Christian followers on the day.

On the holy occasion, former CEM of BTR and UPPL president, Pramod Boro, Assam cabinet minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma, ABSU president Dipen Boro have extended their merry Christmas greetings to all citizens of the state.

"I'm wishing everyone a very Merry Christmas filled with warmth, hope and the joy of togetherness. May the spirit of Christmas usher in peace, compassion and renewed faith, strengthening the bonds that unite us as one community" said UPPL president Pramod Boro.

In Chirang, the Christmas celebration was witnessed a huge throng of devotees and followers of Christian religion at various churches in the district. A mass prayer was organised at Tulrajhar Donbosco Church where devotees from all walks of life participated.

In Udalguri, the churches have been seen decorated with lights and reflection across the district on the holy occasion. MLA of Udalguri LAC and former deputy CEM of BTR, Gabinda Chandra Basumatary extended his warm greetings and best wishes to all citizens on the occasion. People cutting across the age come out since morning and offered their prayer and worship to the Lord Jesus on the Merry Christmas Day.

# Diganta Bharati receives Pankaj Bordoloi Memorial Award

**HT Correspondent**  
**TEZPUR, Dec 25:** The All Sonitpur District Students' Union (AASU) organised a soulful musical tribute at Bhupen Hazarika Kalabhumi here on Wednesday to commemorate the birth anniversary of late Pankaj Bordoloi, one of Assam's most revered playback singers and a prominent cultural figure associated with the students' movement. The occasion also marked the institution of the Pankaj Bordoloi Memorial Award, which was conferred for the first time on noted singer Diganta Bharati in recognition of his significant contribution to Assamese music.

Accepting the award, Diganta Bharati described the honour as a deeply enriching experience, particularly because it was instituted by AASU. Stressing the importance of perseverance and hard work over destiny, he reflected on his long musical journey and his nearly three-decade-long association with acclaimed artist Zubeen Garg. Speaking on Tezpur's rich cultural heritage, Bharati said the town's identity is inseparable from cultural stalwarts such as Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Bhupen Hazarika.

Paying rich tribute to Pankaj Bordoloi, Bharati described him as an unparalleled artist who could render the compositions of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnurasad Rabha and Parbat Prasad Barua with unmatched precision and pronunciation. He referred to Bordoloi as the "Dronacharya" of Assamese music and urged scholars and cultural institutions to undertake systematic research and documentation of his works to preserve his legacy.

Earlier, Bharati, along with Bordoloi's wife Ruby Bora Bordoloi, AASU vice-president Nital Bora, Sonitpur district AASU president Abhijit Nath, general secretary Arup Talukdar and other office-bearers, paid floral tributes to the late singer. In his welcome address, Abhijit Nath remembered Bordoloi as a committed nationalist artist who actively participated in cultural and public causes and said the memorial award would be presented annually to honour distinguished personalities of the state.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.  
- Jesus Christ*

## Launch of BlueBird Block-2

By any technical measure, India's successful launch of the BlueBird Block-2 satellite should have been routine. Rockets lift satellites into orbit every week now. SpaceX alone has normalised spaceflight to the point of near banality. And yet, the LVM3-M6 mission — which placed a 6,100-kg U.S.-built communications satellite into low Earth orbit — deserves closer scrutiny, not for what it achieved, but for what it quietly signals. This was not a flag-waving demonstration of national pride, nor merely another commercial launch in an increasingly crowded market. It was a carefully calibrated statement about cost, capacity, and the future balance of power in the global space economy — one that Washington and Western launch providers would be unwise to overlook. At its core, the mission highlights an uncomfortable truth: the economics of space launch are changing again, and not necessarily in ways that favour established players. BlueBird Block-2, built by AST SpaceMobile, is the largest commercial communications satellite ever deployed in low Earth orbit. Its purpose is ambitious: to enable direct-to-smartphone 4G and 5G connectivity without reliance on ground-based cellular infrastructure. For U.S. telecom and satellite strategists, that alone is significant. But the more revealing choice was how the satellite got there.

AST SpaceMobile turned to India's Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and its heavy-lift LVM3 rocket — not SpaceX, not Europe's Ariane 6, and not a U.S. government-backed launcher. The reason was not technical capability; all three could have carried the payload. The reason was economics and availability. For constellation operators, shaving \$10–20 million per launch can decide whether a network scales, stalls, or collapses under capital pressure. ISRO understands this. And with the LVM3-M6 mission, it has made clear that it intends to compete not on spectacle or cadence, but on price discipline. None of this diminishes SpaceX's dominance. Falcon 9 remains unmatched in launch frequency, reliability, and reusability. Starship, if it succeeds, will likely reset cost curves again. But dominance breeds concentration risk — and customers know it.

India is offering something different: a state-backed launcher with fewer internal conflicts, predictable scheduling, and lower upfront costs — even if it lacks reusability or rapid cadence. For some customers, especially those launching fewer but heavier satellites, that trade-off is acceptable. In this sense, ISRO is not trying to out-SpaceX. It is exploiting the gaps SpaceX leaves behind. The LVM3 was not designed as a commercial workhorse. Originally known as the GSLV Mk-III, it was built to support India's own geosynchronous satellites and, eventually, human spaceflight. The BlueBird Block-2 mission was not about a satellite. It was about signalling that access to orbit — once the preserve of a few — is becoming a negotiable commodity. In that negotiation, India has entered the room not as a junior partner, but as a disciplined, cost-conscious competitor.

# Will FTA with New Zealand hamper Indian apple growers' interests

Amid a stuck period for Indo-American Trade finalization, India and New Zealand announced a bilateral agreement, on December 22, 2025, stating a win-win situation for both. However, the implementation may take a period of six months or so.

A Government of India press release through PIB, on 22 December, terming the FTA as Gains for Agriculture, Technology Cooperation, and Farmer Income Growth states that New Zealand have agreed on focused Action Plans for kiwifruit, apples, and honey to improve productivity, quality, and sectoral capabilities of these fruits' growers in India. The cooperation includes the establishment of Centres of Excellence, improved planting material, capacity building for growers, technical support for orchard management, post-harvest practices, supply chains and food safety. Projects for premium apple cultivators and sustainable beekeeping practices will enhance production and quality standards.

This is Paired with Market access for the selected agricultural products (Apples, Kiwifruit, Manuka Honey) from New Zealand in India.

The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi on December 22, 2025, Tweeted on his X account, Narendra Modi @narendramodi, "An important moment for India-New Zealand relations, with a strong push to bilateral trade and investment! My friend PM Christopher Luxon and I had a very good conversation a short while ago following the conclusion of the landmark India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement. Concluded in just nine months, this historic milestone reflects a strong political will and shared ambition to deepen economic ties between our two countries.

This FTA ensures: Enhanced market access, Deeper investment flows, Numerous opportunities for innovators, entrepreneurs, farmers, MSMEs, students and youth."

In another tweet on the same day, PM Modi wrote, "The India-NZ partnership is going to scale newer heights. The FTA sets the stage for doubling bilateral trade in the coming 5 years. India welcomes investment worth over USD 20 billion from New Zealand across diverse sectors. Our talented youth, vibrant startup ecosystem and reform-driven economy offer a strong foundation for innovation, growth and long-term partnership. At the same time, we continue to strengthen cooperation in other areas like sports, education and cultural linkages."

New Zealand also seems cheered with this FTA. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

Trade, (MFAT) New Zealand on its web site states, "The New Zealand – India FTA will deliver preferential access for New Zealand exporters to the large and fast-growing Indian market for 95% of our current exports over time – with more than 50% benefitting from full tariff elimination immediately on the day one, and rising to more than 80% over time."

Divulging the key good benefits, MFAT adds, "Forestry – a major export to India – over 95% of exports will be able to enter tariff-free immediately from entry into force, with tariffs on almost all our existing trade phased out over seven years. Tariffs removed immediately on sheep meat, wool, coal and many other products, tariffs on New Zealand's key fish and seafood exports phased out over seven years, valuable new quota access for kiwifruit and apples, with volumes starting well above average recent trade, and growing beyond that."

MFAT claims that New Zealand is the first country to secure preferential access for apples in any Indian FTA, and the first kiwifruit exporter to secure tariff-free access for kiwifruit plus a 50% tariff reduction outside quota, phased tariff elimination on other horticultural products including cherries, avocados, blueberries and persimmons, tariffs on manuka honey cut by 75% over five years, making New Zealand the first country to secure preferential access for honey in any Indian FTA, tariffs on bulk infant formula and other dairy-based preparations, and peptones (a dairy-based product) phased out over seven years, tariffs for albumins (a milk protein product) halved within a quota covering average recent trade.

This new preferential access will provide valuable new opportunities to grow exports to India, and a more level playing field with competitors from India's FTA partners who already enjoy low or no tariffs on many of their exports."

New Zealand hopes that the benefits of the FTA are expected to grow over time as India's economy continues to grow – projected to become the world's third-largest economy over the coming years – and its middle class continues to expand.

New Zealand's version reveals that most of these FTA parts are circling around the farmers' issues. Whether it is forestry, sheep meat, wool, tariffs on bulk infant formula and other dairy-based preparations, and peptones (a dairy-based product), tariffs for albumins (a milk protein product), key fish and seafood, preferential access for apples in any Indian

FTA, and the first kiwifruit exporter to secure tariff-free access for kiwifruit plus a 50% tariff reduction, preferential access for honey, or phased tariff elimination on other horticultural products including cherries, avocados, blueberries and persimmons, tariffs on manuka honey cut by 75% over five years.

Enticing the inclusion of horticulture, animal meat and sea products in the FTA, Apple Farmers' Federation of India (AFFI) has condemned the "Lowering of Import Tariffs" on New Zealand Apples and doubted that Dumping of Foreign Apples will Worsen the Crisis in Apple Economy.

In a reactionary press statement, the Apple Farmers' Federation of India (AFFI) unequivocally condemned the ending of 50 per cent basic customs duty as per the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on import of apple. AFFI pleads that as per this FTA, a fixed quantity of imports of apples at zero or highly concessional tariff rates will be allowed. New Zealand's trade ministry on Monday said it has become the "first" country to get duty concessions for its apples under any free trade agreement signed by India. A similar tariff rate quota (TRQ) system has also been agreed upon for honey, kiwi and albumins.

AFFI fears that the present FTA with New Zealand rings alarm bells as the

country has been the fourth largest exporter of apples to India. In the agreement, import duty concessions will be given to New Zealand on 32,500 metric tonnes (MT) in the first year of the pact. The quota will be increased to 45,000 MT in the sixth year at 25 per cent duty.

Apple growers underline that this bilateral FTA, which India is boasting as a major-win, has come at a significant cost for its horticultural sector, a sector that contributes 30 per cent of agricultural GDP. Apples are considered a high-value crop in this subsector and bring remunerative incomes to farmers in the Himalayan states of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and as well as Northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Meghalaya.

AFFI adds that however, over the past two decades, imports of apples from US, Turkey, Iran, New Zealand, Afghanistan, etc have been steadily rising while the export of our domestically produced fruit has remained near stagnant. In the last 25 years, imports have climbed from 0.2 lakh MT to 6 lakh MT, from 1.7 per cent of domestic production to

22.5 per cent. At the same time, our exports – at just 21,700 MT – is behind even the 2004–05 figures when India exported 23,100 MT of apples.

Federation further states that in recent years, the Modi government reduced the basic customs duty on apples from around 75% down to 50%. In 2023, as part of broader trade negotiations, India removed a 20 per cent retaliatory additional duty on US apple imports that had existed on top of the basic duty. Iranian apples are being imported into India under the guise of Afghanistan-origin to exploit the Afghanistan-India FTA and avoid import duties. AFFI in the past has repeatedly urged the Indian government to ban Iranian apples that are arriving under this relabelling practice. These reductions and illegal rerouting of apples have propelled the increase in our imports.

Considering that the two states, J&K and Himachal Pradesh, producing almost 90 per cent of India's annual apple production of 2.6 million MT, have been facing natural disasters and weather disturbances year after year, the Indian government should have increased the basic import duty to 100 per cent as has been the consistent demand of apple farmers. Instead, in an anti-farmer move, the security of India's apple growers has been compromised to favour the interests of New Zealand.

So, the AFFI demands that the Indian government protect the interests of apple farmers and immediately rescind the ending of 50 per cent import tariffs on New Zealand apples. We call upon farmers in apple-growing villages across the country to protest this blatant attack on their livelihoods.

Showing its concerns, in its two-day National Coordination Committee meeting, on 22 July 2024, the Apple Farmers Federation of India (AFFI) had raised the issues of the three apple-growing states (Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand). They had demanded that the government stop the corporatisation of the apple industry and protect farmers by reducing the cost of production. The demands included a 100% import duty on apples; implementation of a price policy to ensure 50% of the retail price as procurement price; banning of spurious pesticides and fertilisers; insurance coverage in the public sector; and subsidy for inputs, storage and transport. But contrary to AFFI's expectations, the Government of India has signed an FTA with New Zealand, which may hamper the interests of Apple growers. How the government will safeguard their interests – is the question to be answered? (IPA Service)

## DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Jag Mohan Thaken

# The joy of picnic and road accidents

By: Himanshu Ranjan Bhuvan

With the arrival of winter, people step out towards nature's embrace in search of temporary relief from the monotony of daily life, work-related busyness, and mental depression. This journey is the picnic journey, which is not merely confined to eating and enjoying, but is regarded as a vibrant part of Assamese folk culture. The tradition of spending the day in an open space together with relatives, friends, or colleagues plays an important role in strengthening social bonds. However, it is extremely regrettable that in recent years, a terrifying, tragic, and alarming chapter has been added to this festival of joy, namely frequent road accidents. A day that begins with laughter and merriment sometimes ends in such a heart-wrenching accident that darkness descends upon an entire family or society. The news of picnic groups' vehicles meeting with accidents, instant deaths, or serious injuries that appear almost daily on newspaper pages shakes our conscience. These unwanted deaths cannot be dismissed merely as fate's writing or sudden incidents; rather, there is a need for deep analysis of the extreme carelessness, reluctance towards rules, and consumerist mentality lurking behind them. As a result of the chaotic behaviour we resort to in the name of joy, the word "picnic" sometimes carries the message of fear instead of joy.

A vast difference has emerged between the concept of picnics and their current form, which can be identified as one of the main psychological causes of road accidents. Earlier, picnics were a peaceful process of resting in nature's lap, where travel was slow and the aim was merely coexistence. But the aggression of modern globalisation and mechanisation has gripped our mentality in such a way that now a picnic means intense excitement, competition, and a kind of frenzy. When a group sets out from home for a picnic, alongside joy, a kind of aggressive attitude also works in their minds. The intense desire to reach the destination first, the competition to occupy a good spot, and the mentality of overtaking other vehicles on the road overwhelm both the driver and the passengers. This mental instability adversely affects the driver's brain, causing him to increase the vehicle's speed and ignore road rules. Moreover, a trend of showmanship has emerged in today's picnics. Who has gone in the most expensive car, who has brought the biggest sound box, or who can create the most commotion—these seem to have become the criteria for picnics. This artificial competition reduces people's natural caution and patience. As a result, a chaotic environment is created

on the highways where every vehicle behaves like a soldier in a battlefield. If we do not delve deep into this mental change, we cannot prevent accidents merely by enacting laws, because the root of the problem lies hidden in our unrestrained concept of joy.

Analysis of picnic-related road accidents reveals that excessive consumption of alcohol or intoxicating substances is a primary and terrifying factor. Unfortunately, in the present time, picnics and drinking have become two sides of the same coin. In many cases, the main purpose of going on a picnic seems to be drinking under the open sky. From the beginning of the journey, even inside the vehicle, signs of alcohol consumption are visible. The most dangerous aspect is when the driver falls into this intoxication. Alcohol affects the central nervous system, slowing down the brain's decision-making ability and the body's reaction time considerably. An intoxicated driver becomes unable to accurately judge the vehicle's speed, road distance, or the position of oncoming vehicles. Under the influence of alcohol, an artificial confidence or "euphoria" is created in the driver's mind, causing him to feel no hesitation in dangerously overtaking or driving without caution on difficult road sections. Not only the driver, but when other passengers in the vehicle become drunk and shout or incite the driver, the situation becomes even more dangerous. In our society, drinking in the name of festivals has become a social malaise, where people prioritise momentary excitement over their own safety. This drunken mentality endangers not only that specific vehicle but also the lives of innocent pedestrians or other vehicles on the road.

The aggression of high-volume music or "DJ" culture is another modern and important factor in picnic-related accidents that indirectly but certainly invites danger. Nowadays, fitting extremely high-powered speakers in almost all passenger buses, travellers, or small vehicles going on picnics has become a fashion. The intensity of sound emitted from these devices is so high that it harms human hearing as well as brain balance. When deafening music plays inside a vehicle, the driver becomes completely disconnected from the outside world. Horns from other vehicles, police signals, or other road warnings do not reach his ears. Psychological research has proven that fast-paced and high-volume music increases heart rate and creates intense excitement in the mind, unknowingly prompting the driver to press the accelerator or increase speed. When passengers dance and sing to the music's rhythm, the vehicle's balance may be disturbed, especially on hilly or curved roads where it



can be extremely fatal. Moreover, this high noise creates tremendous obstruction in concentrating the driver's attention, resulting in loss of control and accidents in moments. Instead of bird-song or the murmur of rivers in nature's lap, this mechanical noise not only pollutes the environment but also destroys mental stability. Although music as an expression of joy is acceptable, its misuse in the confined space of a moving vehicle poses a threat to life. Therefore, keeping the sound level moderate inside the vehicle and maintaining the driver's mental peace is extremely essential from the perspective of road safety.

The geographical location of picnic spots, road infrastructure, and the influence of winter weather are also closely linked to accidents during picnics. Picnic spots are generally far from urban or populated areas, sometimes at the foot of hills, sometimes on riverbanks, or sometimes near remote forests. The roads to such places are often steep, dilapidated, or sharply curved, where passing two vehicles together is a challenge. In winter, Assam's highways are covered with dense fog in the morning and evening, reducing visibility almost to zero. Driving at high speed on unfamiliar roads in such conditions is equivalent to suicide. Drivers often lack prior experience of these remote roads; without knowing where sharp turns are, where there are potholes, or where the road is broken, they refuse to reduce speed. Moreover, during picnic season, the number of vehicles on highways increases abnormally. From large trucks and buses to small cars and motorcycles, the roads become crowded. Instead of driving patiently amid this excessive crowd and traffic jam, drivers dangerously try to overtake, resulting in head-on collisions. Blaming the govern-

ment for poor roads is easy, but failing to take necessary precautions for one's own safety despite weak infrastructure is our own mistake. Using fog lights in fog, keeping speed limited, and following road instructions are the driver's responsibility. Ignoring geographical challenges of the road and floating only in the tide of joy ensures terrible consequences.

The most dangerous time in a picnic journey is the return journey, where the maximum accidents occur. Not only road conditions but also the physical and mental fatigue of the driver and passengers play an important role. After a day of various games, dancing, singing, cooking, and excessive eating from morning, tremendous tiredness sets in the body. At the end of the day's excitement, when it is time to return home in the evening, the driver's body and brain become exhausted. Driving in this fatigued state makes the driver's eyelids heavy, and he may fall victim to "micro-sleep" or drowsiness. Even a few seconds of this drowsiness can render a high-speed vehicle uncontrollable. Moreover, light variation in the evening is the most difficult time for driving. In this transitional period when daylight ends and night darkness descends, visual illusions are likely. Many picnic groups delay leaving the spot, causing them to speed up on the road to make up for lost time. The urgency to reach home quickly blinds them. People returning with memories of the day's joy become careless in this final phase. Many fall asleep from tiredness inside the vehicle, causing the driver to feel isolated and experience drowsiness. The return journey requires as much caution as is often neglected. If the group's driver has consumed alcohol, the danger multiplies manifold. Therefore, giving the driver rest during the return, talking

to keep him alert, and keeping the vehicle's speed fully controlled are essential for saving lives.

The trend among today's youth of going on picnics on bikes or two-wheelers is a concerning aspect contributing to increased road accidents. Young boys and girls, especially teenagers and youths, form groups and ride bikes to picnics, playing terrifying games on highways in the name of showing strength. Not wearing helmets, riding two or three on one bike, and driving at wind speed have become a matter of pride for them. To make short videos or reels for social media, they do suicidal acts like letting go of hands while moving, performing stunts, or talking on mobile. At this age, blood runs hot, and there is no mental maturity to think about future consequences. They do not want to think that the highway is not a stage for stunts but a place for responsible behaviour. Parents' responsibility here cannot be denied. Many parents hand over expensive and powerful bikes to their underage children without even checking if they have a driving licence. This parental laxity and excessive affection pushes children towards death. Statistics of accidents during picnic season show that a large portion of the deceased are from this young generation. Providing realistic education on road safety to youths and awakening a sense of responsibility in them is an urgent call of the present time. They need to understand the difference between joy and recklessness, that staying alive is the greatest adventure.

The solution to this problem will never yield results if confined only to police administration or government rules; it requires widespread social awareness and personal responsibility. The government has enacted various laws for road safety, set up check posts everywhere, used devices to catch drunk drivers, and imposed fines. But deploying police on every part of thousands of kilometres of roads in a state like Assam is practically impossible. The mentality of driving slowly only out of fear of police, wearing seat belts, or helmets proves that we still do not consider safety as our own need but as a burden. Real change will come only when every citizen considers himself a responsible pedestrian or driver. Picnic groups should establish some rules among themselves before starting the journey. Senior or aware members of the group must ensure that the driver does not drink under any circumstances. If the driver is professional, monitoring him and forcing him to remain restrained is the passengers' responsibility. On the other hand, if a group member is driving, he must be kept completely away from intoxication. We need to realise the simple truth that our joy should not cause inconvenience or dan-

ger to others. Aware individuals in society, student organisations, and voluntary institutions can take the lead in organising road safety awareness camps during picnic season, distributing pamphlets, and educating people. When conscience guides people more than fear of law, the rising graph of accidents will come down.

Picnic accidents do not merely cause death or injury to a few individuals; they have a deep socio-economic impact on society. When the sole breadwinner of a family meets with an accident while going on a picnic, the entire family is economically destroyed. The future of elderly parents, wife, and young children plunges into darkness. One accident does not just break bones; it shatters many dreams and hopes. A person seriously injured and becoming disabled becomes a burden on the family for life. Moreover, hospital expenses, legal complications, and fighting mental trauma make families' conditions pathetic. A large human resource of society is wasted in these accidents. Those boys and girls who could have become the nation's pillars in the future—their untimely deaths hinder the country's development. The joy of picnics is momentary, but the consequences of mistakes are permanent. When we see the horrific scene of an accident vehicle on the highway, we merely express sorrow and stop there. But we do not try to feel the story behind that accident and the subsequent suffering. From a sociological perspective, these accidents create cracks in the social fabric. Therefore, not treating picnics merely as a festival of joy but taking the associated safety and responsibility aspects seriously is the moral duty of every individual in society.

In conclusion, everyone has the right to celebrate life, but we must always remain vigilant that this celebration does not take away our own or others' lives. A picnic means enjoying nature's freshness, renewing relationships, and removing mental impurities. It can never be a stage for extremism or chaos. We must pledge that this time in our picnic, we will abstain from alcohol, keep vehicle speed controlled, follow road rules, and embrace nature's serene environment instead of high-volume music. Our goal should be that every person leaving home returns home smiling. Parents must teach their children lessons of safety, and the young generation must learn the proper use of their energy. When we all together build a healthy and safe picnic culture, only then will every picnic spot in Assam truly become a place of joy. Let safe travel, restrained behaviour, and responsible mentality be the charioteers of our picnics. Life is very beautiful; not losing it prematurely but living it fully is the real joy.

# The Vulnerable Christ: A reminder for today's world

By: Satyabrata Borah

On a quiet night in the fields near Bethlehem, angels appeared to humble shepherds tending their flocks, illuminating the darkness with heavenly light as they announced the good news of great joy. They sang with exultant voices, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to all people of goodwill." This momentous declaration marked the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God Himself, who entered the world through the womb of the Virgin Mary. In this profound act, God intervened decisively in human history, choosing not mere spectacle but intimate involvement with humanity's story.

Jesus, fully divine, took on the full nature and form of a human being, not to remain distant or aloof, but to save us from our brokenness. He became like us in every way, embracing vulnerability, fragility, and weakness from the very moment of His birth in a humble stable. As a helpless infant, He shared our human condition completely, experiencing the full spectrum of emotions and trials that define our existence. He knew joy and anticipation in moments of celebration, pain and struggle in times of hardship, and deep sorrow in the face of loss. More than that, He understood the anguish of victims of injustice and oppression, those crushed under the weight of society's indifference or cruelty.

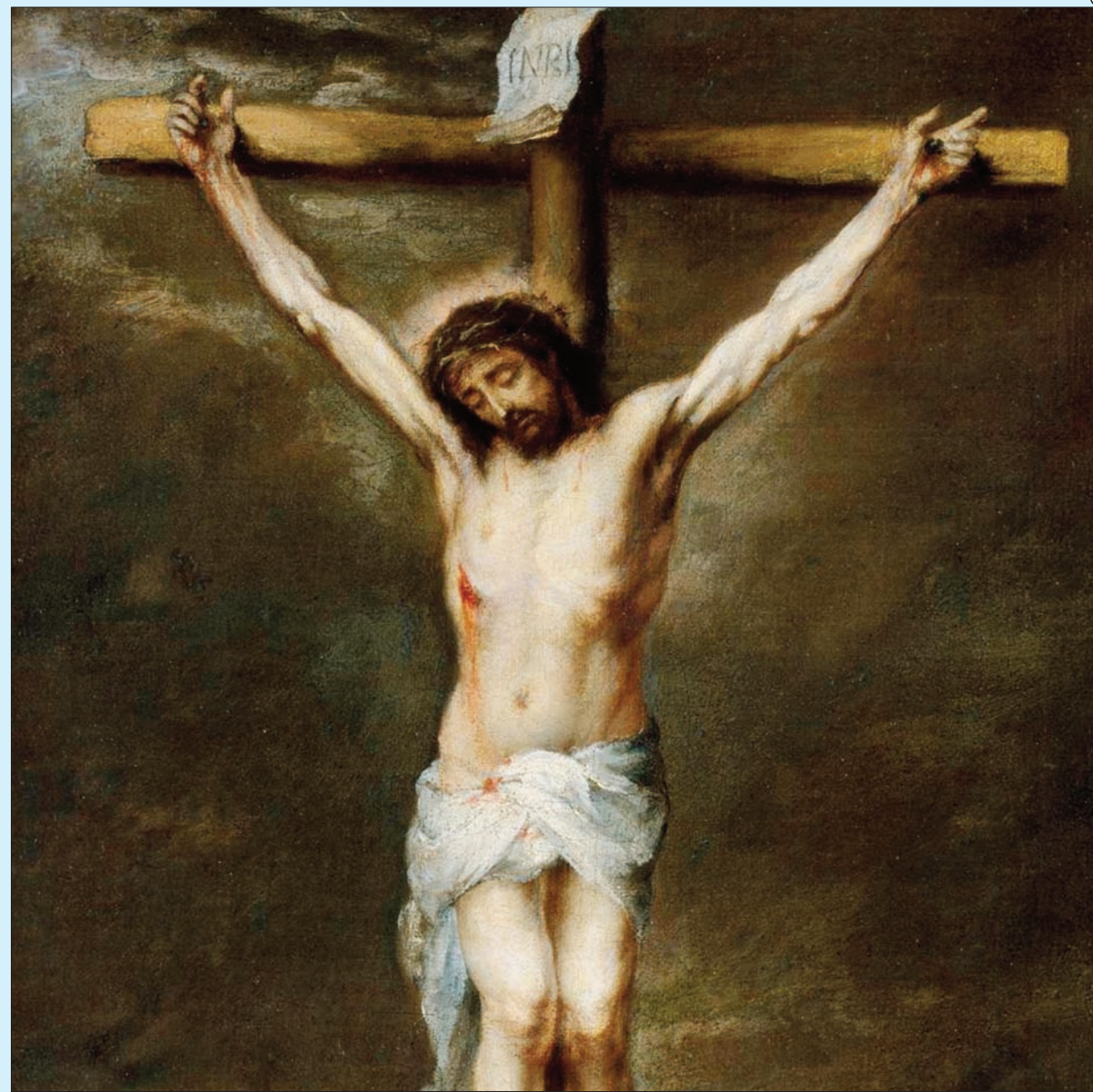
Because He lived among us, Jesus could empathize with every human experience. He healed those who were sick and helpless, restoring bodies ravaged by disease and spirits weighed down by despair. He felt the piercing grief of a widow who had lost her only son, accompanying her in mourning and raising the young man to life as a sign of hope. He recognized the thirst and hunger of crowds who followed Him, not only feeding them with loaves and fishes but offering Himself as the true bread from heaven, the spiritual nourishment that satisfies the soul's deepest longings. He reached out to lepers, those condemned as social outcasts, touching and cleansing them despite the taboos that isolated them from community. He confronted demons that ruined people's lives, driving them out with authority and freeing individuals to reclaim their dignity and freedom. In all these acts, Jesus always

extended compassion and love, never turning away from those in need. His ministry revealed a God who does not observe suffering from afar but enters into it, sharing our burdens and transforming them through grace. Yet today, in a world rushing toward progress and self-sufficiency, many have forgotten what it truly means to be human. We chase illusions of invincibility, masking our inherent fragility with distractions and achievements, losing sight of the profound dignity that comes from our shared vulnerability and dependence on one another and on God.

Christmas arrives each year as a gentle yet insistent reminder of why Jesus came: to bring peace to a world torn apart by hate, division, and strife. In an age where conflicts rage and ideologies clash, where communities fracture along lines of politics, religion, and culture, the message of the angels echoes anew. Jesus hears the cries of those subjected to cruelty, individuals and entire peoples for whom life has become a relentless fight for survival. He listens to the pleas of refugees displaced by violence, families shattered by loss, and children robbed of innocence amid chaos. Even the groans of Mother Earth reach His ears, as our mindless disregard for nature despoils the creation entrusted to our care, leading to environmental devastation that disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized.

The vulnerable among us extend far beyond those disadvantaged by physical, mental, or social conditions. They include countless souls fleeing wars, persecution, climate upheavals, and other dangers across many countries, risking everything in search of safety and a future. Women and children bear particular burdens in these crises, often targeted with unspeakable violence in wars and conflict zones. The familiar image of Mother Mary cradling her newborn child, so often depicted on Christmas greeting cards, captures this tenderness amid fragility. It serves as a poignant reminder of the vulnerability that women and children endure, especially in times of turmoil, and calls us to protect and honor them with the reverence due to the holy family itself.

At Christmas, we are invited to recall all vulnerable groups within our societies: the impoverished struggling to meet basic needs, Dalits and other mar-



ginalized castes facing systemic discrimination, workers exploited in harsh conditions, and minorities persecuted for their beliefs or identities. These are the modern equivalents of the shepherds who first received the angelic announcement, ordinary people on the margins whom God chose to honor with the greatest news the world has ever known.

Christmas celebrates the mystery of the divine becoming human, the Word

made flesh dwelling among us. It proclaims the gift of abundant life that God has promised and delivered through His Son, a life not confined to material prosperity but overflowing with meaning, purpose, and eternal hope. This abundance is meant to be shared, for the essence of the feast lies in generosity. We are called to distribute our resources with those who are disadvantaged, ensuring that no one is excluded from the joy of

the season. Christmas is as much a community feast as it is a family celebration, because true happiness multiplies when we share our joys with others, extending warmth and welcome beyond our immediate circles.

This happiness belongs not only to an elite few but to all people of goodwill, regardless of background or status. The birth of Christ levels distinctions, reminding us that God's favor rests on the

humble and pure of heart. This Christmas, let us clothe ourselves in the garment of love, a love that envelops all of humankind without exception or condition. The manifestation of divine love in God becoming man issues a profound invitation to every person: to relinquish hatred toward the other, to abandon prejudices that divide, and to view everyone through the eyes of God, who shows no favoritism.

In the journey of life, we encounter countless milestones, moments of triumph and trial that shape our paths. If we fill our days with love and compassion, inspired by the example of the incarnate Lord, then Christmas becomes more than a single day; it permeates our entire existence. There is no end to Christmas when our lives reflect the ongoing presence of Emmanuel. Yet life remains uncertain, filled with unpredictability and shadows. We cannot foresee what tomorrow may bring, whether joy or sorrow, health or hardship, peace or upheaval. Tragedies and difficulties will inevitably come, testing our resolve and faith.

But the birth of Jesus infuses hope into the hearts of those battered by life's storms. It reassures us that, despite every challenge we face, God remains sovereign and in control. He will never abandon us, for He is Emmanuel, God with us, present in the manger's straw, in the cries of the suffering, in the quiet moments of prayer, and in the acts of kindness we offer one another. This promise sustains us through the darkest nights, pointing toward the dawn of resurrection and the ultimate triumph of love over every force that seeks to diminish humanity.

As we gather around lights and trees, exchange gifts and meals, let the deeper truth of Christmas reshape our vision. The child in the manger calls us to embrace our shared humanity, to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable, and to live as bearers of the peace proclaimed by angels long ago. In doing so, we participate in God's ongoing work of redemption, making the spirit of Christmas a living reality that transforms the world, one act of compassionate love at a time. For in the incarnation, God has drawn near, and through us, His love continues to reach every corner of creation, bringing glory to Him in the highest and peace to all people of goodwill.

## Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 101st Birth Anniversary

# ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE: A statesman shaped by India's soul

By: Lalit Garg

In the modern history of India, there are a few towering personalities who shape the nation not merely through power or position, but through ideas, character, and conduct. Atal Bihari Vajpayee stands among those rare luminaries. A great statesman of Indian politics, a stalwart of the Bharatiya Janata Party, a Bharat Ratna awardee, an eloquent orator, journalist, and a sensitive poet, Vajpayee was a leader who appeared larger than politics even while remaining deeply rooted in it. His 101st birth anniversary is not only an occasion of remembrance, but a moment of introspection and resolve—about the kind of India we envision and our role in realizing that vision. Every year on 25 December, the Government of India observes his birth anniversary as Good Governance Day, reflecting the values he embodied throughout his public life. Atalji was a rare peak personality in Indian politics, in whom firmness of thought, elegance of behavior, and fearlessness of decision-making coexisted harmoniously. He remained

humble at the pinnacle of power and dignified even while sitting in the opposition. This is why he was not regarded as the leader of a single party, but as a leader of the entire nation. He earned the epithet "Ajatshatru" (one without enemies) not because he lacked opponents, but because even amidst intense disagreement, he preserved respect, dialogue, and democratic grace. For Atal Bihari Vajpayee, politics was never merely a means to acquire power; it was a form of national service and disciplined sadhana for nation-building. At a time when politics was increasingly plagued by opportunism, bitterness, and distrust, he anchored it in values, decorum, and constitutional faith. Whether in power or in opposition, his commitment to democracy remained unwavering. As a statesman, thinker, social reformer, and nation-builder, he won not only the hearts of millions of citizens but also the admiration of his fiercest critics. The name "Atal" has become a golden page in Indian history—evoking the fragrance of a people's leader, a visionary statesman, an idealist thinker, a builder of modern India, a skilled administrator, and a philosopher-statesman. His personality had countless dimensions: he was both man and icon, thinker and doer, orator and leader, ruler and guardian of democracy.

Serving as Prime Minister three times was not merely a personal achievement, but a testament to the trust the nation placed in his integrity and vision. From leading a minority government in 1996 to heading a stable coalition after 1999, his journey demonstrated that in a democracy, moral authority and leadership credibility matter more than mere numbers. His historic statement in Parliament—"Governments will come and go, but the nation and democracy must endure"—remains a guiding principle for Indian politics even today.

One of Atalji's most decisive contributions was in instilling strategic self-confidence in India. The 1998 Pokhran nuclear tests were not just scientific or military milestones; they were a declaration of India's self-respect and sovereign resolve. He made it clear that while India is committed to peace, it would never compromise on its security or sovereignty. When international pressure and economic sanctions followed, Vajpayee's leadership shine even brighter. He neither resorted to aggression nor succumbed to submission; instead, he guided the nation through patience, dialogue, and self-reliance, strengthening India economically and diplomatically. This rare balance defines his statesmanship.

Yet, to see Atal Bihari Vajpayee only as a leader of tough decisions would be an incomplete assessment. He was equally a messenger of peace. His historic bus journey to Lahore symbolized his far-sighted belief that courage, compassion, and communication must walk together. Even during the Kargil conflict, he upheld international norms while resolutely defending India's territorial in-



tegrity, presenting the world with the image of India as a responsible and mature power. He believed war should always be the last resort—but when national dignity was challenged, decisive action was unavoidable. This synthesis of idealism and realism made him a true statesman.

Vajpayee's humility and absence of arrogance were legendary. Leaders across party lines, including from the Congress, acknowledged his political acumen and moral stature. Former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru himself was deeply impressed by Vajpayee's parliamentary eloquence and once remarked that Atalji would one day become the Prime Minister of India. The strong organizational and ideological foundation of today's Bharatiya Janata Party owes much to his vision and perseverance. As India's External Affairs Minister in 1977, he made history by delivering a speech in Hindi at the United Nations General Assembly—an experience he described as one of the most fulfilling moments of his life. His parliamentary speeches, marked by clarity, wit, and depth, remain invaluable treasures of India's democratic heritage.

During Vajpayee's tenure, India took a transfor-

mative leap in infrastructure and technology. The Golden Quadrilateral highway project, expansion of rural roads, the telecom revolution, and encouragement of private sector participation laid the foundation of a modern, connected India. For him, development was not confined to economic statistics; it was inseparable from the everyday life of the common citizen. His iconic slogan—"Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Vigyan"—encapsulated his integrated vision of national progress, where security, agriculture, and knowledge reinforce one another. Even today, this slogan can serve as a guiding mantra for India's development journey.

For over five decades in public life, Atal Bihari Vajpayee held numerous positions—from parliamentarian to External Affairs Minister and Prime Minister—yet he remained distinct, untainted, and principled. In an era of declining political values, he stood firm, fearless in thought, immaculate in conduct, and dignified amidst chaos. He was among those rare leaders who formed governments and shaped a new political culture on the strength of their credibility, character, and vision, reinforcing transparency, good governance, and democratic accountability. On the global stage, he emerged as a leader committed to liberal democratic ideals and a balanced, humane worldview.

Perhaps Vajpayee's most endearing quality was his sensitivity even while wielding power. The poet within him never faded. His poems are not mere literary creations; they are expressions of the nation's struggles, hopes, and inner strength. His famous lines—"I shall not accept defeat, I shall not resign to conflict"—are not just verses, but a philosophy of life that inspires both individuals and nations. His nationalism was never narrow or exclusionary; it was inclusive, cultural, and deeply human. He took pride in India's ancient civilization while embracing modernity with confidence. He acted as a bridge between tradition and change. His understanding of Hindutva was not aggressive, but rooted in cultural self-assurance and coexistence.

Today, when politics is increasingly marked by polarization, mistrust, and hostility, Atal Bihari Vajpayee appears more relevant than ever. His life teaches us how to balance strength with civility, conviction with humility, and nationalism with humanism. His 101st birth anniversary invites us not merely to remember his name, but to internalize his values—integrity, dialogue, tolerance, and devotion to the nation. Atal Bihari Vajpayee is not a closed chapter of history; he is a living voice within India's conscience, reminding us that nation-building is not the responsibility of governments alone, but of citizens as well. If we draw inspiration from his ideals and commit ourselves to building a vigilant, compassionate, and strong India, that alone will be his true birth anniversary—and our most sincere tribute to him.

## Rot in govt schools and education system

By: Dr Satyavan Saurabh

Haryana, known for its sports, military heritage, and development claims, often faces a ground reality contrary to these claims. The picture that emerged during Governor Prof. Asim Ghosh's inspection of the Government Model Sanskriti Primary School in Panchkula is not just the story of one school, but exposes the reality of Haryana's education system, which has been hidden behind files and statistics for years. When a state's Governor has to cover his nose from the foul smell of school toilets, it should not only be seen as an inconvenience but as a question mark on the entire system.

For the past few years, the Haryana government has been touting modernization in education with terms like "Model Sanskriti Schools," "Smart Schools," and "Digital Classrooms." Budget speeches announce crores of rupees for schools, posters of new schemes are displayed, and inauguration ceremonies present a picture of development. But this school in Panchkula shows that the development on paper is dying on the ground. Toilets have no water, doors are broken, and the infrastructure is so dilapidated that staff have to make do with the lack of stairs to reach the roof.

This situation didn't arise overnight. It's the result of years of administrative negligence, the failure of inspection mechanisms, and a lack of accountability. The Haryana Education Department has a comprehensive structure—Block Education Officers, District Education Officers, Engineering Wings, Inspection Committees, and School Management Committees. The question is why no one noticed this stench until the Governor arrived. Were all these officials blind, or have they adopted an administrative culture of ignoring everything despite seeing it?

In a state like Haryana, where there's already a deep divide between rural and urban education, this state of government schools further deepens social inequality. Families with the means send their children to private schools. However, those without options are forced to continue their children's education in these schools. In this situation, dirty toilets, dilapidated buildings, and unsafe environments become not just a disorder but a form of social injustice.

The poor condition of toilets is often considered a minor issue, but in reality, it is directly linked to the quality of education. Particularly in Haryana, where girl child education

As lofty as the claims of education reform in Haryana are, the ground reality is equally harsh. The deplorable conditions exposed during the Governor's inspection of a government school in Panchkula reveal that the problem isn't specific to a single school, but to the entire system. Dirty toilets, lack of water, and dilapidated infrastructure are a direct threat to the health and dignity of children. The lack of basic amenities despite budgets and plans worth crores is evidence of administrative failure. If accountability isn't established now, Haryana's future will be shaped by these dilapidated schools.

and dropout rates are already a concern, the lack of clean and safe toilets is a major factor in keeping girls out of school. The effectiveness of campaigns like "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) is questioned when schools lack even basic facilities for girls.

The Governor's anger was understandable, and he ordered immediate improvements. However, Haryana's experience shows that such orders often end up limited to temporary cleaning and whitewashing. Toilets shine for a few days, broken doors are temporarily repaired, and then everything returns to normal. If the guilty officials in this case are not identified and concrete action is not taken against them, this incident, like other inspections, will be buried in files.

The Haryana government touts its spending on education as an achievement. But the gap between spending and results is constantly widening. Questions arise as to where the money is going. Is substandard material being used in construction, is there corruption in the contracting system, or is the monitoring system completely lax? Unless these questions are honestly answered, it is futile to expect any new scheme to bring about real improvement.

The role of society is no less important in this entire episode. In Haryana, parents, panchayats, and local public representatives often remain silent until the matter reaches the media. School management committees exist on paper, but they are neither empowered nor taken seriously. If the local community plays an active role in monitoring schools, such poor conditions would no longer be possible to hide for years.

It's also important to note that Haryana's government schools are not just centers of education, but also a means of safety, nutrition, and social inclusion for children in rural and

backward areas. Midday meal programs, health checkups, and scholarships are delivered through these schools. When the school environment itself is unsafe and abusive, the purpose of these programs is undermined.

This incident should serve as a warning in the context of Haryana. Reforms will not be achieved simply by issuing orders. Regular independent audits of school infrastructure, transparent scrutiny of construction and maintenance contracts, and exemplary action against officials found negligent are essential. Furthermore, school management committees and panchayats should be empowered to hold them accountable by empowering them with real power.

Haryana has long been known as a land of hardworking farmers, soldiers, and athletes. The state can only maintain that reputation if its next generation receives a respectful and safe educational environment. Smelly toilets, broken doors, and dilapidated buildings are not the hallmarks of a developed state.

The Governor's handkerchief has become a symbol of the fact that the situation is no longer concealable. This is a moment of introspection for the Haryana government, administration, and society. If lessons are learned from this incident and concrete and lasting reforms are implemented, this inspection could prove to be a positive turning point. But if this is also forgotten after a few days of discussion, this plight will impact Haryana's future just as it is impacting its schools today.

Ultimately, the question is whether Haryana wants to raise its children to be "models" only through slogans and schemes, or whether it truly wants to provide them with a school where cleanliness, safety, and respect are fundamental rights. This is the true test of education, and the state's future rests on it.

# 'All must join hands to maintain law and order' BNP's Tarique Rahman returns to B'desh

**DHAKA, Dec 25:** Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) acting chairman Tarique Rahman on Thursday called on countrymen to join hands to maintain law and order, in his first address to party supporters hours after his arrival in Dhaka after a gap of 17 years.

"Whatever political party we belong to, whatever religion we believe in, whether we are non-partisan individuals -- all must join hands to maintain law and order," he told thousands of party supporters gathered at the July 36 Expressway in the capital, where he went straight after arriving at the airport.

Rahman's call for maintaining law and order came amid a fresh wave of unrest and political instability gripping Bangladesh following the killing of prominent youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi, who was a prominent face in last year's mass protests that forced the collapse of the Sheikh Hasina government.

Rahman, the 60-year-old son of ailing former prime minister Khaleda Zia, has emerged as a



leading contender for prime ministership in the polls.

Referring to a popular quote from US civil rights activist Martin Luther King "I Have a dream", Rahman said, "I have a plan for the people of my country and for my country," state-owned Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha reported.

"This plan is for the interest of the people, for the development of the country, for changing the lot of

the country. To implement the plan, I need the support of all the people of the country. If you stand beside us, God willing, we will be able to implement my plan," Rahman added.

He said he wants to make a safe Bangladesh where people irrespective of castes, creeds and faiths can live in a peaceful environment, the report said.

"We have people from the hills

and the plains in this country -- Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. We want to build a safe Bangladesh, where every woman, man and child can leave home safely and return safely," he said.

Rahman's call for unity came as Jamaat-e-Islami, the BNP's coalition partner during its 2001-2006 tenure in power, has emerged as its main rival in the upcoming polls after the interim government blocked Awami League's participation under the country's tough Anti-Terrorism Act.

He urged people to pray for her ailing mother and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, whom he was going to meet at the Evercare hospital in Dhaka after leaving the venue.

Zia, a three-time prime minister, has been undergoing treatment at the intensive care unit (ICU) at the hospital.

BNP emerged as the forerunner to capture power in the February polls, as former prime minister Hasina's Awami League party has been barred from contesting the election. (PTI)

# N Korea displays apparent progress in construction of nuclear-powered submarine

**SEOUL, Dec 25:** North Korea on Thursday displayed apparent progress in the construction of a nuclear-powered submarine, with state media photos showing a largely completed hull, as leader Kim Jong Un condemned rival South Korea's push to acquire the technology.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said Kim visited a shipyard to inspect the construction of what the North describes as an 8,700-ton-class nuclear-propelled submarine, which the leader has previously called a crucial step in the modernisation and nuclear armament of North Korea's navy. The North has indicated it plans to arm the submarine with nuclear weapons, calling it a "strategic guided missile submarine" or a "strategic nuclear attack submarine."

During the visit, Kim described South Korea's efforts to acquire a nuclear-powered submarine, which have been backed by US President Donald Trump, as an "offensive act" that severely violates the North's security and maritime sovereignty.

He says the South Korean plan further underscores the need to modernise and nuclear-arm North Korea's navy, and claimed that the completion of his nuclear-powered submarine would be an "epoch-making" change in strengthening its nuclear war deterrent against what he called enemy threats.

The agency did not specify when Kim visited the shipyard, but released photos showing him inspecting a huge, burgundy-colored vessel, coated with what appears to be anti-corrosion paint, under construction inside an assembly hall with senior officials and his daughter. It was the first time North Korean state media had released images of the submarine since March, when they mostly showed the lower sections of the vessel.

It was not immediately clear how close North Korea is to completing the vessel. But because submarines are typically built from the inside out, the release of what appears to be a largely completed hull suggests that many core components, including the engine and possibly the reactor, are already in place, said Moon Keun-sik, a submarine expert at Seoul's Hanyang



University. "Showing the entire vessel now seems to indicate that most of the equipment has already been installed and it is just about ready to be launched into the water," said Moon, a former submarine officer in the South Korean navy, who believes the North Korean submarine could possibly be tested at sea within months.

A nuclear-powered submarine was one item on a long wish list of sophisticated weaponry that Kim announced during a major political conference in 2021 to cope with what he called growing US-led military threats. Other weapons were solid-fuelled intercontinental ballistic missiles, hypersonic weapons, spy satellites and multi-warhead missiles. North Korea has since performed a run of testing activities to acquire them.

It would be a worrying development if North Korea obtains a greater ability to fire missiles from underwater is a worrying development, because it's difficult to detect such launches in advance. But there have been questions about whether North Korea, a heavily sanctioned and impoverished country, could get resources and technology to build nuclear-powered submarines.

Some experts say North Korea's recent alignment with Russia -- including sending thousands of troops and military equipment to support President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine -- may have helped it to receive technological assistance in return.

While some analysts suspect North Korea may have sought a re-

actor from Russia, possibly from a retired Russian submarine, Moon said it is more likely that North Korea designed its own reactor, while possibly receiving some technological assistance from Russia.

During a summit with Trump in November, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung called for US support for South Korea's efforts to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, while reaffirming a commitment to increase defence spending to ease the burden on the United States.

Trump later said that the United States is open to sharing closely held technology to allow South Korea to build a nuclear-powered submarine, but it's not immediately clear where and when the vessel would be built and how Seoul would get the nuclear fuel and reactor technology required.

In a separate report, KCNA said Kim on Wednesday supervised a test of a new, long-range anti-air missile that was fired toward its eastern sea. South Korea's Defence Ministry didn't immediately comment on the launch.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have worsened in recent years as Kim accelerated his military nuclear program and deepened alignment with Moscow following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. His government has repeatedly dismissed calls by Washington and Seoul to revive negotiations aimed at winding down his nuclear and missile programs, which derailed in 2019 following a collapsed summit with Trump during the American president's first term. (AP)

## Blast at mosque in Nigeria kills 5



**LAGOS, Dec 25:** Five people have been killed in Nigeria's northeastern Maiduguri after a bomb exploded during prayer at a mosque on Wednesday night, a police statement said.

Police added that 35 people were injured in the attack, which it said is likely a suicide attack.

"Preliminary investigations further suggest that the incident may have been a suicide bombing, based on the recovery of fragments of a suspected suicide vest and witness statements recorded, while investigations are ongoing to establish the exact cause and circumstances," Nahum Daso, spokesperson for Borno state police command, said in the statement.

Daso said police were conducting a sweep of the area in search of secondary devices.

The Christmas Eve attack is the latest in a series of attacks in Nigeria's troubled northern region, where the country is battling multiple armed groups, including Boko Haram and its splinter group, Islamic State West Africa Province, among others. Several thousand people have been killed, with millions displaced from their homes since 2009, according to the United Nations.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack, but the use of suicide bombers has been heavily attributed to Boko Haram, the Islamic militant group that has previously claimed responsibility for many such attacks across the northeastern region.

Analysts say the group's use of suicide bombers has subsided over the past few years, but it still has the capacity to launch such attacks. In July 2024, a three-pronged suicide attack on a wedding ceremony in Borno raised the specter of a renewed use of the method by the militant group. (AP)

# India engaged with US to find mutually beneficial trade pact: Kwatra

**NEW YORK/WASHINGTON, Dec 25:** India remains very constantly engaged with the United States to find a mutually beneficial and balanced trade arrangement as early as possible, India's Ambassador to the US Vinay Mohan Kwatra said.

"On trade and tariff...we remain very constantly engaged with the United States Trade Representative (USTR) with the hope to find a mutually beneficial and a balanced trade arrangement as early as possible," Kwatra told PTI in an exclusive interview here.

"Our effort all along, right through this whole year, the tone for the relationship was set during Prime Minister's visit in early February. We agreed to a very, very significant and substantial outcome document across range of areas. Space was one of them," he said.

Kwatra termed India's successful launch of an American communication satellite on Wednesday as a "very important and big day" for partnership between Washington and New Delhi, saying it caps a series of achievements in 2025 in bilateral space cooperation between the countries.

In a historic achievement, Indian Space Research Organization's (ISRO) heaviest rocket LVM3-M6 successfully placed the next-generation commercial communication satellite BlueBird-6 (Block-2), developed by AST SpaceMobile, USA, into its precise intended orbit. LVM3 carried the heaviest commercial satellite ever launched from Indian soil, underscoring LVM3's growing capability as a reliable heavy-lift launch vehicle.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had visited the US in February this year for a bilateral meeting with

US President Donald Trump, their first meeting within weeks of Trump's inauguration for a second term in the White House.

In the joint statement issued after the meeting, the two leaders had hailed 2025 as a "pioneering year" for US-India civil space cooperation, with plans for a NASA-ISRO effort through AXIOM to bring the first Indian astronaut to the International Space Station (ISS), and early launch of the joint "NISAR" mission, the first of its kind to systematically map changes to the Earth's surface using dual radars.

The leaders had called for more collaboration in space exploration, including on long duration human spaceflight missions, spaceflight safety and sharing of expertise and professional exchanges in emerging areas, including planetary protection. (PTI)

# Bangladesh police announces reward for information on Hindu household attackers

**DHAKA/NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** Bangladesh police announced a reward for information on attackers who set on fire a Hindu-owned house near the southeastern port city of Chattogram, as mob violence emerged as a major crisis in the changed political landscape.

Chattogram range's police chief Ahsan Habib offered the bounty on Wednesday night without specifying the amount during his visit to the burned-down house of Qatar expatriate workers Shukh Shil and Anil Shil at Raojan area on the outskirts of the city. Ittefaq newspaper reported on Thursday.

According to reports, unidentified miscreants set the home on fire on Tuesday night, but the residents managed to come out of the house unharmed.

Family members said they woke up after sensing the heat of the fire in the predawn hours, but were initially unable to come out as the doors were locked from the outside. The eight members of the two families escaped the burning house after cutting through tin sheets and bamboo fencing.

A series of arson attacks targeting the homes of Hindu families took place in the past week in the same area. Police said they have arrested five suspects and formed a "special security team" to ensure safety in the neighbourhood. The Business Standard newspaper reported.

"Houses of seven Hindu families were burned in three separate localities (at Raojan)" in five days, the report read.

Raojan Police Station chief Sajedul Islam said so far, five suspects were arrested in police raids, and manhunters were underway for others.

The police held a meeting with local influential people to ensure interfaith harmony and social vigilance against perpetrators of such "heinous crimes".

A mob last week lynched 28-year-old Hindu factory worker Dipu Chandra Das in central Mymensingh over alleged defamation of the religion, sparking a widespread protest in the country. Muhammad Yunus' interim government said it would take care of the minor child, wife and parents of Das.

Police and other law enforcement agencies said they arrested 12 of the mobbers so far, while a senior adviser to the government visited the bereaved family to offer support.

The mob violence and arson attacks exposed Bangladesh to a sense of fright, especially after the death of Inqilab Mancha leader Sharif Osman Hadi at a Singapore hospital six days after he was shot by masked gunmen in Dhaka.

On the same evening, the mob set alight the offices of the mass circulation Daily Star and Prothom Alo and two leading cultural groups, Chhayano and the Udichi Shilpi Goshti, which were founded in the 1060s.

Yunus' office in a statement on Tuesday said "allegations, rumours or differences of belief can never excuse violence, and no individual has the right to take the law into their own hands".

But a leading rights group, Ain o Salish Kendra, said their report suggested 184 people were killed in mob violence across the country in 2025. (PTI)

# Algeria votes to declare French colonisation crime, demands restitution

**ALGIERS(ALGERIA), Dec 25:** Legislators in Algeria voted to declare France's colonisation of the North African country a crime, approving a law that calls for restitution of property taken by France during its 130-year rule, among other demands seeking to redress historical wrongs.

France slammed the law as a "hostile act" threatening bilateral efforts to heal wounds of the past. The two countries retain close cultural and economic ties but have troubled diplomatic relations.

In a solemn ceremony steeped in symbolism, 340 of 407 members of Algeria's National Assembly voted late Wednesday to approve the law. The move came just a few weeks after African countries made a collective resolution for recognition and reparations for colonial-era crimes.

The law covers the period from the landing of King Charles X's army on the beaches of Sidi Ferruch west of Algiers in 1830 to July 5, 1962, the date of Algeria's official independence.

The text provides for the restitution of Algerian archives and property moved to France during the colonial period, and the transmission to Algiers of detailed maps of French nuclear tests conducted in Algeria from 1960 to 1966. It also calls for the repatriation of the remains of some Algerian resistance fighters taken to France.

The law stipulates prison sentences for any action by an Algerian celebrating French colonialism, for attacks on symbols of the Algerian resistance, and "remarks with colonial connotations."

France is unlikely to heed the demands in the law. The law is "a manifestly hostile initiative," the French Foreign Ministry spokesperson's office said in a statement to The Associated Press. It noted efforts under French President Emmanuel Macron to address colonial-era grievances, and added: "We continue to work toward the renewal of dialogue," notably about security and migration issues. (AP)

# UN turns 80 in 2025 amid global crises, India says ready for greater role

**UNITED NATIONS, Dec 25:** The UN marked its 80th anniversary in 2025 amid global conflicts, financial crisis, and US President Donald Trump's criticism, as India urged the world body to focus on "leadership and hope" and expressed willingness to take on a greater role.

The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, along with several others around the world from Sudan to Myanmar, raged unabated in 2025, yet again highlighting the ineptitude of the UN and its powerful, but polarised, Security Council in addressing global challenges.

As nations continue to grapple with humanitarian emergencies, climate chaos and economic inequality, questions are raised over the relevance of the UN and whether the 80-year-old organisation, founded in 1945, has solutions for the problems of a world in flux in the 21st century. Against this backdrop, India gave a clarion call for reformed multilateralism. Addressing world leaders from the UN General Assembly podium in September, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar stressed that an "objective report card" will show that the UN is in a state of crisis.

"When peace is under threat from conflicts, when development is derailed by lack of resources, when human rights are violated by terrorism, the UN remains gridlocked. As its ability to forge com-

mon ground diminishes, belief in multilateralism also recedes," he said.

India categorically told the world that central to the erosion of the UN's credibility has been resistance to reform, and Delhi stands ready to assume greater responsibilities in an expanded UNSC, which, with its current 15 members, is not representative of the world of 2025.

"Both permanent and non-permanent membership of the Council must be expanded. A reformed Council must be truly representative. And India stands ready to assume greater responsibilities," Jaishankar said. "The ninth decade of the UN must be one of leadership and hope. Bharat will do its fair share, and more," he said. In the fight against terrorism, India continued to lead from the front in combating the scourge.

India exercised its right to defend its people against terrorism through Operation Sindoor that targeted terror infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack in April perpetrated by The Resistance Front.

At a time when Pakistan was sitting in the UNSC as a non-permanent member, the organisation issued a statement condemning in the strongest terms the Pahalgam attack, and underlined the need to hold its perpetrators, organisers, financiers and sponsors accountable and bring



them to justice.

The Resistance Front, a proxy of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba terror group, also found mention for the first time in a Security Council report for its role in the Pahalgam attack.

The calls for reforming the UN also came from the highest echelons of the world body when Secretary General Antonio Guterres gave a clarion call to reform the Security Council to make it more representative, transparent, and effective. As the UN was grappling with its myriad challenges, its 80th year coin-

cided with one of its most harshest critics returning to power in the White House for a second term.

Relations between the UN and Trump 1.0 were far from cordial and were characterised by severe criticism by the US President of the UN's effectiveness, with the American leader describing the world body as "just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time".

After Trump commenced his second presidency in January 2025, UN watchers and envoys braced for a chilly and less than cordial relationship between

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and Turtle Bay. Within hours of his swearing-in in January, Trump signed an executive order directing the US to withdraw, again, from the Paris climate agreement, echoing a similar directive from his first term.

Within weeks of his second term, Trump issued an order directing that the US will not participate in the UN Human Rights Council, will conduct a review of its membership in UNESCO and suspend funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. And when Trump arrived at the UN Headquarters for the 80th General Assembly session in September, he did not hold back and delivered one of his harshest rebukes of the world body.

"What is the purpose of the United Nations? The UN has such tremendous potential... but it's not even coming close to living up to that potential... all they seem to do is write a really strongly worded letter and then never follow that letter up. It's empty words and empty words don't solve war," Trump said in his speech.

Criticising the UN over migration, Trump said, "Not only is the UN not solving the problems it should... it's actually creating new problems for us to solve. The best example is... the crisis of uncontrolled migration... The United Nations is funding an assault on Western countries and their borders."

Trump noted that in 2024, the UN budgeted USD 372 million in cash assistance to support an estimated 624,000 migrants journeying into the US.

Trump also slammed the UN for its "predictions" about climate change, describing it as the "greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world". Though the US remains the largest donor to the UN in 2025, it clawed back over USD 1 billion in funding to the world body.

Guterres, in December, said the UN ended 2024 with USD 760 million in unpaid assessments, most of it still outstanding, and has yet to receive USD 877 million in contributions due for 2025, bringing total arrears to around USD 1.586 billion.

In a sign of the times, the UN said it will no longer provide paper towels in UNHQ main campus restrooms servicing office spaces and encouraged use of electric hand-dryers. The move is expected to save over USD 100,000 per year.

India voiced support for sustainable and predictable financing of the UN system, emphasising that resources should be used effectively and efficiently.

Underlining that both global peace and prosperity are endangered worldwide, India's Permanent Representative to the UN, Parvathaneni Harish, said that in the real world, nothing can run forever without reform and repair. (PTI)

# Honeymoon murder, regional party's rise, crackdown on mining mark Meghalaya's unquiet year

**SHILLONG, Dec 25:** A honeymoon murder, rise of a regional party, infrastructural push and crackdown on illegal coal extraction dominated headlines in Meghalaya this year.

The killing of Indore-based businessman Raja Raghuvanshi allegedly by his wife and others grabbed national attention, with the police arresting multiple accused and filing a detailed charge sheet. The case fed into wider debates on policing capacity and the handling of high-visibility investigations.

Meghalaya Police stated it was among the most resource-intensive probes in recent years, citing financial tracking and interstate coordination with agencies in Madhya Pradesh.

Political currents shifted in tandem. The Voice of the People Party (VPP), which secured its maiden Lok Sabha win in 2024 by unseating three-term Congress MP Vincent H Pala in Shillong, consolidated its standing by sweeping the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council polls and forming the executive committee early this year.

The outcome signalled a break from long-standing alignments in urban Khasi-Jaintia areas

and underlined the party's transition from agitation to administration.

Congress receded further after its lone remaining MLA, Ronnie V Lyngdoh, resigned and joined the ruling National People's Party (NPP), a move recognised under the anti-defection law and one that left the party without representation in the 60-member House.

A major cabinet reshuffle in September added to the governance churn, with eight ministers resigning and eight inducted as the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance recalibrated coalition representation across NPP, UDP, HSPDP and BJP.

Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma retained finance and cabinet affairs, while both deputy chief ministers held portfolios linked to home, public works and urban infrastructure.

Sangma said the decisions followed consultations to ensure "balanced regional representation across districts".

The government positioned connectivity and youth-linked investment as central fiscal priorities, investing in road upgrades, skill development and tourism infrastructure.



Beautification drives continued in Shillong alongside appeals for traffic discipline, while judicial nudges pressed land acquisition linked to an airport proposal.

A ₹ 50-crore support package to revive an airfield in the western region was pitched as a step toward improved air access.

Education and youth livelihoods drew administrative attention. The state disbursed ₹ 130 crore in scholarships covering nearly 70,000 students, and advanced a World Bank-supported initiative to retain adolescents in school.

A new curriculum decision mandated Khasi and Garo instruction up to class 1, which Sangma

framed as cultural grounding, noting that children must learn with "confidence and a sense of belonging".

Tourism and cultural events shaped the economic narrative. The revived Autumn Calendar returned marquee festivals, with Me'gong Festival in Garo Hills drawing visitors. Officials claimed that the sector revived post-pandemic.

Heavy rain triggered landslides along tourist approaches to Shillong and Sohra. In the Dawki-Shnongpdeng belt, tourism stakeholders highlighted water pollution in parts of Umngot River due to road-cutting work on the Shillong-Dawki stretch under the NHIDCL corridor.

The Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board inspected the site, imposed a fine for non-compliance and tightened scrutiny along the route.

In the sports sector, work progressed for a football stadium with 40,000 capacity near the state capital.

The issue of illegal coal extraction dominated regulatory discussion later in the year.

In December, the East Jaintia Hills administration demolished 11 unauthorised coke plants operating without mandatory approvals, acting on

the high court's directions with supervision from enforcement and pollution control officials.

A court-appointed committee later reported that illegal coal mining remained active in parts of the district. It recommended intensified patrolling, exit-point checking and regular compliance reporting to the chief secretary.

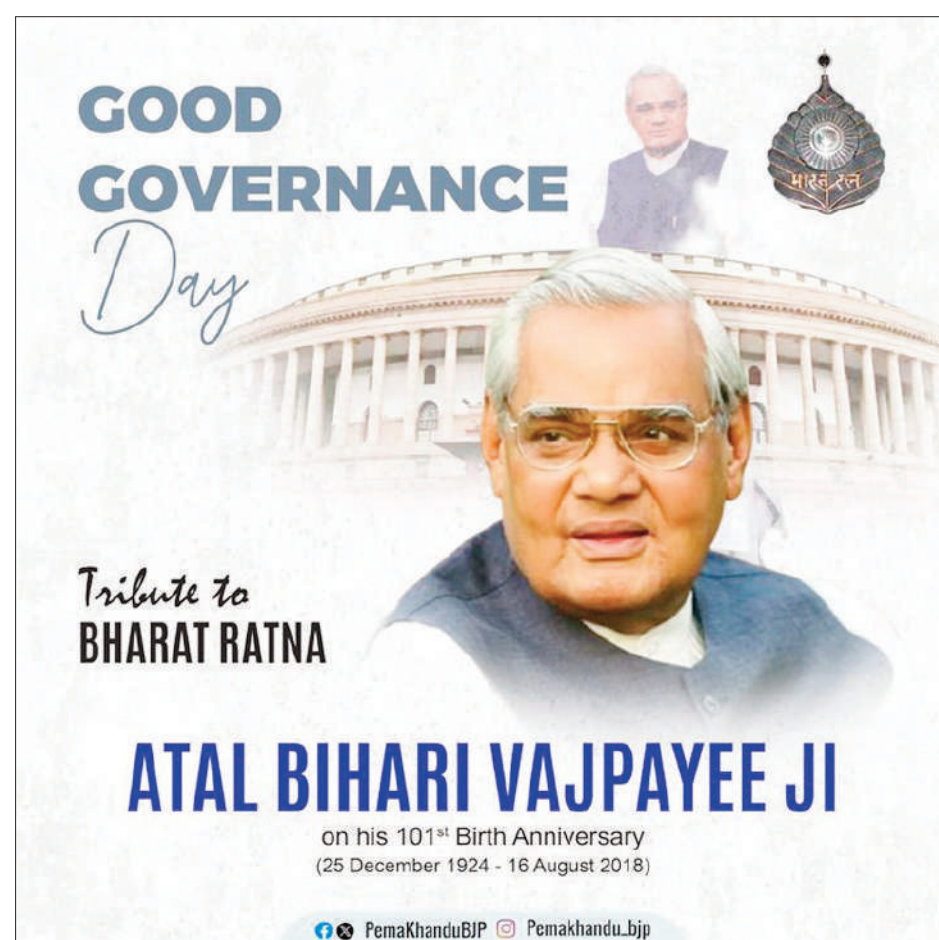
Row erupted when a cabinet minister, while responding to a query on missing coal stock near riverbanks, suggested that monsoon rain "could have washed" some into Assam and Bangladesh -- remarks that drew scrutiny amid judicial monitoring.

Disputes along the Assam-Meghalaya interstate boundary also remained active.

In Lapangap, farmers attempting to harvest paddy in a disputed tract were stopped by villagers across the boundary, prompting police deployment and administrative appeals for calm.

In October, a Karbi villager died and several people were injured in a clash over farmland access near West Karbi Anglong and West Jaintia Hills. Both state administrations reiterated that regional mechanisms would continue. (PTI)

## Towering statesman whose vision continues to guide nation: Arunachal CM pays tribute to Vajpayee



**ITANAGAR, Dec 25:** Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Thursday paid tributes to former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee on his birth anniversary, remembering him as a towering statesman whose vision continues to guide the nation's governance ethos.

Khandu said the occasion was a reminder of Vajpayee's lifelong commitment to democratic values.

"On the occasion of Good Governance Day, we remember the ideals and vision of Bharat Ratna Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji," he said in a post on X.

"Let us reaffirm our commitment to transparency, accountability and people-centric governance for a stronger and inclusive nation," he added.

Vajpayee was born on this day in Gwalior in 1924 and passed away in New Delhi on August 16, 2018. The government observes his birth anniversary as Good Governance Day.

He served the country as prime minister for three terms between 1996 and 2004.

Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein also paid homage to Vajpayee, recalling his "decisive yet compassionate leadership".

Mein said that as PM, Vajpayee's leadership, humility and farsighted policies laid a strong foundation for a confident and progressive India.

He said Vajpayee's enduring legacy of good governance, inclusive development and national unity continues to inspire generations.

"Let us pay tribute to his memory by upholding his ideals and dedicating ourselves wholeheartedly to the service of the Nation," he added. (PTI)

## Church services, community feasts mark Christmas celebrations in Christian-majority Mizoram



**AIZAWL, Dec 25:** Christmas was celebrated across Mizoram on Thursday with traditional fervour to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ, as churches of various denominations held special services.

Group songs and special Christmas-related performances were presented by youth members and children of local churches, conveying messages of love, peace and joy.

Traditional congregational singing services, known locally as 'Zaikhawm', were also held following church services.

The celebrations began on Wednesday evening, locally called 'Urlawk zan', during which wor-

ship services, dedication programmes and congregational singing were organised by churches.

The Roman Catholic Church also held midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

While most churches in Christian-majority Mizoram observe Christmas for two days, the duration of the celebrations sometimes extends to a week, depending on local convenience.

A traditional high tea, known as 'Thingpui ruai', was served on Thursday, while community feasts, an integral part of Christmas celebrations, will be organised on Friday by most churches, including

the Mizoram Presbyterian Church and the Baptist Church of Mizoram.

However, some indigenous churches began the community feasts on Thursday.

Mizoram, which celebrated the centenary of the arrival of Christianity in 1994, observes Christmas as a blend of religious devotion and traditional practices.

Despite influences of Western-style celebrations, the Mizo people continue to follow customs rooted in their historic traditions.

Some Christian denominations, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, do not observe Christmas. (PTI)

## Arms, ammunition recovered in Manipur



**IMPHAL, Dec 25:** Arms and ammunition were recovered from Manipur's Imphal West district, police said on Thursday. The recovery was made from Lambal and Haorang Keirel areas of the district on Wednesday, they said.

Among the items recovered were a single-barrel gun, three pistols, three bolt-action rifles, eight grenades, 28 mini-flare cartridges, two radio sets and 28 live ammunition of different calibres, they added.

In a separate operation in Churachandpur district, an 8-ft 'pumpi' (locally-made mortar), 12 'pumpi' shells, a modified MP5 rifle and a single-barrel rifle were recovered from Thangjing forest. (PTI)

## Christmas celebrated in Meghalaya with midnight prayers, carol processions

**SHILLONG, Dec 25:** Christmas was celebrated across Meghalaya with midnight services in churches and carol processions through illuminated streets, as church leaders called upon people to reflect on the message of hope, peace and love associated with the birth of Jesus Christ.

People gathered at churches for prayers and hymns to mark the festival. Carol processions were held in various localities, drawing residents and visitors alike. Addressing a congregation during Midnight Mass at Catholic Cathedral here, Bishop Victor said the birth of Jesus Christ symbolised the victory of light over darkness.

Pastor Anand Thapa of Mawkhar Presbyterian Church urged worshippers to carry the spirit of Christmas beyond the celebrations and practise compassion and harmony in everyday life.

Streets across Shillong were illuminated with decorative lights,



giving the city a festive look and drawing a large number of tourists.

Rohan Mehta, a tourist from Delhi, said, "The carols and lights make the city very welcoming. It feels special to be here now."

Maria Fernandes, a visitor from

Mumbai, said Shillong offered "a very warm and simple celebration" that stood out from other destinations, while admiring the giant Christmas tree put up at Khyndailad junction in the heart of the city. (PTI)

## Journalist found dead in her house in Mizoram

**AIZAWL, Dec 25:** A journalist was found dead in her house in Aizawl on Thursday, police said.

Ezrela Dalidia Fanai, 41, was a freelance journalist who had worked with several national media houses over the years. She lived alone in the house after her mother passed away in July, police said.

Although she answered phone calls till Wednesday morning, she did not respond to the youths of a local church, who organised a Christmas Carol at her premises on Wednesday night, they said.

When her relatives failed to reach her over the phone on Thursday morning, they, along with locals, broke into the house and found her lying dead on the floor, police said. Her colleagues and relatives said that she was suffering from depression following the death of her mother. Alcohol bottles were found near her body, locals claimed. (PTI)

## Northeast students join National Integration Tour to Gujarat



**HT Correspondent**

**NAHARLAGUN, Dec 25:** Under the Assam Rifles Civic Action Programme, the Khonsa Battalion has organised a National Integration Tour for students from Wancha Rajkumar Government College, Deomali, Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh. The students will attend the 26th Rashtra Katha Shivir organised by Shri Vedic Mission Trust at Village Pransla, Rajkot district, Gujarat.

A total of 11 students from the Khonsa Battalion's area of responsibility are participating in the tour, scheduled from 27 December 2025 to 4 January 2026. The tour was flagged off on 25 December 2025 by Wanki Lowang, Minister of Geology, Mining and Minerals, Government of Arunachal Pradesh from Deomali.

The initiative aims to instill a sense of nationalism, promote national integration and expose North Eastern youth to India's diverse cultural heritage and developmental progress. The tour will allow participants to interact with people from different regions, broaden their perspectives and gain insights into social harmony, unity and cultural diversity. The program also seeks to channel the energy of local youth positively, discouraging involvement in drug abuse or insurgency. This initiative reflects Assam Rifles' commitment to the holistic development of North Eastern youth and the promotion of peace, harmony and national unity in the region.

## Sikkim BJP pays tribute to former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee

**GANGTOK, Dec 25:** The BJP's Sikkim unit on Thursday celebrated the 101st Birth Anniversary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee with great enthusiasm at Amrit Mahotsav Park in Sangkhola in Gangtok district. The programme was attended by the party's state secretary Sangay Pulger, other leaders and workers from all six districts, said Sikkim BJP spokesperson Niren Bhandari.

Dhruv Chauhan, a party worker, addressed the gathering, highlighting the life story and achievements of Vajpayee, a Bharat Ratna awardee, as well as his contribution to the development of Sikkim.

The programme concluded with the workers pledging to work for the development of Sikkim, following in the footsteps of Vajpayee.

Similar programmes were also organised by the BJP district teams in Namchi and Geying to commemorate the birth anniversary of the former PM. Vajpayee was born on this day in Gwalior in 1924 and passed away in New Delhi on August 16, 2018. The government observes his birth anniversary as Good Governance Day. (PTI)

Celebration blends culture, adventure and eco-tourism as India greets its first sunrise of the year

## Sunrise Festival in India's easternmost village to welcome New Year

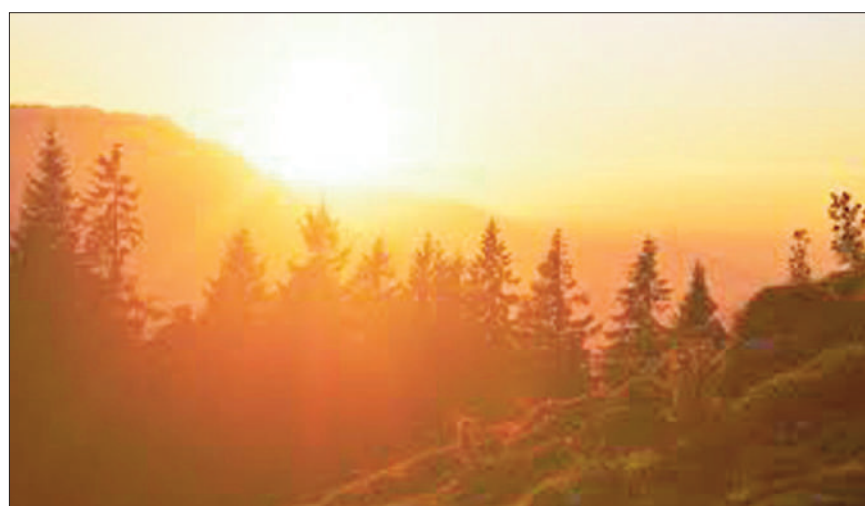
**ITANAGAR, Dec 25:** Tourists can usher in the New Year at Arunachal Pradesh's Dong, the first village in India to witness the sunrise, amid a lineup of cultural performances and adventure activities.

The first Sunrise Festival will begin on December 29 and continue till January 2, bringing together artists, explorers, scholars and travellers from across India and abroad, officials said on Thursday.

Located in the remote Anjaw district near the India-China-Myanmar tri-junction, Dong, home to the Meyor tribe is known as the first place in India to witness sunrise, they said.

The five-day community-led celebration will mark the country's first sunrise of the New Year, aiming to showcase Arunachal Pradesh as a destination for nature, culture, adventure and sustainable tourism, they added.

Programmes will include traditional sunrise ceremonies, cultural performances by communities from across the state, guided treks, nature walks, river activities, eco-



camping, village tours, photography expeditions, workshops, folk-art and craft sessions and local food showcases.

Organisers said the event will follow a strict sustainability approach with the theme

of 'No Trash, No Trace, No Excuses', promoting responsible travel and eco-friendly practices.

A sunrise pledge will also be administered on January 1, they said.

## Most victims burnt to death: Police Six killed after truck collides with bus in Karnataka

**CHITRADURGA (KARNATAKA), Dec 25:** At least six persons, including a child, were killed when a speeding truck crashed against a luxury sleeper bus that caught fire under the impact in this district in the wee hours of Thursday, a senior police official said.

While the East Zone Inspector General of Police Ravikanth Gowda had earlier said nine people were killed, citing preliminary investigation, later he and the district police chief said that five persons lost their lives.

It later emerged that a child was among those killed in the accident.

"With this, the number of people killed in this accident is six," Superintendent of Police, Ranjith Kumar Bandaru, told reporters in Chitradurga.

According to Gowda, three others whose identity was not known might have saved their lives by jumping out of the bus.

Five passengers of the bus and the driver of the truck were killed in the accident.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah consoled the deaths. Both announced ex-gratia to the next of kin of the deceased.

Siddaramaiah also said a proper probe would be conducted into the fatal accident.

The accident happened after the container truck jumped a road divider and collided with the oncoming bus, Gowda told reporters.



The bus with 32 occupants, including 30 passengers was on its way from Bengaluru to Gokarna. The vehicle was engulfed in flames under the impact of the collision and most of the deceased were burnt alive inside the bus at Golarthi in Hiriyur Taluk, he added.

The bus driver and cleaner escaped.

"As per the investigation so far, it (container lorry) directly hit the diesel tank (of the bus), leading to diesel tank leak and fire," Gowda said.

According to police sources, three friends

were among the survivors. Two other passengers saved their lives by jumping from the vehicle.

"Of the 12 injured, nine have been shifted to Sira and three to Tumakuru. One of the patients with critical burn injuries has been taken to Victoria Hospital in Bengaluru," Gowda added.

Except for the one who has been shifted to Bengaluru, the rest of the injured are out of danger, the IGP said.

Another bus from T Dasrahalli to Dandeli with 42 school children that was behind the

ill-fated bus just escaped the accident.

"The bus carrying schoolchildren hit the bus (involved in the accident) from behind, turned to the other side and veered off the road. Fortunately, no one sustained even a minor injury," Gowda said.

The children continued their journey in another bus, he said, adding that the school bus driver is an important eyewitness whose statement will be recorded.

Most passengers of the bus that was involved in the accident had booked their tickets online.

"We have got their phone numbers. We are trying to contact their families," he said. The officer said a DNA test would be performed to identify the bodies.

Recalling the horror, driver of the bus Rafiq said the truck came from the other side of the road divider and hit his vehicle.

"It was overspeeding. I was maintaining the speed at 60-70 (km/hr) at that time. I saw the vehicle coming from the front. I know only the vehicle (truck) hitting the bus, after that I don't know what happened and how I was brought out." A badly injured Rafiq told reporters in the hospital that he tried to control the bus on seeing the vehicle approaching from the opposite direction.

"My bus even grazed a vehicle moving next to us. I don't know what vehicle it was. But, couldn't (control)." (PTI)

## No connection between PM's 'global talk and local walk' on environment, says Cong



**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** The Congress on Thursday claimed that the redefinition of the Aravallis would render more than 90 per cent of the hills unprotected and open them up for mining and other activities.

In a post on X, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said there is no connection between Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "global talk and local walk" when it comes to environmental concerns.

He also accused the government of launching a determined assault on ecological balance by weakening environmental protection laws and loosening pollution norms.

The government countered Ramesh, with Environment Minister Bhopendra Yadav saying no FSI study has been conducted on what the Congress leader is claiming. "But I know the reason you are spreading these lies despite FSI issuing a categorical denial," he said, as he put out a post of Forest Survey of India on X that refuted claims that a study was conducted.

Yadav rejected Congress' claims that more than 90 per cent of the Aravallis will not be protected under the redefinition of the hills, saying the party is "rattled" because the government has issued a total ban on mining in the Aravallis.

Under the new definition, an "Aravalli Hill" is a landform with an elevation of at least 100 metres above its local surrounding terrain and an "Aravalli Range" is a cluster of two or more such hills within 500 metres of each other.

"The Modi Sarkar's redefinition of the Aravallis, that goes against all expert opinion, is dangerous and disastrous." According to the Forest Survey of India's data that is authoritative, only 8.7 per cent of the Aravalli hills that are higher than 20 metres exceed 100 metres. If we take all Aravalli hills identified by FSI, not even 1 per cent exceeds 100 metres. The FSI believes, and rightly so, that height limits are dubious and ALL of the Aravallis irrespective of height should be protected," Ramesh said. "In terms of area, this means that

well over 90 percent of the Aravallis will NOT be protected by the redefinition and could well get opened up for mining, real estate, and other activities that will further damage an already ravaged ecosystem," the former environment minister said.

This plain and simple truth cannot be covered up, Ramesh said.

"This is yet another example of the Modi Sarkar's determined assault on ecological balance that includes loosening of pollution standards, weakening of environmental and forest laws, emasculating of the National Green Tribunal and other institutions of environmental governance," he said. "There is simple (simply) no connection between the PM's global talk and his local walk when it comes to environmental concerns," the Congress leader said. Hitting back, Yadav said, "Maybe your 'environmentalist hat' would be credible if you questioned your party colleague Ashok Gehlot about who destroyed the Aravallis."

"You and your coterie are rattled because we have issued a total ban on mining in the Aravallis from Gujarat to Delhi. We will not allow you, Mr Gehlot or anyone else in your party to plunder the sacred Aravalli range ever again. Will continue to work for the restoration of what your party has ravaged," the Environment minister said on X. After Yadav's rebuttal, Ramesh said the Union minister of environment, forests, and climate change continues to "mislead and misinform" on the Aravallis. "FSI is now under additional charge of the ministry's ADG and will say whatever the minister wants and is directed to. FSI's internal assessment warned the ministry. Is such an assessment being denied?" he asked.

"The raw data is very much with FSI. So why doesn't the minister ask FSI to do a formal study and come out with the elevation chart of the very large number of hills of varying heights that constitute the Aravallis in the 15 districts of Rajasthan?" Ramesh further asked. (PTI)

## Prez releases Constitution of India in Santhali language

**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday released the Constitution of India in the Santhali language at a function held at the Rashtrapati Bhavan here.

The Santhali language, which was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution through the 92nd Amendment Act, 2003, is one of the most ancient living languages of India.

It is spoken by a significant number of tribal people in Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal and Bihar.

Speaking on the occasion, the president said it is a matter of pride and joy for all the Santhali people that the Constitution of India is now available in the Santhali language, written in the Ol Chiki script.

It will make them able to read and understand the Constitution in their own language, Murmu added.

The president appreciated Union Minister of Law and Justice Arjun Ram Meghwal and his team for bringing the Constitution in the Ol Chiki script in its centenary year.

The dignitaries present on the occasion were Vice President C P Radhakrishnan and Meghwal among others. (PTI)

## Shah inaugurates Abhyudaya MP Growth Summit

**GWALIOR, Dec 25:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday inaugurated the 'Abhyudaya Madhya Pradesh Growth Summit' here, and also launched as well as performed the groundbreaking ceremony of industrial projects of ₹ 2 lakh crore.

Shah also inaugurated the Gwalior Fair and dedicated to people the renovation work carried out at the Atal Museum on this occasion.

According to officials, 25,000 beneficiaries and thousands of entrepreneurs and investors are participating in the summit, organised to mark the birth anniversary of former prime minister late Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

This industrial projects will generate 1.93 lakh employment opportunities, they said.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, Union Minister of Communications Jyotiraditya Scindia, state Assembly Speaker Narendra Singh Tomar, and state BJP chief Hemant Khandelwal, among others, were present on the occasion.

CM Yadav has earlier said that under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the state government was making its important contribution in achieving the goal of a Viksit Bharat and making the country the third most powerful economy in the world.

According to the state government, the Growth Summit will present the development model of Madhya Pradesh with a new and comprehensive perspective. The summit is not just confined to investment proposals and industrial announcements alone, but presents an integrated vision in which industry, urban development, tourism, MSMEs, startups and employment advance together. (PTI)

## Top Maoist leader Ganesh Uike, who carried ₹ 1.1 cr bounty, 5 others killed in gunfights in Odisha

**BHUBANESWAR, Dec 25:** Top Maoist leader Ganesh Uike, who carried a bounty of ₹ 1.1 crore on his head, was among six red rebels killed in gun battles with security forces in Odisha's Kandhamal district, police said on Thursday.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah called it a "major breakthrough", while Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi described it as a "remarkable success" to build a Naxal-free India.

CPI(Maoist) central committee member Uike was the chief of the banned outfit in Odisha, Sanjeeb Panda, an ADG rank officer heading anti-Naxal operations in the state, said.

Two Maoists from Chhatisgarh were killed in an exchange of fire with security forces in Gumma forest in Belghar police station area on Wednesday night. Fresh gun battles took place in a forest in Chakapad police station area on Thursday morning, in which four other Maoists, including Uike, were killed, he said.

"Four Maoists were killed in the gunfight. One of them was identified as 69-year-old Ganesh Uike, who is also known by his aliases Pakka Hanumantu, Rajesh Tiwari, Chamru and Rupa. He was a native of Pullemala village under Chendur mandal in Telangana's Nalgonda district," Panda said.

The identity of the other three Naxals, including two women, was yet to be ascertained, the officer said.

Taking to X, Shah said, "In a major operation in Kandhamal, Odisha, 6 Naxalites, including Central Committee Member Ganesh Uike, have been neutralised so far. With this major breakthrough, Odisha stands at the threshold of becoming completely free from Naxalism. We are resolved to eliminate Naxalism before the 31st



of March 2026." Majhi, who is also the home minister of the state, congratulated the police personnel for their indomitable courage, professionalism and excellent coordination.

"Today, Odisha has achieved a remarkable success in the campaign to build a Naxal-free India. During the ongoing joint operation in Kandhamal district, 6 Naxalites, including Ganesh Uike, a member of the Naxal Central Committee, have been neutralised," Majhi said in a social media post.

With this significant breakthrough, Odisha stands on the threshold of being completely free from Naxalism, he said.

"We are determined to completely eradicate Naxalism. The development of the state and the safety of the people are our highest priorities. Peace and progress will determine the future direction of Odisha," the chief minister said.

Addressing a press conference, DGP Y B Khurania said, "While two Maoists were gunned down on Wednesday, four others, including Ganesh Uike, were neutralised this morning. The killing of a central committee

member is a big success for Odisha Police. It has broken the backbone of the Maoists in the state." The DGP said operations were underway at different places along the Kandhamal-Ganjam inter-district boundary. "We hope to get more success. This is one of the biggest operations against Maoists in Odisha in recent times. We thank the security personnel involved in the operation. We are determined to meet the Union home minister's target of eliminating Naxalism by March, 2026," he added.

Replying to a question, the DGP said that there was no report of any casualty on police side so far. "This is for the first time in recent times that a Maoist commander of central committee member rank has been gunned down by security forces in Odisha," he said.

The DGP said that based on intelligence inputs, a joint operation involving 23 teams – 20 of Special Operations Group of Odisha Police, two of CRPF and one of BSF – was launched in Chakapad police station area in Kandhamal district and bordering Rambha forest range in Ganjam district on Thursday morning.

"Multiple gunfights were reported on Thursday in different areas. Later, four bodies of Maoists – two men and women each – were recovered. Two INSAS rifles and a .303 rifle were also seized," he added.

The Naxals killed on Wednesday night were identified as CPI(Maoist)'s area committee member Bari alias Rakesh, and dalam member Amrit, both from Chhatisgarh, a senior police officer said, adding they carried a cumulative bounty of ₹ 23.65 lakh on their heads.

The gunfights took place after 22 Maoists surrendered before Khurania in neighbouring Malkangiri district on Tuesday. (PTI)

## PM Modi inaugurates Rashtriya Prerna Sthal on Vajpayee's birth anniversary

**LUCKNOW, Dec 25:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday inaugurated the Rashtriya Prerna Sthal, a landmark national memorial and complex dedicated to celebrating the life and ideals of Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The inauguration coincides with the 101st birth anniversary of the former prime minister. Modi was accompanied by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Governor Anandiben Patel, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, and other senior leaders.

He was warmly welcomed by people who waved the tricolour and raised slogans in his honour.

The sprawling complex also features 65-foot-high bronze statues of BJP ideologues Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, alongside Vajpayee.

A state-of-the-art museum, designed in a lotus-shaped structure and spread over 98,000 square feet, allows visitors to explore the contributions of these leaders to nation-building.

After the inauguration, the prime minister, along with other leaders, visited the museum housed within the complex. PM Modi viewed the displays dedicated to the lives and contributions of Vajpayee, Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya.

According to an official statement, the Rashtriya Prerna Sthal, developed at an estimated cost of ₹ 230 crore over 65 acres, is envisaged as a permanent national asset promoting leadership values, national service, cultural consciousness, and public inspiration.

The memorial, described as an "inspirational complex of enduring national significance", is expected to serve as a source of motivation for present and future generations, reflecting the pivotal role of Vajpayee, Mookerjee, and Upadhyaya in shaping India's political thought and public life. (PTI)

## Dy Speaker of Gujarat Assembly Jethabhai Bharwad resigns

**AHMEDABAD, Dec 25:** Gujarat Assembly Deputy Speaker Jethabhai Bharwad on Thursday resigned from the post, citing his "busy schedule" and other responsibilities, the state government said in a release.

Bharwad, accompanied by Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel and state BJP president Jagdish Vishwakarma, handed over his resignation to Speaker Shankar Chaudhary at the latter's official residence in Gandhinagar, said the release.

Chaudhary has accepted the resignation, it said. Bharwad (75), who also goes by the name Jethabhai Ahir, is a six-time MLA from Shehra constituency in Panchmahal district.

The veteran BJP MLA was elected as the Deputy Speaker for the first time in September 2021 and was re-elected to the post after the assembly elections in 2022. (PTI)

## India entered semiconductor industry a bit late, but it will soon start exporting: Shah

**GWALIOR, Dec 25:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said India's entry into the semiconductor industry was strong though a bit late, but exuded confidence that the nation would soon be self-reliant in the sector and start exporting.

He also said the geographical location of Madhya Pradesh is so attractive and its land so fertile that one can earn crores of rupees by investing even a small amount in the state.

Addressing the 'Abhyudaya Madhya Pradesh Growth Summit' here, he said, "We have made a strong entry into the semiconductor industry, although a bit late. In no time, we will not only become self-reliant in the semiconductor sector, but will also start exporting it." On the occasion, Shah also inaugurated as well as performed the groundbreaking ceremony of industrial projects of Rs 2 lakh crore to mark the 101st birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Remembering Vajpayee, he said, "Atal ji was a great orator, a sensitive poet, a leader dedicated to public welfare and remained 'ajatahatru' (person without enemies) in politics." Shah also paid tributes to Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya on his birth anniversary and C Rajagopalachari on his death anniversary.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, Union Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, Assembly Speaker Narendra Singh Tomar, and several other leaders were present on the occasion.

The Union Home Minister praised CM Yadav for organising regional investment conferences and said when a state develops with regional balance, the public



and investors benefit the most.

He said, "When industries with regional characteristics develop, they are sustainable and successful. May this new idea be auspicious for Madhya Pradesh. Best wishes to those who have invested."

Referring to the "Vibrant Gujarat" investor summit held during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat, Shah said that he had initiated a systematic and scientific initiative of such events in the state capital. He said, "This attracted investment to the state. It was a very good initiative and was successful. But Mohan Yadav has initiated a new initiative: a regional investment conference for the state's balanced development. This initiative will greatly benefit all states in the future for their balanced development."

Shah said Madhya Pradesh's greatest advantage is its geographical location, which reduces transportation costs. He added that this potential can only be fully exploited if industries are established throughout Madhya Pradesh.

He said that a multi-modal logistics park is being built in Indore, encouraging companies from across the country to establish warehouses and hubs.

The senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader also stated that his party has shown Madhya Pradesh the path to development, as it was once a "BIMARU" (economically ailing) state when the Congress government was in power under the leadership of former Chief Minister Digvijay Singh of the Congress. He said that former Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan worked to remove Madhya Pradesh from the "BIMARU" category.

Shah said, "Now Mohan Yadav is working to advance this with even more energy than Shivraj Singh Chouhan. This will certainly transform Madhya Pradesh into a developed state."

He said that Madhya Pradesh was once lagging behind in the electricity sector, but today it produces surplus electricity and has surpassed the entire country in terms of cleanliness. MP has industries in agriculture, food pro-

cessing, pharmaceuticals, IT, and many other sectors, and is also a leader in startups, he added.

"Nearly 50 percent of our startups are run by our women and girls. Madhya Pradesh has set a record in India by registering 4.57 lakh new MSME units in just one year. It is also poised to become a hub for medium, small, and cottage industries. Now, startups and innovation will take it to new heights," Shah said.

He said favourable infrastructure is being developed in the state for textile and tourism industries, and excellent work has been done in the ease of doing business here. Under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, a strong foundation is being laid in many new areas, which will make India a global leader in the future, Shah asserted.

"Our foreign exchange reserves have crossed \$700 billion. We have also made a strong entry into the semiconductor industry. We will become self-reliant in this sector and will also export it. India has also made huge strides in the field of digital transactions and fintech. In 2024-25, 46 per cent of global digital transactions took place in India," Shah pointed out.

He said, "There is a saying in our Gujarat: 'Ek par gaam, dusri par Ram'. Similarly, on one side there are the digital transactions of the entire world, and on the other side there are the digital transactions of India alone."

An official said industrial projects worth more than Rs 2 lakh crore, for which Shah performed the ground breaking and inauguration, are from the industry, energy, new and renewable energy, tourism and health sectors and these will generate around 1.93 lakh jobs.

# Vajpayee's legacy of governance, consensus continue to guide India: CM Naidu

**VENKATAPALEM (ANDHRA PRADESH), Dec 25:** Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday said former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's ideals, integrity and national vision continue to inspire India's governance and democratic values.

The Atal-Modi Good Governance Yatra, launched by Andhra Pradesh BJP on December 11, culminated today, after statewide programmes highlighting Vajpayee-Prime Minister Narendra Modi governance ideals and values.

Participating as the chief guest of Atal-Modi Good Governance Yatra, Naidu addressed a public meeting after the unveiling of a statue of Vajpayee at Atal Smruthi Vanam here in Guntur district.

"Vajpayee's ideals, integrity and national vision continue to guide India's governance and strengthen its democratic values," said Naidu, addressing the gathering.

He said farmers' sacrifices inspired the establishment of Vajpayee Smruthi Vanam, envisioned as a historic memorial educating future generations about leader-



ship, governance, and patriotism.

Recalling Vajpayee as poet, orator and statesman, Naidu cited Golden Quadrilateral highways, telecom reforms, nuclear tests, and Kargil leadership, strengthening India's global stature and influence.

Drawing parallels, Naidu said Prime Minister Narendra Modi accelerated reforms through infrastructure, Public Private

Partnership (PPP) initiatives, defence strength, and technology, positioning India toward top global rankings steadily.

Naidu said Vajpayee's leadership inspired generations of public representatives, leaving a lasting imprint on India's democratic institutions.

The Chief Minister said Vajpayee's contributions would always be remembered with deep respect and gratitude for shaping the nation's growth and stability.

He said Vajpayee was respected across party lines for his integrity, balanced approach and ability to place national interest above political considerations.

Recalling his association with Vajpayee, Naidu said he had the opportunity to work closely with the former prime minister and draw from his experience and wisdom.

He said Vajpayee was respected across party lines for his integrity, balanced approach and ability to place national interest above political considerations.

# Muraleedharan questions legality of Kerala Cabinet's Nativity Card decision



**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Dec 25:** Senior BJP leader V Muraleedharan on Thursday questioned the legal validity of the Kerala Cabinet's decision to introduce a permanent, photo-embedded Nativity Card, alleging that the move was unnecessary and "politically motivated".

Reacting to the in-principle approval given by the Cabinet on Wednesday, the former union minister said the authority to determine citizenship rests with the central government and asked why the state needed to introduce another identity document when Aadhaar already contains comprehensive personal details.

"There is a mystery behind this Nativity Card," the BJP leader said, adding that the move raised serious legal and constitutional questions.

He alleged that the decision was aimed at wasting public money and accused Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his colleagues of eyeing election-related funding through the project.

Muraleedharan said the Left government had a history of making announcements that placed a burden on the public exchequer without offering any real benefit to ordinary people.

He urged the government to withdraw decisions that led to the misuse of taxpayers' money.

Referring to the now-stalled SilverLine rail project, he said the government was currently engaged in removing the yellow boundary markers that had earlier been installed, again at public expense.

"This clearly shows how poorly thought-out decisions are being taken," he said.

The criticism came a day after Chief Minister Vijayan announced that the Cabinet had given in-principle approval for replacing the existing nativity certificate with a permanent, photo-embedded Nativity Card.

Vijayan had said the current system forced people to repeatedly obtain certificates for different purposes and lacked statutory legal backing.

The Chief Minister said the new card would help people easily prove their birth, residence or permanent status in Kerala and prevent exclusion.

He added that the Revenue department had been asked to prepare a draft law, in consultation with the Law Department, to give the card legal validity.

The BJP, however, has mounted a strong attack on the proposal.

Party state president Rajeev Chandrasekhar has said the move would be legally challenged, calling it an example of "dangerous separatist politics" and alleging that it was meant to divert attention from the ruling front's recent electoral setbacks. (PTI)

# Delhi CM inaugurates Atal Canteens, offering ₹ 5 meals

**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** The Atal Canteens, inaugurated on Thursday to mark the 101st birth anniversary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, will offer nutritious meals for just ₹ 5. The initiative aims to provide affordable and nutritious meals to workers, the poor, and other needy residents of the national capital. The government has allocated ₹ 104.24 crore for the operation and management of this ambitious scheme.

Each Atal Canteen will serve approximately 1,000 meals per day, benefiting over 1,00,000 people daily across Delhi, said an official statement.



Union Minister for Power and Housing and Urban Affairs Manohar Lal Khattar, along with Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, inaugurated an Atal Canteen near 'Apna Bazaar' in Nehru Nagar, Lajpat Nagar.

Gupta, along with ministers and dignitaries, also partook of a meal at the Atal Canteen and directed officials to ensure the highest standards of food quality and hygiene.

Speaking on the occasion, Khattar said the Atal Canteens launched across Delhi on the birth anniversary of Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee represent a historic initiative inspired by the ideals of service, good governance, and human sensitivity.

He said that the scheme is not merely a welfare programme, but a strong commitment to extending dignified support to citizens at the last mile. By providing nutritious meals for ₹ 5, the spirit of public service is being strengthened.

He added that, in line with the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi centred on service, good governance, and welfare of the poor, the initiative will ensure that no one in Delhi goes hungry.

Gupta also described the scheme as a significant step towards ensuring a life of respect and self-reliance for poor and hardworking citizens.

Recalling the legacy of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, she said his leadership and commitment to good governance continue to inspire public service initiatives across the country.

She said that 100 Atal Canteens are being established across Delhi. Of these, 45 canteens were virtually inaugurated on Thursday, while the remaining 55 will become operational within the next 15 to 20 days.

The chief minister said a symbolic contribution of ₹ 5 has been fixed to preserve the self-respect of beneficiaries, encourage responsible consumption, and prevent food wastage.

Each beneficiary is provided freshly cooked meals at a nominal cost of ₹ 5 per plate, while the Delhi government bears ₹ 25 per meal.

Under this scheme, 100 Atal Canteens are being set up across Delhi. Each canteen will serve meals twice a day.

A standardised menu has been prepared for all canteens, including nutritious items such as dal-rice, roti, and vegetables. Facilities include modern kitchens, LPG-based cooking systems, and industrial RO water plants.

To ensure transparency and smooth operations, digital token systems, CCTV surveillance, and regular audits have been put in place. In addition, the quality of food and raw materials will be regularly tested by FSSAI and NABL-accredited laboratories to ensure safe and high-quality meals for citizens.

Each meal weighs approximately 600 grams, providing an average of 700-800 calories and 20-25 grams of protein, in line with balanced and nutritious dietary norms. The lunch timings are from 11:30 am to 2 pm, and dinner is from 6:30 pm to 9 pm. Approximately 700 people will gain employment under this scheme. (PTI)

# TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee targets BJP over women's safety

**KOLKATA, Dec 25:** Trinamool Congress national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Thursday alleged that the 'Beti Bachao' campaign by the BJP in saffron-party ruled states have become a mockery as "convicted rapists" were walking free and alliance partner ministers were mocking survivors.

In a post on X, Banerjee referred to a two-day old Delhi High Court order suspending the jail term of expelled BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the 2017 Unnao rape case.

The TMC leader also cited a video in which Uttar Pradesh minister and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party leader Om Prakash Rajbhar was laughing while commenting on the demonstration by Unnao rape survivor at India Gate in New Delhi in protest against the HC order.

"Rape accused BJP MLA Kuldeep Sengar granted bail. BJP ally UP minister Om Prakash Rajbhar mocks rape survivors. Absolute silence from @BJP4India leadership all across," Banerjee said. (PTI)

# Neuro Justice Trilogy book on function-based disability assessment released in Bengaluru

**BENGALURU, Dec 25:** In a step towards transforming how the Indian judiciary assesses human life and functional disability in motor vehicle accident cases, the Neuro Justice Trilogy and the Neuro Justice Framework Handbook were officially released here on Thursday.

Authored by functional neurosurgeon Dr Sharan Srinivasan and neurorehabilitation expert Dr Prathiba Sharan, the trilogy and handbook propose a shift from a "symptom-based" to a "function-based" approach in assessing disability and compensation, an official statement said.

The Neuro Justice Trilogy was formally released by Supreme Court Justice Aravind Kumar at a high-level gathering of judicial, medical, policy and law-enforcement representatives held at the NIMHANS Convention Centre here.

He emphasised that the work symbolises the meaningful intersection of law, neuroscience, and ethics.

The programme was presided over by Karnataka Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao, who underlined the

# Army personnel can now sign up on Instagram, but as 'passive observers': Sources

**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** The Indian Army has brought a change in its social media guidelines under which its personnel can now sign up on Instagram, but with a rider that they can use it only as "passive observers" without putting up posts or comments on the platform, sources said on Thursday.

The move aims to augment the awareness level of Army personnel in the "digital age of information" and guard them against any potential or inadvertent leak of sensitive information, they said.

The revision in guidelines was introduced a few days ago, and applies to all ranks in the Indian Army, a source in the defence establishment said.

"The revised guidelines essentially mean that Army personnel can now sign up on Instagram, but with the condition that they can use it only as passive observers. They can view

posts, but cannot post content or comments on the platform," the source said.

Essentially, no "user-generated content" is allowed, so even "liking" a post would fall in that category, the source added.

Earlier, Army personnel could sign up and use X, but not Instagram.

"The restrictions already apply on X, so Army personnel using X can only view posts, but cannot post, repost or comment on them," another source said.

"The reason behind this change in guidelines is essentially that the information age is changing, and the Army cannot keep itself away from this information world," the source said.

Through social media, Army personnel can see, observe and gain information, and keep themselves abreast of the happenings in and out of the country, the sources said.

# J-K leaders demand strict action after Kashmiri trader 'assaulted'

**SRINAGAR, Dec 25:** Political leaders in Jammu and Kashmir on Thursday expressed concern over the reports of assault on a Kashmiri trader in Uttarakhand, and urged the state administration to take legal action against the perpetrators. National Conference (NC) Lok Sabha MP Ruhullah Mehdi said coercing any citizen to prove patriotism through compelled speech violates constitutional freedoms.

"Reports from Uttarakhand indicating that a Kashmiri trader was assaulted for refusing to chant a slogan on religious grounds are deeply troubling."

"Coercing any citizen to prove patriotism through compelled speech violates constitutional freedoms and human dignity," Mehdi said in a post on X. The alleged incident came to light after a purported video of it was shared online. The Kashmiri vendor was reportedly seen being assaulted by a group of five men who abused and thrashed him for refusing to chant "Bharat Mata Ki Jai". (PTI)

# Use of chemical fertilisers root cause of many diseases, says Shah; pitches for natural farming

**REWA (MP), Dec 25:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday termed chemical fertilisers as the root cause of many diseases and made a strong pitch for natural farming, saying it not only increases farmers' income but also saves water and promotes public health.

Addressing a Farmers' Conference held here, Shah said the government was developing a "complete system" - from soil and laboratory testing, certification to packaging - to ensure that the agricultural produce of the country's farmers reaches global level in a better way as there is a huge market for natural farming in the world.

"Chemical fertilisers are the root cause of many diseases today. Natural farming is an approach that doesn't reduce farmers' income,

but instead makes their produce pure," he said.

Natural farming is a traditional practice that people have forgotten over the time. A dung and urine of a single indigenous cow can help cultivate 21 acres of land, he said.

"It (natural farming) increases income, saves water, and relieves people from many diseases," he added.

Shah, who is also Minister of Cooperation, said approximately 40 lakh farmers in the country have adopted natural farming and he has personally practised it on his farms.

This has increased production, not decreased it, he said.

"There is a huge market for natural farming in the world and to ensure that the produce of the country's farmers reaches the

global market in a better way, a complete system is being developed - from soil testing to certification, laboratory testing of the produce and packaging," Shah added.

According to him, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has established two big cooperative institutions through the Ministry of Cooperation, which are doing the work of certification of natural farming produce, its testing in world-class and modern labs, packaging, marketing and export.

Shah said, "In the coming time, more than 400 laboratories across the country will provide certificates to the farmers, due to which their income will increase by almost one-and-a-half times."

It can guide many farmers and cowherds towards progress, he said.

"There is also a cowshed here, and a complete range of natural farming methods based on cow dung has been developed. This approach, which generates incomes of up to ₹ 1.25 lakh per acre of land, will certainly prove to be a great blessing for small farmers," he said.

Earlier, Shah visited the Basaman Mama Cow Project and described it as a "very good approach". Basaman Mama is worshipped as a folk deity in the Vindhya region. It is believed that he sacrificed his life to protect the environment in this region in the 8th century.

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, Deputy Chief Minister Rajendra Shukla, minister Prahlad Patel and several other leaders were present at the event. (PTI)

# Unnao rape case: Akhilesh urges court hearings in 'language people understand'

**LUCKNOW, Dec 25:** Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday called for "linguistic inclusivity" during court hearings after the Unnao rape survivor reportedly expressed concern that arguments of the case were held in English in the court.

Yadav made the remarks in a post on X in connection with the Unnao rape case involving former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar.

Sharing an image of a media report highlighting the survivor's concern, Yadav wrote in Hindi, "Insaf ki zubaan samajh aane se hi insaf hoga," and added that "linguistic inclusion" is a decisive factor in the pursuit of justice.

In the same post, he said in English that the "dispensation of justice depends on the use of a language that is understandable to all parties involved. Linguistic inclusivity is a determinative element in the true administration of justice."

On December 23, the Delhi High Court suspended the jail term of Sengar, who is serving life imprisonment in the Unnao rape case, saying he has already served seven years and five months in prison.

Sengar's sentence has been suspended by the high court till the pendency of his appeal challenging his conviction and sentence in the rape case. He has challenged a December 2019 trial court verdict in the case.

He will, however, remain in jail since he is also serving 10 years' imprisonment in the custodial death case of the victim's father and has not been granted bail in that case.

Imposing several conditions, the HC directed Sengar, who allegedly kidnapped and raped the survivor when she was a minor, to furnish a personal bond of ₹ 15 lakh with three sureties of the like amount. (PTI)



framework's relevance to public health and said the government valued initiatives that integrate medical science with ethical governance to improve citizens' lives.

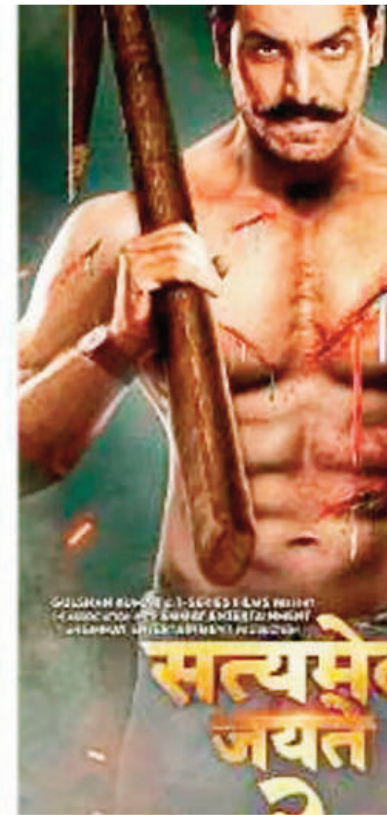
Rudrappa Lamani, Deputy Speaker of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, who recently recovered from a road traffic accident involving brain and spinal cord injuries, said the legislature recognises the importance of such emerging intersections

for social equity and inclusive governance.

Speaking at the event, Lamani stressed the need to establish affordable, multidisciplinary neurorehabilitation centres in all districts of Karnataka, adding that he had earlier been unaware of rehabilitation facilities such as PRS Neurosciences.

Reflecting on the initiative, author Dr Sharan Srinivasan said patients often survive trauma but fail to re-

# NATIONALISTIC FILMS BIG HIT IN A MIXED YEAR FOR HINDI CINEMA



Bookended by two nationalistic hits in "Chhaava" and "Dhurandhar", the Hindi film industry had a mixed year where star-driven vehicles like "Sikandar", starring Salman Khan, and Hrithik Roshan-fronted "War 2" fizzled out at the box office, while romantic drama "Saiyaara" resonated with viewers.

"Chhaava", based on the life of Maratha ruler Sambhaji, became the first major hit of the year with the Vicky Kaushal-starrer earning over Rs. 600 crore at the box office to emerge as one of the highest grossing movies of the year. The Laxman Utekar-directed movie released on February 14 and featured Akshaye Khanna and Vineet Kumar Singh in pivotal roles. Khanna, whose performance as Rahman Dakait and his dance in "Dhurandhar" have become a viral sensation on social media, was not the only common thread between two of the biggest movies. Both, one set in the distant past and another around the Kandahar hijack and the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, are known for their nationalistic theme.

"Dhurandhar", released on December 5, has amassed over Rs 600 crore at the box office to become one of the top 10 highest earning Indian movies, as per the data by box office tracking website Sacnilk.

The success of these movies has contributed in making 2025 a successful year in terms of box office despite the patchy performance of some major movies and highly anticipated sequels.

Bihar-based exhibitor Vishek Chauhan described the box office situation as "flood and famine".

"It's not been a great year but a decent year. There have been few good takeaways, some negatives and positives. But overall, I would call it a very mixed bag and a surprising year, which also kind of reflected the changing palettes of the consumers. It was like a flood-famine situation, either there used to be a flood or there used to be a famine at the box office," Chauhan told PTI.

He further said films like "Chhaava" and "Dhurandhar" proved that box office success does not depend merely on the Khan trio of Bollywood and top stars like Akshay Kumar and Ajay Devgn. "Nobody expected the films ('Chhaava' and 'Dhurandhar') to do the kind of numbers they did. They were high-end to mid-budget films led by the younger stars, not the A-pedigree that we

have like the Khans, Kumars and the Devgn's. So, the surprise package is that there were films headlined by Vicky Kaushal, Ranveer Singh, and Ahan Pandey that did well. It's very refreshing from the audience point of view, I think Bollywood has turned a page." Kamal Gianchandani, CEO, PVR INOX Pictures too said the business has witnessed a rise of 10 per cent from 2024 with some high and low points.

"The business this year has risen by 10 per cent from the previous year. A lot of people thought big ticket and spectacle films would work at the box office but romantic films made a comeback.

Although, a lot of films with big stars, and in a lot of cases sequels, didn't work except "Sitaare Zameen Par", Gianchandani told PTI, giving the example of "Saiyaara" and the re-release of "Sanam Teri Kasam".

Devang Sampat, managing director, Cinepolis India, said 2025 was a good year as "Dhurandhar" is on course to become the highest-grossing Hindi film of the year, tracking over Rs 600 crore.

"But the real story of 2025 is not any single film. It is the depth and diversity that sustained the box office across the year. Like, Hindi cinema saw uneven results, with some high-profile titles unable to sustain momentum beyond opening weekend, films such as "Saiyaara", "Raid 2" and "Mahavater Narsimha" proved that strong storytelling builds audiences

over time," he said.

Director Mohit Suri's "Saiyaara" came out in July and, with its soulful music and narrative, captivated the hearts of audiences, especially youngsters. The film featuring newcomers Ahaan Panday and Aneet Padda earned over Rs 329 crore in India.

Some of the films like John Abraham's political thriller "The Diplomat", Ajay Devgn and Riteish Deshmukh's "Raid 2", Aamir Khan's "Sitaare Zameen Par", and Akshay Kumar and Arshad Warsi's "Jolly LLB 3", did decent business.

Trade expert Taran Adarsh said films like "Chhaava", "Saiyaara" and "Dhurandhar" set new boxoffice records for the industry.

"There were some surprises which caught the industry off guard, like 'Chhaava', 'Saiyaara', and 'Dhurandhar'. Love stories made a comeback with the success of 'Saiyaara', 'Ek Deewane ki Deewaniyat', 'Tere Ishq Mein', and the re-release of 'Sanam Teri Kasam'. There were some films that misfired like 'War 2' and a few others. One thought it would rewrite the box office record but it was a disaster," Adarsh told PTI.

Some of the most anticipated movies primarily franchise movies such as "Emergency", which starred Kangana Ranaut as former prime minister Indira Gandhi, Akshay Kumar's war-drama "Sky Force", Shahid Kapoor's action-thriller

"Deva", Salman Khan's "Sikandar", Sunny Deol-led actioner "Jaat", Akshay Kumar's "Kesari Chapter 2", multi starrer "Housefull 5", Anurag Basu's "Metro...In Dino", Hrithik Roshan and NTR Jr's "War 2", Ajay Devgn's "De De Pyaar De 2" and "Son of Sardaar 2", Tiger Shroff's "Baaghi 4", did poor to average business.

Raj Bansal, a well-known film distributor and director of Entertainment Paradise in Jaipur, believes romantic films were the flavour of the season.

"The beginning of the year was good thanks to 'Chhaava' and ended on a high note with 'Dhurandhar', which could be Hindi cinema's biggest hit. Romantic films have worked well this year including 'Sanam Teri Kasam' re-release, 'Saiyaara', and 'Ek Deewane ki Deewaniyat' did a good business," Bansal told PTI.

According to the distributor, in 2025, top stars like Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, and Ranbir Kapoor did not have any releases. Films such as director Neeraj Ghaywan's Oscar nominated movie, "Homesbound", filmmaker Reema Kagti's "Superboys of Malegaon", Manoj Bajpayee-led "Jugnuma" garnered critical acclaim but failed to leave a mark at the box office.

Bansal believes ticket pricing could be a factor behind the low turnout of audiences in theatres for independent films.

"During COVID-19, independent films got support from OTT platforms, they garnered appreciation. Today, small films have two options, either take the OTT route, or release it in theatres. These films are not being accepted in theatres and are watched on OTT in the comfort of home.

"I feel pricing is another issue, like there should be different pricing for big and star-studded films, and independent films should be priced a little less. Price plays an important factor."

Amrita Pandey, CEO Jungle Pictures, said they are thrilled with the response their films like Yami Gautam's "Haq", Malayalam film, "Ronh" received in theatres.

"It has been a compelling year one that reaffirmed our commitment to bold, content-first storytelling. From the critical acclaim of our Malayalam debut 'Ronh' to the thought-provoking 'Haq'. While 2025 was about exploring strong stories and fearless themes, 2026 will be a year of scale and impact.

"We are especially excited about 'Daayra', directed by Meghna Gulzar with Kareena Kapoor Khan and Prithviraj Sukumaran," Panday told PTI. (PTI)



## MELORA HARDIN ON HER 'BACK TO THE FUTURE' FIRING: IT WAS A HUGE DISAPPOINTMENT

Actor Melora Hardin is finally speaking up about being dismissed from the role of Micheal J Fox's romantic lead in the "Back to the Future" for being taller than him.

"Back to the Future was a huge disappointment," Hardin told Entertainment Weekly. "I was 17, you know. I burst into tears. It was very sad. There were quite a few of those that I remember, you know, things that never really got made. But that I remember being very tough."

Fox recently talked about how Hardin lost the role after he replaced leading man Eric Stoltz as the time-traveling teen Marty McFly in the 1985 sci-fi classic. Claudia Wells played Jennifer Parker opposite Fox in the first movie, directed by Robert Zemeckis.

In his recent memoir "Future Boy", Fox explained that when he replaced Stoltz, some felt co-star Hardin was suddenly too tall to play the character's girlfriend in the franchise's first installment.

The actor recalled that his height "worked in my favor when I was a teenage actor playing a younger kid", but being short "turned against me as an adult, when I went up for romantic leads opposite taller actresses".

"I regret that this prejudice inadvertently affected another cast member in Back to the Future - Melora Hardin, the talented actress who had played Marty's girlfriend, Jennifer, opposite the perfectly tall Eric Stoltz.

"Melora, several inches taller than me, was replaced in the movie after I took over as Marty. Initially, Bob Zemeckis thought perhaps the audience could look past our height difference, but when he quickly surveyed the female members of the crew, they assured him that the tall pretty girl in high school rarely picks the cute short guy."

"No one asked for my opinion, but I would have risen to Melora's defense," added Fox.

Elisabeth Shue played Parker in "Back to the Future Part II" and "Part III". (PTI)

## Ram Gopal Varma says industry ignoring 'Dhurandhar' as it feels threatened by it

Filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma says whenever a pathbreaking film like "Dhurandhar" releases, the industry people feel threatened by it and choose to ignore it.

Varma is a huge fan of the Ranveer Singh-starrer espionage drama that's set in Karachi's Lyari town. The film is directed by Aditya Dhar of "Uri: The Surgical Strike" fame.

"Whenever a path breaking and monstrous hit like #Dhurandhar comes, the industry people will wish to ignore it because they will feel threatened by it due to their inability to match it's standards. So they will think of it as a nightmare, which will vanish when they wake up in their own films," Varma wrote in a long post on X.

The filmmaker, known for cult hits like "Satya", "Rangeela" and "Kaun", also criticised the recent spate of pan-Indian movies, stories that try to appeal to a cross section of audiences.

"This is even more true of all the so called pan india biggies which are right now under various stages of production. They were all written and mounted, modelled on the films made before #Dhurandhar which is the exact opposite of what they all believed will work... what's even more worrisome is that #Dhurandhar apart from being an omega hit also is the most discussed film since the last 50 years," Varma said.

According to Varma, the filmmaker relying to stick to the template of heavy VFX, expensive sets, item songs and hero worship stories, will be "crucified" in their "self created dungeon of masala films".

"More than anything else @AdityaDharFilms is forcing the industry people to look at their own films in the mirror, in comparison to the beautiful looking #Dhurandhar," the filmmaker said.

"Dhurandhar", also featuring an ensemble of stars like Akshaye Khanna, Sanjay Dutt, R Madhavan, Arjun Rampal, Sara Arjun and Soumya Tandon, has become the 10th highest grossing Indian movie ever by earning over ₹600 crore at the box office since its release early in December. (PTI)

## REFRESHING AND BRAVE: KRITIKA KAMRA ON PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN 'THE GREAT SHAMSUDDIN FAMILY'

For actor Kritika Kamra, it was refreshing to see Muslims being portrayed as normal people in "The Great Shamsuddin Family" and without the conventional dramatisation that's often associated with minority narratives in cinema.

Kamra plays the central character of Bani Ahmed in the comedy-drama, written and directed by Anusha Rizvi of "Peepli Live" fame. The film follows Bani, who faces her most important deadline while her house erupts in family chaos, forcing her to juggle a 12-hour writing sprint with an unfolding domestic emergency.

"It was so refreshing to just read a story about a normal family. It's one of those things that is very brave in many ways. It is about an Indian Muslim family, with so many women. It is so different from what you generally see in cinema, but it doesn't do that by making any loud points," Kamra told PTI in an interview.

"All of the characters are a little bit messy, and have their own insecurities. They are very real, relatable people that you and I know. So, when I auditioned for it, I didn't even know it was about an Indian Muslim family till then because Bani is a very common name," she said.

Kamra said Bani embodies the complexities and vulnerabilities of modern Muslim women.

Referring to the stereotypical portrayal of Muslim in cinema, the actor said "The Great Shamsuddin Family" breaks the notion and presents it as "any other Indian family" facing issues like "generational gap, judging one another", among other things.

"And you always see a certain representation, which is more common in cinema where you see Muslim women dressed or behaving a certain way which are all also real and fine.

There is space for that but here you don't see that at all. You see a modern Muslim woman in Bani and you see a modern Indian Muslim family. And that's really refreshing to see. When you see or read it you realize that all Indian families are very common," the 37-



year-old actor said.

Kamra, known for her projects like "Saare Jahan Se Accha", "Tandav" and "Bheed", said when she signs on something, the film or story's core message and politics should resonate with her own principles as an artist.

"I think the politics of the film has to align with yours, I don't mean the politics of my character. I played a gangster on screen who's killing people, so not the politics of the character or even the filmmaker. But it is important how the film looks at its women and also it doesn't vilify any group or community.

These are some of those things that I keep in mind when I'm choosing a part."

The film, produced by Ajit Andhare, Alok Jain, Vipin Agnihotri and Mahmood Farooqui under Star Studio18, premiered on JioHotstar on December 12. It has received rave reviews



from critics.

Kamra, who has been garnering acclaim for her work in "The Great Shamsuddin Family", said the film was a "big opportunity" for her as she got to be directed by Rizvi in a central role.

"It is a big deal for me," Kamra said, adding that she is "obsessively" reading everything being written about the movie on social media.

"It feels very hard-earned and eventually when you get appreciation for it, it's a huge relief. It has boosted my self-confidence," Kamra added.

# Ivory Coast starts Africa Cup title defense with a win as proud dad Zidane sees Algeria beat Sudan



**RABAT, Dec 25:** Ivory Coast got its Africa Cup of Nations title defense off to a winning start and France great Zinedine Zidane watched his goalkeeper son's safe hands as Algeria also started its campaign with a victory. Riyad Mahrez scored twice and the 20-year-old Ibrahim Maza scored his first international goal for Algeria, one of the tournament favorites, to beat 10-man Sudan 3-0 on Wednesday to move top of Group E.

"The most important thing was to start with a win," Mahrez said. "The last two AFCONs, we didn't start good. Today, we really wanted to make it happen and we did."

Zidane, who was at the sweet-smelling Moulay El Hassan Stadium in Rabat to see his son Luca Zidane playing in the Algeria goal, was feted by the crowd every time he was shown on the big screens.

Luca Zidane opted to represent his grandfather's country after getting the Fenec Foxes' invitation and he's been given his chance to shine because of an injury to Alexandre Oukidja, who might have been expected to start otherwise.

Algeria wasted little time Wednesday with Mahrez sweeping in the opener in the second minute after unselfish play from Hicham Boudaoui to set him up.

Zidane was called into action shortly afterward to deny Yaser Awad on a break.

Sudan had to play all its qualification games away from home because of the near 1,000-day old civil war ravaging the country.

Though the Algerians looked confident and played with intensity, the big chances fell at the other end, with Zidane saving again from Awad before Abdel Raouf fired over.

Salah Adil was sent off just as the rain began to fall shortly before the break with his second yellow card for a foul on Rayan Ait-Nouri, who would have been through otherwise.

But the Algerian fans, who were in a majority, needed to be patient.

Mohammed Amoura produced a brilliant cross with the outside of his boot for Mahrez to score in the 61st, and Baghdad Bounedjah headed the ball into Maza's path for the substitute to complete the scoring in the 85th.

"I'm very happy," Maza told The Associated Press. "My first goal in my first African Cup game, it couldn't go any better for me, Alhamdulillah."

**Elephants begin title defense**  
Amad Diallo's second-half strike was enough for defending champion Ivory Coast to beat Mozambique 1-0 in a rain-soaked game in Fez.

The Elephants' captain, Franck Kessie, headed the ball back and Diallo struck it inside the far corner shortly after the break.

Ivory Coast, which won the title in scarcely believable fashion on home ground in the last edition, missed a host of chances to finish the game with Vakoun Bayo having two good chances blocked late on.

Then Geny Catamo eluded three Ivorian defenders in stoppage time only to lack power with his final shot, which was gathered by goalkeeper Yahia Fofana to safeguard the win.

In the other Group F game, Etta Eyoung's early goal through the goalkeeper's legs was enough for five-time champion Cameroon to beat Gabon 1-0 in the coastal city of Agadir.

**Drama in Casablanca**  
Edmond Tapsoba completed a remarkable turnaround as Burkina Faso scored two goals in stoppage time to beat 10-man Equatorial Guinea 2-1 in the early Group E game.

Tapsoba's team had pushed hard for the opening goal after Basilio Ndong was sent off early in the second half for a bad challenge on Bertrand Traore's ankle.

Marvin Anieboh then stunned the Stallions when he launched himself at Carlos Akapo's cross to score with a looping header in the 85th minute.

Georgi Minoungou equalized in the fifth minute of stoppage time and Tapsoba headed the winner three minutes after that. (AP)

## No room for spin: Australia goes into the 4<sup>th</sup> Ashes with a pace-heavy attack against England

**MELBOURNE, Dec 25:** Australia won't attempt to replace injured Nathan Lyon with another spin bowler for the fourth Ashes test against England and will go into Friday's start of the match with a 12-man, pace-heavy squad.

After Lyon suffered a long-term hamstring injury in the Ashes-clinching win in Adelaide and later underwent surgery, offspinner Todd Murphy was called into the squad. But with the MCG pitch showing plenty of grass, Australia opted to leave Murphy out when it named its squad Thursday.

Captain Steve Smith will wait until the toss at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Friday before confirming a starting XI.

England lost each of the first three tests to allow Australia to retain the Ashes in just 11 days of on-field action.

It's unusual for an Australian team not to select a spinner at the MCG, a place where Shane Warne and Lyon have had success.

"A lot of the wickets we're playing on at present are certainly more seam-friendly than spin-friendly," Smith said on Thursday.

"Last week (in Adelaide) was an anomaly; we saw some rough and we saw Nathan come in to play



big-time. "It's a tricky one. You've just got to play what surface you're presented with, and this one out here looks like it's going to offer a fair bit of assistance for the seam bowlers." Joining Lyon and captain Pat

Cummins on the sidelines are Josh Inglis, with fast bowlers Jhye Richardson, Brendan Doggett and Michael Neser included.

Left-handed veteran Usman Khawaja was preferred to Inglis after making 82 and 40 in the third test in Adelaide. Richardson is in contention to play his first test in more than four years after a bad run of injuries.

Doggett and Neser played in the second test in Brisbane, but were left out in Adelaide when Cummins and Lyon returned.

England named its team on Wednesday with the big news the loss of star bowler Jofra Archer for the rest of the series, including the fifth and final test starting Jan. 4 in Sydney.

**Australia squad:** Travis Head, Jake Weatherald, Marnus Labuschagne, Steve Smith (captain), Usman Khawaja, Alex Carey, Cameron Green, Michael Neser, Mitchell Starc, Jhye Richardson, Brendan Doggett, Scott Boland.

**England team:** Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Jacob Bethell, Joe Root, Harry Brook, Ben Stokes (captain), Jamie Smith, Will Jacks, Gus Atkinson, Brydon Carse, Josh Tongue. (AP)

## Bodoland Cup Cricket Tournament concludes in Kokrajhar



**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Dec 25:** The Bodoland Cup Cricket Tournament was successfully concluded on Thursday being held at DN Himmat Singha High School Ground in Kokrajhar.

The tournament was organized by Rainbow NGO, Kokrajhar, with support from the Kokrajhar Cricket Association to explore sporting environment among the sports lovers.

A total of eight teams from Baksa, Kokrajhar, and

Dhubri district participated in the tournament, making the event competitive and exciting for cricket fans.

The final match was played between Sangrila NGO and Gangster Club. In a thrilling contest, Sangrila NGO emerged as the champions, defeating Gangster Club to lift the Bodoland Cup.

Sangrila NGO was awarded a cash prize of rupees 51,000 along with a trophy, while Gangster Club, the runners up received rupees 31,000 and a trophy.

## Yashasvi Jaiswal: Have selectors told him where he stands in white ball cricket?

**JAIPUR, Dec 24:** You don't want to be Yashasvi Jaiswal these days. You would perhaps feel that you are caught in the middle of a constant state of flux that Indian cricket is and would probably be more unsure than ever after being pigeonholed as a "one format specialist".

And that too after being the only young cricketer in the post-Rohit Sharma-Virat Kohli generation, who has shown perfect qualities of being an all-format regular.

Yet it can't be a mere coincidence that every time India has gone for a major white ball assignment in the last two years, the rub of the green has always decided to play hide and seek with the Bhadohi-born man.

In 2024, he had to accept that Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma's experience on those tacky American and Caribbean tracks was valued more. That was the T20 format.

Within another seven months, Jaiswal would first find himself in the 15 for the Champions Trophy but then on the insistence of head coach Gautam Gambhir that a fourth spinner was required, he once again became disposable. That was 50-over format.

And when Shubman Gill, perceived as India's next all-format captain, was dumped by the wayside in 20-over format, the selec-

tors suddenly felt that the second wicket-keeper should be an opener too, hence in comes Ishan Kishan, who smashed a 49-ball century against Haryana in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy final.

No one bothered that Jaiswal also scored a 50-ball ton against the same opponents in a chase of 230-odd only days before.

And within another two and half weeks, we will again find Jaiswal out of an Indian ODI playing eleven come January 11 despite scoring a hundred in national team's previous game against South Africa.

This time, he will have to make way for regular ODI skipper Shubman Gill.

He will turn 24 on Sunday and has enough years to make up for the chances he is forced to miss but he needs to be told where he is going wrong. These are times when self belief does take a hit. "It is unfortunate that Yashasvi is being left out time and again for no fault of his. He has been in tremendous form across all formats of the game and I don't know what else he has to do to get into the team," Dilip Vengsarkar, perhaps the finest chairman of selectors in the last three decades, told PTI when asked how he looks at it.

He last played T20Is in Sri Lanka in July,

2024 after which India prioritised Test cricket for next six months and Jaiswal was also asked to concentrate in red ball cricket.

His last five T20I scores read 93, 12, 40, 30 and 10 -- all while opening the innings -- and at a strike-rate of close to 200, conforming to current team's philosophy of attack at all costs without worrying about volume of runs.

"Nobody should leave a match winner out of the team," Vengsarkar said in a forthright assessment.

Vengsarkar, who basically pushed a 19-year-old Virat Kohli into the Indian side back in 2008, however, agreed with current selection committee on Shubman Gill's exclusion as he feels current form does play a huge role in picking a particular cricketer. But, he is also clear in his mind who would have been his first choice while excluding Gill.

"They are all excellent players but I am with selection committee when they judge players on basis of current form and fitness. Current form does play an important role in context of selection. And if you ask whom I would have picked instead of Gill, my choice would have been Jaiswal. He has proven time and again what a class performer he is and has always given the team kind of starts required

these days," said the former India skipper and a veteran of 116 Tests and 129 ODIs.

The T20 format doesn't reward absence. Rhythm is the main currency, and visibility does matter. While others stayed in the white-ball loop, rotating through bilateral series, staying familiar to selectors, Jaiswal slipped out of sight. Not because he failed, but because the system redirected him.

"You are bound to lose confidence if you are made to feel that you are not required in one format. I mean it will affect his confidence and this game is all about confidence. And confidence comes when you have performances backed by runs," Vengsarkar didn't hold back. If performance, impact, and adaptability are the stated metrics, then Jaiswal stands among the strongest candidates in the country. Former India opener and one of the most respected coaches, W V Raman, feels that chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar must have had a chat with Jaiswal.

"Certain conversations can't be revealed in public but now World T20 squad has been selected and one can't do anything. Jaiswal will have to bide his time but I am confident that the kind of talent he is, he will play many more World Cups," Raman said. (PTI)

## Balaji is core member of team, can be considered for next tie: Rajpal



**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** India's Davis Cup captain Rohit Rajpal on Thursday said experienced doubles specialist N Sriram Balaji remains very much in the national reckoning despite being left out of the squad for the upcoming tie against the Netherlands, stressing that team combinations dictated the selection.

Rajpal explained that the choice was influenced by the need for a deuce-court specialist in the doubles pairing, with Rithvik Bollipalli fitting that role alongside Yuki Bhambri, who prefers to play from the ad court.

"Looking at combinations, we were searching for a deuce-court player. Yuki plays only from the ad court, so Rithvik is a deuce-court specialist. Balaji will remain in the fray," Rajpal told PTI.

The deuce court is the right side of the court from where each game starts, while the ad court (Advantage) is the left side.

The skipper underlined that Balaji's omission should not be seen as a reflection of his ability or standing within the team, pointing to the Chennai-based player's proven record in pressure situations.

"Balaji has played singles earlier at crucial times for India and has handled crucial rubbers for the country. He is a core member of

the Indian team and could very well be considered for the next tie, if fit," Rajpal added.

India will face the Netherlands in the Davis Cup Qualifiers on February 7-8 in Bengaluru.

**Aryan Shah pulls out**  
It has been learnt that reserve player Aryan Shah has pulled out of the tie, a development that has irked the All India Tennis Association (AITA).

"He made himself available for the tie but after the team announcement, he wrote to the AITA that he was not available for the match. This is not appreciated," said an AITA source.

Aryan Shah is ranked 403, and is the number two India player behind top-ranked Sumit Nagal (277).

Aryan could have felt ignored by the selection committee when players ranked below him -- Karan Singh (471) and Dhakshineswar Suresh (524) -- were included in the playing squad while he was named as a reserve.

Dhakshineswar had played a key role in India's inspiring victory against Switzerland in the away tie in September.

The AITA may not look for a replacement since Anirudh Chandrasekhar and Digvijay Pratap Singh are already there as other reserve players. (PTI)

## Sonowal pitches sports as industry to tap global market

**HT Correspondent**  
**DIBRUGARH, Dec 25:** Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways and Dibrugarh MP Sarbananda Sonowal on Thursday said developing sports as an industry could help India tap the global market by creating employment and boosting incomes.

Addressing the closing ceremony of the Sansad Khel Mahotsav at the Chowkidingee playground here, Sonowal said a structured sports ecosystem had the potential to generate jobs and economic opportunities while enhancing the country's global footprint.

"If sports are developed as an industry, India can capture the global market. Sports have the capacity to create employment and increase income," he said while interacting with athletes, students and officials.

The tournament, which began on October 31 across the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency, saw par-

ticipation from various blocks and showcased local sporting talent.

Sonowal said that since Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014, the Centre has prioritised sports as a means of strengthening national unity, peace and integrity. He added that new policies and programmes introduced over the past decade had significantly boosted public interest and participation in sports.

"Sports keep individuals healthy by aligning the mind, body and soul, while also fostering a sense of responsibility towards society," he said. Referring to flagship initiatives such as Khelo India and Fit India, the minister said these programmes had helped identify and nurture talent capable of competing at international platforms, including the Olympics.

Over the past 11 years, he noted, training systems had been strengthened and infrastructure upgraded to create a vibrant sporting environment.



Highlighting growing participation in Dibrugarh, Sonowal said showcasing India's sporting strength globally would contribute to building an Atmanirbhar Bharat.

He also credited the Prime Minister's leadership for introducing policies that enable athletes to access world-class training facilities in India and abroad.

Praising the Assam government's Khel Maharan initiative, Sonowal said it had played a key role in identifying hidden sporting talent across the state.

# India look to seal series with another dominant show against Sri Lanka

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Dec 25:** A dominant India will look to seal the five-match series with another ruthless display when they take on a low-on-confidence Sri Lanka in the third women's T20 International here on Friday.

India have been outstanding with both the bat and the ball in the first and second T20Is, registering comprehensive eight-wicket and seven-wicket wins respectively in Visakhapatnam to underline their overall dominance over Sri Lanka.

It was India's ninth win in their last 11 T20Is against the island nation, who last tasted victory against the hosts in July 2024 at Dambulla.

India boast of an enviable batting line-up, with different players stepping up in the two games. While newly-appointed Delhi Capitals captain Jemimah Rodrigues starred in the opening T20I, opener Shafali Verma finished the job in the second.

The bowling unit has been equally sharp, with the spinners calling the shots by restricting Sri Lanka to 121 for 6 and 128 for 9 in the two matches. Youngsters N Shree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma and Kranti Gaud have shared the workload effectively, bowling with discipline and control.

India's bowling depth was on display when experienced all-rounder Deepti Sharma missed the second T20I with a mild fever and Sneha Rana stepped up with a frugal 1 for 11 in four overs.

Fielding was the lone area of concern in



the opening game, where India dropped five catches, but they showed marked improvement in the second match with three sharp run-outs.

Led by Harmanpreet Kaur, India will aim to continue raising their standards as the series moves to Thiruvananthapuram, which will host the next three matches.

Sri Lanka, meanwhile, will hope that the change of venue brings a change in their fortune for a side battered by back-to-back heavy defeats. While the gulf in quality has

been evident, Sri Lanka will be particularly disappointed by the manner of their batting collapses.

Asked to bat first in both matches, Sri Lanka failed to post competitive totals. They showed some promise early on but lost momentum as wickets tumbled in clusters during the latter half of their innings.

In the opening game, Vishmi Gunaratne laboured to 39 off 43 balls, while Hasini Perera and Harshitha Samarawickrama also struck under a run-a-ball, denying the in-

nings any late acceleration.

The second T20I followed a similar script. Sri Lanka appeared on track before losing captain Chamari Athapaththu, after which they collapsed spectacularly, losing six wickets for 26 runs, including three run-outs, to finish with another sub-par total.

Their bowling too has lacked the penetration required to trouble India's deep batting line-up.

"We had a good powerplay but lost a couple of wickets, then struggled in the middle overs," Athapaththu said after the second T20I.

"Batters played too much with the horizontal bat, which is an area for improvement. We need to score more than 150 batting first. We are trying to rotate strike, but we need to hit more boundaries."

#### The Squads:

**India:** Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC), Deepti Sharma, Sneha Rana, Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Harleen Deol, Amanjot Kaur, Arundhati Reddy, Kranti Gaud, Renuka Singh Thakur, Richa Ghosh (WK), G Kamalini (WK), N Shree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma.

**Sri Lanka:** Chamari Athapaththu (C), Hasini Perera, Vishmi Gunaratne, Harshitha Samarawickrama, Nilakshika de Silva, Kavisha Dilhari, Imesha Dulani, Kaushini Nuthyangana, Malsha Shehani, Inoka Ranaweera, Shashini Gimhani, Nimesha Madushani, Kavya Kavindi, Rashmika Sewwandi, Malki Madara.

Match starts at 7 pm. (PTI)

## Nepotism that existed in sports before 2014 has ended; now poor can rise to top levels: PM Modi



**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said irregularities in team selection and sports that often happened before 2014 came to an end a decade ago, and now children from even the poorest families can rise to the top levels purely through hard work and talent.

Addressing the 'Sansad Khel Mahotsav', a sports and fitness festival aimed at promoting a sporting culture and leadership among the youth, PM Modi said the scale of the Mahotsav is as vast as its impact. Through this initiative, he said, the nation is discovering thousands of talented sportspersons.

"The festival is steadily emerging as a strong pillar of youth empowerment and nation-building. Another special aspect of the 'Sansad Khel Mahotsav' is the way it is playing a transformative role in changing societal mindsets," he said.

The prime minister said that before 2014, irregularities in team selection and sports infrastructure often took place in sports.

"Today, those practices have come to an end. Even children from the poorest families can now rise to the highest levels purely through hard work and talent," he said.

PM Modi also referred to the allocation of more than ₹ 3000 crore for the country's sports budget, which was less than ₹ 1200 crore before 2014. He said that through a special scheme, athletes are being provided monthly financial assistance ranging from ₹ 25,000 to ₹ 50,000 each.

"Today, I want to tell every athlete of the country that you are not just playing for your own victory, you are playing for the country, you are playing for the honour and dignity of the tricolour," he said.

The prime minister also requested all parents to encourage their children to take part in sports and give them opportunities to participate in sporting activities.

Sports is not just a part of learning, it is also important for a healthy body and a healthy mind, he said.

Describing how sports culture is growing in the country, the prime minister said that from every corner of the country, inspiring examples are emerging that motivate the nation.

He said that in some places, differently abled athletes are defying limitations and reaching new heights, while on sports grounds elsewhere, young girls are striving tirelessly to turn their dreams into reality.

"Today, India's athletes are breaking records, setting new benchmarks, and taking India to new heights on the global sporting map," he said. PM Modi said that until a few years ago, family members would scold and reprimand the child for playing too much as it was then considered a waste of time. Today, he said, society, and even parents, have realised that playing does not ruin one's life.

"Now they understand that their children, by excelling in sports, can change not only their own and their family's fate, but also that of the entire village and society. Today, opportunities in sports are not limited, but unlimited," he said.

The prime minister said that in 2030, India will host the Commonwealth Games in Ahmedabad and then the eyes of the entire world will be on India. "Not only that, India is also making efforts to host the biggest sports event, that is, the Olympics, in 2036," he said.

The 'Sansad Khel Mahotsav' is a sports and fitness festival aimed at promoting a sporting culture and leadership among the youth. A key objective is to bring the community together through sports and fitness and to take the message of 'Fit India' to every home.

The festival features a three-level competition, including games at the village, block/ward, and parliamentary constituency levels.

The sports categories include traditional games, football, volleyball, and cricket. The event also includes fun activities like tug of war, lemon spoon race, and sack races to ensure wider participation. (PTI)

## India reaching new heights in field of sports under PM Modi: Rajasthan CM

**JAIPUR, Dec 25:** Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma on Thursday said that India is reaching new heights in the field of sports under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He said that the Prime Minister had made sports a national priority, and initiatives like Khelo India were helping promote a culture of sports across the country.

Sharma was addressing the concluding ceremony of the Sansad Khel Mahotsav at Sawai Man Singh stadium here.

PM Modi addressed the closing ceremony virtually and lauded the Sports Festival, saying that it had become a mass movement.

He said that thousands of talented athletes were emerging through the festival and it was becoming a strong pillar for nation building.

CM Sharma said that under the guidance of the PM, the MP Sports Festival was providing opportunities to youth from towns and villages to showcase their talent.

Initiatives such as the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) and the establishment of sports universities have significantly impacted athletes' lives, he opined.

Sharma added that the state government had taken concrete steps to promote sports in Rajasthan, including the successful organisation of the Khelo India University Games and the launch of the Sports Life Insurance Scheme, which provides accidental and life insurance cover up to ₹ 25 lakh to international medalists.

The Chief Minister said no talented athlete in the state will be left behind due to lack of resources.

Sharma also presented trophies to the winners of the cricket competition during the event.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Jogaram Patel, MP Manju Sharma, MLAs Kailash Verma, Gopal Sharma, Balamukundacharya, other representatives, athletes, coaches, and school students were also present on the occasion. (PTI)

## Clubs do not have voting rights in EFI governance: Delhi High Court

**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** The Delhi High Court has ruled that clubs affiliated with the Equestrian Federation of India (EFI) do not have voting rights in the federation's governance, reinforcing the primacy of state associations and dealing a setback to club-based voting structures that had operated under ministerial exemptions.

Dismissing a set of appeals filed by a Chandigarh-based riding club and connected parties, a division bench of Justices Anil Kshetrapal and Harish Vaidyanathan Shankar upheld that the participation of clubs and institutional members in EFI elections was contrary to the Sports Code, which prescribes a pyramidal governance structure for national sports federations.

The court, in its order on December 23, noted that Clauses 3.9 and 3.10 of the Sports Code explicitly reserve voting rights in a national federation's electoral college for affiliated State Associations (SAs) and Union Territory Associations (UTAs), and not for clubs or individual members.

"In the scheme of the Sports Code, a club does not possess any statutory or legal entitlement to participate in or influence the governance of a National Sports Federation," the bench observed, adding that allowing clubs to vote would dilute the representative



structure envisaged under the Code.

The ruling comes against the backdrop of a long-running dispute over the governance of EFI, which has been under judicial scrutiny for several years over its electoral processes, membership composition and compliance with the Sports Code.

EFI, recognised as the national federation for equestrian sport since 1967, has allowed clubs, individuals and institutional units—including several affiliated with the Indian Army—to become members with voting rights.

This structure has been questioned by state associations, which

argued that it enabled a handful of clubs and institutions to exercise disproportionate control over the federation.

In 2017, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MYAS) had granted EFI two years' time to comply with the Sports Code, which requires a national federation to be built on a base of recognised state units, each backed by district associations.

EFI, however, sought relaxations, citing the "peculiar nature" of equestrian sport, including high infrastructure costs, land requirements and the difficulty of creating district-level units across states.

In February 2021, the Sports Ministry amended the Sports Code to introduce a "Relaxation Clause", empowering it to exempt federations from certain provisions to promote sports or remove implementation difficulties. Subsequently, in November 2021, the sports ministry had granted EFI temporary exemptions from key governance requirements, including those related to the composition of its electoral college.

These relaxations effectively allowed clubs and institutional members to continue exercising voting rights until the federation achieved the mandated spread of state and district units.

However, the High Court noted that these exemptions lacked a substantive factual foundation and were inconsistent with the core principles of the Sports Code.

While the court upheld the validity of the relaxation clause itself, it found fault with the manner in which exemptions were granted to EFI, particularly as they related to electoral governance.

The judgment further endorsed the appointment of a fact-finding committee to assess ground realities in equestrian sport, including the role played by clubs, but made it clear that such entities cannot claim voting rights under the existing legal framework. (PTI)

## Shayan Jahangir and Jordan Cox take Dubai Capitals to play-offs

**DUBAI, Dec 25:** Shayan Jahangir and Jordan Cox struck fifties to help defending champions Dubai Capitals advance to the play-offs with a six-wicket win over Sharjah Warriorz in the World ILT20 here. Jahangir also impressed behind the stumps, getting dangerous Tom Kohler-Cadmore stumped-out, showcasing an all-round performance at the Dubai International Stadium on Wednesday. Chasing 135, Dubai Capitals made light work of the target with an early blitz by Jahangir, and an unbeaten Jordan Cox (61 not out off 50 balls; 4x6, 1x6) finishing the job with ease.

Jahangir and Cox set up a partnership of 76 runs off 63 balls after Capitals lost opening batter Sediqullah Alt with just 17 on board. It was Harmeet Singh who bowled him out, but it took the Warriorz a lifetime to find another

breakthrough. However, Sikandar Raza's over made up for the long wicket-less spells as he picked up two crucial back-to-back wickets – that of half-century Jahangir and Mohammad Nabi in the 14th over. Taskin Ahmed packed off Leus Du Plooy (5 off 6) in the 17th over, but Jordan Cox broke no sweat to make the target in five balls to spare. The Dubai Capitals' bowlers also did well, restricting the Warriorz total to a paltry 134/8 with Haider Ali and Waqar Salamkheil picking up two wickets each. Ali was extremely economical too, giving away just 13 runs in four overs. David Willey, Mustafizur Rahman and Mohammad Nabi bagged a wicket each, contributing to the Capitals' third successive victory that has landed them in the play-offs. (PTI)

## Badminton Nationals: Shruti Mundada, Parul Choudhary advance

**VIJAYAWADA, Dec 25:** Experienced shuttler Shruti Mundada and rising stars Parul Choudhary and Tanvi Patri beat higher-ranked rivals to reach the women's singles pre-quarterfinals in the Senior National Badminton Championships here Thursday.

Shruti packed off seventh-seeded Jiya Rawat 21-14, 21-9, while Parul got the better of ninth seed 18-21, 21-18, 21-12 to advance.

Tanvi Patri ended the campaign of eighth seed Ishara Baruah 22-20, 21-19.

Also advancing to the next round was top seed Un-



nati Hooda, second seed Anupama Upadhyaya, third seed Anmol Kharb and world junior silver medalist Tanvi Sharma.

In men's singles, Aryaman Tandon upset third seed M Raghu 17-21, 21-11, 21-14 in the round of 32. Abhinav Garg and Rithvik Sanjeevi S also secured their spots in the pre-quarterfinals.

Garg got the better of 10th seed Abhinav Thakur 21-19, 21-16, while Rithvik defeated 13th seed Orijit Chhalha 21-15, 21-19. In mixed doubles, Nitin Kumar and Kanika Kanwal upset sixth seeds Kevin Wong CC and Pranavi N 23-21, 21-15. (PTI)

## Divya Deshmukh makes the right moves; Gukesh fails to impress

**NEW DELHI, Dec 25:** A starry-eyed teenager Divya Deshmukh winning the Women's Chess World Cup in faraway Batumi this year not only showcased India's unfathomable depth of talent in the sport but also reaffirmed the country's status as the new hub of the game in the world. Just when it seemed the aura of D. Gukesh, who became world champion in 2024, was on the wane after suffering a string of losses this year, the 19-year-old Nagpur girl emerged from nowhere and achieved three career milestones with one signature triumph.

Divya not only became the first Indian woman to win the FIDE Women's World Cup, she also instantly secured the prestigious Grandmaster title, bypassing the usual "norms" required to earn it.

Divya, whose parents are doctors, also secured an automatic qualification for the 2026 Candidates tournament, where the winner will earn the right to challenge the reigning Women's world champion Ju Wenjun of China.

On that eventful day in July, Divya's victory also shifted the contours of women's chess in the country, which re-

lied on two-time world rapid champion Koneru Humpy and Dronavalli Harika. The two women have been the torchbearers of the sport in the country for nearly two decades.

But while Divya made a huge statement with her triumph, success eluded world champion Gukesh and his year was dotted with unflattering results after it started on a promising note with a second-place finish in the Tata Steel Chess Masters in Wijk Aan Zee, Netherlands.

**Turbulence hits Gukesh**  
After the high of becoming world champion, Gukesh's journey this year has been anything but smooth. Country-mate R. Praggnanandhaa challenged his supremacy, defeating the champion in a thrilling blitz tiebreaker to clinch the Tata Steel Masters title.

In a year, when the 19-year-old Gukesh should have consolidated the gains of the world title, he kept slipping, getting knocked out of the Freestyle Chess Grand Slam, finishing dismally in the FIDE Grand Swiss, and suffering a shocking third-round exit at the FIDE World Cup in Goa.



Gukesh's famous victory over world No.1 Magnus Carlsen in Norway Chess in May-June and the European Club Cup triumph in October, where he won the individual gold and helped his team, SuperChess, bag the title, were the few bright spots in a largely barren year.

Amid all the gloom in classical, rapid and blitz, one signature victory that saw

Gukesh's popularity soar was his win against Carlsen in Norway Chess in Stavanger. That famous triumph, where a shaken Carlsen slammed his fist on the table and muttered "Oh my God" before leaving the hall agitated, caused a social media storm.

French football giants Paris Saint-Germain tweeted a viral image of Gukesh's

calm expression after defeating the Norwegian world No.1, using it to express their own emotions after winning their first-ever UEFA Champions League title. PSG captioned the image: "What it felt like winning our first UCL". The football club's use of the image was widely shared across social media, garnering over eight million impressions.

That nerve-wracking defeat against Gukesh notwithstanding, Carlsen beat an elite field to clinch his seventh Norway Chess title, even as he extended his reign on the chess world by winning multiple titles across formats.

**Home advantage lost**  
India were expected to at least secure one Candidates tournament berth from the World Cup in Goa recently. Unfortunately, front-runners Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi, Nihal Sarin, P Harikrishna and Vidit Gujrathi bowed out at various stages of the tournament as the Indians couldn't capitalise on the home advantage.

Javokhir Sindarov, Wei Yi, and Andrey Esipenko went on to secure their spots for the Candidates in Cyprus next year.

However, Praggnanandhaa did finally manage to seal his spot in the Candidates by winning the FIDE Circuit 2025, making him the first Indian male player to qualify for the prestigious World Championship qualifier by topping the circuit's standings with strong performances and points from events like the London Chess Classic.

**It's raining Grandmasters in India**  
India has come a long way since the legendary Viswanathan Anand became the country's first Grandmaster in 1988. As the country looks ahead to 2026, it now boasts of 91 GMs, with many standing on the threshold of the prestigious title.

Among those who became Grandmasters in 2025 are LR Srihari, Harikrishnan A Ra, Divya Deshmukh, S Rohith Krishna, Ilamparthi AR and Raahul VS.

**Making early moves**  
With Sarwagya Singh Kushwaha from Madhya Pradesh recently becoming the youngest player on the FIDE rating list at the age of just three years, seven months, and 20 days, it's only a matter of time before someone breaks the record as well. Too 'young' to be true! (PTI)