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Woman among 2 granted citizenship under CAA

Tally rises to 4 ● Chittagong woman entered Assam in 2007

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Two persons, including a woman, have been granted Indian citizenship under the CAA, taking the count of people receiving it under the Act to four in Assam, their lawyer said.

For the first time, a woman was granted citizenship under the Act in the northeastern state, senior advocate Dharmnanda Deb, who had also been a member of the Foreigners' Tribunal in Silchar, said.

The 40-year-old woman had entered India from Bangladesh in 2007 and had been living in Sribhumi, while the 61-year-old man, who came to the country in 1975, had been living in Cachar, he said.

The Ministry of Home Affairs issued the certificates on Friday, and the citizenship is deemed effective from the day both individuals entered India, Deb said, while declining to disclose their names, citing possible social harassment.

He said the woman, who hails



from Bangladesh's Chittagong, had accompanied a family member for treatment at Silchar Medical College and Hospital. She met a man from Sribhumi, married him, gave birth to a son and stayed back. She had applied for citizenship after the CAA rules were notified last year, Deb said.

Her first application, submitted in July last year, was rejected due to confusion caused by the delimitation exercise before the Lok Sabha elections. Badarpur, where she now lives, was partially moved from Sribhumi to Cachar, creating uncertainty over the jurisdiction of her area.

The lawyer had reapplied and her case was finally approved.

Deb said she is the first woman in Assam to receive citizenship under the CAA, and notably the first in the state to be granted citizenship through the registration route.

"This was granted under Section 5(1)(c), read with Section 6B of the Citizenship Act, 1955, which allows a person married to an Indian citizen to register as an Indian citizen after residing in India for seven years," he explained.

The second beneficiary, a resident of Silchar town, came to India at the age of 11 from Bangladesh's Moulvibazar district, and had also married locally, and started a family.

He received citizenship through the naturalisation process.

Assam now has four individuals who entered India after the 1971 cut-off and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Connectivity remained distant dream during Cong rule: CM

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday launched a sharp political attack on the previous Congress governments, asserting that decades of neglect had turned the mighty Brahmaputra into a barrier rather than a bridge for Assam's development, a situation his government has decisively reversed.

Highlighting the contrast in governance outcomes, Sarma said that in nearly 70 years after Independence, Assam managed to build only three bridges over the Brahmaputra — the Saraighat Bridge, the Kalia Bhomora Bridge and the Naranarayan Setu.

"For decades, the Congress ruled Assam, but connectivity remained a distant dream. The Brahmaputra symbolised isolation, delay and political apathy," he said.

The chief minister underlined



that the scenario changed fundamentally after 2014, when focused leadership and political will placed infrastructure at the centre of governance.

"In just one decade, Assam has built four major bridges over the Brahmaputra — a second Saraighat Bridge, the Bogibeel

Bridge, the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge and a second Kalia Bhomora Bridge. This is not coincidence, this is commitment," Sarma said.

Calling the Congress era one of "missed opportunities and weak resolve," Sarma said that large river connectivity projects were repeatedly (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Having Messi is a golden moment for Mumbai and India: Tendulkar

MUMBAI, Dec 14: Cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar on Sunday termed Argentine football superstar Lionel Messi's visit to Mumbai as a golden moment for the city and the country.

Tendulkar compared the 2011 Cricket World Cup triumph at the same ground with the visit of Messi, along with his Inter Miami teammates Luis Suarez and Rodrigo de Paul.

"I have spent some incredible moments here. As we call it, Mumbai is a city of dreams. And a number of dreams have seen the finish line here on this very venue. And without your support, we would never have seen those golden moments on this ground in 2011," Tendulkar said referring to India's ODI World Cup triumph in which he played a major role.

"And today, having all three of them here is indeed a golden moment for Mumbai, Mumbaiers and India. The way you have received all three greats of the game has truly been remarkable."

Talking about Messi, he said,

"When it comes to Leo, if I have to speak about his game, it wouldn't be the right platform. And you know, what does one talk about him? He has achieved everything. We really admire his dedication, determination, commitment."

"And above all, his humility, the person that he is. And on behalf of Mumbaiers and Indians, I would like to wish him and his family the very best of health and happiness to all of you. Thank you once again for being here and encouraging youngsters."

Tendulkar also hoped that "India also reaches the height that we all aspire to (in football)."

Tendulkar presented a No.10 jersey signed by him to Messi. The Argentine World Cup-winning captain reciprocated with a football.

Messi arrived in Mumbai around noon under "World Cup level" security measures, marking the second day of his four-city 'GOAT India Tour 2025'.

He will wind up his visit on Monday in New Delhi where he will meet (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Jogdal murders: NHRC moved for justice after 16 yrs

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Sixteen years after six members of a family were hacked to death in their house in Jogdal village in Assam's Kamrup Metropolitan district, a local organisation has approached the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) for justice for the victims.

It has urged the NHRC to take cognisance of human rights violations in the case and intervene to ensure a fair, independent and time-bound investigation.

On the night of December 12, 2009, unidentified assailants had brutally killed Harakanta Doloi, his wife Swapna, their three children and a nephew at their Jogdal residence.

The killings were suspected to have been linked to political leaders who used their influence to acquire land in the area to build a luxury hotel. The perpetrators have still not been brought to book.

The Dimoria Bikash Manch urged NHRC chairman Justice V R Rama Subramanian to look into the

case.

Chief advisor of the Manch, Dibyajyoti Medhi, who submitted the petition on Saturday, said, "We met a member of the panel and handed our petition. He has assured us of looking into the case."

"It has been 16 years but justice has not been done yet. But, we are still hopeful that the NHRC will be able to get justice for the victims. Doloi was a marginal cultivator, and the family was economically impoverished, with no known enmity with any individual or group," he said.

The petition maintained that "the investigation was deliberately weakened due to the suspected involvement of a then minister of the Assam government". The Congress was leading the government in Assam in 2009.

"The initial investigation conducted by Sonapur Police was allegedly neither impartial nor diligent. On the contrary, serious attempts were reportedly made to destroy crucial evidence, including the

burning of the victim's house after the incident," it said.

It further said that a prime accused, Arjun Bordoloi, was killed under mysterious circumstances on September 5, 2012, raising further concerns regarding the integrity of the investigation.

Subsequently, the case was transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and on December 7, 2017, two police officers — Pranab Kumar Deka, the then officer-in-charge of Sonapur police station, and A M Choudhury, the then investigating officer of the case — were arrested on charges of deliberately destroying evidence with the intention of shielding the actual perpetrators.

The case was handed over to the CBI a year later by the state government.

Despite sustained protests and representations submitted by numerous local ethnic and social organisations over the years, the authorities concerned have remained (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Two arrested in Tinsukia over Arunachal truck mishap that killed 21 Assam workers

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Dec 14: Tinsukia Police have arrested two persons for allegedly illegally sending labourers to Arunachal Pradesh from Tinsukia's Gelaphukari tea estate to a fatal road accident in which at least 21 labourers lost their lives.

The arrested persons have been identified as Md Sirajul Ahmed (36) and Sairuddin Ali (27), both residents of Balupara Gaon village under the Gujain area of Tinsukia district. The arrests are linked to a tragic accident on December 8, 2025, when a truck carrying labourers to a construction site in Anjau district of Arunachal Pradesh skidded off the HMC (Hayuliang-Metengliang-Chaglagam) road near Chaglagam Circle under Hayuliang sub-division and plunged into a deep gorge, estimated to be around 700 metres deep.

The accident involved 22 persons, including the driver.

According to police, 20 bodies had been recovered till Sunday

morning, while rescue operations were continuing in the difficult terrain. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), Tinsukia, Mayank Kumar Jha, said the victims were sent to the neighbouring state without following mandatory protocols.

"During the investigation, we have found that the labourers were transported illegally without proper documentation or safety measures. We have registered a case at Tinsukia Sadar Police Station, and an investigation was launched," the SSP said.

Meanwhile, Police have registered Case No. 432/2025 under sections 143(3) (human trafficking), 105 (culpable homicide), 125B (causing danger to life or personal safety through negligent acts) and 61(2) (criminal conspiracy) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). A Special Investigation Team (SIT) has also been constituted to probe the case. "We are investigating the entire chain, and more arrests are likely in the coming days," he (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Himanta meets Radhakrishnan in Delhi



GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday called on Vice-President C P Radhakrishnan in New Delhi, and invited him to visit the state to witness its "transformation" in recent years.

This was Sarma's first official visit to meet Radhakrishnan since he assumed office in September this year. "Honoured to call upon Hon'ble Vice President of India, Shri CP Radhakrishnan ji in New Delhi today," Sarma said in a post on X. "I personally congratulated him on assuming the august office of @VPIndia and invited him to visit Assam to witness the State's transformation in recent years," he said. (PTI)

Himanta congratulates new BJP working president

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday congratulated Nitin Nabin on his appointment as the BJP working president, and said he has stood out for his "administrative efficiency and organisational impact".

Sarma said that Nabin is a leader with "clarity of thought and firm ideological grounding".

Nabin, 45, was appointed BJP working president by the party's parliamentary board.

"Warm congratulations to Shri @NitinNabin ji on taking charge as the National Working President of the BJP. A leader known for his energy, clarity of thought and firm ideological grounding, he has consistently strengthened the organisation," Sarma said in a post on X. The CM (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Sonowal reviews preparedness ahead of PM visit in state



GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal on Sunday reviewed the preparations at Namrup in Assam ahead of

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's scheduled visit on December 21, during which the Prime Minister will lay the foundation stone of a landmark ₹ 11,000-crore Ammonia-Urea fertilizer project.

Sonowal inspected the site earmarked for the foundation stone ceremony as well as the venue for the Prime Minister's public rally, taking stock of arrangements for the high-profile programme that is expected to draw a massive turnout from across Upper Assam and neighbouring districts.

Following the inspection, the Union Minister held a meeting with party workers and members of the public at the rally venue.

The meeting was attended by state cabinet ministers Prasanta Phukan and Jogen Mohan, Rajya Sabha MP Rameswar Teli, MLAs and senior party functionaries.

Speaking to reporters here, Sonowal underlined the importance of the upcoming project for the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Cannot talk about human rights in India and leave out LGBTQIA+ citizens'

Queer children face maximum discrimination, bullying at homes, schools: Survey

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: A recent survey found that LGBTQIA+ children and adolescents face the highest levels of discrimination and bullying in their own homes, schools and neighbourhoods, with activists and stakeholders urging for concerted efforts to address these issues to help them get equal opportunities.

A recent survey of over 900 LGBTQIA+ individuals by a Kolkata-based organisation, "Bridge", which works for the rights of the community across Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal, reported that most bullying happens between the ages of 12 and 15 years.

Many young people are forced to drop out of school, losing out on education, future employment, and income security, Bridge's founder director Prithviraj Nath told PTI.

"Even after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018, the NALSA judgment in 2014, and Transgender Protection

Act of 2019, LGBTQIA+ people continue to face systematic exclusion in education, health care, workplaces, and public life," he said.

Basic human rights still remain out of reach for many and it is extremely important that we bring to light the lived realities and challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community, and have dialogues with the larger society towards equal rights and inclusion of the community, Nath added.

Rudrani Rajkumari, founder of 'Xomonnoy', an LGBTQIA+ rights organisation and support group, pointed out that the government and all stakeholders must make collective efforts to create a roadmap to reduce discrimination and promote equal rights.

"We cannot talk about human rights in India and leave out LGBTQIA+ citizens. Every child deserves safety in their home, respect in their school, and dignity in their workplace. Equality is not a favour, it is a constitutional promise," Rajkumari said.



Former vice principal of Guwahati's Dispur College, Sumita Agarwalla, claimed that it is one of the pioneer institutions in Assam, having done commendable work

for the education of the children from the community.

Besides having a gender-neutral toilet, it has reserved seats for such students in

both its higher secondary and degree courses, with education being free if such a student needs it and sensitisation programmes are also for all its students regarding the issues of the community, she said.

"I, as an educator, feel that it is very important to understand that people from the LGBTQIA+ community are also human beings and citizens of our country, so they have to be treated equally by everyone in every aspect," Agarwalla said.

Lalit Chandra Bharali College's professor Kunjalata Brahma Bhatiri said that more and more people are voicing their support for equal treatment of people from the community and judgement-free spaces, but a collective and concerted effort from all stratas of society is needed.

Sensitisation and orientation to drive in the very understanding of the basic right to live freely and with dignity is required at all levels, she said.

"More people should talk, discuss,

opine and work in attaining dignified living spaces for the queer community," she said.

Tezpur University's faculty from the Department of Social Work, Sammy said, "Incredible work is being done by multiple stakeholders in the field of queer-inclusive education at secondary, college and university levels in the northeastern region but with every new initiative, we face a wall of structural resistance which is coated in layers of binary understanding of society."

Social systems like family, schools, neighbourhoods, state authorities, community institutions, health care services, workplaces and every sector that completes a human being needs gender inclusive approaches and practices as well, she said.

"We cannot lose our queer students, children, adults and elders to public scorn, confined spaces, hopelessness and suicides," Sammy said. Every department in higher education (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Banks advised to link MSME loans to external benchmarks to improve policy transmission

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: The Reserve Bank of India has advised banks to link loans extended to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to external benchmarks with a view to improving monetary policy transmission, the government informed Parliament on Sunday.

As part of the external benchmark-linked lending framework, the reset period for MSME loans has been reduced to three months.

To ensure that existing borrowers are also able to benefit from the revised interest rate regime, banks have been advised to offer a switchover option on mutually agreed terms.

The RBI has also undertaken a series of additional measures aimed at improving credit flow to the MSME sector.

Separately, the Government of India, through the Bureau of Indian Standards under the Department of Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, is implementing Quality Control Orders in a phased manner with specific exemptions and relaxations for MSMEs to ensure that domestic production is not disrupted.

These include additional time for compliance, with a six-month extension for micro enterprises



and a three-month extension for small enterprises.

Exemptions have also been provided for imports by domestic manufacturers for export-oriented production, for limited imports up to 200 units for research and development purposes, and for clearance of legacy stock manufactured or imported prior to the implementation of the orders within six months from the effective date.

The BIS has further introduced financial and technical relaxations based on feedback received on certification processes.

These include concessions in the annual minimum marking fee,

with reductions of 80 per cent for micro enterprises, 50 per cent for small enterprises and 20 per cent for medium enterprises.

An additional concession of 10 per cent is available to MSMEs located in the North-East or run by women entrepreneurs.

The requirement for maintaining an in-house laboratory has been made optional, allowing MSMEs to use BIS-recognised or NABL-accredited laboratories, including shared or cluster-based facilities.

Manufacturers have also been given flexibility to define their own control units and levels of

control under the Scheme of Inspection and Testing.

Product certification process guidelines and product-wise manuals have been made publicly available on the BIS website.

On the credit support front, the government has announced the Mutual Credit Guarantee Scheme for MSMEs, a government-backed initiative designed to facilitate access to loans for business expansion, particularly for the purchase of equipment and machinery.

Under the scheme, lenders including scheduled commercial banks, all-India financial institutions and non-banking financial companies are provided credit guarantee cover for term loans of up to ₹ 100 crore for eligible MSME projects.

In addition, specific lending targets for MSMEs have been prescribed under the priority sector guidelines.

Scheduled commercial banks have been mandated not to seek collateral security for loans up to ₹ 10 lakh extended to micro and small enterprises.

Banks have also been instructed to compute working capital requirements of MSE units at a minimum of 20 per cent of the projected annual turnover for borrowing limits up to ₹ 5 crore. (With inputs from PIB)

JCI Guwahati Princess holds 8th installation ceremony

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: JCI Guwahati Princess, a prominent women-led non-governmental organisation in the city, organised its 8th Installation Ceremony on December 12 at 11 July, Kumarpara, marking the formal inauguration of its new leadership team for 2026.

During the programme, JFM Asha Agarwalla was installed as President of JCI Guwahati Princess for the year 2026, along with her office bearers.

The ceremony formally signalled the beginning of the new term and outlined the organisation's commitment to leadership, community service and women empowerment.

The event also featured the award banquet of the outgoing President, JFA Binita Agarwal, recognising her leadership and contributions during her tenure.

Members lauded her efforts and initiatives undertaken over the past year.

The ceremony was attended by several dignitaries from JCI Zone 25. JFS Sumit Poddar, Zone President 2026, graced the occasion as the chief guest, while JFF Gunjan Harlalka, Zone President 2025, attended as the guest of honour.

JC Priya G. Tiwari, Zonal Vice President, Region D 2026, was present as the Special Invitee. Senior members and office bearers from across the zone also attended the programme.

Members of JCI Guwahati Princess, along with past presidents, were present in large numbers and extended their support and best wishes to the newly installed President and her team for a successful and impactful term ahead.

Ather Energy announces 'Ather Electric December' offers for EV two-wheeler buyers

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Electric two-wheeler manufacturer Ather Energy on Sunday announced the third edition of its month-long year-end initiative, "Ather Electric December", offering a range of benefits for prospective electric scooter buyers.

Now in its third year, the initiative aims to address a common year-end hesitation among automobile buyers, who often defer purchases due to concerns over depreciation with the change of the calendar year.

In an official statement, Ather said the programme reassures December buyers by ensuring continued value through backward compatibility across both hardware and software.

Under the scheme, customers can avail benefits of up to ₹ 20,000 on select Ather scooters.

This includes an instant discount of up to ₹ 10,000 on credit card EMIs, a complimentary eight-year battery warranty valued at ₹ 5,000, and an additional cash discount of ₹ 5,000.

The offers are available to cardholders of Axis Bank, HDFC Bank, IDFC First Bank, OneCard, Federal Bank, Bank of Baroda, Scapia, Canara Bank, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Yes Bank and RBL Bank.

In addition, Ather is offering its 'Eight701M' extended battery warranty, which covers the battery for up to eight years or 80,000 km, whichever comes

first, at a special price of ₹ 1.

The warranty, otherwise priced at ₹ 4,999, is aimed at providing long-term assurance to new buyers.

Ather's current product portfolio includes the performance-focused 450 series and the Rizta, the company's first family-oriented electric scooter.

The 450 series comprises the Ather 450X, 450S and 450 Apex, offering IDC ranges of up to 161 km, depending on the variant.

These models come equipped with features such as multi-mode traction control, MagicTwist™, and connected technologies including Google Maps navigation, WhatsApp integration on the dashboard, and call and music controls on select variants.

The Rizta, available in Rizta S and Rizta Z variants, has been gaining traction in newer markets.

It offers an IDC range of up to 159 km and is designed with a focus on comfort and practicality, featuring a large seat, total storage capacity of up to 56 litres including under-seat storage and an optional front trunk, and a spacious floorboard.

Safety features on the Rizta include SkidControl™, Fall Safe™, Emergency Stop Signal, and theft and tow alerts. At Ather Community Day 2025, the company also announced a major upgrade for the Rizta Z variant, which will now feature touchscreen functionality, further enhancing the user experience.

Contd. from Page 1...

Woman among 2

have been granted citizenship under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. Deb said he has assisted around 25 applicants over the last 18 months, but many applications were rejected or remain pending.

Around 40 people have so far applied for citizenship in the state since the rules were notified last year. The Act enables Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain and Parsi immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who entered India between March 25, 1971 and December 31, 2014 to apply for citizenship.

The CAA, passed on December 11, 2019, had sparked statewide protests in Assam, leading to the death of five persons in the violence.

Assam has nearly two lakh individuals identified as doubtful citizens, but only a small number have applied under the CAA so far.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has claimed that most Hindus migrated to Assam from Bangladesh before the cut-off date of 1971. (PTI)

Connectivity remained distant

announced but rarely executed. "Files moved, committees were formed, but the people of Assam kept waiting. Our government ended this culture of delay," he added. The chief minister said that the transformation is far from over, with four more mega bridges currently under construction.

These include the Kumar Bhaskaravarma Setu in Guwahati, the ambitious Dhubri-Phulbari bridge set to become India's longest river bridge, the Palasbari-Sualkuchi bridge, and the Jorhat-Majuli bridge, which will permanently connect the world's largest river island to the mainland.

Sarma stressed that improved connectivity has directly translated into economic growth, faster emergency response, tourism expansion and stronger social integration across Upper, Middle and Lower Assam.

"Today, the Brahmaputra is no longer a barrier. It is a lifeline of growth," he said.

Taking a final swipe at the Congress, Sarma said, "Where they saw challenges, we saw responsibility. For our government, no task is impossible when public service is the goal."

Two arrested in

said. Both the accused were produced before a local court on Sunday, and police sought remand. "We have appealed for remand and expect to gather more crucial information during further investigation," an official said. The bodies of six workers killed in the accident were brought back to Assam and cremated at Gelaphakuri tea estate in Tinsukia district on Saturday evening and they were laid to rest.

The entire Gelaphakuri tea estate bid a tearful farewell to the youths. The deceased were identified as Abhay Bhumij (33), Sanjay Kumar (36), Junash Munda (20), Agor Tanti (24), Rajni Nag (24) and Rahul Kumar (25).

The bodies were formally received at Tinsukia Medical College by District Commissioner Swapneel Paul and SSP Mayank Kumar. Assam minister Bimal Borah and Tinsukia MLA Sanjay Keshan were also present during the handover.

An official said this was one of the most dangerous rescue operations, with teams from the NDRF, Border Roads Organisation (BRO), the Indian Army and officials of the Anjaw district administration involved.

Jogdal murders: NHRC

largely unresponsive, the Manoh alleged. "... it is humbly prayed that your esteemed office may kindly take cognisance of the grave human rights violations in this case and intervene appropriately to ensure a fair, independent, and time-bound process leading to justice for the victims," the petition said.

All responsible for the crime as well as for the obstruction of justice be brought to book in accordance with the law, it added. (PTI)

Having Messi is a

Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Messi had arrived in India in the wee hours of Saturday, but the opening leg of the tour in Kolkata quickly descended into chaos later in the day due to poor crowd management and security lapses. However, his evening programme in the Hyderabad leg stood in stark contrast to the mayhem in Kolkata, proceeding smoothly and concluding on a positive note. (PTI)

Himanta congratulates new

said Nabin's contributions as a minister in Bihar and as 'Prabhari' of Chhattisgarh "stand out for their administrative efficiency and organisational impact".

"This responsibility reflects the party's confidence in his leadership and its emphasis on nurturing the next generation of leaders. Wishing him every success in this significant role," Sarma added.

Nabin, a Kayasth by caste, will eventually succeed incumbent BJP chief J P Nadda. He is the PWD minister in Bihar and an MLA from Bankipur in Patna.

Nadda was appointed BJP president in January 2020 and has already completed his full term. He was granted extension to lead the party through the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. (PTI)

Sonowal reviews preparedness

region's agrarian economy. He said the Rs 11,000-crore fertiliser complex would mark a new chapter in the agricultural development of the North East, strengthening fertiliser availability and boosting farmer confidence.

The minister added that all arrangements were being meticulously planned to ensure the Prime Minister's visit becomes a memorable and historic occasion for the people of Assam.

The Ammonia-Urea complex at Namrup will be developed by Assam Valley Fertilizer Corporation Limited (AVFCL) as a major joint venture.

The Government of Assam holds the largest equity stake of 40 per cent, while National Fertilizers Limited, Oil India Limited, Hindustan Urvarak & Rasayan Limited and Brahmaputra Valley Fertilizer Corporation Limited are key partner PSUs. With an annual production capacity of 12.7 lakh metric tonnes of urea, the facility is aimed at meeting the fertiliser needs of farmers across Assam and the wider North Eastern region.

Once commissioned, it will be the single largest urea-producing unit in the North East.

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Assam is part of a two-day programme.

On December 20, he will inaugurate the new terminal building of the Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati, before travelling to Namrup on December 21 for the foundation stone ceremony and public rally.

A senior official said preparations are underway on multiple fronts, including security, infrastructure, logistics and crowd management, to ensure the smooth conduct of the event.

Queer children face

institutions needs to create safe spaces, accessibility to queer-affirmative support initiatives such as gender-neutral toilets, transport facilities, hostels and common rooms, livelihood opportunities, and speedy redressal mechanism for complaints and quality healthcare services, she said.

Former Cotton University professor and Assamese writer Najma Mukherjee said, "As an educator and litterateur, I believe in the power of art -- be it literature or the visual arts. Books and movies have definitely contributed to the shaping of public consciousness in understanding queer experiences all around the world."

Nath pointed out that stakeholders, during discussions on the issue, have pointed out that there is a need for capacity building for school teachers and B.Ed trainees to equip them with skills to support LGBTQIA+ students.

There is also a need to engage more with parents to build understanding and provide supportive environments at home and introduce comics, storybooks, and visual learning tools on gender and sexuality in school libraries, especially in Assamese and other languages, he said.

Rajkumari pointed out that stakeholders have urged the government to include mandatory training for teachers and staffers in all educational institutions, in line with the Supreme Court's guidelines on student mental health, and biannual sensitisation for officials in judicial, police, and administrative departments on laws and rights related to LGBTQIA+ people. (PTI)

Budget 2026-27: CII suggests reforms to drive investment-led growth

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: Industry lobby CII has proposed a comprehensive set of reforms for the forthcoming Union Budget 2026-27 to drive sustained investment growth spanning public, private, and foreign investments and maintain India's momentum as one of the world's fastest-growing major economies.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) suggested increasing central capital expenditure by 12 per cent and capex support to states by 10 per cent in FY27; launching a ₹ 150 lakh crore National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) 2.0 for 2026-32; offering incremental tax credits or compliance relaxations for firms achieving significant new investment, production, or tax contribution milestones; and establishing an NRI Investment Promotion Fund.

It also called for reinstating accelerated depreciation benefits to further incentivise fresh capital expenditure and technology upgrades, particularly for MSMEs and manufacturing industries, provided the measure is structured to stimulate modernisation without triggering Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT) obligations.

Besides, CII urged for strengthening the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) by forming a Sovereign Investment Strategy Council (SIFC) to align investments with national priorities.

The Union Budget for the 2026-27 fiscal year is expected to be presented on February 1.

According to CII, reinforcing fiscal stability through an economic-cycle-based public debt framework, in place of inflexible annual deficit rules, would also enhance resilience by allowing counter-cyclical flexibility during global shocks and avoiding repeated breaches of yearly targets. Such a framework would strengthen credibility by aligning fiscal policy with medium-term debt sustainability, it said.

"The forthcoming Union Budget 2026-27 has to serve the dual role of stabiliser and growth enabler, and promoting investments will be one of the most critical components in this regard," CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee said.

Towards this objective, CII has proposed a comprehensive investment strategy anchored in fiscal prudence, capital efficiency, and investor confidence.

The recommendations emphasise strengthening public capital expenditure as the backbone of infrastructure-led growth, while simultaneously unlocking private and foreign investment through targeted incentives, institutional reforms, and enhanced global engagement.

Bolstering public investment remains essential, CII said, observing that public capital expenditure has been the key driver of India's post-pandemic recovery, catalysing infrastructure expansion and crowding in private capital. (PTI)

Samsung Finance announces 15-Day Loan Mela with DMI Finance

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: Samsung has announced a 15-day Loan Mela, organised in partnership with DMI Finance, to support customers looking to purchase or upgrade their Samsung devices through accessible finance options.

According to an official statement, the Loan Mela will run from December 8 to December 22, 2025, across select territories in North and East India.

The Loan Mela brings a convenient finance option for customers

looking to purchase Samsung products. Through DMI Finance, buyers can avail down payments starting from 0%, no paperwork, low processing fees, and dealer-supported assistance, making the purchase process simple and convenient, it stated.

For dealers, the mela offers an opportunity to engage more customers interested in financing their Samsung purchases.

Store teams can help them understand the DMI Finance options available and support the cus-

tomers in completing their transactions confidently.

The Loan Mela will take place across Samsung's East1, East2, North2, and North3 regions, covering Assam, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttarakhand, and the Northeast states.

For additional information, customers can visit Samsung's official platforms or contact the nearest authorised Samsung retailer in the participating regions.

Guwahati set to emerge as Northeast's aviation hub

New terminal at LGBI Airport to boost outbound tourism, regional integration

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 14: As Adani Airport Holdings Limited prepares to operationalise the new terminal at Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport, Guwahati is poised to emerge as the aviation hub of the Northeast, significantly strengthening outbound tourism, economic mobility and regional integration with the national and global mainstream.

The commissioning of the state-of-the-art terminal marks a major milestone in the region's connectivity journey.

Designed to handle millions of passengers annually, the new facility is expected to position Guwahati as a launch pad for international aspirations, connecting people, trade and culture at an unprecedented scale.

As the most populous city in the Northeast, Guwahati is set to play a central role in reshaping the region's air travel landscape.

The expanded infrastructure is expected to give a decisive push to outbound tourism from the Northeast, one of India's fastest-growing travel markets.

Passengers from Guwahati will have enhanced direct access to key domestic destinations including Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi and Jaipur, along with popular tourist centres such as Goa and Varanasi through extended domestic circuits.

On the international front, strengthened and new connections to Singapore, Bangkok's Don Mueang airport and Paro in Bhutan are expected to provide seamless gateways for both leisure and business travellers to Southeast Asia and beyond.

Schedule analysis indicates that Guwahati's upcoming air network will span more than 25



domestic cities, including Aizawl, Imphal, Dimapur, Silchar, Agartala and Dibrugarh, making it the most extensive aviation hub in the region.

International operations currently link Guwahati to Singapore, Paro and Don Mueang, with plans to expand connectivity to other destinations in South and Southeast Asia.

Major metro connections such as Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Hyderabad will further enable onward global travel to Europe, the Middle East and the Americas.

AAHL's strategy centres on developing Guwahati into the Northeast's aviation capital and a catalyst for inclusive economic growth.

Beyond improved passenger comfort, the new terminal is expected to strengthen the region's economic channels by boosting tourism, exports and business linkages.

Enhanced connectivity is likely to benefit tour operators, travel entrepreneurs and micro, small and medium enterprises across Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Mizoram and Nagaland by facilitating both outbound

travel and increased inbound tourism.

Outbound tourism from the region, particularly among young professionals, students and first-time international travellers, is projected to rise sharply. India's overall outbound tourism market is estimated to grow to \$55.4 billion by 2034, at a compound annual growth rate of around 11.4 per cent.

For the Northeast, which accounted for only 0.43 per cent of domestic tourist visits and 1.17 per cent of foreign tourist visits in the previous year, the new terminal represents a significant opportunity to bridge this gap.

Improved air connectivity is also expected to contribute to deeper macroeconomic integration by linking the Northeast's human capital and enterprises with national and global growth corridors.

With rising disposable incomes and an increasing appetite for global exposure, the region stands to channel this momentum into economic activity across sectors such as travel, hospitality, trade and logistics.

For Adani Airport Holdings Limited, which manages eight airports across the country, the Guwahati terminal reflects its broader objective of making airport infrastructure more inclusive and accessible.

The company's focus on the Northeast is seen as both strategic and symbolic, aimed at bringing the region closer to India's economic mainstream.

With the new terminal set to open its gates, Guwahati is no longer merely a point of departure but a gateway of possibilities, signalling the beginning of a new phase of regional transformation and global connectivity for the Northeast.

Union Minister urges youth to balance growth, technology and ecological sustainability

Sonowal stresses environmentally responsible development in Tinsukia



HT Correspondent
TINSUKIA, Dec 14: Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Saturday delivered a strong message on development, emphasising that economic progress cannot be considered meaningful if it comes at the expense of environmental degradation.

"Any form of growth that damages the environment fails the test of long-term welfare," Sonowal

observed, underlining the need to place sustainability at the core of policy and planning.

Addressing students and youth at a public programme in Tinsukia district, the senior leader stressed the urgent need to harmonise growth, technology and environmental responsibility. He cautioned that development models which undermine nature ultimately weaken society itself. Sonowal

emphasised that technological advancement must go hand-in-hand with human values and ecological consciousness.

Focusing on the younger generation, the minister urged students to prepare for a competitive global landscape by cultivating all-round excellence, adaptability, critical thinking and ethical grounding. "Education should not only impart technical knowledge but also nur-

ture social responsibility and commitment to the greater good," he said.

Invoking Assam's historical legacy, Sonowal cited legendary Ahom commander Lachit Borphukan as a timeless example of courage, discipline and patriotism. He said Lachit's leadership offers valuable lessons for today's youth, particularly regarding integrity, sacrifice and dedication to duty. "Our history teaches us that true leadership is rooted in character and service," he added.

Sonowal further outlined his vision of an Assamese society respected globally for competence and innovation, highlighting the potential of Assam's youth to become global contributors if equipped with skills, confidence and a broad outlook. "This century will belong to those who can demonstrate excellence across knowledge, technology, culture and values," he remarked.

Concluding his address, the minister called for collective efforts by institutions, educators and policymakers to ensure sustainable development. He reiterated that Assam's future depends on environmentally responsible growth and a generation capable of meeting global challenges with resilience, integrity and excellence.

Assam Chief Secretary reviews Batadroba Cultural Project

Preparations underway for inauguration by Union Home Minister Amit Shah



HT Correspondent
NAGAON, Dec 14: Assam Chief Secretary Dr Ravi Kota on Thursday reviewed the ongoing construction work of the Batadroba Cultural Project, a flagship initiative of the state government aimed at transforming the birthplace of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev into a world-class spiritual and tourism hub.

The project is scheduled to be inaugurated later this month by Union Home Minister Amit Shah in the presence of Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma. The ceremony is expected to draw over 50,000 devotees and around 2,000 artistes.

During his visit, Dr Kota, accompanied by senior officials, inspected the project site, reviewed the progress of ongoing work and assessed overall preparedness for the upcoming inauguration.

He was joined by local MLA Rupak Sarma, IGP Akhilesh Kumar Singh, Deputy Commissioner Debashish Sarma, Senior Superintendent of Police Swapnil Deka and other senior officials from the district and police administration.

The Batadroba Cultural Project is being developed to highlight Assam's rich cultural heritage and to promote spiritual tourism, aligning with the state government's vision of creating landmark cultural destinations.

NCW Chairperson reviews women-centric schemes in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, Dec 14: Chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW), Vijaya Rahatkar, visited Sonitpur district on Saturday to review the implementation of various women-centric schemes of the Central and Assam governments. She was accompanied by NCW Additional Secretary Radhika Chakravarty, Assam State Commission for Women Chairperson Angurlata Deka and senior officials from the Panchayat and Rural Development Department.

At the District Commissioner's office in Tezpur, Rahatkar interacted with beneficiaries of schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Yojana, Orunodoi, PMFME and self-help groups under the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission. She highlighted the importance of collective strength, independent decision-making and political empowerment for women.

Later, she inaugurated a one-day awareness workshop, "She is a Change Maker", at Darrang College, attended by elected women representatives of Panchayats. She also visited the Sakhi One Stop Centre in Tezpur and chaired a review meeting with district officials to assess initiatives on women's safety, social welfare, health, irrigation, POSH Act implementation and Panchayat development schemes.

Rahatkar appreciated initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Nijut Moira, Orunodoi and Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Yojana for their role in enhancing women's empowerment and livelihoods. She stressed that true progress is achieved when women exercise agency in social, economic and political spheres.

The visit also included a review of women's safety measures in the district with police officials. Assam State Commission for Women Chairperson Angurlata Deka, speaking to the media, expressed hope for speedy justice in the case related to singer Zubeen Garg's death.

Former residents of Mangaldai College boys' hostel reunite in nostalgic meet

HT Correspondent
MANGALDAI, Dec 14: Former residents of the now-defunct Mangaldai College boys' hostel gathered to relive cherished memories of their student days during the seventh annual reunion held on Saturday at a sprawling green lawn at a farm near Sipajhar. The meet brought together hostel residents from the 1980-91 period, many of whom have since retired from their professional lives.

Expressing deep emotional attachment to the hostel, Madan Chandra Nath, a former resident, said that one remains a student till the last breath and that memories of student life are like a green canvas of freedom and affection. Renowned instrumentalist Minku Mani Deka, another former resident, said that although the hostel no longer exists, its memories still linger strongly. He added that whenever he visits Mangaldai from his home in Dhekiajuli, he pauses at the broken gate of the hostel to pay his respects.

The reunion programme began in the morning with tributes to iconic Assamese artistes Bhupen Hazarika and Zubeen Garg. This was followed by an afternoon

session featuring tea and interaction, homage to deceased former residents and recollections of hostel life. Around 30 former residents aged above 60 were felicitated on the occasion. Participants attended the reunion from various places including Udalguri, Dhekiajuli, Guwahati, Baihata Chariali and nearby areas.

During the meeting, the former residents resolved to publish a souvenir next year comprising writings and reminiscences of hostel life contributed by members from their respective workplaces. It was also recalled that a book titled Romanthan, containing brief life sketches of the residents, has already been published.

Key organisers of the programme, including Madan Chandra Nath, Abani Nath and Atul Saharia, urged everyone to keep the spirit and fragrance of those memories alive through positive thoughts and actions, despite the physical absence of the Mangaldai College boys' hostel. The programme concluded with a communal feast, symbolising harmony and enduring friendship among the former residents.

Akhil Gogoi challenges Himanta Biswa to contest from Sivasagar

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, Dec 14: Sivasagar MLA Akhil Gogoi on Sunday issued an open challenge to Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sharma, inviting him to contest the upcoming assembly elections from the prestigious Sivasagar Legislative Assembly constituency. Gogoi stated that if Sharma does not contest, he expects neither Pijush Hazarika nor the state BJP president to stand

against him.

Gogoi, without naming him directly, described the Chief Minister as "the most notorious killer in Assam" and said he would be ashamed to contest against such a person. In addition, Gogoi took a swipe at the state BJP Women's chief, criticising her for discounting him as a potential challenger in the forthcoming elections. He further suggested that if the BJP is genuinely committed to

women's welfare, it should field a women candidate to contest against him this time.

Gogoi's remarks come amid heightened political activity in Sivasagar, a constituency considered highly significant in Assam's political landscape. His challenge underscores the growing tensions between the ruling BJP leadership and opposition voices ahead of the next assembly elections.

Rajamoni Ahmed and Pinki Rajkumari crowned Strong Man and Strong Woman

2nd Powerlifting Championship concludes at Morigaon

HT Correspondent
MORIGAON, Dec 14: The 2nd Powerlifting Championship for men and women concluded late last night at the Morigaon Bihutoli ground. The day-long event was organised by PHYCA, Morigaon and witnessed enthusiastic participation from powerlifters across various age and weight categories.

Rajamoni Ahmed clinched the 'Strong Man' title with a total lift of 600 kg, while Pinki Rajkumari secured the 'Strong Woman' title with an impressive total lift of 280 kg.

In the boys' sub-junior 59 kg category, Sahan Bahane secured first position. Kumud Kasyap topped the 74 kg category, while Juman Patar won first place in the 93 kg category. In the sub-junior girls' 52 kg category, Nousin Agra Anjuma finished first. Pinki Rajkumari also claimed first position in the senior women's 76 kg category, with Digongana Devi securing second place. In the women's 57 kg category, Sunamoni Devi bagged



first position, while Manalisha Aktar won first place in the 84 kg category.

In the men's 59 kg category, Saifulla Khalid secured first position, followed by Sanjib Deka in second place. Mafikul Islam emerged winner in the 66 kg category, with Mujarif Ali finishing second and Aditya Konwar third. In the men's senior category, Atin Mithi claimed first position. Firuj Ahmed won first place in the Masters-1 66 kg category.

In the junior boys' 74 kg category, Rajamoni Ahmed secured first position, while Asikul Hoque

and Mintu Kumar Nath finished second and third respectively. Rakibul Hazarika topped the senior men's 74 kg category. In the junior boys' 83 kg category, Abindam Bordoloi won first position, with Rukumar Deuri finishing second. Raju Ali secured first place in the senior men's 83 kg category, followed by Saddam Hussain in second place. In the men's 93 kg category, Abhijit Saikia emerged winner, while Dr Anurag Sarma secured second position. Subham Chauhan claimed first position in the 105 kg category.

The championship was inaugurated by Morigaon District Commissioner Anamika Tewari in the presence of CEO of MZP Ananta Kumar Gogoi and Deputy CEO Abhijit Chakraborty. The event flag was hoisted by Nitumoni Das, president of the executive committee. The programme was moderated by Pinakhi Bhusan Mahanta, Nitu Das, Muhan Das, Dr Ranjan Patar, Partha Pratim Patar and Ajit Nath.

Laikhuta installed for Bakhor Bengena Mahotsav 2025-26

HT Correspondent
DEMOW, Dec 14: Preparations for the Bakhor Bengena Mahotsav 2025-26 formally began with the installation of the laikhuta at Bakhor Bengena Bokota near Demow on Saturday. The ceremonial installation was carried out by Sushanta Borgohain, MLA of Demow constituency, marking the official commencement of arrangements for the festival.

The Bakhor Bengena Mahotsav 2025-26 is scheduled to be organised near the historic Bakhor Bengena tree at Bokota from December 31, 2025 to January 2, 2026. The festival is expected to attract people from different parts of the region and showcase the cultural heritage and traditional values associated with the Bakhor Bengena site.

The laikhuta installation ceremony was held in the presence of former Thowra MLA Kushal Dowari, members of the organising committee and a large number of local residents of Bokota. Addressing the gathering, the organisers expressed hope that the forthcoming Mahotsav would be organised in a grand and inclusive manner, with active participation from the local community.

Mass resignations from Congress in West Karbi Anglong

HT Correspondent
KHERONI, Dec 14: The Congress party is facing a major setback in West Karbi Anglong as mass resignations sweep through the Karbi Hills ahead of the 2026 Assam Assembly elections.

In Donkamokam, a total of 685 Congress leaders and workers from various Member of Autonomous Council constituencies resigned collectively. The resignations were led by Socheng Block Congress president Vindra Rongpi, Socheng Mohila Congress Committee president Manai Ronghangpi and Amreng Mohila Congress Committee president Tina Tokbipi.

The departing office-bearers represented the Socheng Council Constituency Congress Committee, Mahila Mandal Congress Committee, and other Congress committees in the Chinthong, Amri and Rongkhang Council Constituencies.

The leaders and workers cited the party's misgovernance, family-centric politics and alleged discriminatory treatment of people in the hill districts over the years as reasons for their decision. Political analysts say this wave of resignations is a significant blow to Congress, undermining its organisational strength in the hill districts ahead of next year's elections. Mass departures have also been reported sporadically in East Karbi Anglong, signaling potential challenges for the party in the region.

Reception committee formed for 52nd Karbi Youth Festival 2026

HT Bureau
DIPHU, Dec 14: A Reception Committee (RC) has been constituted to oversee preparations for the 52nd edition of the Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) 2026. The committee is headed by Executive Member (EM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Ritesh Engli as president, Bhubon Tokbi as working president, and EM, KAAC, Richard Tokbi as general secretary.

The formation meeting of the RC was held on December 13 at Rangisina Sarpoo Auditorium of the Karbi People's Hall (KPH), Taralango. The annual five-day festival, organised by the Karbi Cultural Society (KCS) from February 15 to 19, 2026, is celebrated as one of the key ethnic festivals of Northeast India. It showcases the rich culture and traditions of Karbi tribes from Assam and other Northeastern states through cultural competitions, demonstrations and exhibitions by Karbi youths. Other ethnic communities in Karbi Anglong also participate, presenting their languages, traditions and

cuisines. The meeting was chaired by KCS president Humsing Bey with objectives presented by general secretary Sunil Tokbi. In addition to the RC leadership, Gobin Terang, Mukrang Bey and Robin Teron were appointed as office secretaries. Bey emphasised that efforts would be made to make the 52nd KYF more culturally authentic and eco-friendly, including promoting Karbi ethnic foods and using only biodegradable utensils. Hotels and food stalls will be encouraged to prioritize traditional menus over exotic options. Further discussions on enhancing the festival's eco-friendliness and hospitality will take place in the next RC meeting.

The meeting was attended by Chief Executive Member, KAAC Dr Tuliram Ronghang; MLA Darsing Ronghang, KCS adviser Chandrasing Kro, EM, KAAC, Art & Culture Department, Surjya Rongphar and other officials, political representatives, social organizations and cultural leaders.

Pratishruti marks 8 years with Awards for Cancer and Palliative care champions

Trust honours doctors, institutions and media for contributions to cancer awareness

HT Correspondent
DIBRUGARH, Dec 14: Pratishruti Cancer and Palliative Trust, a Dibrugarh-based non-profit organisation dedicated to cancer awareness and prevention, marked the completion of eight years of service on Saturday with a full-day programme at the Dibrugarh District Sports Association's outdoor stadium, as it stepped into its ninth year.

The anniversary event was marked by the presentation of several prestigious awards recognising outstanding contributions in the fields of oncology, palliative care and cancer prevention.

Dr Munindra Narayan Baruah was conferred the Dr Heramba Kumar Bharali Memorial Award for his significant contributions to cancer care, while Dr Kabindra Bhagwati received the Dr Prahlad Kumar Baruah Memorial Award for exemplary services in palliative care. The DK Gogoi Shastri Memorial Palliative Service Leadership Award was presented to Dr Gayatri Palat of Hyderabad, a leading figure in palliative medicine.

In the field of social service, Guwahati-based Karunadhara Trust was honoured with the Ashwinicharan Choudhury Memorial

Cancer Prevention Social Service Award. Senior journalist Anil Poddar of Dibrugarh was presented with this year's 'Pratishruti' Media Award. All awardees were felicitated with citations, mementoes and traditional garments.

Delivering the welcome address, Dr Alrok Kumar Buragohain, president of Pratishruti and Vice-Chancellor of Royal Global University, appealed to all stakeholders to continue working collectively for the welfare of people suffering from cancer. Outlining the organisation's future vision, he said that Pratishruti would work not only towards cancer treatment but also towards identifying and addressing its associated causes.

The chief guest, Nitumoni Saikia, Editor-in-Chief of Pratinid Time, praised the organisation for its dedication and commitment. He described Pratishruti as a symbol of resolve, courage and sacrifice, noting that its sustained efforts had brought hope and relief to many patients and families. Saikia expressed concern over the rising incidence of cancer despite the presence of fourteen cancer hospitals in the state and pointed out the lack of adequate public awareness programmes. He supported the demand for a



cancer hospice in Upper Assam and highlighted possible risk factors, including the widespread consumption of pork and the use of pesticides in tea gardens.

Dr Gayatri Gogoi, honorary director and the driving force behind Pratishruti, highlighted the trust's impactful initiatives, including the administration of HPV vaccines

for cervical cancer prevention to 2,600 individuals over the past six months. On the occasion, four doctors—Anannya Baruah, Trishnashree Bora, Devarshana Bora and Sharadhyotsna Anannya Saikia were honoured as 'HPV Vaccine Champions' in recognition of their contributions to the vaccination drive.

New Delhi's toxic Air quality: A public health emergency

By: Nimisha Chadha

The catastrophic air quality crisis in New Delhi has become a recurring feature of the national capital, posing serious concerns. With countless people in the National Capital Region (NCR) breathing harmful Particulate Matter ≤ 2.5 (μm) (PM2.5) pollutants daily, the impact of the sky-rocketing Air Quality Index (AQI) levels amounts to a public health emergency. Invisible pollutants have resulted in hazardous air quality across the northern regions of the Indian sub-continent, with no catch-all solution. To confront Delhi's air crisis effectively, policy intervention must be an urgent priority, grounded in the latest empirical data, and prioritise immediate actions against local pollution sources.

What's Really Causing Delhi's Air Quality Crisis?

Delhi's wintertime spikes in AQI levels are caused by a myriad of factors, worsened by unfavourable meteorological conditions that trap pollutants close to the surface. Vehicular emissions, waste incineration, displaced dust, stubble burning, firecrackers, and construction have been identified in a report as some of the contributing factors. For years, stubble burning has been singled out as the leading contributor, as pollutants travel across state borders during periods that correlate with increased PM 2.5 pollutants in Delhi. However, newly published data from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) demonstrates that the proportional contribution of stubble burning to Delhi's PM2.5 in 2025 is negligible.

Despite a 77.5 percent decrease in stubble burning since 2021, Delhi's air quality reached its worst in half a decade this winter. As illustrated above, the contribution of stubble burning to PM2.5 levels has dropped to negligible proportions. The CPCB's report has measured AQI only between 1 January and 7 November each year, discounting some of the most severely polluted days. Regardless, the proportional contribution of stubble burning has reduced substantially since 2021, even during the peak period of early November. This aligns with the most recent data from the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), which highlighted that local emissions from vehicles and combustion sources are the most significant contributors.

The city's basin-like topography, combined with colder temperatures, creates temperature inversions where cold air is trapped beneath warm air, preventing pollutants from escaping.

The city's basin-like topography, combined with colder temperatures, creates temperature inversions where cold air is trapped beneath warm air, preventing pollutants from escaping. Pollutant mixing occurs much closer to the ground in the coldest months, exacerbated by lower moisture and calm winds during winter. Furthermore, recent changes, such as the Supreme Court permitting the use of green firecrackers in Delhi-NCR during Diwali, risk aggravating seasonal spikes in air pollution. These conditions are even more precariously placed following the Supreme Court's recent acceptance of a uniform definition of the Aravalli Hills that removes protections for nearly 90 percent of the range from large-scale mining. This could worsen Delhi's air, leading to the loss of vital green cover and natural barrier for desert dust and regional pollutants that the Aravallis provide.

As things stand, sustained local emissions and the meteorological factors that worsen the impact are causing an escalation of the effects of climate change as well as an immediate health crisis.

Impact on Health

Air pollution is a significant threat to public health, particularly in North India, where almost the entire population lives in regions with PM2.5 levels exceeding the World Health Organisation (WHO) standards. PM2.5, the most harmful pollutant, which directly reaches deep into the lungs, is linked to increased incidence of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and non-smoker lung cancer. The WHO estimates that globally, approximately 4.2 million premature deaths associated with ambient air pollution occur annually.

An analysis of the Global Burden of Disease data found that in 2023, air pollution contributed to 15 percent of all deaths in Delhi, amounting to 17,118 deaths — an 8.9 percent increase since 2018 — making it the leading cause of mortality in the city and the biggest threat to residents. While research is still being conducted to better understand all the health risks of air pollution, besides lung and heart disease, air pollution is also associated

with impaired cognitive function, increasing the risk of stroke and dementia, hormone disruption and weakening of immune defences, among others. For children with developing lungs, air pollutants are associated with stunted growth and increasing lifelong respiratory risks.

Between 2022 and 2024, 204,758 cases of ARI were reported to emergency department, of which, 30,424 required hospital admission, demonstrating the burden of air pollution on Delhi's population.

Data collected by the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) under the Acute Respiratory Infection (ARI) digital surveillance, started in August 2023, from six central government hospitals in Delhi revealed that between 2022 and 2024, 204,758 cases of ARI were reported to emergency department, of which, 30,424 required hospital admission, demonstrating the burden of air pollution on Delhi's population.

Current Policy Landscape and Implications for Health

The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) — India's principal policy framework for improving air quality in 131 cities — set the target of a 40 percent reduction in PM10 concentrations compared to 2017–18, or compliance with the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS, 60 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for PM10, 40 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for PM2.5) by 2026, and outlined rigorous measures to mitigate air pollution in major cities. While some progress has been made, Delhi, Gurgaon, and Noida ranked among the highest for both PM10 and PM2.5 concentrations.

Further, the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) target is far more lenient than the recommended limit by the WHO (20 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for PM10, 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for PM2.5), and air pollution at NAAQS levels can also adversely impact health.

Fund utilisation of the NCAP reveals a disproportionate focus on road dust management (67 percent of expenditure). On the other hand, only four percent of the funds are dedicated to capacity building and monitoring. While road dust management is important, allocating resources towards curbing vehicular emissions and open waste burning could do more to reduce local pollutants.

The National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) target is far more lenient than the recommended limit by



the WHO (20 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for PM10, 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for PM2.5), and air pollution at NAAQS levels can also adversely impact health.

An investigation revealed that nearly 22 air quality monitoring stations in Delhi violated CPCB guidelines, with several located near vegetation or obstructions that could affect their readings. Additionally, poor maintenance and violation of guidelines undermine the data's reliability. Under the System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research, technology has also been developed to predict pollution levels in Delhi and ensure preventative actions to protect human health.

The National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCCHH) developed a comprehensive Health Adaptation Plan for Diseases due to Air Pollution (HAP) in 2021, which outlines response measures such as a graded health response to changes in AQI to manage the surge in respiratory and cardiopulmonary diseases due to air pollution. It encompasses health facility preparedness, stockpiling medications, and public advisories. However, monitoring and forecasting gaps based on air pollution data constrain policy response, leaving cities without critical early warning systems or advanced risk communication for their populations. This holds for the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) as well, which mandates

phased restrictions on construction, traffic, and industrial activity as air quality worsens. However, its effectiveness depends on timely and credible data. Even in its most advanced stage (GRAP-IV), the restrictions provided some relief but failed to resolve the underlying issues before these were relaxed once again. Nonetheless, the importance of an emergency response mechanism that halts construction and reduces public exposure to the toxic air should not be underestimated.

Collectively, despite the existence of frameworks, policy responses have fallen short in implementation, and urgent measures must be taken to mitigate the root causes of Delhi's air pollution and its impacts on public health.

An investigation revealed that nearly 22 air quality monitoring stations in Delhi violated CPCB guidelines, with several located near vegetation or obstructions that could affect their readings.

Way Forward

Amid growing recognition of the adverse impacts of air pollution, the Supreme Court described Delhi-NCR's air quality as a 'health emergency,' while agreeing to hear a plea seeking urgent, time-bound action to curb rising pollution levels. In parallel, the return on investment (ROI) of controlling air pollution was estimated to be US\$30 for every dollar spent in the

United States (US), including the benefits of reduced healthcare costs, improved worker productivity, and extended life expectancy, reinforcing that clean air should be treated as a public-health and economic priority. Acknowledging the severity of the crisis, in the short run, efforts across the NCAP, the HAP, and the GRAP need to be aligned so that air quality data can trigger responses across both environmental and health sectors. This would require combined data dashboards and joint control rooms to take unified action.

Nevertheless, to truly combat air pollution and prevent a public health emergency, there must be a multifaceted effort. In addition to the restrictions placed by GRAP, which can mitigate the sources of pollution during spikes, long-term measures to reduce vehicular emissions include accelerating the transition to clean energy, improving public transport networks, and enhancing last-mile connectivity with zero-emission options and demand management tools such as congestion taxes. Proper segregation and collection of waste will reduce open burning, another major contributor to pollutants. Industrial sources in and around Delhi need tighter emissions standards, continuous monitoring and strict enforcement, especially for heavily polluting industries. (Courtesy: ORF)

Medicare costs: 3 key changes in 2026

By: David Mills

Experts are urging Medicare recipients to carefully research their options for next year during the open enrollment period that is now under way.

They say changes in premiums and other Medicare components as well as the government shutdown could affect what they pay for medical care as well as what services are available to them.

"Millions of Medicare beneficiaries will face higher out-of-pocket costs and reduced benefits in 2026, so comparing Medicare coverage options is especially crucial this year," Whitney Stidom, vice president of consumer enablement at eHealth, told Medical News Today.

"Beneficiaries should be proactive during the Medicare annual enrollment period, as comparing plans from multiple insurers can help people save money and find the right option for them," Stidom added. The open enrollment period for Medicare began on October 15 and lasts until December 7.

This eligibility window is for people 65 years and older who want to sign up for the federally funded health program or make changes to their current plans. In addition to the usual considerations, there also may be some uncertainties added this year if the federal government shutdown lasts for an extended period of time.

One is that the processing of claims by recipients and payments to medical providers could be delayed.

Another is that telehealth services could be reduced. Some telehealth programs that were offered over the past several years expired on October 1 and Congress did not take action to renew them.

"Telehealth restrictions will lead to gaps in access for many patients, especially those who are dealing with disabilities or those living in rural areas," said Kanwar Kelley, MD, a specialist in otolaryngology head and neck surgery, obesity medicine, and lifestyle medicine as well as the co-founder and chief executive officer of Side Health in Orinda, CA.

"Converting patients accustomed to telehealth back to in-person visits will incur costs for transportation, lost work, and time," Kelley told MNT. "Patients with mobility issues, rural travel barriers, or caregiver constraints — who benefited most from telehealth — may face greater costs and logistical hurdles to get needed care, and delayed or avoided care can increase downstream costs and worse outcomes."

The basic facts about Medicare

About 69 million people in the United States get health coverage under the Medicare system.

About 90% of those covered are 65 years or older. Most of those under 65 are people with specific disabilities.

Basic Medicare coverage includes what is known as Part A and Part B.

Part A covers inpatient care at hospitals, critical access hospitals, and skilled nursing facilities. It also helps cover hospice care and some

home healthcare. It is estimated that only 1% of people on Part A pay a monthly premium.

Part B covers necessary medical services such as doctor's visits, outpatient care, and ambulance services. Premiums are usually deducted from a person's monthly Social Security check.

An estimated 51% of Medicare recipients have supplemental health insurance such as a Medicare Advantage plan.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) estimate there will be about 5,600 Medicare Advantage Plans available nationwide in 2026. That is close to the numbers from 2025, when the amount of options decreased from the previous year.

The number of plans available to an individual Medicare recipient varies from state to state. In addition, some Medicare Advantage providers, including UnitedHealthcare, have said they plan to scale back their service areas and/or coverage options.

Monthly insurance premiums may change

The average Part B premium is expected to rise from \$185 in 2025 to \$206 in 2026. That 12% increase would be twice as high as the 2025 hike.

It would also more than offset the projected 2.7% increase in Social Security monthly benefits paid to individuals.

One reason given for these increases is that people are utilizing Part B coverage more often, resulting in lower profits for health insurance firms. In addition, more people are enrolling in Part B plans. There are also higher costs in general for hospitalization and outpatient care.

At the same time, it is projected that the average monthly premium for Medicare Advantage plans with prescription drug coverage will decrease from \$16 in 2025 to \$14 in 2026.

In addition, the CMS estimates that monthly premiums for standalone Part D plans will drop from \$38 in 2025 to \$34 in 2026. Premiums for Part D that are part of Medicare Advantage plans will dip slightly from \$13 to \$11 per month.

However, insurance companies will be allowed to raise Part D premiums as much as \$50 per month, higher than the current \$35 monthly maximum.

Experts say Medicare recipients will feel the effects of any premium increases.

"Any cost increase to medical premiums will be significant as prices are rising for other goods and services. In the end, it means less money in consumers' pockets," said Kelley.

Out-of-pocket costs and deductibles

The annual out-of-pocket limit for in-network services for Medicare Advantage recipients will decrease slightly from \$9,350 in 2025 to \$9,250 in 2026. The annual cap on out-of-pocket expenses for Part D drugs will increase slightly from \$2,000 in 2025 to \$2,100 in 2026.

The maximum out-of-pocket cost for insulin will remain at \$35 per month and most vaccines will still be covered under Part D.

However, earlier this year the Trump administration decided against Medicare covering the cost of GLP-1 weight-loss drugs such as Ozem-

pic. At the same time, the annual deductible for Part B medical coverage is projected to rise 12% in 2026 to \$288.

The annual deductibles for Part D coverage are also expected to increase. Those amounts can vary, but the maximum any plan can charge will rise from \$590 in 2025 to \$615 in 2026.

Experts say any increases in deductibles or out-of-pocket costs will be felt.

Prescription drug prices

It is estimated that about 81% of Medicare recipients are also enrolled in Part D, which covers prescription drug expenses.

The number of standalone Part D plans is forecasted to decrease from 464 nationwide in 2025 to 360 in 2026. Medicare officials are expected to continue to negotiate prices for drugs covered under Part D. Experts say that could result in discounts of 38% to 79% on list prices on 10 widely used prescriptions, including blood thinners Eliquis and Xarelto, as well as diabetes medications Januvia, Jardiance, and Farxiga. People with Part D plans will also continue to be able to utilize an automatic prescription payment plan that spreads out drug costs over the year. People who currently have this plan will be automatically re-enrolled for 2026 unless they opt out.

Despite these price reductions, experts say some Medicare recipients could still pay more for prescription drugs.

"Although the price of Part D (drug benefits) may reduce overall, the reduction in options and changes to covered medications could result in higher costs for consumers of certain specialty medications," Kelley noted.

Advice for Medicare recipients for 2026

An estimated 70% of Medicare recipients do not currently compare plan options.

Experts say it is important for Medicare recipients to research options and study different plans during the open enrollment period to see what is best for them financially as well as which medical services are covered.

Stidom noted that consumers should have recently received an annual "notice of change" letter from their Medicare Advantage and Part D providers, informing what will be different in 2026. She said using a licensed insurance agency such as eHealth can save consumers as much as \$1,800 a year.

"For help finding coverage, Medicare beneficiaries can start online with a private marketplace, which can help people compare plans side by side from multiple insurers," she said. "Some websites make it convenient to compare Medicare Advantage plans based on various factors, including personal health needs, locations, prescribed drugs, and more."

Stidom also recommended Medicare recipients closely check their Part D plans "because these plans are offered through private insurers, the year-over-year premium changes can vary."

"Some enrollees may also see changes to their list of covered drugs or to the drug tiers that determine what patients pay for them out of pocket," she noted. (Courtesy: MNT)

Social media, not gaming, tied to rising attention problems in teens, new study finds

By: Torkel Klingberg, Samson Nivins

The digital revolution has become a vast, unplanned experiment — and children are its most exposed participants. As ADHD diagnoses rise around the world, a key question has emerged: could the growing use of digital devices be playing a role?

To explore this, we studied more than 8,000 children, from when they were around ten until they were 14 years of age. We asked them about their digital habits and grouped them into three categories: gaming, TV/video (YouTube, say) and social media.

The latter included apps such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, X, Messenger and Facebook. We then analysed whether usage was associated with long-term change in the two core symptoms of ADHD: inattentiveness and hyperactivity.

Our main finding was that social media use was associated with a gradual increase in inattentiveness. Gaming or watching videos was not. These patterns remained the same even after accounting for children's genetic risk for ADHD and their families' income.

We also tested whether inattentiveness might cause children to use more social media instead. It didn't. The direction ran one way: social media use predicted later inattentiveness.

The mechanisms of how digital media affects attention are unknown. But the lack of negative effect of other screen activities means we can rule out any general, negative effect of screens as well as the popular notion that all digital media produces "dopamine hits", which then mess with children's attention.

As cognitive neuroscientists, we could make an educated guess about the mechanisms. Social media introduces constant distractions, preventing sustained attention to any task.

If it is not the messages themselves that distract, the mere thought of whether a message has arrived can act as a mental distraction. These distractions impair focus in the moment, and when they persist for months or years, they may also have long-term effects.

Gaming, on the other hand, takes place during limited sessions, not throughout the day, and involves a constant focus on one task at a time.

The effect of social media, using statistical measures, was not large. It was not enough to push a person with normal attention into ADHD territory. But if the entire population becomes more inattentive, many will cross the diagnostic border.

Theoretically, an increase of one hour of social media use in the entire population would increase the diagnoses by about 30 percent. This is admittedly a simplification, since diagnoses depend on many factors, but it illustrates how even an effect that is small at the individual level can have a significant effect when it affects an entire population.

A lot of data suggests that we have seen at least one hour more per day of social media during the last decade or two. Twenty years ago, social media barely existed.

Now, teenagers are online for about five hours per day, mostly with social media.

The percentage of teenagers who claim to be "constantly online" has increased from 24 per cent in 2015 to 46 per cent 2023. Given that social

media use has risen from essentially zero to around five hours per day, it may explain a substantial part of the increase in ADHD diagnoses during the past 15 years.

The attention gap

Some argue that the rise in the number of ADHD diagnoses reflects greater awareness and reduced stigma. That may be part of the story, but it doesn't rule out a genuine increase in inattention.

Also, some studies that claim that the symptoms of inattention have not increased have often studied children who were probably too young to own a smartphone, or a period of years that mostly predates the avalanche in scrolling.

Social media probably increases inattention, and social media use has rocketed. What now? The US requires children to be at least 13 to create an account on most social platforms, but these restrictions are easy to outsmart.

Australia is currently going the furthest. From December 10 2025, media companies will be required to ensure that users are 16 years or above, with high penalties for the companies that do not adhere. Let's see what effect that legislation will have. Perhaps the rest of the world should follow the Australians. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)



Messi event chaos

Inquiry panel members inspect Salt Lake stadium, take stock of damage

KOLKATA, Dec 14: A day after spectators went on a rampage during Argentine football icon Lionel Messi's event at Salt Lake stadium here, members of an inquiry committee visited the venue on Sunday and took stock of the damage, officials said.

The three-member team examined broken plastic chairs, twisted metal barricades and littered galleries during their on-ground inspection of the stadium, one of India's largest football arenas, they said.

Led by retired Calcutta High Court judge Justice Ashim Kumar Ray, the committee members started their inspection from the point, where Messi had entered the Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan, and tried to trace his movement inside the stadium, the officials said.

The panel, also comprising Chief Secretary Manoj Pant and Home Secretary Nandini Chakravorty, inspected entry corridors, security arrangements during the December 13 event and adjoining galleries, they said. Cleaning and restoration work were halted to allow the panel to assess the scale of damage and reconstruct the sequence of events that led to the chaos, one of the officials said.

Scattered footwear, torn banners, broken railings and damaged fibreglass seats were visible across several blocks of the stadium gallery, while police personnel guarded sections of the venue as the panel examined security arrangements and crowd flow patterns, another official said.

Officials accompanying the committee members carried out videography and photography throughout the



inspection to gather evidence on the extent of vandalism for the investigation, he said.

What was supposed to be a marquee football spectacle turned into widespread violence and disorder at the stadium on Saturday after Messi's brief and tightly ringed appearance, his first at the venue since 2011, left large sections of the crowd frustrated, as they failed to catch a glimpse of their superstar despite having travelled from far and wide, paying hefty sums for tickets.

The committee, set up by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, has been tasked with fixing responsibility for the lapses and recommending corrective steps to prevent a repeat of such incidents at high-profile events. An FIR has been registered, and the police have arrested the main organiser on charges of mismanagement and public disorder.

Banerjee had on Saturday apologised to Messi and football fans and announced the formation of the high-level committee to ensure accountability. (PTI)

Union Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary named new UP BJP chief

LUCKNOW, Dec 14: Union Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary was on Sunday named the new president of the BJP's Uttar Pradesh unit, with his election being formally announced by Union Minister Piyush Goyal here.

The announcement was made in the presence of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and deputy chief ministers Keshav Prasad Maurya and Brajesh Pathak.

Chaudhary had filed his nomination for the post on Saturday and was the sole candidate in the fray. He submitted the papers to former Union minister and BJP state election officer Mahendra Nath Pandey and central election observer Vinod Tawde.

Adityanath, his two deputies, and Jal Shakti Minister Swatantra Dev Singh witnessed the filing of the nomination.

Outgoing state BJP chief Bhupendra Chaudhary handed over the party flag to his successor.

Goyal presented Pankaj Chaudhary with his certificate of election. At the programme, Sangathan Parv, Goyal called the BJP the world's largest political organisation, and said the global community is aston-



ished by its disciplined and democratic functioning.

Goyal said that the party election was conducted at 1.62 lakh booths.

"The party's steady growth, carried forward from the vision of Dr Yama Prasad Mookerjee, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and guided today by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP national president JP Nadda, has strengthened the organisation, which is evident from the large gathering at the event," he said.

Goyal also announced the names of the party's newly elected national council members, whose numbers ran up to 120, and included Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Modi represents Varanasi, while Adityanath represents Gorakhpur. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is from Lucknow, Maurya from Prayagraj, and Pathak from Unnao.

Other members of the national council include Bhupendra Singh Chaudhary (Sambhal), Smriti Irani (Sultanpur), Dr Mahendra Nath

Pandey (Varanasi), Surya Pratap Shahi (Salempur), Swatantra Dev Singh (Banda), and Dr Ramapati Ram Tripathi (Gorakhpur).

Pankaj Chaudhary will be the 17th chief of UP BJP, former Union minister Mahendra Nath Pandey said.

A seven-time Lok Sabha MP from the Maharajganj constituency, Pankaj Chaudhary belongs to the Kurmi community, categorised under Other Backward Classes (OBC). He is considered a close confidant of Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

Maurya said the 2027 UP assembly election is the next major challenge for the party and asserted that the BJP would secure an overwhelming victory under Chaudhary's leadership.

Cabinet Minister Dara Singh Chauhan said the party would scale new heights under Chaudhary's leadership, while MSME Minister Rakesh Sachan thanked the BJP's national leadership for the decision.

BJP leader Dinesh Pratap Singh said Pankaj Chaudhary was fully capable of providing strong leadership to the party. (PTI)

CEC, his aides must answer how EC allowed stealing of votes: Priyanka

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Sunday said every step of the poll process arouses suspicion and asserted that the chief election commissioner and the two election commissioners must answer how they "conspired" to take away people's voting rights. Addressing the party's 'Vote Chor, Gaddi Chhod' mega rally at Ramlila grounds here, Priyanka Gandhi said Indians must rise when the country's institutions are being crushed.

She named Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi, and said the BJP will not be able to save them, as one day they will be forced to answer for "conspiring" to take away people's vote. "I challenge the BJP to contest polls on the ballot paper. They know they will never win," the Congress general secretary said. (PTI)

Attempt to shield 'infiltrators': BJP ahead of Cong's rally against 'vote theft'

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: Ahead of the Congress' rally over the "vote theft" issue, the BJP on Sunday alleged that the main opposition party was holding the event in its bid to "protect infiltrators" from being removed from the electoral rolls.

The ruling BJP asserted that the Congress will not succeed in its design of misleading people as well as "insulting and defaming" constitutional institutions, because the entire world knows that India's democracy is "very robust".

Stepping up its campaign against the alleged "vote theft" by the BJP in elections, the Congress has organised a rally at the Ramlila Maidan here on Sunday that will be attended by the party's top leaders, including general secretaries Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, K C Venugopal, Jairam

Ramesh, and Sachin Pilot.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and former party chief Rahul Gandhi are expected to address the gathering. Former Congress president Sonia Gandhi is also likely to be present at the event.

Ahead of the event, BJP national spokesperson Sambit Patra said the Congress was holding the rally even as Union Home Minister Amit Shah "exposed" the opposition through his point-by-point rebuttal to their "fabricated" allegations during a debate on electoral reforms during the ongoing Winter Session of Parliament.

"This shows that you do not have truth in your hand, yet you are trying to create an atmosphere of confusion. The Congress' rally is an exercise to protect 'ghuspaithiyas (in-

filtrators)'. This is what the Congress is doing," the BJP MP told reporters here.

"The Congress party may try all it wants to mislead the people as well as insult and defame our constitutional institutions. But, the entire world knows that India's democracy is very robust and it cannot be shaken," he added.

The BJP leader accused the Congress of holding the rally to pursue its "appeasement politics" and dared Rahul Gandhi to challenge the Bihar assembly polls if he felt that there was any irregularity.

"Rahul ji, you still have perhaps 10 days left in your hands. You can still file a complaint if you feel that there was any irregularity (in the poll process) in any of the seats in the Bihar assembly polls," Patra said. (PTI)

India 'strong champion' for global tax transparency: OECD official

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: India is a "strong champion" in implementing transparency measures against offshore tax evasion and its recent campaign asking taxpayers to correctly report their undisclosed foreign assets has led to disclosure of properties worth more than Rs 29,000 crore, a top OECD official has said.

Head of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Secretariat Zayda Manatta told PTI in an interview that these "notable" outcomes were a result of India's "commitment" to global tax transparency and automatic exchange of information standards.

Manatta was here recently for the OECD annual plenary meeting of the 'Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes' hosted by New Delhi between December 2 and 4.

The France headquartered OECD is a globally recognised body that works for economic and social policy promotion. The Global Forum had 172 countries as its members.

"India is a strong champion in tax transparency and has been supporting the work of the Global Forum since 2009. "As demonstrated by the hosting of the 2025 Global Forum Plenary meeting in New Delhi, India is continuously supporting the work of the Global Forum and the fight against offshore tax evasion," Manatta told PTI in an email interview.

Asked about the OECD's expectations from India vis-a-vis the fight against offshore tax evasion, Manatta said India was "meeting its commitment and the requirements of the tax

transparency and exchange of information standards."

"Regarding automatic exchange of financial account information (Common Reporting Standard (CRS)), India has the legal framework in place and is on track with respect to the implementation in practice," she said.

India, as per Manatta, has "benefitted" from the use of CRS data.

"India's Non-Intrusive Usage of Data to Guide and Enable (NUDGE) programme has delivered notable outcomes. "...These include a 45.17 per cent increase in taxpayers reporting foreign assets, an additional INR 292 billion (approximately EUR 2.41 billion) in reported assets, and INR 1.09 billion (approximately EUR 104 million) in additional income," she said.

The OECD official was referring to the campaign initiated by the Income-Tax Department and its administrative body the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), responsible for direct tax administration in the country.

The CBDT had launched the first NUDGE campaign in November, 2024 for taxpayers who had been reported by foreign jurisdictions under the Automatic Exchange of Information (AEOI) framework as holding foreign assets that were not disclosed in their Income Tax Returns (ITRs) for assessment year 2024-25.

The initiative, as per a CBDT statement, yielded in 24,678 taxpayers (including several not directly nudged) revisiting their ITRs and "disclosing" foreign assets worth ₹ 29,208 crore, along with foreign-source income of ₹ 1,089.88 crore.

A second such NUDGE campaign has been launched by the CBDT in November for AY 2025-26.

Manatta said the AEOI regime has brought "significant" benefits to member jurisdictions which includes the exchange of data on 171 million accounts (about 17.1 crore) worth EUR 13 trillion (about ₹ 13 lakh crore) in 2024.

As the name suggests, under AEOI international tax authorities share data to reduce global tax evasion and increase transparency under a CRS.

Manatta said the global forum has "focused" on "broadening" the scope of international tax cooperation between countries and reinforcing compliance frameworks with a priority area being to extend the AEOI regime to "new asset classes" like crypto currency and enhancing standards to safeguard data integrity.

"The Global Forum continues to identify and monitor risks linked to new technologies in particular, that could affect the effective implementation of the tax transparency and exchange of information standards," she said. Asked about the takeaways from the plenary that saw 400 participants from 115 jurisdictions and 10 international organisations, Manatta said the delegates "reaffirmed the principles of inclusiveness and equal footing as essential to combating tax evasion and promoting fairness."

The top OECD official added that the body has advanced its work on the recently-developed crypto assets reporting framework (CARF) under which countries are expected to start exchanging data from 2027. (PTI)

Prez rejects mercy plea of rapist, murderer of 2-year-old

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: President Droupadi Murmu has rejected the mercy petition of a man convicted of kidnapping, raping and killing a two-year-old girl in Maharashtra in 2012, officials said on Sunday.

This is the third mercy plea rejected by the President after assuming office on July 25, 2022.

The Supreme Court on October 3, 2019, affirmed the death sentence awarded to Ravi Ashok Ghumare, saying he had no control over his "carnal desires" and surpassed all natural, social and legal limits

just to satiate his sexual hunger.

In its verdict, a three-judge bench comprising Justice Surya Kant (now chief justice of India), by a majority verdict of 2:1, said the man had "ruthlessly finished" a life which was yet to bloom and his act of committing unnatural offence with the two-year-old exhibits "a dirty and perverted mind, showcasing a horrifying tale of brutality".

Ghumare's mercy plea was rejected by the President on November 6, 2025, according to the status of the mercy petition disclosed by the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

"Having said that, it may be seen that the victim was barely a two-year-old baby whom the appellant (Ravi) kidnapped and apparently kept on assaulting for over four to five hours till she breathed her last.

"The appellant, who has no control over his carnal desires, surpassed all natural, social and legal limits just to satiate his sexual hunger. He ruthlessly finished a life which was yet to bloom," Justice Surya Kant had said, while writing the verdict for himself and (now retired) Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman. (PTI)

Parliament panel recommends UGC recognition for Sonam Wangchuk's HIAL

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: The Himalayan Institute of Alternatives (HIAL), founded by Ladakh educator and activist Sonam Wangchuk, is doing "exemplary" work and should be granted recognition by the University Grants Commission, a Parliamentary panel has noted. In its report tabled in Parliament, the committee headed by Congress MP Digvijaya Singh expressed its concern over pending recognition of HIAL by UGC. The panel also recommended that the Ministry of Education closely study the HIAL model and consider how it can be replicated elsewhere through Centres of Innovation in Education or other interventions. "Dur-

ing its study visit to Ladakh, the committee was impressed with the academic, research, and entrepreneurship ecosystem at the Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh (HIAL), especially its success in implementing experiential education and learning rooted in local socio-cultural and ecological contexts," said the report of the Standing Committee on Education, Women, Youth and Sports. "The committee was concerned to learn that the UGC has not yet granted recognition to HIAL and that the matter has been pending for many years now. The committee observed that HIAL has achieved a tremendous impact on the local community and re-

ceived international fame through its ice stupas and other community engagement activities," it added. The panel noted that HIAL is exemplary in its implementation of the NEP 2020, which calls for such experiential and project-based learning, community engagement, and integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). "The committee recommends that the UGC should consider granting recognition to HIAL. Moreover, the committee encourages the UGC and the department to closely study the HIAL model and consider how it can be replicated elsewhere through Centres of Innovation in Education or other interventions," the report said. (PTI)

Technology should amplify human judgment, not replace it: CJI Surya Kant

CUTTACK (ODISHA), Dec 14: Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Sunday said technology should amplify human judgment and not replace it.

He was addressing a symposium on 'Ensuring justice for the common man: strategies for reducing litigation costs and delays' here. "Pendency of cases in courts clogs every level of the judicial structure, from the trial court to the constitutional court. And when a blockage occurs at the top, the pressure only intensifies below," he said.

He also stressed the need to strengthen judicial infrastructure to reduce pendency.

"This is because without sufficient courts, even the most sincere judicial system will collapse under logistical strain," he said. Justice Kant said technology was very useful during the COVID pandemic.

He, however, said that one cannot afford to forget that technology comes with its own shadows.

"In an age of deep fakes and digital arrests, courts can-

not afford naive optimism... A reform that excludes the poor, elderly, or digitally unfamiliar is not reform at all, it is regression. That is why I have always maintained that technology must remain a servant of justice, not its substitute. It should amplify human judgment, not replace it," the CJI said. He said a system where the executive, legislature and judiciary do not move in harmony resembles a tricycle missing a wheel -- the rule of law cannot balance, let alone move forward.

"And the consequences are stark -- laws may be enacted, offences registered, even liberty curtailed, yet the citizen is left waiting for the one thing that completes the promise of justice: a timely trial that the infrastructure is simply too frail to deliver," he added.

Among others, Orissa High Court Chief Justice Harish Tandon, and judges from high courts across India attended the event, which was also joined by Advocate General Pitambar Acharya. (PTI)

We'll work with truth, non-violence to remove Modi-RSS govt: Rahul



NEW DELHI, Dec 14: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday said his party stands with 'satya (truth)' and vowed to remove the "Narendra Modi-RSS government". Addressing the party's 'Vote Chor Gaddi Chhod' rally at the Ramlila Maidan here, he launched a scathing attack on the Election Commission and mentioned the names of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, and Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi to allege that they were working for the BJP.

"We will stand with 'satya' (truth) and will remove the Narendra Modi-RSS government from power. They have 'satta' (power), and they indulge in 'vote chori'," the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha said.

Gandhi claimed that the BJP transferred ₹ 10,000 during elections, but the poll panel did not take any action against them. "In this fight between truth and untruth, the Election Commission is working with the BJP government," he said.

"(Prime Minister Narendra) Modi brought a new law to give immunity to EC; we will change this law retroactively and act against election commissioners." Gandhi said. Asserting that it may take time, but truth will ultimately win, he said, "We'll work with truth and non-violence to defeat Modi and (Amit) Shah." (PTI)

CAQM warns of health risks, orders suspension of outdoor sports in Delhi-NCR

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has directed Delhi and NCR state governments to ensure the immediate suspension of all outdoor physical sports activities, warning that continued conduct of such events amid poor air quality poses a "serious health risk to children".

In a letter to the chief secretaries of Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh on Saturday, the Commission said it was concerned that "some schools and institutions in Delhi-NCR were still holding outdoor sports activities" despite earlier directions issued in line with a Supreme Court order dated November 19.

The CAQM said continuation of outdoor physical activities during periods of adverse air quality is "contrary to the spirit and intent of the apex court's observations and the Commission's instructions".

The Commission had in a letter dated November 19 called for the "postponement of physical sports competitions scheduled during November and December".



It directed the NCR state governments and the Delhi government to ensure strict and immediate compliance with the earlier instructions, issue necessary directions to all schools, educational institutions, sports bodies and local authorities to discontinue

outdoor physical sports activities and sensitive schools and parents about the health risks involved.

The CAQM also asked authorities to closely monitor compliance at the field level and take appropriate action in case of

any violation.

The panel on Saturday invoked the strictest measures under its air pollution control plan, GRAP, including a ban on all construction and demolition activities in Delhi-NCR after pollution levels rose sharply amid unfavourable meteorological conditions.

Under Stage IV of GRAP, the entry of trucks into Delhi is stopped, except those carrying essential commodities or providing essential services. However, CNG, LNG, electric and BS-VI diesel trucks are allowed.

The plying of Delhi-registered diesel heavy goods vehicles (BS-IV and below) is banned, again with exceptions only for essential services. All construction and demolition activities are banned, including even linear public projects such as highways, roads, flyovers, power transmission lines, pipelines and telecom works, which are otherwise allowed in lower stages.

Schools are required to run classes in a hybrid mode (online and physical) not only

for primary students but also for higher classes (VI to IX and XI) in Delhi and the most affected NCR districts, with students given the option to attend online where feasible.

Under Stage IV, state governments are asked to consider additional emergency steps, such as closing colleges and educational institutions, shutting non-essential commercial activities and even introducing odd-even rules for vehicles if the pollution situation worsens further.

During winters, the Delhi-NCR region enforces restrictions under GRAP, which categorises air quality into four stages - Stage I (Poor, AQI 201-300), Stage II (Very Poor, AQI 301-400), Stage III (Severe, AQI 401-450), and Stage IV (Severe Plus, AQI above 450).

Unfavourable meteorological conditions, combined with vehicle emissions, paddy-straw burning, firecrackers and other local pollution sources, lead to hazardous air quality levels in Delhi-NCR during winters. (PTI)

Guv urges voters to participate in Panchayat, Municipal Polls

Lt Gen KT Parnaik appeals for high voter turnout today



HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, Dec 14: Governor of Arunachal Pradesh Lt General KT Parnaik, PVSM, UYSM, YSM (Retd), has earnestly appealed to the people of the State to participate wholeheartedly in the upcoming Panchayat and Municipal elections and exercise their fran-

chise on December 15, 2025.

In his appeal, the Governor highlighted the importance of Panchayati Raj Institutions, stating that they function at the grassroots level and play a crucial role in ensuring meaningful public participation in development planning and implementation. He said

strong and effective Panchayats are vital for inclusive and sustainable development in rural areas.

The Governor also underlined the significance of municipal councils and urban local bodies, which are directly elected by the people. He said these institutions carry immense responsibility and

authority in promoting urban development and urged elected representatives to utilise their powers judiciously and effectively to serve their communities better.

Reflecting on India's democratic heritage, Lt Gen Parnaik reminded citizens that India is the world's largest democracy, built on the foundations of universal suffrage and adult franchise. He emphasised that every vote holds great value and should be exercised with sincerity, not only as a constitutional right but also as a moral and national duty.

The Governor further called upon all officers and personnel deployed on election duty to uphold the highest standards of devotion, impartiality, transparency and accountability. He stressed that their commitment is essential to ensure the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections across the State.

Concluding his message, the Governor expressed hope that the elections would witness enthusiastic participation from voters, thereby strengthening democratic governance at the grassroots and urban levels in Arunachal Pradesh.

Script choice for Kokborok internal issue of Tiprasa people, no outsider could give diktat: Pradyot

AGARTALA, Dec 14: Tipra Motha Party (TMP) supremo Pradyot Kishore Maniya Debarma on Sunday asserted that the choice of script for the Kokborok language is the internal issue of Tiprasa people and "no outsider could give any diktat" on it.

His assertion came a day after Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha, in a rally, suggested that an indigenous script be developed for the Kokborok language, spoken by around 19 tribes of the state, instead of using the Roman script as demanded by tribal leaders.

"The choice of script for Kokborok is the internal issue of the Tiprasa people. I heard the suggestion of the state's biggest leader on the matter. No outsider can give any diktat to Tiprasa people on which script to use for writing ex-

aminations," Debarma said in a video posted on social media.

Without naming the chief minister, the TMP chief said, "If you have reservations regarding English because the British ruled the country, then tell ministers and MLAs not to send their children to English-medium schools."

He said that if BJP-ruled Assam could allow students of Karbi Anglong district to use Roman script to write their tribal language, why would Tiprasa people of Tripura be deprived of their choice?

"We all know the background of the formation of Bangladesh. Pakistan had tried to impose Urdu on Bengali-speaking people in East Pakistan, but the people did not accept it and launched massive protests. This led to the formation of a new country - Bangladesh."

he said.

Debarma also took potshots at the BJP's Janajati Morcha (tribal wing) rally here on Saturday.

"The crowd in our block-level rally is five times more than your state-level programme... Everybody knows the ground reality. I may not have all the power that you have, but I have the support of the Tiprasa people, which you don't have," he said.

In response to the CM's claim that the BJP will win all the 28 seats in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in the upcoming elections, Debarma said, "Show us by winning all the seats."

Elections to the autonomous district council, currently being run by the TMC, an ally of the BJP will be held early next year. (PTI)

BJP Manipur congratulates Nitin Nabin on being appointed national working president

IMPHAL, Dec 14: The BJP Manipur unit on Sunday congratulated Nitin Nabin on his appointment as National Working President of the party.

In a post on X, BJP Manipur said, "On behalf of BJP Manipur Pradesh, we wish him great success. This reflects the party's faith in young, dynamic, and capable leadership." Former Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh also extended his congratulations to Nabin.

In a post on X, Singh said, "Heartiest congratulations to Nitin Nabin on being appointed as the National Working President of the Bharatiya Janata Party."

"You have showcased exceptional leadership with

your commitment to the party's ideology, and I am confident you will further take the BJP to new heights. Best wishes for a successful tenure," he said.

The BJP appointed Nitin Nabin, a cabinet minister in the Bihar government, as the party's national working president on Sunday.

The BJP parliamentary board picked Nabin for the post.

"Bharatiya Janata Party's parliamentary board has appointed Nitin Nabin, a minister in the Bihar government, the Bharatiya Janata Party's national working president with immediate effect," BJP national general secretary Arun Singh said in a notification. (PTI)



Over 3,000 people take part in Assam Rifles Half Marathon in Shillong

SHILLONG, Dec 14: More than 3,000 people from across the country took part in the fifth edition of the Assam Rifles Half Marathon here on Sunday, an official statement said.

The annual event was organised at the headquarters of the Directorate General Assam Rifles at Laitkor, attracting runners from 26 states and two Union territories.

Held against the scenic backdrop of the headquarters of the force in the higher reaches of East Khasi Hills district, the event was attended by senior officials from the armed forces, government representatives and volunteers from different parts of the country.

The event was conducted in three categories - Cloud Chase (21 km), Pine Path (10 km) and Crystal Stream (5 km).

The 21 km run was flagged off by Director General Assam Rifles Lt Gen Vikas Lakhera, while the 10 km and 5 km categories were flagged off by senior officers of the force.

A total of 3,038 runners participated, including 559 in the half marathon, 1,502 in the 10 km run and 977 in the 5 km run, the statement said.

Participants were awarded medals, certificates and commemorative T-shirts, while cash prizes of Rs 20 lakh were presented to 48 runners across categories, along with several consolation prizes.

In the overall category, Sandeep Devrari of Kumaon Regiment of the Indian Army, won the men's 21 km race with a timing of 1 hour 7 minutes, while Tamsi Singh from Uttar Pradesh's Varanasi emerged as the winner in the women's 21 km category with a timing of 1 hour 23 minutes.

Air Marshal Surat Singh, AOC-in-C Eastern Air Command, attended the event as the chief guest and presented prizes to the winners of the 21 km and 10 km categories, praising the enthusiasm and sporting spirit of the participants.

Speaking on the occasion, Lt Gen Lakhera said the marathon seeks to foster a culture of fitness, wellness and togetherness in the Northeast, adding that participation has more than doubled compared to last year.

The Assam Rifles thanked the Meghalaya government for its support in ensuring the smooth conduct of the event, it added. (PTI)

Six militants arrested in Manipur for extortion

IMPHAL, Dec 14: Security forces have arrested six militants, including two women, belonging to different banned organisations for their alleged involvement in extortion activities in Manipur, a police statement said on Sunday.

All the arrests were made on Saturday. Two active women cadres of the United National Liberation Front (Koireng) were nabbed from Moirangkampu Sajeb Makha Leikai area in Imphal East district. They have been identified as Takhellamb Sanathoi Chanu (19) and Kongbrailatpam

Rameshori Devi (19). Security forces arrested two active cadres of PREPAK (PRO) from Canchipur area in Imphal West district. They have been identified as Kshetrimayum Abinash Singh (21) and Rajkumar Daniel Singh (31). A 9mm pistol loaded with 12 rounds and two .38 cartridges were seized from their possession, it said. One active cadre of UNLF(P) was apprehended from Lamphel Super Market in Imphal West district, while an insurgent belonging to PREPAK (PRO) was arrested from his residence at Kumbi in Bishnupur district. (PTI)

Local body poll campaign ends in Arunachal

SEC appeals to voters to participate in polling from 7 AM to 4 PM today

HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, Dec 14: Election campaigning for the Arunachal Pradesh local body elections came to an end on Friday evening, with the State Election Commissioner (SEC) Rinchin Tashi, IAS (Retd), appealing to people to actively participate in the voting process scheduled for December 15 from 7 AM to 4 PM.

In an exclusive interview, the SEC said that with the conclusion of campaigning at 4 PM, no political party or its agents would be permitted to campaign thereafter. He informed that all preparations for the polls, covering both Panchayat and Municipal elections have been completed. Polling personnel along with security forces have already been dispatched to their respective polling stations across all 25 districts of the state.

Around 40,000 officers, officials and security personnel have been deployed to ensure a peaceful, free and fair election. In case of any repoll, it will be conducted on December 18, while counting of votes will take place on December 20 from 8 AM onwards. The SEC stated that out of 245 Zila Parishad Member (ZPM) constituencies, 59 candidates have been elected unopposed, and elections will be held for the remaining 186 seats. A total of 439 candidates are in the fray, including AAP-1, BJP-185, INC-51, NPP-13, PPA-64, NCP-20, LJP-2 and 103 independents.

For Gram Panchayat elections, there are 8,208 seats in the state, out of which 6,227 Gram Panchayat Members (GPMs)



have already been elected unopposed. Elections will be held for 1,947 seats, while 34 seats remain vacant due to the death of candidates, withdrawal and rejection of nomination papers or non-filing of nominations.

A total of 3,917 GPM candidates are contesting, including AAP-4, BJP-1,792, INC-244, NPP-164, JD(U)-1, NCP-416, PPA-506, LJP-17 and 773 independent candidates.

Regarding municipal elections, the Itanagar Municipal Corporation (IMC) has 20 wards and the Pasighat Municipal Council (PMC) has eight wards. Four candidates in IMC have been elected unopposed, while polling will be held in the remaining 16 IMC wards and all eight PMC wards on December 15 along with the Panchayati Raj elections. A total of 64 candidates are contesting the municipal polls, including BJP-24, INC-10, PPA-10, NCP-8, LJP (RV)-4 and eight independents.

The SEC informed that the total num-

ber of electors stands at 8,31,648, comprising 7,59,210 Panchayat voters and 72,438 municipal voters. Upper Subansiri district has the highest number of Panchayat voters at 61,142, while Dibang Valley has the lowest with 4,249. In municipal areas, the highest number of voters is 5,106 in IMC Ward No. 19, while the lowest is 812 in PMC Ward No 6.

There are 2,171 polling stations for Panchayat elections and 79 polling stations for municipal elections, including 67 in IMC and 12 in PMC.

Given that Arunachal Pradesh shares international borders with Bhutan, China and Myanmar, security agencies have been placed on high alert. The Police and Home Department have made elaborate security arrangements to prevent any untoward incidents during polling.

Highlighting the importance of the exercise, the SEC said that elections are a festival of democracy and local body polls represent grassroots democracy, where the development planning process begins. He said this reflects the concept of Gram Swaraj, envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi for local self-governance.

Restrictions have been imposed on the movement of vehicles within district and constituency jurisdictions as per orders issued by the respective district administrations. Candidates have been issued vehicle passes and permits by returning officers and district election officers. General transport will ply as usual, provided vehicles are not used to ferry voters to polling stations.

Meghalaya launches Green Deposit Scheme

SHILLONG, Dec 14: Meghalaya has launched a Green Deposit Scheme to curb plastic pollution in high-footfall eco-tourism destinations, reinforcing the State's push for sustainable tourism and stronger waste management.

The initiative has been introduced in Cherrapunjee, Dawki and the Living Root Bridges, areas that have seen a sharp rise in tourism and plastic litter affecting forests, rivers and fragile ecosystems.

Under the initiative, tourists carrying plastic items such as bottles or wrappers into notified zones must pay a refundable deposit of ₹ 100,

which is returned upon responsible disposal or return of plastic waste at designated exit points. The move is aimed at discouraging littering and promoting a "leave no trace" culture among visitors.

The Green Deposit Scheme is part of Meghalaya's broader waste management reforms, which include community-led sanitation models, improved waste segregation, and stricter enforcement of plastic regulations.

It also aligns with directions of the Meghalaya High Court on the strict enforcement of bans on single-use plastics, particularly items

below 120 microns.

Officials said the initiative combines enforcement with awareness, with local communities and tourism stakeholders playing a key role in implementation, ensuring environmental protection while supporting responsible tourism growth.

The Green Deposit Scheme also complements the Clean Hills City initiatives under the Swachh Bharat Mission - Urban (SBM-U) 2.0, supported by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India, in collaboration with State Governments. (NNN)

British band 'Blue', K-pop sensation 'Everglow' enthrall audiences in Gangtok



GANGTOK, Dec 14: British band 'Blue' and South Korean group 'Everglow' enthralled crowds at Gangtok's Pajor Stadium as Sikkim hosted 'Orchid Music Festival', organisers said.

The music festival was organised on Saturday by private groups with support from the Sikkim government, they said. While the four-member British band enthralled the packed stadium with hits like 'All Rise' and 'One Love', the South Korean K-pop girl group sang their famous songs 'Dun Dun', 'La Di Da' and 'Adios', they said.

'Blue' is in India as part of their 25th anniversary world tour, with concerts already conducted in Imphal and Shillong. Another concert is scheduled in Bengaluru on Sunday.

Other performers at the Orchid Music Festival were Nepalese singer Neetesh Jung Kunwar, Bhutanese artiste Sonam Wangchen and Sikkim's folk-fusion band 'Sofiyum'. (PTI)

Circle of rhythm event brings music and mindfulness to Brahmaputra Riverfront

Over 70 participants experience soulful drumming, dance and meditation in immersive session



HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Dec 14: The Blissful Soul successfully conducted 'Circle of Rhythm', a deeply immersive and soulful jamming session at the picturesque Brahmaputra Heritage Riverfront on December 13, 2025.

The event saw enthusiastic participation from over 70 people, who gathered to celebrate rhythm, music and inner connection. The session offered a harmonious blend of drum beats, collective singing, free-flow dancing and guided meditation, creating an atmosphere of joy and togetherness. Participants were encouraged to let go of stress, embrace the rhythm and synchronize with the collective energy of the group. The experience proved to be both therapeutic and deeply enjoyable, leaving participants rejuvenated and emotionally uplifted.

Set against the tranquil backdrop of the

mighty Brahmaputra, the Circle of Rhythm fostered mindfulness, presence and community bonding. The rhythmic vibrations and collective expression helped attendees disconnect from daily distractions and reconnect with themselves.

The Blissful Soul, founded by Ritu Gupta along with co-founders Archana Agarwal, Kavita Patwary, Indu Lakhotia and Vishakha Agarwal is dedicated to promoting mindfulness, inner well-being and conscious living through experiential workshops, mindfulness sessions and residential retreats. Over the years, the organisation has conducted retreats and sessions at several scenic and spiritually enriching locations, including Darjeeling, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and various parts of Assam such as Panchnoi, Dibrugarh, Sonapur and Guwahati.

Pacers shine as India bowl out South Africa for 117

DHARAMSALA, Dec 14: Pacers produced a mesmerizing spell of swing bowling as India bundled out South Africa to a below-par 117 in the third T20I of the five-match series here on Sunday.

Leading India's show with early wickets were Arshdeep Singh (2/13), Harshit Rana (2/34) and Hardik Pandya (1/23) after the hosts chose to bowl.

Skipper Aiden Markram offered the lone spark for South Africa with a spirited 46-ball 61.

Undoubtedly, the brightest stars under a cool sky were India's quick bowlers, who procured lethal swing and lateral movement with the new ball.

It had its effect on the low-key power play effort of South Africa - 25 for three - and the phase contained just two fours.

Arshdeep, who had a horror outing at Mullanpur a couple of days back, redeemed himself with a dream first spell (3-0-9-1).

He bowled three deliveries angled away from Reeza Hendricks and then jagged one back to trap



the South African opener leg before with the help of DRS.

Rana did precisely the same to Quinton de Kock, a nip-backer, trapping the frozen-legged left-hander inside the crease.

Dewald Brevis was slightly unfortunate to get castled while attempting a release shot off a wide delivery from Rana.

South Africa suddenly found

themselves at 7 for 3 in 3.1 overs, and it was always going to be an uphill climb for them from there.

Markram crunched a couple of sweet drives in between to keep the board moving but Tristan Stubbs and Corbin Bosch departed in quick succession to further derail South African innings.

Stubbs' wicket helped all-rounder Pandya to complete 100

wickets in T20Is, the third Indian bowler to do so after Arshdeep and Jasprit Bumrah, who did not play this match after returning home to attend to a personal situation.

The BCCI said his availability for the remainder of the series will be announced in due course.

Spinner Varun Chakravarty (2/11 in 4 overs) too reached to a milestone, capturing his 50th T20I wicket while flattening the stumps of Donovan Ferreira (20, 15 balls).

The big-hitting Ferreria was dropped on 13 by Arshdeep at long-on off Shivam Dube, but that did not hurt India.

Chakravarty cut open the lower-order with his bottomless bag of tricks as the pitch also continued to offer good pace and carry.

The spinner also added the wicket of Marco Jansen to keep South Africa pinned to the mat.

Markram completed his fifty off 41 balls with a slashed six off Rana, as the 18th over produced 19 runs. But the South African surge came tad too late. (PTI)

Slot says 'no issue' with Salah after Egypt star recalled for Liverpool win



LIVERPOOL, Dec 14: Liverpool manager Arne Slot insisted there were no outstanding issues between him and Mohamed Salah after recalling the club great to the team for the 2-0 win over Brighton in the Premier League.

Salah received a rapturous welcome from Liverpool fans after coming on as a first-half substitute and they chanted his name during and after the game at Anfield - including after he set up Hugo Ekitike for the second goal.

In an explosive outburst last weekend, Salah told reporters his relationship with Slot had broken down after being dropped for three straight games and that he felt like "someone doesn't want me in the club."

He was then left at home when Liverpool traveled to Inter Milan for a Champions League match on Tuesday, with Slot saying he did not know if Salah would play again for the club.

However, a few days later, Salah was back in the squad for the Brighton game after he held con-

versations with Slot on Friday.

"For me there is no issue to resolve. He is now the same as any other player," Slot said after the game. "I usually never say anything about what we talk about, I am not going to make an exception now. But I think actions speak louder than what has been said and he was in the squad again. "When I had to make my first substitution, I brought him in and he performed as every fan including me would like him to today. The moment he is there I like to use him when we need him. When he came in, he had the performance like you would want him to give."

After the final whistle, Salah applauded all four sides of Anfield -

like some of his other teammates. Salah lingered in front of The Kop stand as fans chanted his name and patted the club crest on his jersey before leaving the pitch and heading to the Africa Cup of Nations with Egypt. Slot did not think that was a farewell gesture by Salah.

"He wasn't the only player who walked around the pitch, thanking the fans because the fans deserved a thank you from us," Slot said. "Mo is going to go to AFCON. I hope he is going to do very well. And in the meantime, we have to play here without him, without many players."

Salah was an unused substitute for the 3-3 draw with Leeds last Saturday, after which he opened up on his frustrations. Before that, he'd been an unused sub in a win at West Ham and came on at half-time of a home draw against Sunderland.

Salah is Liverpool's biggest star and also the club's record scorer in the Premier League. He has four league goals in 14 appearances this season. (AP)

Besides PM Modi, Messi to meet CJI and Army chief in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: Argentine football icon Lionel Messi will meet the Chief Justice of India and the Army chief at a member of Parliament's house after his visit to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official residence during his Delhi leg of the India tour here Monday.

The final day of the GOAT India Tour will also see Messi exchanging greetings with two members of the Indian cricket team at the Ferozshah Kotla Stadium.

It is understood that the member of parliament is Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Praful Patel, who had served as president of the All India Football Federation (AIFF) for three terms.

Messi will arrive in the national capital at 10.45am, and after a 50-minute 'Meet and Greet' session at a city hotel, he will head to the PM's residence where he will spend 20 minutes interacting with Modi.

His next stop will be the residence of an MP, where he is also set to meet the Argentina Ambassador to India Mariano Agustin Caucino, besides CJI Justice Surya Kant and Army chief general Upendra Dwivedi.

The chief of Enforcement Directorate, Rahul Navin, is also likely to part of the select gathering at the MP's house, which will also comprise fee top government officials.

After his meeting with the VVIPs, Messi's convoy will leave for the Ferozshah Kotla Stadium where a few programmes are lined up.

At 3.30pm, Messi is scheduled to enter the stadium via the walkway that leads to the pitch, where the cars will be ready to then leave from there directly to the airport once the GOAT concerts end.

Following a grand welcome with music, Messi will head to the small soccer field where some Indian celebrities will be engaged in a match.

Messi will greet the players, take group photo with teams.

A football clinic with 22 children will be held from 3.55pm to 4.15pm.

Messi will then head to the centre of the field, and two Indian cricketers will give him a gift, and the Argentine footballer will hand over two pre-signed jersey to both. (PTI)

Raphinha scores 2 as Barcelona wins to add pressure on Real Madrid's Alonso before crunch game

BARCELONA, Dec 14: Raphinha scored a brace as Barcelona beat Osasuna 2-0 to increase its La Liga lead and pile more pressure on beleaguered Real Madrid coach Xabi Alonso.

The Brazil forward broke the deadlock with a shot from the top of the area in the 70th minute at Camp Nou. He then put the result beyond doubt by scoring from close range with six minutes remaining.

A seventh league win in a row left the defending champions seven points clear of Real Madrid before its game at Alaves on Sunday. That is likely a must-win game for Alonso after the powerhouse has won just two of its last eight games across all competitions.

Madrid had led Barcelona by five points in the Spanish league after winning a clasico match in late October. But a huge dip in form with just one win in five rounds, including a humiliating 2-0 defeat to Celta Vigo at home last weekend, has left Madrid reeling.

Relishing the trouble of Barcelona's top rival, the Camp Nou crowd chanted "Stay Xabi! Stay Xabi!" in Spanish at one point during the Osasuna match.

Raphinha, however, stayed focused on his team. "We need to focus on ourselves and if we do our job then we won't have to worry about anyone else," Raphinha said. "We are playing better than before and the more points, the better."

Raphinha was key to Barcelona winning La Liga

and Copa del Rey last season, when Hansi Flick's side also reached the Champions League semifinals. Barcelona struggled to replace his speed and incisiveness when Raphinha was sidelined with a leg injury for six weeks earlier this campaign. But he has returned as strong as ever. He also assisted in a 3-1 victory over Alaves in late November and scored in a 3-1 win over Atletico Madrid earlier this month.

Sixteenth-placed Osasuna generated little in attack but its defense and goalkeeper Sergio Herrera frustrated Barcelona until Raphinha struck. Herrera saved a shot by Lamine Yamal while Marcus Rashford's goal-bound effort was blocked by a defender.

Raphinha's first goal came after Barcelona recovered the ball and Pedri Gonzalez led a counter-attack before laying off for him to score from distance. His second was easier: a tap-in after Osasuna defender Alejandro Catena redirected a cross from Jules Kounde to the far post where Raphinha was unmarked.

Griezmann nets again for Atletico

Antoine Griezmann scored the winner after coming off the bench to help fourth-placed Atletico beat Valencia 2-1 and stay nine points behind Barcelona. Griezmann replaced Julian Alvarez with half an hour to go with Atletico leading after Koke Resurrección scored from a rebound in the 17th.

Lucas Beltran pulled the visitors level in the 63rd with a shot from outside the area as the Argentine

striker skirted past a defender and lashed a long strike just inside the post.

Griezmann restored the lead in the 74th at the Metropolitan Stadium when he used an exquisite control, hooking down a long ball with the tip of his boot, before he fired in the winner.

The 34-year-old Griezmann has taken a more limited role with Atletico this season, but he is still proving to be decisive. The former France star scored two goals as a substitute in a 3-1 win over Levante last month and also netted after coming on in the second half against Sevilla and Real Madrid.

His winner against Valencia increased his record haul for Atletico to 204 career goals.

The loss for Valencia will increase the pressure on coach Carlos Corberán with the team in 17th place just on the edge of the relegation zone.

Espanyol keeps surprising

Leandro Cabrera's header helped Espanyol beat Getafe 1-0 on the road and secure a fourth consecutive league win.

Espanyol is the surprise of the season approaching the winter break. The Barcelona-based team is in fifth place after 16 rounds, having barely avoided relegation on the final day of last season.

Also, Mallorca beat Elche 3-1. The game was tied 1-1 until Elche keeper Iñaki Peña gifted the ball to Mallorca's Omar Mascarell, who lobbed the ball over Peña's head from near midfield for the go-ahead goal in the 82nd. (AP)

Terrier's spectacular backheel sets up Leverkusen's derby win

BERLIN, Dec 14: Martin Terrier scored a contender for goal of the season as Bayer Leverkusen defeated local rival Cologne 2-0 in their 73rd Bundesliga derby.

Arthur's cross from the right was behind Terrier, but the French forward dropped down and looped the ball in over Cologne goalkeeper Marvin Schwäbe with the back of his heel to break the deadlock in the 66th minute. Robert Andrich headed in from Alex Garcia's corner six minutes later to seal the win.

Leverkusen was without key players Patrik Schick and Alex Grimaldo but still boasted enough talent to create the greater chances against the visitors, who had injury-enforced absences of their own.

The win kept Leverkusen in fourth place, the last for Champions League qualification.

Fans protest

Many fans missed the derby because of protests against police security measures that they felt went too far. Much of the visitors' block was empty for the game because around 500-600 Cologne fans decided to

leave the stadium before kickoff. Supporter group Fanhilfe Köln alleged that police had conducted strip searches on traveling supporters.

Despite the rivalry between the clubs, Leverkusen ultras also left the stadium in solidarity with the Cologne fans.

Frankfurt digs deep

Ritsu Doan scored for Eintracht Frankfurt to end its four-game winless run across all competitions with a 1-0 win over Augsburg.

The Japan forward took the ball past two Augsburg defenders and unleashed his shot before he was closed down by two more. The deflection from a retreating defender took the ball beyond Finn Dahmen in the Augsburg goal in the 68th minute, setting off relief-tinged celebrations around the stadium.

Noahkai Banks briefly spoiled the mood when he equalized late, but the goal was ruled out for offside after a VAR check. It was the second goal that was ruled out for offside for the visitors in the game.

Frankfurt lost narrowly at Barcelona in the Champions League

on Tuesday, after it was routed 6-0 at home by Leipzig in its previous game.

"The lads tried with all they had left in the tank," Frankfurt coach Dino Toppmöller said of his team's busy schedule. "They were lacking that bit of freshness. It's been a grueling six months."

St. Pauli finally wins

St. Pauli overcame a harsh sending off to end its 10-game winless run with a 2-1 victory over relegation rival Heidenheim.

Pauli had Eric Smith sent off before the break when referee Sören Storks penalized him for a foul on Marvin Pieringer as the last defender, though TV replays showed the Heidenheim forward made the most of light contact and threw himself to the ground. There was no VAR intervention.

Martijn Kaars had already put Pauli ahead, and he stunned the visitors by scoring the second against the run of play early the second half.

Pieringer pulled one back later, but Pauli held on for its third league win of the season. (AP)

Hemanth Reddy's ton guides Andhra to thrilling win against Punjab

PUNE, Dec 14: Young Andhra batter Hemanth Reddy proved way too strong-willed in the face of some hostile bowling from Punjab as he smashed an unbeaten 109 to lead his side to a thrilling five-wicket win in a high-scoring Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy Super League A match, here Sunday. Reddy, playing only his second career SMAT game, saw the entire Andhra top and middle order being wiped out and leaving them perilously close to defeat at 56 for 5 while chasing 206 for victory.

But the 23-year-old, who has played most of his cricket in the Andhra Premier League, came up with his career-best performance, blazing to a 53-ball 109, studded with 11 boundaries and seven sixes as Andhra reached 211/5 on the penultimate ball of the match.

Tall Punjab pacer Gurnoor Brar (3/23) made life difficult for Andhra batters, removing openers Srikr Bharat (1) and Ashwin Hebbur (4) in the very first over, reducing the opponents to seven or two.

Brar, a former net bowler for five-time IPL champions Mumbai Indians who was bought for Rs 1.3 crore by Gujarat Titans ahead of the 2025 season, struck again in the fifth over by dismissing Andhra skipper Ricky Bhui (15).

In between, pacer Ayush Goyal also got the wicket of India all-rounder Nithish Kumar Reddy as Andhra reeled at 4/35, which quickly became 5/56 in the ninth over.

Needing someone who could really thwack the Punjab bowlers and also play a sensible innings, Reddy stepped up.

Coming in at No.3, Reddy, who last played a Ranji Trophy group match against Hyderabad without much success at the top of the batting order, negotiated the early overs with caution before blasting off even as he saw wickets crumbling at the other end.

He finally got a reliable partner in SD Prasad (53 not out off 35 balls) and the pair stitched together an unbeaten 155-run stand for the six

wicket to guide Andhra home.

The thrilling win put Andhra's campaign back on track following their four-wicket loss to Madhya Pradesh in a low-scoring match, while Punjab can say goodbye to their SMAT campaign this season after their six-wicket defeat against Jharkhand in a high-scoring game.

For Nithish Kumar, this was a second successive disappointing show after his 25 against Madhya Pradesh.

Earlier, Harmoor Singh (42) and skipper Prabhsimran Singh (20) gave Punjab a promising start. Anmolpreet Singh (47), Salil Arora (42) and Ramandeep Singh (43) then made useful contributions as Punjab managed a competitive 200-plus total.

Brief Scores:

Punjab: 205 for 5 in 20 overs (Harmoor Singh 42, Anmolpreet Singh 47, Salil Arora 42, Ramandeep Singh 43).

Andhra: 211 for 5 in 19.5 overs (M Hemanth Reddy 109 not out, SDNV Prasad 53 not out, Gurnoor Brar 3/23). (PTI)

I had to reinvent my running, hated people saying I was a great starter but not finisher: Shelly-Ann

PUNE, Dec 14: Legendary Jamaican sprinter Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce says she hated being labelled "a great starter but not a great finisher," and had to reinvent her running style in her formative years to rise to the elite level.

Fraser-Pryce, an eight-time Olympic and 17-time World Championship medalist, said she put in a lot of effort in 200m to sharpen her 100m sprint race in which she owns the third-fastest time in history at 10.60 seconds.

"I had to really reinvent the way I ran, growing up in high school to becoming an elite sprinter because how I ran wasn't ideal, it wasn't going to make me win races," Fraser-Pryce, a brand ambassador of the Bajaj Pune Marathon, told PTI in an exclusive interview.

"People would say 'man, she's a great starter but not a great finisher' and I used to hate hearing those things, because I'm like, 'but I can finish too!'"

"I had to get stronger in the gym. I had to do more 200m if I wanted my 100m to be better. I really had to put myself out there, challenge myself more and come out of my comfort zone."

"I used to literally run and fall on my face. I had to learn and relearn how to stay upright, strike the ground, swing my arms and go forward. For me, yes people talk about your height and say 'oh



you're too short' but that wasn't something that I could control."

'Never really believed I could be who I am now'

Fraser-Pryce, whose list of achievements include three Olympics and 10 World Champi-

onships gold medals, said she did not have big goals growing up in the Waterhouse district of Kingston, Jamaica.

"When I was younger, I never really believed I could be the person I am today. I never saw a lot of inspiration or have a lot of role models and so

for me I grew up thinking that things were just not possible for me."

"(But) once you know your purpose, you're so focused on doing those things. For me, it's really the faith and the consistency that has made the difference."

"For 18 years, I've been running and running, breaking records, just defying what's really possible for elite female sprinters and it has been my absolute honour to have really been leading the charge, of just giving women the platform to do more and to not limit themselves," she said.

Fraser-Pryce, a.k.a. "Pocket Rocket" who is also the oldest to win a world title at 35, proudly looks back at her career for being involved in so many "talking points" including on her inclusion for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which faced intense criticism. "I've been in the conversations at different points. People talked about you're too young to go to an Olympic Games, or they're telling you 'oh you can't become a mom and come back to elite sprinting', or they're telling you about your age or you're too old to run," she said.

She recalled her gold medal sprint in 100m at the 2008 Games saying it was an occasion where she just wanted to be in the finals.

"I remember going to the 2008 Olympic Games and I made the team and we had so many debates

back home whether I was capable of racing in the Olympic Games. That was one moment where my goals were so mediocre, I just wanted to make the finals."

"I was in my room with a couple of my teammates and I started to talk about if I won, what I would do and I was saying to myself if I win this 100m I'm going to jump, I'm going to scream I'm going to just do all kind of things, I'm just going to act crazy," she said.

"It's the power of just speaking it and literally, I went to that finals and I crossed that line thumping the sky and doing the exact thing I said I was going to do in the room two days before that finals."

'I showed up, no matter what'

She also reflected on her illustrious career with a deep sense of pride, admitting that the reality of retirement may truly sink in only next season.

"When I finally hung up my spikes, it was hard, it was emotional for me because I spent 18 years doing what I love and that 18 years came with success and it came with setbacks and it came with a lot of different things." "I tell myself I'm not going to miss it yet because it's literally like three months that I've gone so I think maybe next year, when the track season actually starts, maybe that time I'll be you know missing it a little bit more," Fraser-Pryce added. (PTI)