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Government of Assam



Steering Holistic Progress in Karbi Anglong



Chief Guest

Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister, Assam

August Presence

Dr Tuliram Ronghang
Chief Executive Member, KAAC

Smti Nandita Gorlosa
Minister, Sports & Youth Welfare, etc., Assam &
Guardian Minister, Karbi Anglong District

Shri Amarsing Tisso
MP, Diphu HPC

Dr Numal Momin
Deputy Speaker, Assam Legislative Assembly &
MLA, Bokajan LAC



Ceremonial Distribution

**₹10,000
SEED MONEY**

for Eligible Women SHG Members

Bokajan LAC

**Total
SHG members
17,398**

📅 24 February 2026 | 🕒 11.30 AM

📍 Hanjanglangso Stadium, Bokajan

Inauguration

Mini Stadium Khatkhati

Project cost
₹12.5 crore



Weekly Markets in Bokajan LAC

Balipathar

Project cost
₹3.3 crore

Silonijan

Project cost
₹2.6 crore

Barpathar

Project cost
₹2.3 crore

Hidipi

Project cost
₹1.8 crore

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Banks need to concentrate on core business, desist mis-selling: FM

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday came down heavily on banks for mis-selling of financial products, including insurance, to customers and asked them to focus on their core business instead.

"Banks should concentrate on their core business...My pet peeve has always been...you are spending more time on selling insurance when it is not required, and conveniently, it fell between two stools (of the RBI and Irdai)," Sitharaman told reporters after her customary post-Budget address to the Central Board of the RBI.

On February 11, the RBI had issued draft guidelines on mis-selling, saying banks will have to refund the entire amount paid by the customer for the purchase of the product or service and also compensate the customer for any loss arising due to mis-selling as per an approved policy. The public has been given time until March 4 to give feedback.

The stricter norms on mis-selling will come into effect from July 1, the RBI had said.

"I am glad that the RBI is coming up with guidance on why mis-selling is not going to be entertained. I think the message should go to the banks that you cannot afford to mis-sell. And this word mis-sell, instead of offending anybody, seems to be one more word in the lexicon," the finance minister said.

Stating that banks were asking customers to buy insurance products even though they already had their required insurance, Sitharaman said the RBI did not monitor such mis-selling, thinking that it fell under the domain of the insurance regulator, Irdai, on the other hand, felt banks are not regulated by the insurance regulator, and customers suffered due to regulatory gaps.

"...individual deposit holder, the citizen of this country who kept saying, why am I being asked to take an insurance when I am giving



my property, my piece of land (for taking a home loan? He wants a loan for which the property (collateral) is already there. So, what is he being asked to de-risk? Why should he come up with another insurance there?" the minister said.

Sitharaman said banks should focus on understanding their customers, strengths, weaknesses, and the business cycle, and in the case of personal account holders, their needs and requirements.

She reiterated that banks should concentrate on their core business, which is mobilising deposits and giving loans, and instead of selling non-bank products, they should focus on improving their low-cost deposit base or CASA (Current Account Savings Account) deposits.

The emphasis should be on knowing the customer, mobilising deposits, and lending responsibly, she said, adding that banks have lost sight of this core banking principle, prioritising other activities over building relationships with customers and understanding their credit requirements.

This has led to an impersonal approach to banking and customer dissatisfaction, and banks must prioritise customer-centricity, understand their needs, and provide tailored services, she added.

Meanwhile, RBI Governor San-

jay Malhotra said that deposit growth in the banking system is around 12.5 per cent, while advances are growing at the rate of 14.5 per cent.

Malhotra said the monetary policy committee will take a decision on further policy rate cut depending on evolving growth and inflation dynamics.

Since February 2025, the RBI has slashed the benchmark policy repo rate by 125 basis points to 5.25 per cent in a bid to bolster growth amid benign inflation. However, in the last policy earlier this month, the MPC decided to maintain the status quo with a neutral stance amid global uncertainty.

The next bi-monthly policy, which is going to be the first for the 2026-27 fiscal year, will be announced on April 6.

Assuring the market about comfortable liquidity, Malhotra said the RBI will take all measures to provide durable liquidity to all market segments.

He further said that the Reserve Bank of India's bilateral switches of government bonds with the Centre were a tool for debt management and not for liquidity management.

He noted that press reports had said the government's gross borrowing aim was on the higher side in 2026-27, and these measures

would bring down that target.

The Union Budget for FY27 had pegged the government's gross borrowing aim at a record ₹ 17.21 lakh crore for FY27 from a revised ₹ 14.61 lakh crore in the current financial year.

The government conducted two tranches of bilateral gilt switches in FY26 totalling ₹ 1.13 lakh crore, of which ₹ 75,504 crore of four FY27 gilts were switched on February 12.

A switch operation entails replacing a security maturing in the near term with a longer-maturity paper, effectively postponing the government's debt repayment.

"Some of the RBI holdings were maturing (in FY27), which is why we have done a switch with the RBI holdings. We also followed it up with a switch with the market," he said.

"They are all part of our operating policy toolkit; they do not reflect any change in our operational strategy."

Asked about the nationwide rollout of Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC), Malhotra said it is not a substitute for cash or other fast payment systems, and the Reserve Bank of India will introduce it only after evaluating the range of features it offers.

"The CBDC is not, for the moment, a substitute for cash, neither is it a substitute for other fast payment systems. It is there to augment the payment systems that we have," he said.

"Unless and until we have the whole bouquet of features which are available on this CBDC, it will be premature to implement it on a large scale. However, at the same time, there are additional advanced features which other forms of payment and currency do not have," he said.

Launched by the RBI in 2022, the retail CBDC has been positioned by the central bank not as an alternative to the domestic instant-payments system Unified Payment Interface but as a digital version of currency notes. (PTI)

Shivraj Singh Chouhan launches agriculture, rural development projects in Assam



GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Union Agriculture and Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Monday launched several initiatives and handed over to the Assam government the approval letter of ₹ 1,819 crore sanctioned for road projects in the state under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana.

Chouhan also inaugurated the newly constructed building of Assam Seeds Corporation Limited, launched a new mobile application called 'Krishi Sarathi' for the Agriculture Department and another app 'Rural One' for the Panchayat Department at a programme held here in the presence of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

He also launched the social audit module of the AWAS Plus app with one lakh beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin formally performing their house warming ceremonies.

The government signed a tripartite memorandum of understanding with PepsiCo and SBI to secure fair returns for the state under the Chief Minister's Utkarsh Yojana, while Chouhan and Sarma handed over cheques to 10 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) or Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs).

Sarma said that the day marked a significant milestone for Assam as the Union Minister announced the Centre approved ₹ 1,819 crore for Assam under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana to build 1,522 kilometres of roads and 62 bridges.

He added that the state would pave nearly 2,000 new rural roads and begin the tender process on Tuesday.

Referring to Assam's recent economic performance, Sarma said that the Reserve Bank of India's economic survey ranked Assam as the fastest-growing state in the country.

Assam's tea industry has regained its strong position in the global market with the state exporting an additional 40 million kilograms of tea this year, he said.

The CM expressed hope that recent free trade agreements with Britain, the European Union, and Dubai, secured through Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomatic efforts, would allow Assam's Joha rice, ginger, and lemon to enter international markets without additional tariffs.

Sarma also said that tea garden workers who have lived on the same land for 200 years have ownership rights, and the government has amended the law to grant them land ownership.

He announced that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would personally distribute the land pattas in March, enabling nearly two lakh families to gain social justice through this move.

The CM also requested Chouhan to allow fresh geotagging so that these workers could receive houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. The Union Minister responded positively.

Urging farmers to adopt modern methods, the chief minister said traditional farming alone cannot double farmers' incomes.

He encouraged farmers to focus on horticulture and commercial crops, and the government would grant special support to FPCs for using drones to spray fertiliser and monitor crops.

The CM called on agricultural extension workers to act more actively and carry new technology to the fields.

Sarma urged the government, banks, and FPCs to work together and build a self-reliant Assam. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 3...

Seat-sharing talks

that Rajior Dal enjoys strong grassroots support in several constituencies and plays a crucial role in mobilising voters, particularly among youth and marginalised sections.

"If the Rajior Dal is kept out, the alliance will face serious difficulties. Ignoring our contribution will only benefit the BJP," Gogoi said, adding that Opposition unity is essential to challenge the ruling party effectively.

Gogoi also indicated that while he is open to continued dialogue, the Congress must clarify its stand at the earliest to avoid confusion among party workers and supporters.

He said prolonged indecision could demoralise Opposition cadres and create uncertainty ahead of elections.

CM calls on Guv

& Sikkim". Sarma also apprised the governor about "Govt of Assam's various developmental initiatives and key policy measures aimed at accelerating the state's growth trajectory", the CMO statement added. (PTI)

Jayanta Malla Baruah

removal of the Akhil Gogoi-led Rajior Dal from the Congress alliance, and alleged that some political parties engage in vote-bank politics centred on minority communities, while the NDA alliance focuses on protecting the interests and rights of indigenous people.

Speaking on the occasion, BTC chief Hagrama Mohilary conveyed his best wishes to the beneficiaries and expressed hope that they would utilise the financial assistance to become self-reliant and contribute to the region's economic growth.

He also informed the gathering that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Kokrajhar on March 13, where he is expected to participate in a major public programme and launch key development initiatives.

Badruddin Ajmal to

win there," Ajmal said. He further claimed that AIUDF remains a decisive force in Assam's minority-dominated areas and said the party is fully prepared to face the upcoming political battle, regardless of alliance outcomes.

Himanta terms erection

in this regard in New Delhi on April 20, 2023, in the presence of the Union Home Minister. Khandu on Sunday said, "The Seijosa pillar sets the blueprint for the remaining demarcation process, strengthening cooperation between the two sister states and paving the way for lasting harmony, development and confidence among the people residing in the border regions."

The two states share a 804.1 km boundary, touching eight districts of Assam and 12 of the adjoining state. Out of the 123 villages under dispute, the differences in 71 villages have been resolved, and the process is underway to address the issues in the remaining 52 villages. (PTI)

No Hindu to

constituencies are likely to be held in March-April. (PTI)

PM to visit

several other important development projects. To review preparations for the high-profile visit, Assam chief secretary Ravi Kota visited Kokrajhar on Monday and inspected arrangements at the Greenfield ground, the venue for the public gathering.

Assam cabinet minister Jayanta Malla Baruah also accompanied him during the inspection. The officials reviewed helipad preparations, security arrangements and infrastructure facilities required for the large public event.

Following the inspection, the Chief Secretary and the minister held a review meeting at the BTC Secretariat to assess readiness and coordinate administrative measures.

BTC Chief Hagrama Mohilary was present during the inspection and review process. According to minister Jayanta Malla Baruah, after the Kokrajhar programme on March 13, the Prime Minister is expected to attend several other events across Assam on March 14 as part of his visit to the state.

Over 1 cr pensioners

by the Department of Pension and Pensioners' Welfare. Speaking on the occasion, BJP Lok Sabha MP Dilip Saikia said pensioners' role in society is very important. "They retire after offering long service to society. Many people retire, but they are not tired. They always want to serve the motherland," he added.

Saikia claimed that a lot of work has taken place in the last 10 years in reforming the system, especially related to pensioners and their pensions. (PTI)

27th Akhanda Bhagavat

Vedic Vaishnav Mahasabha, will attend as the chief guest. Lalit Chandra Hazarika, Chief Advisor, will also be present, while Madhurjya Bora, a noted youth orator from Jorhat, has been invited as the appointed speaker to deliver insights on religious philosophy and theology.

The organising committee has extended an open invitation to devotees and members of the public across the region to participate in the event and seek spiritual blessings.

"We invite everyone to join us at the Shankar Mandir Namghar to grace this auspicious occasion and help enhance the spiritual beauty of our collective gathering," members of the organising committee stated.

Sonowal launches ₹ 1,500-cr

shipbuilding and manufacturing in Tuticorin, Tirunelveli, and Madurai districts, attracting investment, creating employment, and stimulating sectors such as renewable energy, logistics, and tourism.

"The projects will strengthen its (VOC Port) position as a major transshipment hub scaling up regional and international connectivity. The advanced technologies and investments in infrastructure and clean energy projects will also allow the port to compete with various international ports such as the Colombo port," Sonowal said.

Susanta Kumar Purohit, Chairperson, VOC Port Authority, added, "By prioritising world-class infrastructure, cutting-edge digitisation, ambitious green innovation, and port-led industrialisation, including shipbuilding, VOC Port is strengthening its pivotal role in regional prosperity and national development."

V.O. Chidambaram Port is one of the major ports in the country. From April 2025 to January 2026, cargo handling increased 6 per cent to 35.97 million tonnes.

Container volumes rose 9.40 per cent to over 7.16 lakh TEUs in the April-January period of the current fiscal year. (PTI)

UPI Circle on BHIM app enables safe, controlled payment access

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Managing shared expenses in modern households often involves handing payments not just for oneself but also for children, elderly parents, or trusted staff.

While digital payments have simplified financial transactions, many users still face challenges in securely sharing payment access without compromising control.

To address this need, the BHIM Payments App has introduced a new feature called UPI Circle, designed to make authorised UPI transactions safer, more structured and convenient.

The UPI Circle feature allows a primary user to grant controlled payment access to trusted individuals, known as secondary users.

Through this system, the primary account holder can authorise payments directly from their bank account while maintaining clear oversight and setting defined spending limits.

The feature eliminates the risky practice of sharing sensitive information such as UPI PINs, passwords or device access.

Instead, it ensures that all transactions remain transparent, traceable and secure, with full visibility available to the primary user at all times.

UPI Circle is expected to be particularly useful for households managing routine expenses, enabling parents to monitor children's spending, caregivers to handle daily purchases for elderly family members, and employers to authorise limited transactions for trusted staff — all without compromising security.

By combining convenience with built-in safeguards, the feature aims to make digital payments more practical for shared usage while strengthening trust, accountability and financial control for users.

Morepen Laboratories secures ₹825 crore global CDMO Deal



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Morepen Laboratories Limited has secured a multi-year Contract Development and Manufacturing Organization (CDMO) mandate valued at approximately ₹825 crore (about USD 91 million) from a leading global pharmaceutical company, marking one of the largest single CDMO orders in the company's history.

According to the company, supplies under the agreement are expected to begin within the next four to five months, with execution scheduled to continue through the first quarter of the following financial year, subject to operational and regulatory clearances.

The mandate represents a significant step in Morepen's strategic expansion into the fast-growing global CDMO segment and strengthens its position as a key manufacturing partner for regulated markets.

With more than four decades of expertise in active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) manufacturing, the company has built a strong regulatory track record supported by internationally accredited facilities, including approvals from the US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), WHO-GMP and European

authorities. The company said its integrated capabilities — spanning product development to commercial manufacturing — allow it to support complex scale-ups and long-term supply programmes for global pharmaceutical innovators.

It is also evaluating further capacity expansion and technology investments in line with its growing CDMO opportunity pipeline.

Chairman and Managing Director Sushil Suri described the agreement as a major milestone in the company's manufacturing journey, stating that it reflects the confidence of global customers in Morepen's quality systems, regulatory compliance and execution capabilities.

He said the CDMO business represents a natural extension of the company's core API strengths and will provide long-term growth stability.

Kushal Suri, President — International Growth (API), said the mandate validates Morepen's ability to manage end-to-end technical, regulatory and commercial scale-ups under stringent global standards.

He added that the company now aims to leverage this achievement to secure additional long-term international manufacturing partnerships.

Industry trends indicate that global pharmaceutical firms are increasingly consolidating supplier networks and partnering with reliable, compliant and scalable manufacturers capable of ensuring uninterrupted long-term supply.

Morepen said its vertically integrated API platform and operational scale position it strongly to benefit from this shift in global outsourcing demand.

CCPA slaps ₹ 15 lakh fine on Vajirao & Reddy for misleading UPSC ads

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) has imposed a penalty of ₹ 15 lakh on Delhi-based coaching institute Vajirao and Reddy Institute for publishing misleading advertisements claiming credit for candidates who cleared the UPSC Civil Services Examination 2023, many of whom had enrolled only for mock interview sessions.

The institute had claimed on its official website, shortly after results were declared on April 16, 2024, that it had produced "over 645 selections out of 1,016 vacancies", with "6 in Top 10 AIR" and "35 in Top 50 AIR".



These claims appeared alongside advertisements for its regular courses, creating the impression that successful candidates had been trained by the institute through all three stages — Preliminary, Mains, and Interview.

The CCPA found this to be a deliberate misrepresentation. On examining enrolment records submitted by the institute, the au-

thority found that a significant number of candidates had signed up only for the "Interview Guidance Programme" or "Mock Interview", meaning they had already independently cleared the first two stages before approaching the institute.

A further 431 enrolment forms neither specified the course enrolled in nor carried a date of fill-

ing. The institute failed to produce fee receipts or other corroborative documents.

"Non-disclosure of such information creates a misleading impression that the successful candidates were trained by the Institute across all stages of the examination," the CCPA said in a statement.

What makes the case more serious is that this is not the first time the institute has faced regulatory action. It was penalised ₹ 7 lakh for similar violations in its advertisements related to UPSC CSE 2022 results.

The repeat offence led the CCPA to treat this as a subsequent contravention and impose a steeper penalty.

With roughly 11 lakh candidates applying for civil services every year, the authority noted the scale of potential harm, as students and families invest considerable time and money guided by advertisements that do not present the complete picture. (PTI)

NAME CORRECTION

My correct name is Swarna Pandey which was wrongly recorded as 'Swarna Tripathi' in my PAN Card bearing No BGUPTS181L. This information is for all concerned.

Swarna Pandey

Mobile No. 9435309971

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THE HILLS TIMES 3

Good days are coming for Bhupen Borah, says Himanta Assam polls: BJP finalises candidates for 80 seats

Staff Reporter
GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said that the BJP has already finalised candidates in 80 Assembly constituencies and asserted that there is no vacant seat within the party at present. Speaking to reporters here, Sarma said the ruling party is fully prepared for the upcoming elections and has completed much of its internal groundwork. "Our names are confirmed in 80 seats. There is no constituency vacant in our party," the chief minister said, underlining the BJP's organisational readiness and confidence.

Making a significant political remark on former Assam Congress president Bhupen Borah, Sarma hinted at a possible political future for him, saying "good days are coming for Bhupen Borah." The chief minister further claimed that two Assembly constituencies have been kept ready for Borah, though he did not elaborate on the names of the con-



stituencies where Borah might be given a party ticket.

Sarma's comments on Bhupen Borah came a day after former state Congress Chief joined BJP with his supporters.

The chief minister also maintained that the BJP's focus remains on strengthening its own base

rather than reacting to opposition politics.

Taking a swipe at the opposition's alliance efforts, Sarma also offered advice to the Congress on its tie-up strategy.

Referring to the Rajgor Dal, the chief minister said the Congress should take a clear decision if it in-

tends to include the party in its opposition alliance.

"The Congress should decide what it wants to do with the Rajgor Dal in the opposition alliance," Sarma said, suggesting that confusion and lack of clarity among opposition parties continue to weaken their political positioning.

The chief minister alleged that internal contradictions and leadership issues within the opposition camp have repeatedly benefited the BJP in previous elections and would likely do so again if unresolved. Reiterating the BJP-led government's confidence, Sarma said the party is moving ahead with a clear roadmap and strong grassroots support.

He added that the BJP's electoral strategy is centred on development, governance, and stability, which, according to him, have earned the trust of the people of Assam.

The remarks come amid heightened political activity in the state, with all major parties stepping up preparations ahead of the next Assembly polls.

Bhupen Borah hails BJP's leadership

'Waited for 7 months to secure appointment Gandhi family'



Staff Reporter
GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Newly inducted Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Bhupen Borah on Monday launched a sharp attack on the Congress leadership, citing personal experiences to highlight what he described as the "stark difference" between the functioning of the Congress and the BJP.

Borah, who formally joined the BJP on February 22, said that despite spending several years in the Congress, he failed to secure an appointment with the Gandhi family, apparently meaning Sonia Gandhi and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi or Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra for seven months.

In contrast, he claimed that Union Home Minister Amit Shah met him within five minutes.

"I waited for seven months but could not get an appointment with the Gandhi family. But Amit Shah met me within five minutes. That itself explains the differ-

ence between the two parties," Borah told reporters here.

He further alleged that senior Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi took nine months to visit his residence, while chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma reached his home within 24 hours of his decision to quit the Congress.

"These examples clearly show how leaders are valued in different political cultures," Borah said, adding that the Congress has lost touch with grassroots workers and senior leaders alike.

Taking a swipe at the Opposition alliance in Assam, Borah claimed that the Congress is currently in a strong position in only 24 Assembly constituencies.

He also criticised the Opposition's focus on minority-dominated constituencies, calling it a "political miscalculation" that has weakened the party's broader appeal.

Borah alleged that internal confusion, lack of leadership accessibility and delayed decision-making have contributed to the Congress' declining influence in the state.

The former Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president, Bhupen Borah joined the BJP on February 22 in the presence of state BJP chief Dilip Saikia and senior BJP leaders, marking a significant political development ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections.

Political observers see Borah's entry into the BJP as a major boost for the ruling party, while his remarks are expected to intensify the political battle between the BJP and the Congress in the state.

Badruddin Ajmal to contest assembly polls, takes a dig at Cong

Staff Reporter
GUWAHATI, Feb 23: AIUDF chief and former Dhubri MP Badruddin Ajmal on Monday made a series of sharp political remarks, asserting his confidence ahead of the upcoming elections while taking digs at the Congress over leadership and alliance dynamics in Assam.

Speaking to reporters here, Ajmal said he remains politically resilient despite sustained attacks. "I am a tiger and will remain a tiger. Even if I die, I will die as a tiger," he said, projecting confidence in his political standing and grassroots support.

On the question of opposition unity, Ajmal said he remains hopeful of an understanding with the Congress till the last moment.

"We are hopeful till the final moment. It is the Congress that is talking about divorce; we have not given any divorce," he said, suggesting that AIUDF has not shut the door on alliance possibilities.

Using a colloquial phrase to underline his point, Ajmal said, "Miya biwi razi, to kya karega kazi?", indicating that if there is mutual willingness between parties, external narratives should not interfere.

Referring to the 2021 Assembly elections, Ajmal claimed that opposition infighting had caused significant damage in Upper Assam.

"In 2021, Akhil Gogoi and Lurinjyoti Gogoi destroyed the Congress in Upper Assam, and the same will happen again," he alleged, asserting that fragmented opposition politics continues to benefit the BJP.

The AIUDF chief also announced his electoral plans, stating that he would contest from Binakandi and expressed confidence of victory. "I will contest the election from Binakandi and I will (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Jayanta Malla Baruah distributes CMAAA cheques to 3,930 youths in Chirang

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, Feb 23: Cheques under the Chief Minister's Atmanirbhar Asom Abhiyan (CMAAA) were distributed at a ceremonial programme held at the District Parade Ground in Kajalgaon, the headquarters of Chirang district, on Monday, with a total of 3,930 beneficiaries receiving financial assistance.

The distribution programme covered youths from seven Assembly constituencies under the Kokrajhar Lok Sabha seat.

Beneficiaries included recipients from Sidli-Chirang and Bijni constituencies in Chirang district, as well as Baokhungri, Dotoma, Gossaigaon, Kokrajhar and Parbatjhora constituencies in Kokrajhar district.

Each beneficiary received the first instalment cheque of ₹75,000 under the scheme aimed at promoting self-employment and entrepreneurship among youths.

Assam cabinet minister Jayanta Malla Baruah attended the programme as the chief guest and distributed the cheques in the presence of BTC Chief Executive Member Hagrama Mohilyar and several other dignitaries.

Addressing the gathering, minister Baruah said the self-reliance scheme introduced by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has encouraged many young people across Assam to pursue self-employment opportunities instead of depending solely on government jobs.



He claimed that during the BJP government's tenure, more than 1.1 lakh youths have already been provided employment opportunities through various initiatives.

He further announced that if the BJP-led alliance returns to power in the upcoming Assembly elections, financial assistance under the CMAAA scheme will be extended to 15 lakh youths over the next five years to boost employment generation and entrepreneurship across the state.

In the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) alone, he said, around 15,000 additional youths will be covered under the scheme. The minister also took a political jibe at opposition parties, referring to the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Himanta terms erection of first pillar on Assam-Arunachal border 'historic milestone'

GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said that the erection of the first border pillar between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh as part of resolving the inter-state boundary dispute is a "historic milestone".

This is "truly momentous" as it ends decades of uncertainty over the inter-state borders between the two states, the CM said in a post on X.

The first border pillar between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh was erected at Seijosa on Sunday.

"A historic milestone has been reached! Post the signing of the Namsai Declaration, the first border pillar between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh has been in-

stalled in Pakke Kesang district," Sarma said.

The Namsai Declaration was signed by Sarma and his Arunachal Pradesh counterpart Pema Khandu on July 15, 2022, setting in motion measures to resolve differences in 123 villages claimed by both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

"Under the leadership of Adarniya @narendramodi ji, the Ashtalakshmi region is moving forward as a cohesive unit. With the guidance of Adarniya @Amit-Shah ji, we will sustain these efforts. Gratitude to Hon'ble CM Shri @PemaKhanduBJP ji for his support in these efforts," he added.

The two CMs later signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

No Hindu to remain in oppn party: CM

'Cong leaders to follow 'schedule' in joining Assam BJP'

GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said there is a 'schedule' for several senior Congress leaders to join the BJP in the state, and finally, no Hindu will remain in the opposition party.

Many Congress leaders will try to join the BJP ahead of the forthcoming assembly elections, but it will not be possible to give tickets to all of them, Sarma said on the sidelines of a programme here.

"There is a schedule, and they (Congress leaders) will join accordingly to that. Some will join in 2027, some before the 2029 Lok Sabha polls, and others before the 2031 assembly polls," Sarma said while replying to questions on the possibility of more leaders joining

the BJP after former Congress president Bhupen Borah resigned and entered the saffron party.

The BJP has already started preparations for the next Parliamentary elections as "both assembly and Lok Sabha polls are important for us," he said.

"One thing, however, is sure that no Hindu leader will remain in the party (Congress)," Sarma claimed. Asked whether any more Congress MLAs would join the BJP before this year's assembly polls, the CM said there is "no vacancy in the BJP now. If we bring in MLAs now, how will we give them tickets?"

The BJP has almost finalised the list of candidates, and the remaining ones will be discussed with the allies, he said, adding: "The list will

be announced after we go to Delhi for the final discussion."

Borah resigned on February 16 after Rahul Gandhi, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, spoke with him, and the Congress leadership rushed to his house to convince him to change his decision.

The former state Congress president asked for time to reconsider, but the chief minister went to his house the next day and announced that Borah would join the BJP, dealing a blow to the main opposition party ahead of the assembly polls. Sarma has been claiming since then that many senior Hindu leaders would join the BJP.

Assembly elections for the state's 126 (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

PM to visit Kokrajhar on March 13

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, Feb 23: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit the Bodo heartland of Kokrajhar on March 13, where he will participate in a major public programme and lay the foundation stone for a railway line connecting Kokrajhar with Bhatu.

Officials said the proposed rail link is expected to significantly boost regional connectivity, trade and economic prospects in the Bodoland region as well as strengthen cross-border ties with Bhatu.

During the visit, the Prime Minister is also likely to inaugurate and announce (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Projects to boost green infrastructure, tech adoption and global connectivity

Sonowal launches ₹ 1,500-cr projects at VOC Port

TUTICORIN (TAMIL NADU), Feb 23: Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Monday launched ₹ 1,500 crore worth of projects at V.O. Chidambaran Port, Tuticorin, to upgrade port infrastructure, setting up clean projects and adoption of new-age technologies.

The investments will help V.O. Chidambaran Port (VOC Port), Tuticorin, to become a major transshipment hub of Tamil Nadu, boosting regional and international connectivity through sea routes, the Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways said.

Sonowal, who was in Tuticorin to oversee port operations, inaugurated over ₹ 160-core projects, including VOC maritime heritage museum focussing on historical legacy of the port, a few road projects improving transportation, dig-



ital twin project for AI-driven operations and maintenance.

The minister also laid foundation stone of projects worth ₹ 1,340 crore such as setting up of 8 MW wind farm with 5 MW storage, 2 MW green hydrogen facility and 2

MW ground mounted solar plant, along with an energy management system equipped with smart metering facility.

Of the ₹ 1,340 crore, ₹ 131.31 crore will be invested by VOC port on rail infrastructure projects for

cargo movement, ₹ 250 crore towards manufacturing of shipbuilding equipment, ₹ 367 crore towards green tug initiative of the government for towing, pushing, and manoeuvring of large ships utilising green energies.

Sonowal also launched anti-drone system project to security of VOC port through radar-based detection and jamming systems.

"The focus of our government under leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is very clear for the maritime industry. We aim to build a self-reliant, green and technologically advanced maritime sector," he stated.

Sonowal said the projects launched on Monday will extend benefits far beyond the port, lowering logistics costs for trade, spurring industrial expansion, including (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

27th Akhanda Bhagavat Path to be held from March 1

HT Correspondent
HOWRAGHAT, Feb 23: The spiritual atmosphere in Howraghat is set to deepen as preparations near completion for the 27th Annual Session and Akhanda Bhagavat Path, scheduled to be held from March 1 to March 8, 2026 (16 Phagun to 23 Phagun, 577 Sankarabda).

The week-long religious congregation is being organised by the Howraghat Regional Vedic Vaishnav Mahasabha and hosted by its Howraghat Town Branch at the Shankar Mandir Namghar in Howraghat.

The programme will feature a continuous recital of the Bhagavat along with a series of spiritual activities aimed at fostering devotion, unity and community participation among devotees.

As part of the event, a grand open meeting will also be organised. Montu Bora, Secretary of the Assam (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Over 1 cr pensioners filed online life certificates in 8-10 months: Minister

GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Union Minister Jitendra Singh on Monday said more than one crore pensioners across the country digitally submitted their life certificates in the last 8-10 months.

Singh, the minister of state for personnel, public grievances and pensions, said that the central government has been using technology to the maximum possible extent to give benefits to citizens.

"Earlier, applying for a pension was a complex job with multiple forms and NOCs. Nowadays, just one form is needed, and everything is online. A lot of rationalisation has taken place in the last 10-12 years," he said at a pension-related function here.

Various citizen-centric steps have been initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ease the discomfort of the retired persons, Singh said.

"Digital life certificate is one of

such revolutionary steps. In the last 8-10 months, 1.11 crore face recognitions have been done. It has become a mass movement," he asserted.

The Union minister claimed that the Modi government has not made any new rules related to pensions, but removed the old and obsolete norms.

"The people who saw the North-east before 2014 can understand the transformation in the region. The people's mindset has changed, and youths have started going outside the region," he added.

Singh asserted that the biggest contribution of PM Modi is "mainstreaming" of the Northeast with the rest of India.

The Union minister was speaking at the 58th Pre-Retirement Counselling (PRC) Workshop, Pensioners' Awareness Programme and Bankers' Awareness Programme, organised (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

QUOTE OF THE DAY

If you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you're doing. -W. Edwards Deming

Leaving a void in literary arena

Mani Shankar Mukherjee, better named as Shankar, passed away in Kolkata on Friday, February 20 imparting grief to thousands of his readers who enjoyed his story telling power portrayed through hundreds of his works. He was 92. One hardly comes across a person who is better known by his middle name; such persons are exceptions. So was Mani Shankar Mukherjee, whose middle name Shankar came in the same breath as his bestselling novels. Inarguably, he stood out in more ways than one apart from being known by his middle name A corporate top honcho as a public relations man, MSM as he was known among his professional fraternity wore the executive's hat and that of an extraordinary penman with equal ease. His hours before he left for his place of work, Sankar was at his writing desk. And one has to storm one's brain to find out how his fruits of labour turned into one best selling tome...after another Once in his office, his persona took leave of Shankar the author and encased himself in the garb of a burra sahib, one who had his finger on his firm's pulse. Resplendent in jacket and tie, he busied himself in in-house meetings and audio visual presentations to show his company in the best light.

Walking back to the years of his early life when he did odd jobs as diverse as a salesman of baskets to a typist and thereafter as a clerk of Noel Frederick Barwell, the last English barrister of Calcutta High Court can one trace his initiation to hard work. An untimely death of his father of his father, a lawyer in Howrah court left him to be the sole bread earner of a large family. Small wonder, be it Koto Ajanare which was his 1955 debut novel in which he recalled the joys and sorrows at Calcutta High Court or Samrat O Sundari telling the travails of an actress as she encounters the designs of a theatre owner, the novels gripped the readers attention. Entranced by the smooth flow in which every detail is perfectly depicted, the readers asked for more. Once dubbed a "one book wonder" after Koto Ajanare (The Great Unknown), Shankar silenced all criticism about his literary abilities after publication of his second novel Chowringhee.

Shankar wrote compactly and copiously. Very few authors knew the world of success and failure and the innate seeds of stagnation in them like him and brought it out in his works. In his last years, he was busy in writing story books on Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa Shankar has been prolific in his writing for the last seven decades but his popularity among the Bengali readers never waned. With his passing away, Bengali readers will lose the charm of storytelling in a most lucid manner savvy with both young and old.

Manipur at the Crossroads of Peace

By: Satyabrata Borah

Manipur today feels like a wound that has been left open for far too long. It is a land of extraordinary beauty, of green hills folding into one another, of valleys that have fed generations, of cultures that know how to celebrate life through dance, song, food, and shared memory. Yet for months, this same land has echoed with fear, suspicion, and grief. Homes have burned, families have been torn apart, and trust between communities has cracked in ways that will not easily heal. When violence becomes routine and pain becomes political, the most urgent need is not another argument or accusation, but a healing touch that can gently but firmly break the cycle of harm. At the heart of Manipur's crisis is not just a clash between groups or a failure of law and order. It is a human tragedy. Every statistic hides a face. Every report of displacement hides a child who has forgotten what it feels like to sleep without fear. Every burned village hides memories that can never be rebuilt with bricks alone. When we talk about safety first, we must understand that safety is not only the absence of gunfire, safety is the confidence that tomorrow will not bring revenge, that one's neighbour is not an enemy, that identity is not a death sentence. Without restoring this deeper sense of safety, peace will remain fragile and temporary.

The cycle of violence in Manipur feeds on fear and mistrust. One act of violence invites retaliation. Retaliation hardens into justification. Justification turns into collective blame. Soon, entire communities are reduced to labels, and individuals lose their humanity in the public imagination. This cycle is not unique to Manipur, but the pain it produces is always local and personal. A mother searching for her missing son does not care about ideology. A farmer watching his fields lie abandoned does not think in terms of political advantage. Their suffering demands a response rooted in empathy, not calculation. A healing touch begins with acknowledging pain without ranking it. One of the most damaging tendencies in any conflict is the urge to compare suffering. Who suffered more. Who started first. Who deserves sympathy. This way of thinking deepens division and delays healing. In Manipur, different communities have endured loss, displacement, and fear. Healing will not come from denying anyone's pain or from weaponising it. It will come from a shared recognition that no grievance justifies the destruction of innocent lives and that no community holds a monopoly on suffering. Listening is an essential part of healing, yet it is often the most neglected. Too many conversations about Manipur happen without Manipuris in the room, or with only the loudest voices being heard. Real listening requires patience and humility. It means sitting with stories that are uncomfortable. It means hearing anger without immediately dismissing it, while also refusing to let anger turn into violence. When people feel heard, they are less likely to feel the need to shout through destruction. A society that listens creates space for non-violent solutions to emerge. Safety must be restored not only through security forces but through trust. Armed presence can stop immediate violence, but it cannot rebuild relationships. If safety is enforced without sensitivity, it risks becoming another source of resentment. Security measures must protect all communities equally and transparently. Any perception of bias or selective action only deepens wounds. People must believe that the state sees them as citizens first, not as members of a category. Fairness is not just a legal principle here; it is a psychological necessity for peace. Displacement is one of the deepest scars left by the violence in Manipur. When people are forced to leave their homes, they lose more than shelter. They lose dignity, routine, and a sense of belonging. Relief camps may provide food and basic care, but they cannot replace the feeling of home. A healing approach must prioritise safe and voluntary return, or meaningful rehabilitation where return is impossible.

This process must involve the affected communities in decision making. Being consulted restores a sense of agency, which is essential for emotional recovery. Children are perhaps the most silent victims of this conflict. Many have seen things no child should see. Fear at a young age can shape a lifetime of mistrust. If Manipur is to heal, special attention must be given to the emotional and psychological well-being of its children. Schools should become spaces of safety and normalcy again, not sites of anxiety. Teachers, counsellors, and community elders have a crucial role to play in helping children process trauma without passing on hatred. Women, too, bear a unique burden in times of violence. They

often become caretakers in crisis, holding families together while carrying their own unspoken pain. Many have faced loss, displacement, and insecurity. A healing process that sidelines women is incomplete. Women's voices, experiences, and leadership are vital for rebuilding social bonds. Historically, women have often been bridges between communities, capable of softening hardened positions and nurturing dialogue where formal politics fails. Political responsibility cannot be avoided in a discussion about healing Manipur. Leadership matters, especially in moments of crisis. Words spoken by those in power can either calm tensions or inflame them.

Silence can be as damaging as provocation. People look to leaders not just for policy, but for moral direction. A healing touch from leadership would involve honest communication, accountability, and a visible commitment to peace over political gain. Admitting failures is not a sign of weakness; it is a step toward rebuilding trust. Media also plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions. Sensationalism may attract attention, but it often deepens fear and anger. Responsible reporting can humanise victims instead of turning them into symbols. It can highlight stories of courage, compassion, and solidarity that still exist even in dark times. Manipur has countless examples of people helping one another across community lines. These stories deserve as much space as stories of violence, because they remind society of what is still possible. Civil society and local institutions are crucial to any healing process. Religious leaders, student groups, cultural organisations, and village councils have deep roots in the social fabric of Manipur. Their involvement can lend credibility to peace efforts that official channels alone may lack. Healing is not something that can be imposed from above. It grows from within communities, through dialogue, shared activities, and gradual rebuilding of trust. Local peace initiatives, however small they may seem, can have a powerful ripple effect. Justice is another essential component of healing. Without accountability, wounds fester. People need to believe that crimes will not be forgotten or excused. At the same time, justice must be pursued carefully, without turning into collective punishment. Individual responsibility should be clearly established, and the rule of law must be seen to operate fairly. When justice is delayed or denied, anger finds other outlets. When justice is visible and fair, it creates space for reconciliation. Reconciliation does not mean forgetting. It does not mean pretending that nothing happened. It means choosing not to let the past dictate an endless future of revenge. This is one of the hardest choices any society can make. It requires courage, patience, and often forgiveness that feels impossible. But reconciliation is not a gift to the offender; it is a release for the victim. It allows people to reclaim their lives from the grip of hatred. Economic recovery is also deeply tied to healing. Violence disrupts livelihoods and deepens poverty, which in turn fuels resentment and instability. Supporting farmers, small businesses, artisans, and daily wage workers is not just an economic necessity but a peace strategy. When people have hope for a better tomorrow, they are less likely to be drawn into conflict. Development, however, must be inclusive and sensitive to local realities, otherwise it risks creating new grievances. Cultural exchange and shared spaces can slowly rebuild connections. Manipur's rich traditions have always thrived on diversity.

Festivals, sports, music, and art have the power to bring people together in ways that political dialogue often cannot. Encouraging safe opportunities for communities to interact again, even in small ways, can help dissolve the image of the other as an enemy. Familiarity humanises, and humanisation is the enemy of violence. A healing touch also requires time. Ultimately, safety first in Manipur means putting human lives above pride, power, and politics. It means choosing compassion over conquest, dialogue over dominance. A healing touch is not soft or weak. It is firm in its refusal to accept violence as normal. It insists on dignity for every person, regardless of identity. It recognises that peace is not the silence of guns alone, but the return of trust, laughter, and ordinary life. Manipur deserves more than survival. It deserves healing. It deserves a future where children can grow up knowing their neighbours as friends, not threats. Breaking the cycle of violence is not easy, but it is possible when society chooses to see each other not as enemies, but as fellow human beings carrying pain and hope in equal measure. The path forward begins with safety, but it is completed only through empathy, justice, and the courage to heal together.

Beyond Robodog: The hollowness of Indian higher education

By: Dr Priyanka Saurabh

The recent controversy surrounding the display of Robodog at Galgotias University has generated widespread discussion on social media and in the mainstream media. On the surface, this issue appears to be about appropriateness, priorities, or campus culture, but in reality, it is merely a symptom of a deeper, structural crisis that has been brewing in India's higher education system for years. The problem isn't Robodog. The problem is what our universities have gradually become.

The past two decades have seen unprecedented expansion in higher education in India. The number of private universities, self-financed colleges, and degree institutions has grown rapidly. This expansion has often been presented as a result of "increased access to education" and a "demographic dividend." However, when this expansion occurred without corresponding regulation, academic rigor, and accountability, quality has come at a cost. The result has been that quantity has increased, but quality has steadily declined. Today, most—though not all—private universities and degree colleges in the country have become less centers of learning and more centers of degree distribution. Education is becoming a transaction rather than an intellectual process—degrees in exchange for money. Attendance, academic participation, laboratory work, and intellectual discipline are no longer mandatory but are subject to negotiation. What was once non-negotiable in higher education has now become flexible, weak, and distorted.

This decline is particularly worrisome in subjects where rigor is essential. Weakening theoretical studies is one thing, but the hollowing out of science education is far more serious. Today, students are receiving bachelor's and master's degrees in science without attending regular classes or receiving practical laboratory training. Experimental work—once the backbone of scientific training—has become a mere formality. Degrees are awarded, but competence is not ensured. The consequences of this hollowing out are becoming apparent when students apply for jobs. A master's degree in chemistry can't explain basic scientific concepts. A commerce graduate can't explain the basic concepts of debit and credit. A student with a management degree appears weak in problem-solving and critical thinking. These aren't isolated examples, but rather common trends observed repeatedly by industry.

Naturally, this leads to frustration

among students and parents. When employment fails despite years of study and substantial financial investment, questions arise. Parents are right to ask why their children remain unemployed despite their education. This discontent often targets the government, which is accused of failing to create jobs. While job creation is a policy challenge, this discourse ignores an uncomfortable truth—that a significant number of graduates are actually unemployed.

This raises the fundamental question. If students lack the necessary knowledge and skills, how did they obtain the degrees that qualify them? Who gave such institutions permission to issue certificates without ensuring academic quality? The answer lies in the regulatory framework for higher education. Higher education in India is overseen by a number of ministries, departments, and regulatory bodies whose stated purpose is to safeguard standards, ensure quality, and maintain academic integrity. Accreditation systems, inspections, evaluations, and academic audits were created for this purpose. However, in practice, these processes often remain formalities rather than genuine evaluations. Inspections are often pre-planned. Documents are embellished to fulfill formalities. Buildings and infrastructure are prioritized over teaching quality. Compliance is placed above learning outcomes. The actual academic experience of students, the quality of teaching, the rigor of examinations, and the culture of inquiry—these are rarely seriously and consistently monitored. As a result, institutions learn to "manage" regulators rather than improve education.

This regulatory laxity has led to a vicious cycle—institutions operate with minimal academic accountability, regulators maintain the appearance of oversight, and degrees continue to be issued. The price of this system is borne not by institutions nor by regulators—but by students, employers, and society. Ironically, while industry complains about a shortage of qualified human resources, the country grapples with a serious crisis of educated unemployment. This is not a contradiction, but a natural consequence of a system that prioritizes certification over competence. Companies are forced to spend heavily on retraining new employees, while young professionals struggle with a lack of confidence and career stagnation.

The biggest victims of this system are honest and talented students who, often due to a lack of options or misleading branding, end up in

mediocre institutions. They work hard and want to learn, but ultimately, they are burdened more by the institution's name on their marksheet than by their own abilities. Their individual merit is overshadowed by the lack of institutional credibility. This is not only unfair, but a waste of talent on a national scale. It must be acknowledged that India still has some high-quality institutions that compete internationally. But they are the exception, not the rule. It's worth noting that school education up to grade 12 remains relatively structured and controlled. As students enter higher education, oversight loosens and expectations become blurred. If this trend is not arrested in time, the long-term consequences will be dire. The social and economic value of degrees will decline. Public trust in higher education will weaken. The distinction between merit and mediocrity will become ever more blurred. Phrases like "university on every street" will become not satire but a description of reality—where universities will be everywhere, but education will not.

Now is the time for reform—and that reform must be honest and rigorous. Regulatory bodies must move beyond box-ticking and adopt outcomes-based, transparent, and unpredictable assessment. Teaching quality, learning outcomes, student engagement, and assessment integrity must be prioritized over buildings and advertising. Institutions must be held accountable. Colleges and universities that consistently fail academically must face firm action—including seat reductions, course suspensions, or even revocation of accreditation. Higher education cannot be a business where failure carries no price. Students and parents must also be more vigilant. Making decisions based solely on marketing, infrastructure, and branding compromises the future. Education is not a simple purchase, but an investment in intellectual and professional development—and wrong decisions have far-reaching consequences.

Ultimately, the purpose of higher education is not to dispense degrees, but to produce thinking, competent, and responsible citizens. Until this core purpose is restored, controversies like Robodog will continue to arise—creating a buzz for a while and then subsiding—while the real crisis remains. We need systemic inspection, not cosmetic reforms. Because the crisis of education is never confined to the classroom—it quietly shapes the future of the nation. *(The author is a PhD (Political Science), a poet and social thinker.)*

course becomes standardised, and ideological vocabulary grows interchangeable. In such a scenario, democracy may continue to function procedurally through regular elections and peaceful transfers of power, but it weakens substantively. Citizens may still vote, but their sense of meaningful choice gradually diminishes. Yet it would be premature to lapse into fatalism. Political fluidity can, under certain conditions, signal adaptability and responsiveness to changing social realities. Democracies must evolve alongside the societies they govern. The real danger lies not in movement itself but in movement without meaning. If party transitions are accompanied by serious public reasoning, ideological clarity, and willingness to engage critics, they can actually enrich democratic debate. The present concern arises primarily when shifts appear purely strategic and unmoored from articulated principles. Assam today stands at a crossroads that mirrors broader national trends. Regional aspirations continue to intersect with powerful national narratives, creating a complex political terrain. Leaders operate under intense pressures arising from identity politics, development imperatives, and coalition arithmetic. In such a landscape, realignment can be tempting and sometimes even defensible. But temptation does not erase responsibility. The credibility of democratic politics ultimately depends on whether leaders can distinguish between realism and cynicism in their public conduct. The urgent task ahead is to restore that distinction. Realism acknowledges constraints while retaining a normative compass; cynicism discards the compass altogether. When ideology is treated as disposable, politics risks sliding into purely transactional negotiation. Transactional systems may deliver short-term efficiency, but they rarely inspire durable public trust. Assam's evolving political story therefore offers not just a warning but also an opportunity: a chance to reaffirm that while power is necessary for governance, principle remains indispensable for legitimacy. *(The writer can be reached at dipakurmigpltd@gmail.com)*

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Dipak Kurmi

broader transformation that might be described as the managerialisation of politics. Modern campaigns increasingly rely on data analytics, micro-targeting, and professional consultants who refine messaging with corporate precision. Coalition arithmetic is often engineered with algorithmic sophistication. Within this technocratic framework, ideology becomes just one variable among many, useful but negotiable. Political leaders begin to resemble strategic assets in a competitive marketplace where value is measured in winnability rather than doctrinal fidelity. This shift does not necessarily invalidate democratic competition, but it does alter its moral texture in subtle yet consequential ways.

Democracy, however, is not a corporate merger exercise. At its normative core, it is a moral and philosophical project that presumes competing parties offer distinct visions of society. If those visions become interchangeable, elections risk degenerating into contests of branding rather than genuine ideological choice. The difference between parties collapses into personality, charisma, organisational muscle, and financial resources. Over time, such convergence can produce voter fatigue and deepen political cynicism, particularly among younger citizens who already display growing scepticism toward institutional politics across India.

One might reasonably argue that

ideological rigidity is neither desirable nor realistic in a plural society like India. Coalition politics requires compromise; social realities shift; governance demands flexibility. All of this is true. But compromise is not synonymous with abandonment, and evolution is not equivalent to erasure. A mature democracy accommodates ideological growth while still demanding intellectual honesty. If a political leader genuinely rethinks a long-held position, that journey deserves to be transparent, argued, and publicly defended. Without such candour, flexibility begins to resemble opportunism.

Voters, too, share a portion of the responsibility for the current political climate. Electoral culture in many regions increasingly rewards proximity to power. A section of the electorate often prefers aligning with parties perceived as likely winners, believing that such alignment ensures greater development funds, administrative access, and political leverage. In doing so, voters indirectly reinforce the logic that survival trumps principle. Political opportunism rarely thrives in isolation; it flourishes within an ecosystem that quietly normalises it. The relationship between political supply and voter demand is therefore more intertwined than is often acknowledged.

The media environment further complicates the picture. Party-switching is frequently covered as spectacle rather than substance. Headlines emphasise strategic gains and losses, dramatic visuals of leaders joining new parties, and the immediate electoral arithmetic. Rarely does sustained coverage probe the ideological implications of these moves. The story becomes numerical rather than normative. Questions of consistency, accountability, and political philosophy are pushed to the margins. In an age of rapid news cycles and attention-driven media economics, the slower work of democratic scrutiny often struggles to find space.

If idealism retreats too far from politics, the system does not collapse overnight; instead, something subtler occurs. Politics becomes fluid but hollow, competitive yet conceptually thin. Allegiance turns provisional, dis-

The commercial prospects of Assam as the gateway to Northeast India

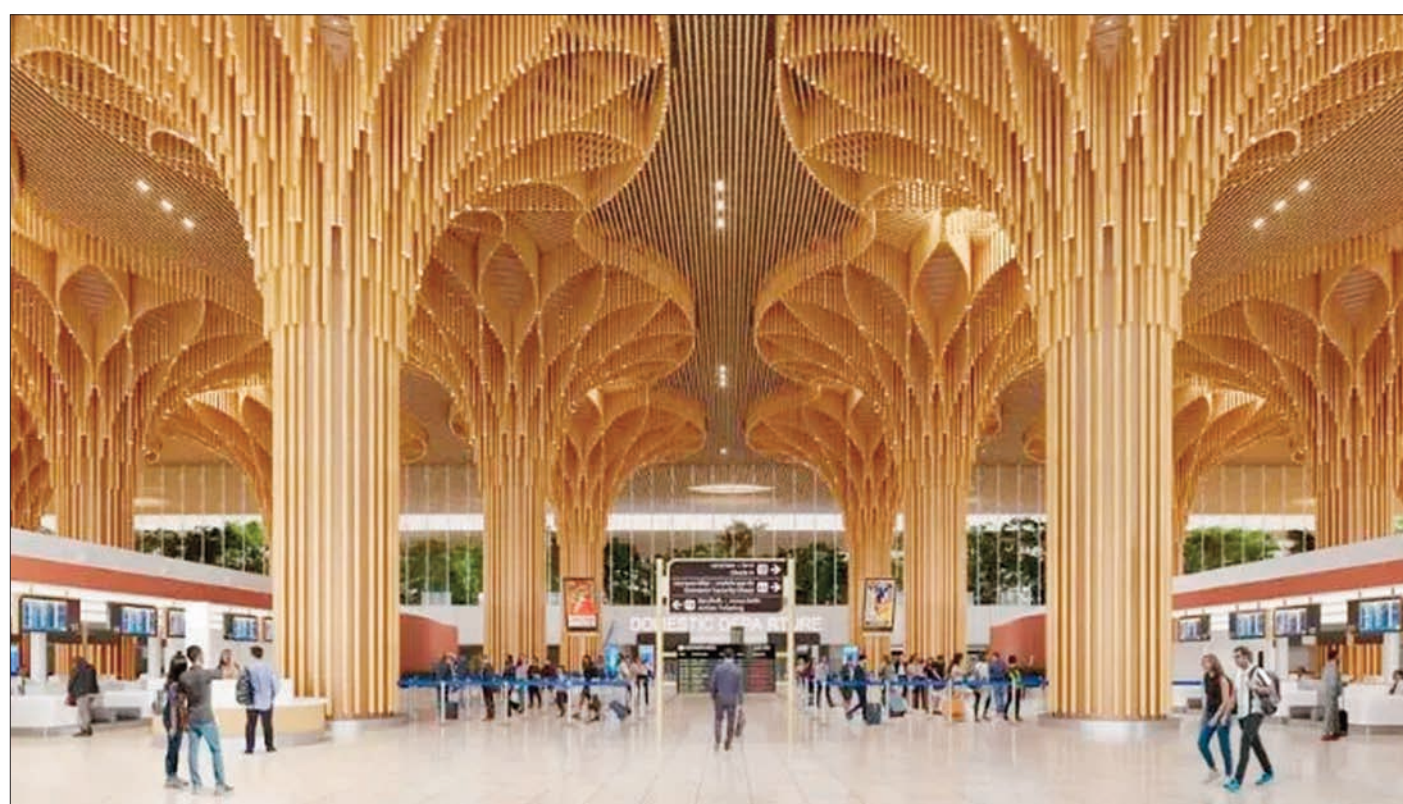
By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

A close look at the map of Assam makes one thing strikingly clear: this landmass serves as the most strategically important economic corridor or trade route for the entire Southeast Asia, with no alternative currently available to India. The phrase “gateway to Northeast India” has been heard since childhood, but its true economic significance often remains hidden behind emotional rhetoric and political slogans. In reality, this concept of being a gateway forms the backbone of Assam’s economy and the foundation of its future prosperity. After the narrow Siliguri Corridor or “Chicken’s Neck,” Assam’s location connects the mainland of India to the other six northeastern states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya—establishing the state as the unspoken guardian of the entire region and its only reliable transit point or transportation hub. In today’s global economy, where supply chain management has gained greater importance than mere production, this geographical advantage places Assam at the threshold of immense commercial potential.

Virtually every essential commodity required in the northeastern market—from rice and pulses to luxury cars and cement for house construction—must pass through Assam’s territory. This transit opportunity turns Assam not merely into a revenue collection center but offers a rare chance to transform it into a logistics hub, warehouse, and distribution center for the whole region. The question, however, is whether we have merely used this geographical advantage as a slogan or have truly succeeded in deriving economic benefits from it. If we remain only gatekeepers at the door, there will be no gain for us; our benefit will come only when we become participants in the trade of every item passing through that door.

In recent years, revolutionary changes have occurred in Assam’s infrastructure sector, particularly with the construction of new bridges over the Brahmaputra and the expansion of four-lane national highways, giving the idea of commercial potential a new dimension and paving the way to transform Assam into a modern economic powerhouse. Bridges such as the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge, Bogibeel Bridge, Kaliabhomora Setu, and

the new parallel bridge to Saraighat should not be viewed merely as transportation facilities; they are actually economic arteries that are converting Assam into a “high-speed economic zone” or fast-paced economic domain in the Northeast. Goods that once took three or four days to reach the easternmost parts of Arunachal Pradesh or interior areas of Nagaland from Guwahati now reach their destinations within 24 hours due to improved road transport. As a result, transportation costs for businesses have decreased, and the risk of goods spoilage has diminished. This transformation has made Assam an attractive destination for the country’s leading logistics companies, as evidenced by the massive warehouses emerging in areas like Amingaon, Changsari, or Borjhar. Companies such as Flipkart, Amazon, and major FMCG firms have now realized that establishing a central distribution hub in Assam is far more profitable than dispatching goods from Kolkata to capture the northeastern market. The construction of India’s first multimodal logistics park at Jogighopa is a landmark step that will connect rail, waterways, and roadways at a single point, turning Assam not only into a trade center for India but also for Bhutan and Bangladesh. If this infrastructure is utilized effectively, Assam has the full potential to evolve from a mere transportation route into a major commercial gateway in South Asia. The relevance of the “Act East Policy” should no longer be confined to diplomatic discussions or government files; the time has come to analyze it from a business perspective, as this policy recognizes Assam as the doorway to Southeast Asia. Assam is the only Indian state (with Arunachal and Manipur also playing roles, though Assam remains the central hub) that can establish direct land connectivity with rapidly growing economies such as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Once the Asian Highway or international roadways are fully constructed, it will become possible to drive from Guwahati to Bangkok, creating unprecedented opportunities in trade. However, a major caution is necessary here—opening roads alone does not guarantee trade; trade requires produced goods. If we are not careful, these international routes could become a curse, as cheap products from



China or Thailand might flood our markets and overwhelm local industries. Therefore, to leverage the gateway advantage, roads alone are not enough; what is needed is a strong “export-oriented mindset.” Success will depend on how we can upgrade our products, tea, organic agricultural products, eri-muga silk fabrics, or food items to international standards and sell them in markets like Bangkok or Yangon. Assam must not remain merely a route for importing others’ goods; it must become a route for exporting our own goods. Only then will the true benefits of the Act East Policy reach the common people of Assam. For this policy to succeed, Assam’s young entrepreneurs must learn the language and rules of international trade and develop a mindset capable of competing in the global market.

Looking at Assam’s economic history, it becomes evident that since the British era, this region has been treated merely as a source of raw materials—whether crude oil, coal, or tea leaves. To a large extent, this colonial economic structure persists today, where our resources are sent out, processed elsewhere, and returned packaged at ten times the price to our own markets. To maximize commercial potential, this old cycle must be broken, and emphasis must be placed on “value addition” or value-added industries. For ex-

ample, Assam produces abundant bamboo, yet we still use it primarily as raw material or for paper pulp. However, with modern methods, bamboo can produce flooring tiles, fabrics, and even ethanol—products with demand worth billions in the global market. Similarly, if we establish large-scale food processing industries in Assam for the region’s abundant fruits such as pineapple, orange, lemon, or chili, we could export juice, jam, jelly, pickles, or sauces not only across India but also to neighboring countries. The expansion of the Numaligarh Refinery and new bio-refinery projects in Assam are positive steps in this direction, but they are not sufficient. Our goal must be to create an industrial environment where “Made in Assam” becomes not just a government slogan but a powerful market brand. When Assam’s raw materials are processed within the state, fully packaged, and sent to markets, only then will the economic benefits reach the local people, providing a permanent solution to unemployment.

The tourism industry is another strong pillar of Assam’s commercial potential, yet unfortunately, we have confined it largely to viewing rhinos in Kaziranga and visiting Kamakhya Temple. Twenty-first-century tourism means not just sightseeing but a massive service industry. By leveraging Assam

as the gateway to Northeast India, we can develop it into a center for MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) tourism. Given Guwahati’s superior communication and infrastructure compared to other states, there is immense potential to host national and international conferences, trade fairs, or corporate meetings here. In addition, Assam holds bright prospects in medical tourism. The numerous super-specialty hospitals now established in Guwahati attract not only patients from Assam but also from Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. When a patient arrives from outside, accompanying family members stay in hotels, hire vehicles, shop, and thereby increase cash flow in sectors not directly related to tourism. Similarly, if we develop cruise tourism or river tourism centered on the Brahmaputra River on the model of Europe’s Danube or Rhine rivers, it could attract wealthy tourists from around the world. Tourism should not be viewed merely as entertainment but as an “exportable service.” Only then can genuine commercial gains be derived from it.

Of course, several real and formidable challenges lie in the path of Assam’s bright commercial potential, which cannot be denied. The foremost among them is the annual problem of

floods and erosion, which destroys our hard-earned infrastructure every year and deters external investors. Before any major industrialist invests crores in Assam, they think ten times whether roads to their industry will remain blocked during the monsoon months or whether their factory will submerge underwater. This uncertainty slows the pace of Assam’s industrial development. In addition, legal complexities in land acquisition, a culture of protests or movements (though significantly reduced nowadays), old perceptions linger in investors’ minds, and bureaucratic sluggishness all spoil the business environment. To create an “Ease of Doing Business” environment, the government must eliminate corruption and delays at every level—from obtaining land patts to electricity connections—not just open online portals. Ensuring uninterrupted power supply is another crucial condition, as no modern industry can profit while relying on generators. To truly make Assam a gateway, permanent and scientific solutions to these foundational problems are essential; otherwise, we will continue discussing potential without achieving anything in reality.

The most important factor determining Assam’s commercial future is its human resource or the skills of the new generation. No matter how many grand

highways or bridges we build, if modern-minded entrepreneurs capable of using them for business are not created in our society, all these infrastructure benefits will be reaped by outsiders. In today’s digital age, the definition of business has changed; it is now possible to sit in Guwahati and sell goods in London or New York. Building a skilled youth force proficient in e-commerce, digital marketing, logistics management, and the rules of international trade is the greatest need of the present time. Our education system still fosters only a job-oriented mindset, where after obtaining degrees, boys and girls frantically search only for government jobs. Without changing this mindset, Assam can never become a business center. The government and society together must create an environment where starting a “start-up” or new business is considered more respectable than holding a job. Our youth must realize that the smartphone in their hands is not merely an entertainment device but brings the entire world market within their reach. When our boys and girls can produce, brand, manage logistics themselves, and place Assam’s goods at the world’s doorstep, only then will the name “gateway” become meaningful for Assam.

In conclusion, Assam’s commercial potential as the gateway to Northeast India is limitless, but transforming this potential into reality requires dispassionate planning, hard work, and a visionary outlook. The geographical position provides us with a divine gift, but making proper use of that gift is our own responsibility. The current central and state government policies are business-friendly, but their effective implementation at the grassroots level requires public cooperation and awareness. Instead of remaining merely a market, we must elevate ourselves to a productive and exporting state. By maintaining good relations with neighboring countries, strengthening our infrastructure, and properly developing human resources, Assam can certainly emerge as a major economic power in South and Southeast Asia. Times have changed, and this is the most opportune moment for the Assamese nation to advance toward economic self-reliance in step with these changing times. (The author is the recipient of the ‘Yuba Lekhak Sanman - 2025’ from the Government of Assam)

The social divide between AI users and non-users

By: Soham Das

Artificial Intelligence is often described as the defining technology of our era. From students generating study notes in seconds to professionals automating complex workflows, AI tools are rapidly becoming embedded in everyday life. Yet beneath this technological progress lies a quieter transformation—the emergence of a new social divide between those who can effectively use AI and those who cannot.

Unlike previous digital gaps, the divide around AI is not only about access to devices or the internet. It is increasingly about awareness, literacy, and confidence in interacting with intelligent systems. As AI becomes a productivity multiplier, those who understand how to use it gain disproportionate advantages in education, employment, and social mobility. Those who remain outside this ecosystem risk falling further behind, creating a new layer of inequality within society.

One of the most visible areas where this divide is emerging is education. Students who are familiar with AI tools can summarise textbooks, generate explanations, practise questions, and explore concepts interactively. Learning becomes faster, more personalised, and often more engaging.

Meanwhile, students without exposure to these tools continue relying solely on traditional methods, which may be slower and less adaptive to individual needs. Over time, this difference in learning efficiency can translate into differences in academic performance and confidence.

The divide is not merely technological; it is cultural. In many households, especially in developing contexts, awareness about AI remains limited. Parents and teachers may view AI with suspicion or misunderstanding, associating it with cheating or job loss rather than learning support.

As a result, some students grow up encouraged to explore AI tools, while others are discouraged or un-

aware of them. This uneven exposure shapes attitudes toward technology and influences future opportunities.

Employment is another domain where the AI divide is becoming pronounced. Professionals who integrate AI into their work—whether in writing, data analysis, design, or research—often experience significant productivity gains. Tasks that once took hours can now be completed in minutes.

This efficiency allows them to take on more responsibilities, learn new skills faster, and remain competitive in evolving job markets. Conversely, workers unfamiliar with AI may struggle to match this pace, not because of lack of talent, but because of lack of technological augmentation. This dynamic risks reinforcing existing socioeconomic inequalities. Individuals from urban, educated, and resource-rich backgrounds are more likely to encounter and experiment with emerging technologies. They benefit first from new tools and opportunities. Meanwhile, individuals from under-resourced communities may adopt these technologies later, if at all.

The result is not simply a gap in income or education, but a widening gap in cognitive empowerment—the ability to access, process, and apply knowledge efficiently.

Language also plays a crucial role in the AI divide. Many AI tools are optimised for global or dominant languages, particularly English. Users comfortable with these languages gain smoother and more effective interaction with AI systems. Those who primarily use regional languages may face barriers in expression, comprehension, or perceived usefulness. Although multilingual AI is improving, disparities in linguistic accessibility still influence who benefits most from AI adoption.

Beyond practical advantages, AI literacy is shaping self-perception and agency. Individuals who can use AI effectively often experience a sense of enhanced capability—the feeling that complex tasks are

within reach. They may explore ideas more freely, experiment creatively, and approach challenges with greater confidence.

Non-users, observing these capabilities from a distance, may perceive AI as intimidating or inaccessible. Over time, this psychological divide can be as significant as the technological one. Social perception of intelligence and competence may also shift in the AI era. As AI-assisted outputs become more common, society may begin to equate productivity with skill, without recognising the role of technological assistance. Those who leverage AI effectively may be seen as more capable, even when the underlying difference lies in tool usage rather than intrinsic ability. This can reshape hierarchies in classrooms and workplaces, subtly privileging AI users.

However, framing the divide solely as a problem of non-users risks oversimplification. There are legitimate concerns about overreliance on AI—including erosion of critical thinking, authenticity, and originality. Some individuals consciously choose limited AI use to preserve human-centred learning or creativity.

Their caution highlights an important truth: technological adoption should be informed, not coerced. The goal is not universal dependence on AI, but equitable access to informed choice.

Addressing the AI divide therefore requires more than expanding infrastructure. It demands inclusive digital literacy that extends beyond basic device use to understanding how intelligent systems function, what they can and cannot do, and how to use them ethically. Educational institutions play a central role in this transition. Integrating AI awareness into curricula can ensure that all students—regardless of background—gain exposure and confidence in interacting with emerging technologies.

Teachers themselves need support in navigating AI integration. Without adequate training, educators may either prohibit AI entirely

or ignore it altogether, both of which widen the divide. Guided use, critical evaluation, and transparent discussion can transform AI from a hidden advantage for some students into a shared learning tool for all. When AI literacy becomes collective rather than individual, inequality diminishes.

Public awareness initiatives are equally important. Community programs, libraries, and digital literacy campaigns can introduce AI tools in accessible, local contexts. Demonstrating practical benefits—such as language translation, health information access, or agricultural guidance—can make AI relevant beyond urban or professional settings. When people see technology addressing real-life needs, adoption becomes more inclusive.

Ultimately, the emerging social divide around AI reflects a broader historical pattern. Every transformative technology—from printing to computing to the internet—initially amplified inequality before becoming more widespread. The trajectory of AI will likely follow a similar path. The critical question is how quickly and deliberately society works to close the gap. Artificial Intelligence has the potential to democratise knowledge on an unprecedented scale. Yet without conscious effort, it can also concentrate advantage among those already positioned to benefit. The divide between AI users and non-users is not inevitable, but it is already visible. Recognising it early is the first step toward ensuring that the intelligence revolution remains inclusive rather than exclusive.

In the end, the measure of technological progress is not how advanced our tools become, but how broadly their benefits are shared. A future where only some can amplify their abilities through AI is not truly intelligent. A society where everyone can engage with technology critically, confidently, and creatively—that is the promise worth striving for. (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

The fading roots of Indian land

Land touches the deepest roots of human life. It is identity, memory, inheritance, shelter, and livelihood. But across India, land is also confusion, dispute, bureaucracy, and loss. For millions, owning land should provide security. Yet in practice, it often creates stress, legal entanglement, and generational disconnect.

The Delhi government is working on a long-awaited land modernisation initiative. Every land parcel in the capital will soon receive a unique Land Aadhaar, a 14-digit identification code for deeds, rights, and records. The aim is to reduce disputes, clarify ownership, and make the land marketplace transparent. If this system works as designed, it will become a model for other states struggling with old records and protracted litigation. The initiative is a needed step toward clarity and confidence in property transactions.

The very idea of a universal identifier for land speaks to the core problem. India’s land records have never been fully reconciled with human mobility. For decades, paper deeds, inconsistent surveys, missing maps, unclear boundaries, and overlapping claims have made land one of the most contested assets in the country. This issue becomes more acute when we look at migration patterns. Millions of Indians born in villages have moved to cities, towns, or even abroad for education, employment, and business opportunities. These are often well-educated, skilled individuals. They have earned diplomas, degrees, and global exposure. But they also carry ancestral lands in villages that remain opaque in terms of ownership and rights.

Outdated Terminology: For the migrant, maintaining ancestral land turns into a logistical nightmare. One generation works far from the village. Another generation inherits documents that are misfiled, shared in portions, or written in outdated terminology. The physical proximity needed to manage, survey, or regularize land never existed. Resolving disputes requires frequent travel, money, and time; commodities that migrants seldom have in abundance. Many have to rely on agents, acquaintances, or intermediaries whose motivations may not align with the family’s best interests. Land in rural India is not just property. It is emotional capital. Sealing that emotional asset into a functional financial asset has always been difficult. Land markets, unlike digital or paper assets, are illiquid. They are slow to transact. They require physical verification and countless checks. Even today, buying or selling a property often feels more complicated than trading shares or digital currencies. The friction lies not only in legal systems, but in human systems: trust, documentation, accessibility, and interpretation.

Real estate has long been marketed as one of the “solid” investments, a benchmark of stability. But when markets aren’t transparent, and records aren’t cohesive, this belief becomes questionable. A land parcel without a clear title is not an asset, but a potential liability. The migrant who left the

village to improve life for the next generation often finds that the very piece of land meant to be safety becomes a source of worry instead.

A Game Changer: The “Land Aadhaar” plan in Delhi is not a silver bullet. It does not instantly resolve fractured documentation practices across states. It does not replace the need for legal reforms or timely adjudication. But it does signal a shift, that is, digital clarity over paper clutter, transparency over opacity, accessibility over exclusion. A unique identifier makes land records searchable, traceable, and easier to litigate or verify. This is the kind of structural change that can ease the burden on families who live far from their ancestral homes. My upcoming book, *The Fading Roots – Between Cities and Confusing Rural Lands*, examines exactly this tension; the push and pull between the mobility of modern life and the fixed identity of rural land. Throughout this narrative, one thread becomes clear—rootedness without clarity becomes a burden, not a blessing.

If future generations are to live with confidence about their inherited assets, India needs a nationwide approach to land records that combines modern technology, legal harmonisation, and inclusive access. The goal must be to let land serve its purpose—security, not stress. Land is memory. Clear records build confidence. Clarity creates choice. Modernisation of land documentation can turn confusion into possibility. Bliss On. (The writer is the founder of BlissMedia. Views are personal)

Talking Points

Narvijay Yadav



Mexico fears more violence after army kills leader of powerful Jalisco cartel

GUADALAJARA (MEXICO), Feb 23: Schools were cancelled in several Mexican states and local and foreign governments alike warned their citizens to stay inside, as widespread violence erupted following the army's killing of the powerful leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

Nemesio Ruben Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho" was the boss of one of the fastest-growing criminal networks in Mexico, notorious for trafficking fentanyl, methamphetamine and cocaine to the US and staging brazen attacks against government officials who challenged it.

He was killed during a shoot-out in his home state of Jalisco as the Mexican military attempted to capture him. Cartel members responded with violence across the country, blocking roads and setting fire to vehicles.

President Claudia Sheinbaum urged calm and authorities announced late Sunday they had cleared most of the more than 250 cartel roadblocks across 20 states.

The White House confirmed that the US provided intelligence support to the operation to capture the cartel leader and applauded Mexico's army for taking down a man who was one of the most wanted criminals in both countries.

Mexico hoped the death of the world's biggest fentanyl traffickers would ease Trump administration pressure to do more against the cartels, but many remained hunched down and on edge as they



waited to see the powerful cartel's reaction.

Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco state and Mexico's second-largest city, was almost completely shut down on Sunday as fearful residents stayed home.

Passengers arriving to the city's international airport Sunday night were told it was operating with limited personnel because of the burst of violence.

Jacinta Murcia, a 64-year-old nutrition products vendor, was among those nervously walking late Sunday night through the airport, where earlier in the day travellers sprinted and ducked behind chairs fearing violence. Most flights into the city were suspended on Sunday.

Murcia anxiously scrolled through news stories on social media showing the face of "El Mencho" and sent messages to her

children, who were tracking her location as she tried to travel across the city to her house after dark.

"My plan today leaving the airport is to see if there are any taxis, but I'm scared of everything. That there are blockades, that there's a curfew, that something could happen," she said. "I'm all alone."

Authorities in Jalisco, Michoacan and Guanajuato reported at least 14 other people killed Sunday, including seven National Guard troops.

Videos circulating on social media showed tourists in Puerto Vallarta walking on the beach with smoke rising in the distance.

In another part of the airport a group of elderly Mexicans gathered, discussing how to get home.

"We better all go together," one said. "Go with God."

David Mora, Mexico analyst for International Crisis Group, said the

capture and outburst of violence marks a point of inflection in Sheinbaum's push to crack down on cartels and relieve US pressures.

US President Donald Trump has demanded Mexico do more to fight the smuggling of the often-deadly drug fentanyl, threatening to impose more tariffs or take unilateral military action if the country does not show results.

There were early signs that Mexico's efforts were well received by the United States.

US Amb Ron Johnson recognised the success of the Mexican armed forces and their sacrifice in a statement late Sunday. He added that "under the leadership of President Trump and President Sheinbaum, bilateral cooperation has reached unprecedented levels".

But it may also pave the way for more violence as rival criminal groups take advantage of the blow dealt to the CJNG, Mora said. "This might be a moment in which those other groups see that the cartel is weakened and want to seize the opportunity for them to expand control and to gain control over Cartel Jalisco in those states," he said.

"Ever since President Sheinbaum has been in power, the army has been way more confrontational, combative against criminal groups in Mexico," Mora said. "This is signalling to the US that if we keep cooperating, sharing intelligence, Mexico can do it, we don't need US troops on Mexican soil." (AP)

Pak claims to have killed at least 70 militants in strikes along Afghan border

KABUL, Feb 23: Pakistan's military killed at least 70 militants in strikes along the border with Afghanistan early Sunday, targeting what it described as hideouts of Pakistani militants it blamed for recent attacks inside the country, the deputy interior minister said. Kabul rejected the claim.

Tala Chaudhry, Pakistan's deputy interior minister, offered no evidence for his claim in an interview with Geo News that at least 70 militants were killed in the strikes. Pakistan's state-run media later reported that militant fatalities jumped to 80.

The Afghan Defense Ministry said in a statement that "various civilian areas" in the provinces of Nangarhar and Paktika in eastern Afghanistan were hit, including a religious madrasa and multiple homes. The statement called the strikes a violation of Afghanistan's airspace and sovereignty.

Afghan government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said on X the attacks "killed and wounded dozens, including women and children." He said Pakistan's claim of killing 70 militants was "inaccurate." Mawlawi Fazl Rahman Fayyaz, the provincial director of the Afghan Red Crescent Society in Nangarhar province, said 18 people were killed and several others wounded.

Pakistan's president renews warning

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari said late Sunday Islamabad's recent strikes along the Afghan border were "rooted in (Pakistan's) inherent right to de-



fect its people against terrorism," after repeated warnings to Kabul went unheeded.

Earlier this month, Zardari warned that the Taliban-led government has created conditions "similar to or worse than" those before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

In a statement, he said Pakistan had "exercised restraint" by striking only border hideouts but warned that those responsible for attacks inside Pakistan "will not remain beyond reach," stressing that protecting Pakistani citizens is "paramount and non-negotiable."

Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned Pakistan's ambassador to Kabul to protest the Pakistani strikes. In a statement, the ministry said protecting Afghanistan's territory is the Islamic Emirate's "Sharia responsibility" and warned that Pakistan would be responsible for the consequences of such attacks.

On Sunday, villagers cleared

rumble in Nangarhar following airstrikes, while mourners prepared for funerals of those killed. Habib Ullah, a local tribal elder, said those killed in the strikes were not militants. "They were poor people who suffered greatly. Those killed were neither (the) Taliban, nor military personnel, nor members of the former government. They lived simple village lives," he told The Associated Press.

Pakistan's Information Minister Attaullah Tarar wrote on X that the military conducted "intelligence-based, selective operations" against seven camps belonging to the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP, and its affiliates. He said an affiliate of the Islamic State group was also targeted.

Tarar said Pakistan "has always strived to maintain peace and stability in the region," but added that the safety and security of Pakistani citizens remained a top priority. (PTI)

EU diplomats to meet Board of Peace director over Gaza's future

BRUSSELS, Feb 23: The European Union's top diplomats are set to meet Monday with the director of the Board of Peace in Brussels after a shaky and controversial embrace of U.S. President Donald Trump's efforts to secure and rebuild the war-ravaged Gaza Strip.

Nikolay Mladenov, a former Bulgarian politician and U.N. diplomat chosen by Trump to manage the Board of Peace, will meet the EU's foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas and foreign ministers from across the 27-nation bloc. The EU diplomats are also expected to discuss the war in Ukraine and fresh sanctions on Russia.

Just across the Mediterranean Sea from the Middle East, the EU has deep links to Israel and the Palestinians. It now plays a crucial oversight role at the Rafah border crossing, and is the top donor to the Palestinian Authority.

The question of whether to work with the Trump-led board has split national capitals from Nicosia to Copenhagen. The EU is supportive of the United Nations' mandate in Gaza.

EU members Hungary and Bulgaria are full members of the board, as are EU candidate countries Turkey, Kosovo and Albania.

Twelve other EU nations sent observers to the inaugural meeting in Washington on Thursday: Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The EU flag was displayed at the event alongside EU observer and member nations. European leaders like French

President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen turned down invitation to join, as did Pope Leo XIV. But von der Leyen did send European Commissioner for the Mediterranean Dubravka Šuica to the meeting in Washington as an observer.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot said sending Šuica without consulting the European Council, the group of the bloc's leaders, broke EU regulations.

"The European Commission should never have attended the Board of Peace meeting in Washington," Barrot said in a post on X. "Beyond the legitimate political questions raised by the Board of Peace," the Commission must scrupulously respect European law and institutional balance in all circumstances."

"It is in the remit of the Commission to accept invitations," von der Leyen spokesperson Paula Pinho said Friday.

While the executive is not joining the board, it is seeking to influence reconstruction and peacekeeping in Gaza beyond being the top donor to the Palestinian Authority, she said.

Trump's ballooning ambitions for the board extend from governing and rebuilding Gaza as a futuristic metropolis to challenging the U.N. Security Council's role in solving conflicts. But they could be tempered by the realities of dealing with Gaza, where there has so far been limited progress in achieving the narrower aims of the ceasefire. (AP)

Kim reelected to top post of North Korea's ruling party as it hails his nuclear buildup

SEOUL, Feb 23: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was reelected to the top post of the ruling Workers' Party, with delegates crediting him for bolstering the country's nuclear arsenal and strengthening its regional standing, state media reported Monday. The report from the party congress, a major propaganda spectacle where Kim is expected to outline his political and military goals for the next five years, suggests he will double down on accelerating a nuclear arsenal already equipped with missiles capable of threatening Asian U.S. allies and the American mainland.

The party also released a new roster for its powerful Central Committee that confirmed a generational shift in Kim's leadership circle, with aging military chiefs and the 76-year-old head of Pyongyang's rubber-stamp parliament among dozens replaced in the 138-member body. The congress, which began

last Thursday, comes as Kim grows increasingly assertive in regional politics, following an aggressive expansion of his nuclear arsenal and closer ties with Russia forged through joint war efforts in Ukraine, which have deepened his standoffs with Washington and Seoul. Kim has also pursued stronger ties with China, traveling to Beijing last September and having his first summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in six years. Analysts say Kim will likely use the meeting to unveil new military goals, including strengthening conventional forces and integrating them with nuclear capabilities, while reemphasizing a campaign for economic "self-reliance" through mass mobilization, following gradual post-pandemic gains fueled by rebounding trade with China and arms exports to Russia.

Party credits Kim's leadership as a boost to national pride

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said Kim was reelected as the party's general secretary with the "unshakable will and unanimous desire" of thousands of delegates on the fourth day of meetings Sunday. Under party rules, the congress, which Kim has held every five years since 2016, elects the general secretary to serve as the party's top representative and leader. Kim, 42, has held the party's top post throughout his rule, though the title changed from first secretary to chairman at the congress in 2016 and then to general secretary at the congress in 2021.

The party said in a statement that by building up nuclear forces, Kim has created a military capable of handling "any threat of aggression" and "any form of war," and credited his leadership with "reliably guaranteeing" the country's future and "boosting the pride and self-esteem" of North Koreans. (AP)

China says assessing impact of US Supreme Court ruling on Trump's tariffs

BEIJING, Feb 23: China on Monday said it is conducting a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the US Supreme Court's ruling against global tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump under an emergency powers law. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce said it has noted the Supreme Court's decision declaring illegal the US government's imposition of tariffs on trading partners under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) and is evaluating its relevant content and implications. Beijing's reaction came ahead of Trump's planned visit to China from March 31 to April 2 for talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. On Sunday, US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said he did not expect the ruling to impact Washington's talks with China. "The purpose of this meeting with President Xi is not to fight about trade. It's to maintain stability, make sure that the Chinese are holding up their end of our deal and buying American agricultural products and Boeings and other things," Greer told ABC news. (AP)

EU diplomats scramble to overcome Hungary's threat to derail new sanctions on Russia

BRUSSELS, Feb 23: The European Union's latest sanctions package targeting Russia's shadow fleet and energy revenues is being blocked by Hungary, the bloc's top diplomat said on Monday.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said the bloc's 27 foreign ministers gathering in Brussels would likely not agree on the 20th package of sanctions, which it hoped to pass ahead of the fourth anniversary on Tuesday of Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine. "I think there is not going to be progress regarding this today," Kallas said before a regular meeting of the EU's foreign ministers in Brussels, where discussion of the 20th sanctions package was planned.

The meeting came after Hungary threatened over the weekend to block the EU sanctions plans and to obstruct a 90 billion euro loan for Ukraine until Russian oil deliveries to Hungary resume.



Russian oil shipments to Hungary and Slovakia have been interrupted since Jan. 27 after what Ukrainian officials say were Russian drone attacks that damaged the Druzhba pipeline, which carries Russian crude across Ukrainian territory and into Central Europe. That has led to rising tensions between Budapest and Kyiv.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban doubled down Monday on his unsubstantiated allegation that Ukraine

was deliberately holding back shipments of Russian oil, and accused Kyiv of seeking to topple his government.

In a post on social media, Orban referred to the oil supply disruptions as a "Ukrainian oil blockade" led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. "We have given President Zelenskyy firm and proportionate responses," Orban wrote. "He, too, must understand: by attacking Hungary, he can only lose." For the sanctions to pass,

the 27-nation bloc needs to reach a unanimous decision.

Kallas said that efforts would also continue on Monday to advance the EU's 90 billion euro loan to Ukraine.

Hungary's looming election hangs over EU talks

Facing a crucial election in less than two months, Orban has launched an aggressive anti-Ukraine campaign and accused the opposition Tisza party, which leads in most polls, of conspiring with the EU and Ukraine to install what he called Monday a "pro-Ukraine government aligned with Brussels and Kyiv."

Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said he believed Hungary's surprise announcement Sunday could really be about Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's fierce fight to hold onto power. "I would have expected a much greater feeling of solidarity from Hungary for Ukraine," he said in Brussels. (AP)

Gulf Arab countries back Kuwait in dispute with Iraq over their maritime border

BAGHDAD, Feb 23: A dispute between Iraq and Kuwait over their maritime border that reignited over the weekend has prompted Gulf Arab countries to side with Kuwait, putting Baghdad on the defensive on Monday over its demand.

The dispute came after Iraq recently submitted a map and geographic coordinates to the United Nations to delineate what it says are Iraqi areas in the Persian Gulf waters — some of which Kuwait claims infringe on its territory.

Although relations have improved between the two countries since the 2003 ouster of former Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein — who invaded Kuwait in 1990 — their maritime boundary has been a persistent cause of friction.

Kuwait's foreign ministry said Iraq's claim infringes on Kuwait's sovereignty by placing Kuwaiti areas, including the Fasht al-Qaid and Fasht al-Aj shoals, in Iraqi territory.

Kuwait's neighbours are now backing its stand, with Qatar, the United Emirates and Oman issuing statements in solidarity. Saudi Arabia said it has "serious concerns" about the Iraqi map, adding that it also encroaches on a joint Saudi-Kuwaiti zone. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said in a statement Monday that Kuwait had "deposited its maps with the United Nations in 2014, without consulting Iraq at the time." (AP)

आम-सुचना

मेसर्स जेके लक्ष्मी सीमेंट लिमिटेड, गौवा : न्यू उमरांगसो (19 किलो), तहरीगन : उमरांगसो, जिला : दीमा हसाओ, राज्य : असम को पर्यावरण और जलवायु परिवर्तन मंत्रालय, भारत सरकार (राज्य पर्यावरण प्रभाव मुल्यांकन प्राधिकरण (SEIAA) द्वारा जारी), असम एकीकृत सीमेंट प्लांट की उत्पादन क्षमता विलंकार (0.95 मिलियन TPA), सीमेंट (0.95 मिलियन TPA - OPC, PPC, PSC, कम्पोजिट सीमेंट, PLC और LC3) WHRS (6 MW) और D.G. सेट (2x500 KVA) के अनुसार पत्र संख्या SEAC/SEIAA.4283/2025 दिनांक 20.02.2026 के माध्यम से मंजूरी दी गई है। उपरोक्त मंजूरी से संबंधित जानकारी असम राज्य प्रदूषण नियंत्रण बोर्ड, गुवाहाटी को भेज दी गई है। इसे पर्यावरण, वन और जलवायु परिवर्तन मंत्रालय, भारत सरकार की वेबसाइट <http://parivesh.nic.in> पर भी देखा जा सकता है।

मेसर्स जेके लक्ष्मी सीमेंट लिमिटेड
न्यू उमरांगसो (किलो), दीमा हसाओ, असम

General Information

M/s JK Lakshmi Cement Limited, Village: New Umrangso (19 Kilo), Tehsil: Umrangso, District: Dima Hasao, State: Assam has been granted approval (issued by the State Environmental Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) for the Assam Integrated Cement Plant with production capacity of clinker (0.95 million TPA), cement (0.95 million TPA - OPC, PPC, PSC, composite cement, PLC and LC3), WHRS (6 MW) and D.G. Set (2 x 500 KVA) vide letter No. SEAC/SEIAA.4283/2025 dated 20.02.2026. Information regarding the above approval has been sent to the Assam State Pollution Control Board, Guwahati. It can also be viewed on the website of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, <http://parivesh.nic.in>.

M/s JK Lakshmi Cement Ltd.
New Umrangso (19 Kilo), Dima Hasao, Assam

Under-construction bridge segment collapses in Dima Hasao

No casualties reported



HT Correspondent

HAFLONG, Feb 23: A portion of an under-construction bridge under the Silchar-Saurashtra East-West Corridor project collapsed late Sunday night in Assam's Dima Hasao district, triggering concern over construction quality.

The incident occurred at Dalaising area, but no casualties or injuries have been reported.

According to sources, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) is executing four-laning work on the Harangajao-Jatinga stretch of the corridor, a key segment of the East-West connectivity project.

The 25-kilometre stretch has been entrusted to Gujarat-based Dinesh Chandra R Agrawal Infracon Private Limited.

The sudden structural failure during ongoing construction has raised questions about work standards, monitoring and safety mechanisms.

The project authorities had earlier targeted opening at least a two-lane carriageway by January 31, later revised to February 15, but the deadline was missed due to technical issues and incomplete flyovers.

The latest collapse has now created fresh uncertainty over the timeline of the long-delayed project, which has been under implementation for more than two decades.

Construction activities had recently intensified following directions to expedite completion, with work reportedly continuing round the clock.

Local observers have alleged that pressure to meet deadlines may have resulted in substandard execution, though officials said the exact cause will be known only after a detailed technical investigation. No formal statement had been issued by the concerned authorities at the time of filing this report.

Governor attends cleanliness drive under Seva Sankalp Saptah

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 23: Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya on Monday participated in a cleanliness drive at Latacil playground in the city as part of the ongoing Seva Sankalp Saptah, launched by Lok Bhavan on February 21.

The programme was held in the presence of Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) Mayor Mri-gen Sarania and other officials.

Addressing the gathering, the Governor lauded the efforts of the GMC, noting that Guwahati's rise to the 44th position in the national cleanliness rankings in 2025 from an earlier rank of 402 reflects a historic achievement.

He congratulated the Mayor, his team and sanitation workers, whose dedication he said played a crucial role in this transformation.

Highlighting the significance of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan,



Acharya said the mission goes beyond sanitation and serves as a foundation for nation-building. Drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on cleanliness and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiative to turn it into a mass movement since 2014, he said the campaign has united citizens across the country.

and disciplined service.

Referring to the Sanskrit saying "Shuchirbhatuh Shuchih Bhavet," Acharya stressed that true purity includes both external cleanliness and inner conduct.

He said a clean environment is essential for public health, environmental protection and a secure future for coming generations.

Calling upon the youth to lead by example, the Governor urged them to make cleanliness a way of life and pledge themselves to service, respect for labour and collective responsibility in building a clean, healthy and prosperous state. Commissioner and Secretary to the Governor SS Meenakshi Sundaram, GMC Commissioner Chinmay Prakash Phukan, Deputy Mayor Smita Roy, Chairman Bhupen Barua, Vice-Chairperson Ratna Singh, GMC officials, volunteers and youth were among those present at the event.

2 arrested in Sivasagar, pistol recovered during op

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, Feb 23: Acting on specific intelligence inputs, Sivasagar Police on Monday arrested two alleged drug peddlers during an operation at ASTC Tiniali and recovered a pistol from their possession, officials said.

According to police sources, the accused were intercepted while travelling in a Fortuner vehicle (registration number DL3CBD 7208).

The arrested individuals have been identified as Pallob Saikia alias Mun, a resident of Padumoni, Japisajia under Selenghat Police Station in Jorhat district, and Bharat Saikia of Jorhat.

Police said both accused are suspected to have been involved in drug trafficking activities for a long period.

Pallob Saikia, a retired Army jawan, was also allegedly linked to an inter-state pig transportation syndicate, officials added.

During the operation, a pistol was recovered from their possession.

BJP holds Sakti Kendra Sammelan, Mahila Morcha meet in Haflong

HT Correspondent
HAFLONG, Feb 23: In a bid to strengthen its grassroots organisational base in Dima Hasao district, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Monday organised its first Sakti Kendra Sammelan at Atal Bihari Vajpayee Bhawan in Haflong, followed by a Mahila Morcha interaction meeting, both drawing enthusiastic participation from party leaders and workers.

The Sakti Kendra Sammelan was attended by BJP Dima Hasao district president and MAC Dhriti Thaoson, district Vistarak Vinod Tiwari, DHAC Executive Member Donpoinon Thaoson, vice president Liton Chakrabarty, and general secretaries Kehungsamying Riame and Konjit Kemprai, along with mandal leaders, Shakti Kendra in-charges and party karyakartas. Addressing the gathering, Dhriti Thaoson emphasised that the party's success in hill districts depends on a strong booth-level network and urged workers to remain closely connected with people while ensuring effective delivery of government welfare schemes to last-mile beneficiaries.

Donpoinon Thaoson highlighted ongoing development initiatives in the district and called on cadres to act as a bridge between the administration and the public, stressing the importance of infrastructure growth, connectivity and social welfare implementation.

Vinod Tiwari spoke on organisational discipline and teamwork at the Sakti Kendra level, encouraging workers to intensify community engagement and maintain regular interaction with voters.

The convention focused on outreach strategies, local development priorities, infrastructure projects and flag-



ship schemes, with interactive sessions allowing participants to share field experiences and prepare future action plans. Later, the Mahila Morcha interaction meeting was held at the same venue, attended by district Mahila Morcha president Ripa Hojai, Vinod Tiwari, Liton Chakrabarty and Haflong mandal president Dilota Langthasa, along with women members from across the district. In her address, Ripa Hojai highlighted the vital role of women in organisational growth and social transformation, urging members to expand grassroots outreach and spread awareness about welfare schemes for women and families.

Speakers stressed unity, coordinated action and sustained public engagement, while participants reviewed ongoing activities and discussed future plans to strengthen the Mahila Morcha network.

Both programmes concluded with leaders and workers reaffirming their commitment to organisational expansion, women empowerment and overall development of Dima Hasao district.

BSS elects new executive committee for 2026-28 term

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, Feb 23: The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), the apex literary body of the Bodo community, has constituted its new executive committee for a three-year term from 2026 to 2028, with Gopinath Borgoyary elected as president.

The new office bearers were elected through ballot voting held at Udalguri on Sunday.

Borgoyary, hailing from Kokrajhar, secured victory in the presidential race by defeating his nearest rival Sitaram Basumatary of Baksa. Kamala Kanta Mushahary of Guwahati, Dr Premananda Mosahary of Karbi Anglong and Nilima Basumatary of Kokrajhar were elected as vice presidents, while Nilo Kanta Goyary of Udalguri was chosen as the general secretary.

The elected secretaries include Dr Pranab Jyoti Narzary (Sonitpur), Sahendra Nath Basumatary (Gosaigaon), Rajendra Basumatary (Salbari), Dilip Basumatary (Jonai) and Swrjila Wary (Dhemaji).

Lohit Chandra Brahma of Guwahati has been elected as the cashier. Meanwhile, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) felicitated the newly elected office bearers, extending congratulations and expressing hope that they would continue to strengthen the promotion of Bodo language, literature and culture.

DN Chakrabarty mourned in Morigaon

HT Correspondent
MORIGAON, Feb 23: The Morigaon District Journalists Association has expressed deep condolences over the passing away of veteran journalist and writer Dharendra Nath Chakrabarty, describing him as a prominent figure in Assam's newspaper and media fraternity.

In a statement, the scribe body said Chakrabarty was widely respected within the journalistic community for his contributions and long association with the field of journalism.

His guidance and valuable advice at various times had inspired many journalists and media workers in the district.

Class IX student from Itakhola goes missing

HT Correspondent
BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 23: A 16-year-old student from Itakhola in Biswanath district has been reported missing since February 19, raising concern among family members and local residents.

The missing boy has been identified as Derhasar Basumatary, son of Prabhin Basumatary and Anjali Basumatary, residents of No 1 Serfangin near the Assam-Arunachal border under the Itakhola outpost.

He is a Class IX student of Holy Kind English School and was appearing for his ongoing annual examinations.

According to family sources, Derhasar left home following a domestic conflict involving his mother and sister. Since then, he has remained untraceable despite extensive efforts by relatives to locate him.

After failing to find any leads, the family lodged a missing person complaint at the Itakhola police outpost on Sunday.

Police have initiated necessary steps to trace the minor. Anyone with information regarding the whereabouts of Derhasar Basumatary has been requested to contact the family at 8011026997 or 9365690661, or inform the Itakhola police immediately.

Renovation of Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha Bhavan launched

HT Correspondent
NAGAON, Feb 23: The renovation initiative of the Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha Bhavan was formally launched on Monday, with local MLA Rupak Sarma inaugurating the project.

Representing the Nagaon-Batadroba constituency, Sarma said the initiative is part of broader efforts to develop Nagaon district across multiple sectors.

He announced that the building's infrastructure will be upgraded comprehensively, including the installation of an air-conditioning system and overall modernisation.

The MLA also reiterated the government's vision to transform Nagaon into a major tourist hub.

He noted that the recently opened Shradhanjali Garden at Morikolong Beel is a key component of this plan, while other projects such as Dr Bhupen Hazarika Kalatirtha and Zubeen Garg Park are nearing completion and will soon be opened to the public.

Sarma further informed that beautification work of the Koolong river, which flows through the town, is currently underway as part of urban development initiatives.

Race heats up for BJP ticket in Margherita LAC

HT Correspondent
DIBRUGARH, Feb 23: Political activity is intensifying in the politically significant 83rd Margherita Legislative Assembly Constituency in Assam's Tinsukia district, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) preparing to finalise its candidate for the upcoming Assembly elections.

The constituency, considered a key battleground in Upper Assam, has drawn considerable attention as four aspirants have applied for the BJP ticket.

Among them is two-time sitting MLA Bhaskar Sharma, who has represented the constituency since 2016.

Sharma first entered the Assembly in 2016 after defeating former Congress heavyweight and four-time MLA Pradyut Bordoloi by a margin of 22,744 votes.

He strengthened his position in the 2021 elections, securing a second consecutive term with 86,640 votes, over 56.5 percent vote share and a massive victory margin.

Other aspirants seeking the party nomination include Khitish Debnath, Harish Suman Saikia and Anamika Rajbanshi, all of whom have submitted their applications to the party leadership.

However, according to feedback from local residents across the constituency, the overwhelming public sentiment appears to favour the incumbent MLA.

Many voters said they were largely unfa-

miliar with the other aspirants and expressed a preference for continuity in leadership.

Across various sections of society — including tea garden workers, traders, and urban residents — people credited Sharma with visible development works in the constituency over the past decade.

These include improvements in infrastructure, civic facilities and local amenities.

Women voters particularly highlighted the benefits of welfare schemes such as Urn-



odoi, Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan (MMUA), Chief Minister's Arogya Scheme, Nijut Maina Scheme, widow pensions and free ration distribution, stating that these initiatives have strengthened financial security and empowerment.

With the 2026 Assam Assembly elections approaching, the strong grassroots support for the sitting MLA underscores his political standing in the constituency.

However, the final decision on the BJP candidate is awaited, making Margherita a constituency to watch as the political climate in Assam gathers momentum.

2 retired principals join UPPL ahead of Assam Assembly polls

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, Feb 23: Amid intensifying political activity ahead of the forthcoming Assam Assembly elections, two retired college principals have joined the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), signalling a fresh boost to the party's organisational strength in the Bodoland region. Former principal of Kokrajhar Science College, Dr Ramananda Sinha, and retired principal of Bengol College in Chirang district, Dr Ranjit Narzary, formally joined the UPPL and were immediately appointed as Vice Presidents of the party.

After joining the party led by Pramod Boro, both leaders addressed the media and expressed their readiness to actively participate in the upcoming elections. They stated that they are willing to contest the Assembly polls if nominated by the party leadership. Dr Ranjit Narzary said he is prepared to contest from the Sidli Assembly constituency, while Dr Ramananda Sinha expressed his willingness to contest from the Baokhungri Assembly constituency.

Barchala Gorkha Jagaran Mancha hosts Ganganath Upadhyay Memorial Lecture

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, Feb 23: The Barchala Constituency Gorkha Jagaran Mancha organised a memorial lecture in honour of freedom fighter and social worker Ganganath Upadhyay at Dhira Majuli Community Hall on Sunday, focusing on the theme "The Dhekiajuli Episode of India's Freedom Movement: Martyrs and the Contribution of Freedom Fighters."

Delivering the keynote address, Dr Chandan Kumar Sarma of Tezpur University described the Dhekiajuli incident of September 20, 1942, as a rare and significant episode of the freedom movement that has not received adequate national recognition.

He said the stories of martyrs' sacrifices inspire patriotism and stressed the need for greater research, documentation and publicity to bring the historic event into the national discourse. Dr Sarma urged writers, researchers, journalists and students of Assam to undertake serious academic work on the episode and publish studies in multiple languages.

He also appealed to the public to cultivate reading habits and lauded the Gorkha Jagaran Mancha for organising the lecture to raise awareness.

The programme began with the lighting of the ceremonial lamp by Gop Bahadur Thapa, president of the Singari Regional

GODWINS School Band shines at National 'Music Ka Maha Yudh'

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 23: In a landmark achievement for the city's young music talent, the GODWINS School Band of Guwahati secured the 2nd Runner-Up position at Music Ka Maha Yudh – War of the Bands, Season 3, a prestigious national-level inter-school competition held on February 14, 2026, at the Netaji Indoor Stadium in Kolkata.

The grand musical event witnessed participation from more than 3,000 students representing over 300 schools from 10 states across India, making it one of the country's largest inter-school music platforms.

Competing against some of the finest young bands nationwide, the GODWINS School team delivered an electrifying, high-energy performance that impressed both judges and the audience.

The competition was further enhanced by the presence of celebrated playback singers Shaan and Kumar Sanu, whose association added prestige to the event.

For their achievement, the band members



were awarded a cash prize of ₹30,000, marking a proud milestone in the school's history.

Expressing his joy, school Principal Balaraj Sinha said he was immensely proud that the students got an opportunity to represent Assam on a national stage with passion and dedication and emerge as 2nd Runner-Up in the rock band competition.

Following their success, the band has reportedly received an invitation from T-Series to perform in Delhi on February 27.

However, school authorities indicated that participation may not be possible due to the students' upcoming board examinations, which remain their immediate priority.

NFR extends Holi Special train services

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 23: To manage the additional passenger rush during the upcoming Holi festival season and ensure hassle-free travel, the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has extended the services of four pairs of Holi Special trains during February-March 2026.

According to an official release, the services of train nos 07046/07047 (Secunderabad-Naharlagun-Secunderabad) and 03129/03130 (Kolkata Terminal-New Jalpaiguri-Kolkata Terminal) have been extended to operate one additional trip each in both directions.

Train nos. 09189/09190 (Mumbai Central-Katihar-Mumbai Central) will run six additional trips each way, while the weekly special train nos 04614/04613 (Amritsar-Katihar-Amritsar) will operate three additional trips in both directions.



Train no 07046 (Secunderabad-Naharlagun) weekly special has been extended to run on February 27, 2026, while its return service, train no 07047 (Naharlagun-Secunderabad), will run on March 2, 2026. Similarly, train no 03129 (Kolkata Terminal-New Jalpaiguri) weekly special will operate on February 28, 2026, and in the return direction, train no 03130 (New Jalpaiguri-Kolkata Terminal) will run on March 1, 2026.

till March 5, 2026, while train no 04613 (Katihar-Amritsar) will run every Friday from February 27 till March 7, 2026.

Railway officials stated that all these special trains will operate with their existing schedules, stoppages, timings and coach composition.

The extension of these train services is expected to significantly benefit waitlisted passengers on regular trains operating along these routes.

It will also improve connectivity between the Northeast and the Eastern and Northern regions of the country, facilitating smoother passenger movement during the festive period and supporting regional integration.

Passengers have been advised to verify the detailed timings and stoppages of these trains through the IRCTC website and official social media platforms of NFR before undertaking their journey.

India unveils its first counter-terrorism policy

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: The government on Monday unveiled the country's first counter-terrorism policy, "Prahaar", setting out a multi-layered strategy based on "zero tolerance", intelligence-led prevention and disruption of extremist violence that aims to deny terrorists, their financiers and supporters access to funds, weapons and safe havens.

The policy unveiled by the home ministry is based on seven key pillars to counter the terror threats emanating from India or abroad -- prevention, responses, aggregating internal capacities, human rights and "Rule of Law"-based processes, attenuating the conditions enabling terrorism including radicalisation, aligning and shaping the international efforts to counter terrorism and

recovery and resilience through a whole-of-society approach.

"There has been a history of sporadic instability in the immediate neighbourhood of India, which has often given rise to ungoverned spaces. Besides, a few countries in the region have sometimes used terrorism as an instrument of State policy," the document said, without naming Pakistan.

"Notwithstanding this, India does not link terrorism to any specific religion, ethnicity, nationality or civilisation. India has always denounced terrorism and its use by any actor for achieving any stated or unstated ends unambiguously and unequivocally," it added.

Stating that India has consistently stood by the

victims of terrorism and has been steadfast in its belief that there can be no justification whatsoever for violence in the world, the document said it is this principled approach that informs New Delhi's policy of "zero tolerance" against terrorism.

"India has since long been affected by sponsored terrorism from across the border, with jihadi terror outfits as well as their frontal organisations continuing to plan, coordinate, facilitate and execute terror attacks in India. India has been on the target of global terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which have been trying to incite violence in the country through sleeper cells," it said.

Operating from foreign soil, terrorists have hatched conspiracies to promote violence in India,

with handlers using latest technologies, including drones, to facilitate terror-related activities and attacks in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, the policy said.

"Increasingly, terrorist groups are engaging organised criminal networks for logistics and recruitment to execute and facilitate terror strikes in India. For propaganda, communication, funding and guiding terror attacks, these terror groups use social media platforms as well as 'instant messaging applications'," it added.

The policy lists out technological evolution, which offers terrorists a cloak of invisibility, making it difficult to penetrate their nefarious scheming or track their funds.

"Technological advancements like encryp-

tion, dark web, crypto wallets, etc. have allowed these groups to operate anonymously. Disrupting/intercepting terrorist efforts to access and use CBRNED (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, Explosive, Digital) material remains a challenge for Counter Terrorism (CT) agencies. The threat of state and non-state actors misusing drones and robotics for lethal purposes remains another area of concern, even as criminal hackers and nation states continue to target India through cyber-attacks," the document read.

It described India's approach in preventing and countering threats as "proactive" and "intelligence-guided", noting that the country faces risks across air, land and water. (PTI)

Pre-2018 land acquisition cases can't be reopened for grant of compensation with interest: SC

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: The Supreme Court on Monday orally observed that pre-2018 land acquisition cases cannot be reopened for the grant of compensation with interest to the farmers whose land had been acquired under the NHAI Act.

The observation was made by a special bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Ujjal Bhuyan while commencing the hearing in an open court of a plea of the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI), seeking a review of a 2019 verdict of the top court. The apex court, in 2019, held that the decision to grant compensation with interest to farmers whose land was acquired under the NHAI Act would apply retrospectively. The NHAI, represented by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, said the 2019 judgement imposed a huge financial burden (approximately ₹ 32,000 crore) and should only apply prospectively.

The bench had previously rejected this, noting that denying such benefits violated Article 14 (right to equality) of the Constitution. "What perhaps weighed with your lordship was that it was ₹ 100 crore," Mehta said, adding that in another judgement, the top court said that no disposed of cases will be reopened. "The cut-off date appears to be of 2008, provided claims were alive then. Pre-2018 matters cannot be reopened. Those matters which were pending in 2008 continue. If someone in the early 2020s filed an application saying they are entitled to parity on the basis of 2008, we can say yes as the solatium but not interest, like in land acquisition matters," the CJI observed.

The bench heard the brief arguments and asked the parties to file written submissions, if any, and listed the review plea for hearing after two weeks. On November 4 last year, the CJI-led bench had



agreed to hear in open court the plea of the NHAI seeking review of its verdict. The bench had issued a notice on the review plea and listed the matter for open court hearing on November 11, 2025.

The solicitor general had told the bench that the matter would have wide implications of around ₹ 32,000 crore, and not ₹ 100 crore

as was stated earlier in the petition.

On February 4, 2025, the top court, while rejecting NHAI's plea, had ruled that its 2019 decision allowing the grant of compensation and interest to farmers, whose land was acquired under the NHAI Act, would apply retrospectively. The NHAI had sought the applicability of its September 19, 2019 judg-

ment prospectively, consequently precluding the reopening of cases where land acquisition proceedings had already been completed and the determination of compensation attained finality.

The bench had said, "We find no merit in the contentions raised by the applicant, NHAI. We reaffirm the principles established in Tarsem Singh (2019 decision) regarding the beneficial nature of granting 'solatium' and 'interest' while emphasising the need to avoid creating unjust classifications lacking intelligible differentia. Consequently, we deem it appropriate to dismiss the present miscellaneous application."

The top court had said in its 2019 decision that Section 3J of the NHAI Act, by excluding the applicability of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and consequently denying solatium and interest for lands acquired under the NHAI Act, was violative of Article 14 of the Constitution. (PTI)

Former railway minister Mukul Roy dies at 71

KOLKATA, Feb 23: Former railway minister Mukul Roy, once regarded as West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's most trusted lieutenant and the TMC's principal strategist, died of cardiac arrest at a private hospital here early on Monday.

He was 71, and is survived by his son, Subhranshu Roy.

He breathed his last around 1.30 am at the hospital in Salt Lake, Subhranshu Roy said.

He had been suffering from multiple ailments and was in and out of the hospital over the past two years. Family members said he had also been diagnosed with dementia and had recently gone into a coma.

His body will be taken to his residence before the last rites are performed later in the day, they said.

A former Union minister and two-time Rajya Sabha member from West Bengal, Roy's four-decade-long political journey saw his stints in the Congress, TMC and the BJP. His political career began with the Youth Congress, before he joined hands with Banerjee when she broke away from the grand old party to form the Trinamool Congress in 1998. As a founding member, he quickly emerged as one of the key organisational pillars of the fledgling party and went on to serve as its general secretary. He was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 2006 and became the party's leader in the Upper House in 2009, turning into TMC's principal troubleshooter in Delhi. In the UPA-2 government, when the TMC was a constituent, Roy first served as Minister of State for Shipping before taking over as the railway minister in 2012.

In West Bengal's political circles, Roy earned a reputation as a backroom operator deft in organisational work. Following the TMC's historic victory in 2011 that ended 34 years of the Left Front rule, he played a significant role in

consolidating the party's hold in several districts, overseeing defections from the CPI(M) and the Congress, strengthening the new regime's political base.

However, his career was not without controversy. His name had surfaced in the Saradha chit fund case and the Narada sting operation. By 2017, relations between Roy and the TMC leadership had deteriorated. In November that year, he joined the BJP in a move that altered the state's political equations. Tasked with strengthening the BJP's organisation in West Bengal, Roy was credited by party leaders with helping engineer defections from the TMC and expanding the saffron party's base ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, in which the BJP won 18 of the state's 42 seats.

He was elected as a BJP MLA from the Krishnanagar Uttar constituency in the 2021 West Bengal assembly elections. Within months, however, he returned to the TMC, triggering legal and political wrangling. Subsequently, a court disqualified him as an MLA under the anti-defection law for switching parties after being elected on a BJP ticket.

Though he rejoined the TMC, Roy never regained the political centrality he once enjoyed. As his health declined, he gradually withdrew from active politics. Often described as the 'Chanakya' of West Bengal politics during his prime, Roy remained a pivotal figure in the state's turbulent political landscape -- a strategist who operated as comfortably in Delhi's power corridors as in the backrooms of Kolkata's party offices.

Leader of the opposition in the state assembly, Suwendu Adhikari, condoled Roy's death.

In an X post, he wrote, "Deeply disheartened to learn about the sad demise of senior politician, Shri Mukul Roy. (PTI)

Ajitdada was the 'best CM' Maharashtra never had: Fadnavis

MUMBAI, Feb 23: Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Monday led leaders cutting across party lines in paying tributes to the late Deputy CM Ajit Pawar on the first day of the Budget session of the state legislature, saying he was "the best CM the state never had".

Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde described the late NCP leader as an "elder brother" and said he, Fadnavis, and Pawar were like an "equilateral triangle," being close to each other.

On January 28, Deputy CM Pawar and four others died in a plane crash in Pune's Baramati town.

In a glowing tribute to Pawar in the assembly on the first day of the legislature's budget session, Fadnavis said the state has lost a towering leader and administrator.

Pawar's shocking demise has created a political vacuum that will never be filled, the CM said while hailing the NCP leader, whose party is a constituent of the ruling Maha Vikas Aghadi.

"Ajitdada (as Pawar was fondly called) and I share the same birthdate, but he was 11 years senior to me in age. He was my dada in the real sense," Fadnavis noted.

He said Ajit Pawar became deputy chief minister a record six times and had the capacity to lead the state.

"Ajitdada was the best CM Maharashtra never had," the senior BJP leader stated.

He said there is political arithmetic to various decisions, adding that destiny would have fulfilled his wish sometime.

"Ajitdada was always punctual, but this time his timing went wrong," Fadnavis said, referring to the plane crash last month.

He said Pawar was never a politically correct person. He always acted on what he said and was a straightforward person, Fadnavis noted. "Ajitdada was a leader who honoured the word he gave. In 2019, we decided to form a government together. But that didn't happen because his party's senior leadership decided to step back. Ajitdada stood by his word, and we took the oath together.

"But he discussed with me and then went back to his original party after the court order went against us," Fadnavis recalled, referring to the two-day government formed by Fadnavis in alliance with Pawar before the Maha Vikas Aghadi came to power.

Fadnavis also said Ajit Pawar was the best finance minister any CM could ask for. This year, he would have presented his 12th budget and next year, he would have broken Sheshrao Wankhede's record of presenting 13 budgets, he noted.

Pawar pushed through the Ladki Bahin scheme, which provides financial assistance to women, overruling the finance department's reservations about its impact on the state exchequer, the CM said. (PTI)

TMC, BJP pay tributes to Mukul Roy; Mamata, Suwendu mourn death of Bengal's 'Chanakya'

KOLKATA, Feb 23: Tributes poured in from all quarters of West Bengal's political spectrum on Monday for veteran leader Mukul Roy as both Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari mourned the death of the state politics' 'Chanakya'.

Roy, 71, died of cardiac arrest early on Monday at a private hospital in Salt Lake after a prolonged illness. His death concluded a five-decade-long political career during which he was part of the Congress, TMC and BJP, often being at the very centre of West Bengal's power struggles.

In an emotionally worded post

on X, Banerjee said she was "deeply shocked and grieved" at the sudden demise of her "long-time political colleague and co-fighter in many struggles".

"I am deeply shocked and grieved by the sudden news of the demise of veteran politician Mukul Roy. He was my long-time political colleague and a co-fighter in many political struggles. The news of his departure has left me heartbroken," she wrote. "He devoted himself to the party from its very inception. His acceptability across all levels of the organisation was unquestionable," she wrote, recalling how Roy had worked "pranpaat" (with utmost dedication) for

the TMC since its birth in 1998.

In a line that carried both candour and closure, the chief minister acknowledged the rupture in their relationship. Roy had "chosen a different path" at one stage, she said, but "returned again".

"His contribution to West Bengal's politics and his organisational skills will not be forgotten. The political fraternity, irrespective of party lines, will feel his absence," Banerjee added, urging his son Subhranshu Roy to "remain strong" and assuring him that "we are with you in this crisis".

Roy was a backroom strategist who expanded the party's footprint booth by booth, district by district.

Ex-BJP MP takes back blanket from Muslim woman after asking her religion in Tonk

JAIPUR, Feb 23: Former BJP MP Sukhbir Singh Jaunpuria kicked up a row during a blanket distribution event at Rajasthan's Tonk, when he allegedly took back a blanket given to a Muslim woman after asking her religion.

The Congress condemned his action, saying religious discrimination is a violation of constitutional rights. Several Congress leaders shared a video of the incident in which Jaunpuria is seen purportedly saying that those who abuse Prime Minister Narendra Modi have no right to take the blanket.

The incident took place at a temple premises in Kareda village of Niwai tehsil on Sunday afternoon, when the former MP had gone to invite people for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposed visit to Ajmer on February 28.

According to locals, blankets were initially handed out to women present at the event, but it was later taken back from a Muslim woman.

A video clip of the event shows Jaunpuria purportedly saying that those who abuse Prime Minister Narendra Modi have no right to take the blanket. He also said that the programme was his personal initiative and not

linked to any government scheme.

Meanwhile, a Youth Congress leader went to the village and distributed blankets to Muslim women, and accused the BJP of doing politics of division. Villagers, along with Congress workers, also held a protest on Monday.

Leader of Opposition in the Rajasthan Assembly, Tikaram Jolly, alleged discrimination and condemned the act. "A former MP asking a poor woman her religion and then taking back the blanket is highly condemnable," Jolly said.

Congress MP from Tonk-Sawai Madhopur Harish Chandra Meena said that the treatment meted out to Muslim women by the former MP was the result of a "disruptive" mindset that destroys the social fabric of this country.

"Giving blankets to poor and helpless women, then asking their names and taking them back based on their religion, this is a deeply shameful and inhumane act," he said.

"Politics is a medium of service, not of insult and discrimination. The public elects representatives so that they treat every class, every religion and every needy person equally, and not to mock anyone's poverty and helplessness," he added. (PTI)

Jharkhand civic polls: Nearly 51 pc voter turnout recorded in 48 ULBs till 3pm

RANCHI, Feb 23: Around 51 per cent of the 43 lakh odd voters exercised their franchise till 3 pm in the civic polls to 48 urban local bodies in Jharkhand on Monday, an election official said.

Voting, which commenced at 7 am, is underway amid tight security. "Voter turnout of 50.61 per cent was recorded till 3 pm. Polling is peaceful," State Election Commission (SEC) secretary Radhe Shyam Prasad said.

Seraikela Nagar Panchayat recorded the highest turnout of 63.20 per cent, while Ranchi Municipal Corporation registered the lowest at 34.16 per cent, followed by Dhanbad Municipal Corpo-

ration at 36.60 per cent.

Over 43 lakh voters are eligible to decide the fate of 6,000-plus candidates. Chief Minister Hemant Soren and his Kalpana Soren, an MLA from Gandey assembly constituency, exercised their franchise at a booth in St Paul Kuldeep High School in Ranchi's Harmu area.

"Civic poll is part of our democratic system where we elect our local representative. We have exercised our franchise and appeal to the people to use their rights to vote," Soren told reporters after casting his vote. Union Minister of State for Defence, Sanjay Seth, exercised his franchise at a booth in

Kaju Bagan area of Ranchi.

State Election Commissioner (SEC) Alka Tiwari exercised her franchise at ward number 40 in Ranchi and said polling is underway peacefully across the state.

Long queues of voters, especially women, were seen at most polling stations. However, in two major municipal corporation areas -- Ranchi and Dhanbad -- fewer electors had turned up to cast their votes. Chaos and minor clashes were reported from parts of the state. Supporters of two candidates clashed at a booth in Town police station area of Giridih district, which was brought under control by the police. (PTI)

OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT CHILD PROTECTION UNIT (DCPU) KARBI ANGLONG, DIPHU

Under Mission Vatsalya, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India

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Applications are hereby invited for engagement of Support Person under Section 39 of the POCSO Act, 2015, to assist child victims during investigation and trial processes.

Eligibility Criteria:

Post Graduate Degree in Social Work / Sociology / Psychology / Child Development;

OR

Graduate with minimum three (3) years of experience in child education, child development, or child protection issues.

As per Rule 5(6) of the POCSO Rules, 2020, eligible organizations actively engaged in the field of child rights or child protection may also apply. Officials associated with children's homes/shelter homes responsible for custody of children are also eligible to apply as Support Person.

Application Details:

Applications will be received during office hours from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

Applications will be accepted from the date of publication of this advertisement up to 10 (ten) days thereafter.

Applications should be submitted to the Office of the District Child Protection Officer, District Child Protection Unit, Rongkhelan, Beltola Road near Kidzee School, Diphu, Karbi Anglong.

Incomplete applications or applications received after the last date shall not be entertained.

Sd/-

i/c District Child Protection Officer
District Child Protection Unit
Karbi Anglong, Diphu

Meghalaya CM presents ₹ 32,023-cr state budget for FY'27, no new tax proposed

SHILLONG, Feb 23: Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma on Monday presented a ₹ 32,023-crore budget for the 2026-27 financial year, projecting a fiscal deficit of around 3.5 per cent of the gross state domestic product.

The chief minister, who also holds the finance portfolio, did not announce any new tax.

Presenting his ninth consecutive budget in the assembly, Sangma said the government aims to balance fiscal discipline with accelerated growth under its "Vision 2032" roadmap, targeting a three-fold expansion of the state's economy during what he described as the "Meghalayan Decade".

A new 1,000-day mission to tackle child malnutrition has been announced with an allocation of ₹ 127 crore, while ₹ 244 crore has been earmarked for nutrition programmes.

The budget estimates revenue receipts of ₹ 26,583 crore and capital receipts of ₹ 5,417 crore. Excluding borrowings of ₹ 5,379 crore, total receipts are pegged at ₹ 26,621 crore, Sangma told the assembly.

On the expenditure side, total spending has been projected at ₹ 32,023 crore, with revenue expenditure estimated at ₹ 21,812 crore and capital outlay at ₹ 10,211 crore. Capital expenditure crossed the ₹ 10,000-crore mark for the first time, he said. After excluding loan repayments of ₹ 2,731 crore, total effective expenditure is estimated at ₹ 29,293 crore, he said.

Sangma added that improved tax mobilisation, strategic use of centrally sponsored schemes and externally aided projects have enabled a sharp rise in capital expenditure.

Interest payments for the 2026-27 financial year are estimated at ₹ 1,540 crore, while pension liabilities are projected at ₹ 1,980 crore, the chief minister said.



Sangma said total transfers from the Centre are expected to rise to ₹ 21,229 crore, while the state's own tax revenue is projected to increase to ₹ 4,720 crore.

He said the fiscal deficit has been maintained within the permissible limit of 3.5 per cent, reflecting the government's emphasis on fiscal prudence while sustaining development spending.

Highlighting the economic performance of the state, the chief minister said Meghalaya is currently the country's second-fastest growing state with a real GDP growth rate of 9.66 per cent and has sustained nearly 10 per cent growth for three consecutive years.

Sangma said the state's GDP is projected to reach ₹ 76,320 crore in 2026-27, with a target of ₹ 85,000 crore by 2028 and ₹ 1.35 lakh crore by 2032.

Outlining the government's "Mission 10" strategy, the CM said agriculture and high-value horticulture remain key growth drivers, with an allocation of Rs 664 crore.

New prime hubs for value addition, expansion of strawberry cultivation and irrigation investments were among the major initiatives announced.

The animal husbandry and fish-

eries sectors will receive ₹ 247 crore and ₹ 130 crore, respectively, to strengthen rural livelihoods.

Tourism, arts and culture have been allocated ₹ 376 crore, a 57 per cent increase, with plans to develop global-scale destinations at Umiam, Sohra, Dawki-Shnongpdeng and Nokrek, Sangma said.

The government will also support 1,000 homestays under the Chief Minister's Meghalaya Homestay Mission.

Sports received a major push ahead of the 39th National Games to be hosted by Meghalaya in 2027.

Sangma proposed ₹ 844 crore for sports and youth affairs, including ₹ 210 crore for organising the Games and ₹ 400 crore for infrastructure such as the Mawkhanu Football Stadium and international-standard facilities at Umsawli.

Entrepreneurship and skilling initiatives will receive ₹ 241 crore, with new schemes under CM-Elevate covering green taxis, adventure tourism and agriculture infrastructure.

The state is also targeting overseas placements and village-level skill training to expand employment opportunities, Sangma said.

In the urban sector, ₹ 1,540 crore

has been allocated for projects, including New Shillong City, waste management, redevelopment works and expansion of administrative complexes.

Major connectivity projects will continue under the Meghalaya Logistics and Connectivity Improvement Project, with ₹ 1,982 crore earmarked for road infrastructure.

Sangma said the government remains committed to universal piped water supply, allocating ₹ 571 crore for major water schemes and ₹ 300 crore for Jal Jeevan Mission-related works.

The power sector will receive ₹ 1,123 crore to strengthen transmission networks and hydropower projects, while ₹ 149 crore has been allocated for IT and digital connectivity.

In the social sectors, the health department will receive ₹ 2,472 crore, with continued expansion of medical infrastructure, including Shillong Medical College and new maternal and child health facilities.

Education has been allocated ₹ 3,347 crore, including support for scholarships, infrastructure upgrades and a structured pay framework for fixed-pay teachers.

Housing initiatives will include completion of PMAY-Gramin targets and new affordable housing complexes in urban areas.

Sangma said the government will continue strengthening welfare programmes such as CM-CARE, FOCUS+ and SHG support, alongside a new Chief Minister's Model Village Scheme aimed at transforming rural economies.

"The gains of growth must reach every Meghalayan," Sangma said, adding that sustained public investment, improved service delivery through digital platforms, and community-led development will remain central to the state's strategy as it moves towards its "Vision 2032" goals. (PTI)

MSME sector crucial to India's growth, youth must become job creators: Khandu

ITANAGAR, Feb 23: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Monday underscored the pivotal role of the MSME sector in driving India's economic growth and called upon the youth to become job creators rather than job seekers.

Inaugurating a national-level mega awareness programme here, organised by the National Small Industries Corporation Ltd (NSIC) under the Union MSME ministry, in coordination with the state government, Khandu highlighted that the MSME sector currently supports over seven crore enterprises nationwide, benefiting more than 31 crore people.

He stressed the need to accelerate growth in the North East, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh.

The chief minister observed that since 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, several policy interventions have been introduced to strengthen the economy, including the establishment of the National SC-ST hub in 2016 to uplift Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Citing procurement policies, Khandu informed that 25 per cent of total government procurement is mandated from MSMEs, with 4 per cent reserved for SC/ST entrepreneurs and 3 per cent for women entrepreneurs, terming it a progressive step towards inclusive growth.

Referring to the Union Budget 2026, Khandu outlined the Centre's three-pronged strategy for MSMEs, focusing on equity support, risk capital access and liquidity enhancement.

The chief minister mentioned that ₹ 10,000 crore growth fund support for SMEs, ₹ 2,000 crore under the Self-Reliant India Fund for micro enterprises and over Rs 7 lakh crore liquidity support for the sector.

He also said professional institutions such as ICAL, ICSI and



ICMAI would design short-term modular courses to strengthen corporate and financial capabilities of MSMEs, especially in tier-II and tier-III towns.

The chief minister also virtually inaugurated the Entrepreneurship Development Institute at Jote, near here, which will provide structured training, mentoring and capacity-building support to startups and MSMEs.

Highlighting state initiatives, Khandu referred to the Arunachal Pradesh Entrepreneurship Development Programme launched in 2020 and the Arunachal Pradesh Innovation & Investment Park, which provides mentoring in collaboration with premier institutions and seed funding to startups.

He said that nearly 300 startups are currently operating in the state and that Arunachal Pradesh was recently recognised as one of the best-performing states in the Startup India ecosystem.

Under the Arunachal Pradesh Industrial Investment Policy 2025, the state is offering a power sub-

sidy of ₹ 2 per unit, 100 per cent exemption on stamp duty and registration fees, 50 per cent capital investment subsidy in government industrial areas, interest subsidies, GST reimbursement, transport and air freight subsidies, and export incentives to attract investors, Khandu said.

Encouraging youth to move beyond the conventional preference for government jobs, Khandu said opportunities in entrepreneurship are limitless, stressing that dedication, discipline and focus are essential for success.

The chief minister highlighted the state's potential in hydropower, mining, agriculture, horticulture and floriculture, noting that Arunachal Pradesh has over 600 varieties of orchids and urging entrepreneurs to tap into floriculture to reduce orchid imports.

Khandu also pointed to emerging export opportunities following recent trade agreements between India and major global partners and proposed organising similar awareness camps in eastern, central and western regions of the state to ensure wider outreach.

The event was co-chaired by state Industries Minister Nyato Dukam and Youth Affairs & Sports Minister Kento Jini. (PTI)

93 pc of biometric enrolment of Myanmar refugees completed in Mizoram: Minister



AIZAWL, Feb 23: The Mizoram government has nearly completed the biometric enrolment of refugees from Myanmar who have taken shelter across the state, Home Minister K Sapdanga informed the Assembly on Monday. The minister said that deputy commissioners are currently supervising the final phase of the process.

"Altogether, 93 per cent of the biometric enrolment for Myanmar refugees was completed as of February 5. We aim to complete the remaining work as quickly as possible," he said.

According to the minister, Mizoram currently hosts 38,059 people, including refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) from neighbouring Manipur.

He said the registration process, which involves collecting biometric and demographic details of asy-

lum seekers from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), is also underway and expected to be completed soon.

A senior official of the state home department said 13 per cent of over 2,300 Bangladeshi nationals have been enrolled to date.

Among foreign nationals sheltered in the state, Myanmar nationals form the bulk, with over 28,000 people staying across all 11 districts.

Asylum seekers from Bangladesh are lodged mainly in Lawngtlai and Serchhip districts, the official said.

Additionally, nearly 7,000 Kuki-Zo people from Manipur displaced by ethnic violence are also sheltered in the state, another official said. The enrolment drive for refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh began in late July last year through the 'Foreigners Ident-

ification Portal and Biometric Enrolment' system following a directive from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

The senior official said district authorities faced impediments such as technical glitches and weak or unavailable internet connectivity in remote villages, particularly in Lawngtlai district.

While it is easier to collect data from refugees living in relief camps, it is difficult to undertake the task of collection of those people residing with relatives or friends or in rented houses, he said.

"Although the number of Myanmar refugees keeps changing due to frequent in and out migration, we are trying our best to ensure that no refugee is left. We also hope to complete the process soon," the senior official told PTI.

Mizoram shares a 510-km long international border with Myanmar in the east and a 318-km stretch with Bangladesh in the west.

Myanmar nationals, mostly from Chin state, fled to Mizoram following a military coup in the neighbouring country in February 2021, while the asylum seekers belonging to ethnic Bawm tribe, one of the Mizo tribes, from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts came to the state after a military offensive against an ethnic insurgent group in 2022.

The Chin, Bawm and Zo-Kuki people share close ethnic ties with the Mizo people. (PTI)

Centre sanctioned ₹ 97 cr to transform Sairang into world-class rail station: Lalduhoma

AIZAWL, Feb 23: The central government has sanctioned ₹ 97 crore for the comprehensive upgrade of Sairang railway station, located 21 km from here, into a world-class facility, Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma said in the assembly on Monday.

Sairang, which serves the state capital, is a terminal station on the Bhaibari-Sairang railway line, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September last year.

Lalduhoma informed the House that the Ministry of Railways has formally approved the state's request for the "World Class" designation for the station.

This funding follows the recent integration of Mizoram's capital into the national railway grid and aims to modernise the station to meet international standards.

The chief minister said that the upgrade will involve significant structural changes, including both vertical and horizontal extensions of the existing station building, and development of new terminal buildings to accommodate increasing passenger traffic. Besides, extensive beautification of the station premises and surrounding areas will be required, he said.

According to the chief minister, a tender for the project has already been issued and opened, signalling an immediate start to the develop-



ment phase.

Beyond passenger amenities, the state government is pushing for Sairang to serve as a critical logistics hub.

Lalduhoma said that discussions are ongoing with Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw regarding the establishment of a large-scale warehouse in the station area.

"While land availability was initially cited as a challenge, a joint inspection is now scheduled following our repeated appeals. If the land is successfully secured, we intend to construct a major warehouse facility to support regional trade and local entrepreneurs," he said.

The development came close on the heels of the inauguration of the Sairang-Silchar rail service earlier this month.

The inauguration of the 51.38 km stretch of the Bhaibari-Sairang railway line brought the northeastern state within the country's railway map. (PTI)

Four arrested in Arunachal after drugs seized from their possession

ITANAGAR, Feb 23: Four people, including a police head constable, have been arrested in Arunachal Pradesh after drugs were seized from their possession, officials said.

Heroin worth over ₹ 50,000 was seized from the possession of two persons in Banderedewa on Sunday, officials said.

A case under the NDPS Act has been registered, and both accused have been arrested, they added.

Acting on a tip-off, a police team raided the residence of head constable Ronald Leya in Aalo in West Siang district on Sunday and seized 6.44 gm of cannabis (ganja) worth around ₹ 12,000, officials said.

The head constable has been arrested, and an investigation launched under the NDPS Act.

A police team raided the residence of a person in West Siang district and seized 12.26 gm of heroin worth ₹ 77,000, they said.

A case has been registered under the NDPS Act, they added. (PTI)

Meghalaya generated 3.66 lakh jobs between 2019-2025: CM

SHILLONG, Feb 23: Meghalaya has generated an estimated 3.66 lakh jobs between 2019 and 2025, Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma told the Assembly on Monday.

Replying to the debate on the Governor's Address, Sangma said agriculture accounted for the largest share with 1.90 lakh jobs, driven by initiatives such as floriculture (789), mushroom cultivation (4,078), fruit development (12,714), organic farming (47,927) and the Lakadong mission (15,333).

"Every district has benefited," the chief minister said, highlighting organic farming employment in West Garo Hills (5,279), Ribhoi (4,301) and East Khasi Hills (4,728). The hospitality sector added 12,683 jobs, transport 9,835 and manufacturing and recycling 24,926, he said, citing a KLEMS-based employment assessment prepared using Reserve Bank of India methodology.

A KLEMS-based employment assessment is an analytical framework that estimates employment trends by evaluating labour input within the broader context of production factors: Capital (Capital), Labour, Energy, Materials, and Services (KLEMS). It is primarily used to measure industry-level productivity and economic growth by analysing how efficiently these inputs are used to produce goods and services, with employment figures (number of workers) serving as a key input into this modelling framework.

State flagship schemes have also expanded livelihood opportunities, with about 10,000 people supported under YES Meghalaya, 11,050 under Aqua Mission, nearly 1.7 lakh under CM-CARE and 9,000 under PRIME, touching "close to 8 lakh" beneficiaries overall, Sangma added.

"It is difficult to satisfy everybody, but we are trying," he said. On wages, the chief minister said Meghalaya's minimum wage of ₹ 525 is the country's second-

highest after Karnataka's ₹ 581 and the highest in the northeast.

"This reflects the intention of the government to support in the most possible way the poorest of the poor," he said.

Sangma further claimed that Meghalaya is now the country's second-fastest growing economy with a 9.66 per cent real GDP growth rate, behind Tamil Nadu's 11.91 per cent, adding that the state has maintained an average growth of around 10 per cent over the past three years. The government is targeting a GDP of ₹ 85,000 crore, or roughly a \$10 billion economy.

He acknowledged that per capita GDP remains low but said Meghalaya has moved from 28th position in 2019 to 26th currently, attributing slower gains partly to a population growth rate of 0.95 per cent. "Per capita GDP growth for Meghalaya, we are ranked number five in the country between 2019-2025," he said, adding that overall living standards have improved compared to 2018.

Highlighting policy initiatives, Sangma said the state has adopted a state anthem and symbols after 50 years, revived legacy projects such as the Croborough Hotel and taken up construction of a new Assembly building, linking these developments to broader economic momentum measured under the RBI labour-energy-services framework. On support for local contractors, he said while large tenders follow central guidelines, smaller works are being directed to local operators, with spending rising from ₹ 454 crore in 2019 to ₹ 1,286 crore at present.

"A three-time jump to ensure small-time contractors are able to take care of their livelihood," he said. The chief minister also announced that the government plans to build houses for families too poor to buy land, saying the move aims to ensure "the poorest of the poor are not left behind," particularly as major infrastructure projects reshape Shillong. (PTI)

Manipur CM meets Nitin Nabin, discusses party affairs in state

IMPHAL, Feb 23: Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh on Monday met BJP president Nitin Nabin in New Delhi and discussed about strengthening the party in the ethnic violence-affected state.

Singh was accompanied by two deputy chief ministers Losii Dikho and Nemcha Kipgen, leaders of the Naga People's Front (NPF) and the BJP, respectively, according to an official statement released here.

During the meeting, the leaders discussed matters relating to strengthening the party's state unit.

Nabin also asked the CM to speed up the state government's effort on the resettlement of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and assured him of all help from the party's side in this effort, the statement said.

Singh, a BJP MLA, was sworn in as the chief minister on February 4. Manipur was under the President's Rule on February 13 last year, days after the resignation of CM N Biren Singh in the wake of the ethnic violence. (PTI)

Lakshmipriya's BAFTA win a moment of immense pride for entire nation: Manipur CM

IMPHAL, Feb 23: Chief Minister Y Khemchand Singh on Monday said director Lakshmipriya Devi's film 'Boong', which won the best children and family film category at the 79th BAFTA awards, is a moment of immense pride not only for Manipur but for the entire nation.

Singh extended his heartiest congratulations to Lakshmipriya Devi on her remarkable achievement at the British Academy of Film & Television Awards (BAFTA) 2026.

"Smt Lakshmipriya Devi's victory at the 79th BAFTA 2026 exemplifies her commitment to impactful filmmaking, with 'Boong' claiming the top honour in the best children & family film category, bringing accolades to Manipur and India," the CM said in a post on Facebook.

Singh said Lakshmipriya Devi has consistently brought laurels through her outstanding work in cinema, and this latest honour fur-



ther elevates the stature of Manipuri art and culture on the global stage. "On behalf of the people of Manipur, I extend my heartfelt appreciation and best wishes for her continued success. May she keep inspiring generations and bringing greater pride and glory to our

state," he added. Quirky Manipuri coming-of-age comedy-drama 'Boong', produced by Farhan Akhtar's Excel Entertainment, won the prestigious BAFTA Award for Best Children's & Family Film in London on Sunday.

Lakshmipriya Devi made an

emotional plea for peace in her acceptance speech after receiving the coveted trophy from Paddington Bear, the lead character starring in the West End show 'Paddington The Musical'. She was joined on stage by producers Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani and the assistant director of 'Boong', Rahul Sharda.

"The walk up till here felt like the last few steps to reach a summit of a mountain we never knew we were climbing in the first place," said Devi.

"Just want to use this opportunity to say that we pray for peace to return to Manipur, we pray that all the internally displaced children, including the child actors in the film, regain their joy, their innocence and their dream once again. "We pray that no conflict is ever formidable enough to destroy the one superpower that all of us have as human beings, that is forgiveness. So, thank you BAFTA for giving us not only an award but this stage to express our hope," she said. (PTI)

What we always celebrate is the language of cinema: Alia Bhatt at BAFTA Awards

SHAHID KAPOOR-STARRER 'O'ROMEO' EARNS RS 100.10 CRORE AT BOX OFFICE



“ O’Romeo”, featuring Shahid Kapoor and Triptii Dimri in the lead roles, has earned over Rs 100 crore at the worldwide box office.

The film, which also stars Avinash Tiwary, Tamannaah Bhatia, Disha Patani and Vikrant Massey in pivotal roles, released on February 13. It is produced by Sajid Nadiadwala under Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment.

The makers shared the box office numbers with a post on X handle, which featured the film’s poster. The total collection of the film stands at Rs 100.10 crore at the worldwide box office. At the domestic box office, the film has earned Rs 76.60 crore gross and Rs 23.50 crore overseas.

O’Romeo Box Office Collection Till Day 11 According to Sacnilk, O’Romeo performed reasonably over its first ten days, collecting an estimated Rs 55.80 crore net in India. On its eleventh day, the film added approximately Rs 0.24 crore to its tally, taking the total India net collection to around Rs 56.04 crore.

O’Romeo Occupancy Report for Day 11 and Day 10

On its eleventh day, Monday, February 23, 2026, O’Romeo recorded an overall Hindi occupancy of 5.80 percent, with morning shows reflecting similar turnout levels. In compari-

son, the film fared better on its tenth day, Sunday, February 22, 2026, registering an overall Hindi occupancy of 13.15 percent. The Sunday performance showed higher engagement during afternoon and evening shows, while night shows witnessed a moderate response.

Ensemble Cast and Storyline Details
Alongside Shahid Kapoor and Triptii Dimri, O’Romeo features a strong ensemble cast including Vikrant Massey, Tamannaah Bhatia, Avinash Tiwary, Disha Patani, Farida Jalal, and Nana Patekar. The film is written and directed by Vishal Bhardwaj and draws inspiration from Hussain Zaidi’s book Mafia Queens of Mumbai.

Plot Overview and Theatrical Release Date
Set against the dark backdrop of Mumbai’s underworld, the narrative follows gangster Haseen Ustara, played by Shahid Kapoor, who is forced into exile after killing a don’s brother. His life takes another turn when he becomes entangled with Afsha Qureshi, also known as Rani Sharma, portrayed by Triptii Dimri. The film explores love, violence and emotional conflict while blending crime and romance. O’Romeo hit theatres on February 13 and continues its run with modest expectations going forward. (PTI)



Actor Alia Bhatt, who made her debut as a presenter at the 79th edition of the BAFTA Awards, surprised fans by starting her speech in Hindi to make a point about the universal nature of cinematic language.

Bhatt presented the Best Film not in English Language category BAFTA to Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier for his film “Sentimental Value” at the ceremony on Sunday.

“Namaskar! Agla award ek aisi film ke liye hai, jo angrezi mein nahi hai,” Bhatt said. “Don’t reach for the subtitles just yet. I was only saying in Hindi that the next award is for a film not in the English language. Because while film speaks in countless voices, what we always celebrate is the language of cinema. And that one we all speak fluently. And the incredible nominees are,” she added.

Bhatt then opened the envelope to reveal the winner. “Sentimental Value”, which is also nominated in multiple categories at Oscars, was the first Norwegian film to win at BAFTA.

“We live in a time when images are thrown at us at the rapid speed we could imagine. A

yet. I was only saying in Hindi that the next award is for a film not in the English language. Because while film speaks in countless voices, what we always celebrate is the language of cinema. And that one we all speak fluently. And the incredible nominees are,” she further added. The actor opted for a custom silver Gucci dress and complemented it with a white stole.

Bhatt was among a star-studded lineup of celebrities as presenters, which included the names of Alicia Vikander, Bryan Cranston, Cillian Murphy, Delroy Lindo, Emily Watson, Ethan Hawke, Gillian Anderson, Glenn Close, Hannah Waddingham, Monica Bellucci, Rege-Jean Page, Riz Ahmed, and Stellan Skargard, among others. (PTI)

lot of these images are seen on our phones and a lot of these images are trying to sell us the ideas, things, ideology and they are seeking us out to try to use the moving image for that. I feel that the films this year are the films that are made for deep viewing, for humanist viewing where we can sit together in rooms like this and experience to see the other, hopefully, through empathy, curiosity and open up the possibility of the theatrical experience for that,” Trier said while accepting the award.

Bhatt was among a star-studded lineup of celebrities as presenters, which included the names of Alicia Vikander, Bryan Cranston, Cillian Murphy, Delroy Lindo, Emily Watson, Ethan Hawke, Gillian Anderson, Glenn Close, Hannah Waddingham, Monica Bellucci, Rege-Jean Page, Riz Ahmed, and Stellan Skargard, among others. (PTI)

Alia Bhatt turns presenter at BAFTA Awards, begins speech in Hindi

AMITABH BACHCHAN ROPED IN TO PROMOTE SKILL INDIA DIGITAL HUB

Legendary actor Amitabh Bachchan has been roped in to promote the Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH) as part of a new nationwide campaign to increase its outreach, the government said on Sunday.

The campaign “Badhna Hai Toh Yahan Judna Hai” to accelerate India’s Digital Skilling Movement through SIDH was launched by the Minister for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Jayant Chaudhary on the sidelines of the just-concluded AI Impact Summit.

“As part of its nationwide outreach, the campaign brings on board legendary actor Amitabh Bachchan, whose enduring popularity and wide public appeal are expected to

further strengthen awareness and participation in Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH), India’s integrated digital platform for skilling, employment, and lifelong learning,” a statement said.

The campaign aims to further expand access to SIDH, which has already onboarded more than 1.5 crore registered candidates, emerging as one of the country’s largest unified digital skilling platforms.

As India moves rapidly towards a Viksit Bharat and navigates the transformative impact of artificial intelligence, automation, and digital innovation, SIDH is positioned as the central engine enabling citizens to upskill, reskill, and future-proof their careers.

Speaking at the launch, Chaudhary said, “SIDH exemplifies how digital public infrastructure can power lifelong learning and create real economic opportunity, especially in an era defined by AI and automation. Through ‘Badhna Hai Toh Yahan Judna Hai’ campaign, we are inviting every Indian to connect with this ecosystem and take the next step in their growth journey.”

SIDH is operated by the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) under the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship. (PTI)



Anupam Kher wishes ‘friend, favourite director’ Sooraj Barjatya on his birthday

Actor Anupam Kher congratulated filmmaker and his friend Sooraj Barjatya on his 62nd birthday in a lengthy note on social media and said his films are filled with “values, relationships, faith, and goodness”.

Kher recalled meeting the filmmaker at the sets of “Saaransh”, where he served as an assistant director to Mahesh Bhatt. The “Khosla Ka Ghosla” actor shared a post alongside the filmmaker on his Instagram handle on Sunday.

“Happy Birthday, dearest Sooraj Barjatya. In your own quiet, dignified way, you are truly a national treasure. The kind of films you choose to make - filled with values, relationships, faith, and goodness - very few even dare to attempt today. From the days of #Saaransh to the film you are making now, I have had the privilege of watching your journey up close. And what a journey it has been - consistent, graceful, and rooted in conviction,” Kher wrote in the caption.

“In an industry that constantly changes itself, you have remained steadfast in your belief that goodness works. And that belief has touched millions of hearts. Thank you for being my friend.

Thank you for being one of my favourite directors. And thank you for reminding us that cinema can still be pure. #HappyBirthDaySooraj,” he added.

Kher featured in several projects directed by Barjatya, including “Hum Aapke Hain Koun” in 1994, “Vivah” in 2006, and “Uunchai”, which released in 2022. (PTI)

FARHAN AKHTAR-BACKED MANIPURI FILM ‘BOONG’ WINS BAFTA AWARD IN LONDON



In what is being seen as a proud moment for Indian cinema, Farhan Akhtar-backed Boong has won the Best Children’s & Family Film award at the British Academy Film Awards. The Manipuri-language film managed to outshine major international contenders, including Hollywood’s big commercial successes like Zootopia 2 and Lilo & Stitch.

The ceremony took place on February 22, 2026, at the Royal Festival Hall in London and was hosted by Alan Cumming. The award in the Children’s & Family Film category was presented in a special moment on stage by Paddington Bear, who said, “I am the first-ever bear to present an award, and also the first presenter to get marmalade over a BAFTA.”

Boong was nominated alongside three other films in the same category — the French

animated feature Arco, Lilo & Stitch, and Zootopia 2. The latter, in particular, has been a massive box office success worldwide. Industry reports note that Zootopia 2 crossed the \$1 billion mark and went on to collect over \$1.8 billion globally, becoming one of the highest-grossing animated films in history.

Despite the scale and commercial pull of these titles, the jury chose Boong, a rooted and emotionally driven story from Manipur. The win is being viewed as a significant recognition for regional Indian cinema on a global platform.

Reacting earlier to its nomination when the nods were announced in January, the film’s production house had said in a statement, “Boong is extremely honoured and grateful to be nominated in the BAFTA Children’s & Family category.”

Directed by Lakshmi Priya

Devi and produced by Farhan Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani under Excel Entertainment along with Chalkboard Entertainment and Suitable Pictures, Boong tells the story of a young boy growing up amid social and political tensions in Manipur.

The film follows Brojendro, also called Boong, played by Gugun Kippen. He lives with his single mother Mandakini, portrayed by Bala Hijam, after his father Joykumar disappears without explanation. Believing that bringing his father back would be the greatest gift for his mother, the young boy sets out on a journey with his friend to search for him. Parts of the journey take him towards the border town of Moreh and even across into Myanmar.

Set against racial tension and uncertainty in the region, the film captures childhood innocence while showing the strain

conflict can put on families. The title “Boong” itself means “little boy” in Manipuri.

Before its BAFTA win, the film had already drawn attention at global festivals. It premiered at the 2024 edition of the Toronto International Film Festival and was later showcased as a Spotlight Film at the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne 2025. Director Lakshmi Priya Devi has also been recognised earlier for her work, including winning Best Director at the Bulbul Children’s International Film Festival in Goa.

The cast includes Vikram Kochhar, Angom Sanatombam, Nemetiya Ngangbam, Jenny Khurai, Hamom Sadananda, Thoudam Brajabidhu and Modhubala Thoudam in key roles.

Farhan Akhtar attended the ceremony with Shibani Akhtar, marking the occasion as a special one for the team. (Agencies)

Star-studded Karnataka hold all aces against gritty J&K

HUBBALLI, Feb 23: Jammu and Kashmir's entry into their maiden Ranji Trophy final is a heartwarming tale of grit and passion but to grab the title, the underdog side would need to pull off a giant-sized miracle against eight-time former champions Karnataka over the next five days, starting Tuesday.

The tag of favourites is attached to Karnataka not merely because of their rich legacy, but it is a well-earned one after a season in which they consistently rose above opponents, conditions and injuries to key players at various junctures.

Karnataka have dominated teams both at home and away after a stuttering start against Saurashtra at Rajkot, where they conceded a narrow first innings lead to lose points.

However, eternal nemesis Mumbai and tricky newcomers Uttarakhand were dealt away with confidence and ease, indicating the growing belief within the side.

Central to that dominance has been the form of their star batters -- KL Rahul, Karun Nair, Devdutt Padikkal, and Ravichandran Smaran.

Rahul (3 matches: 457 runs, Avg: 91.40), Karun (8 matches: 699 runs, Avg: 63.54), Devdutt (5 matches: 532

runs, Avg: 66.50), and Smaran (8 matches: 950 runs, Avg: 950) have fired on all cylinders through the season.

It has helped Karnataka overcome a middling season from Mayank Agarwal, who eventually stepped away from captaincy as Devdutt took over the team's reins.

To his credit, the left-hander has led well both with the bat and his tactically sharp mind.

This strong batting unit, however, will meet its match at the KSCA Stadium

RANJI TROPHY FINAL

here in a capable Jammu and Kashmir bowling attack, led by pacer Auqib Nabi. The team is at the biggest stage of India's domestic calendar for the first time since making its tournament debut 67 years ago.

Nabi has taken 55 wickets this season and has been the go-to bowler for J&K. The status would not change on a pitch here that is expected to give some assistance to quick bowlers at least initially.

However, limiting Karnataka's strength to their batting will be naive. They have a varied bowling attack led by India pacer Prasad Krishna.

The support cast of Vidwath Kaver-



appa, Vidyadhar Patil, Vysakh Vijaykumar, Shikhar Shetty and Mohsin Khan has done exceedingly well in various situations.

Shreyas stands tall
But one man stands head and shoulders above the rest — Shreyas Gopal. The leg-spinner has taken 46 wickets

and made 442 runs at an average of 45.7 — golden numbers for an all-rounder.

Shreyas has lifted Karnataka from the brink on more than one occasion this season and he will continue to be a key figure in the title clash as well.

"Shreyas has been very good this season as he has often supported frontline batsmen and bowlers and that has made Karnataka a stronger team in all conditions," former Karnataka skipper R Vinay Kumar had told PTI.

Big-match experience
Apart from their overall cricketing strength, Karnataka can also lean on their players' big-match temperament.

Rahul, Karun, Shreyas and Mayank were a part of the state team that did the Ranji Trophy double in 2013-14 and 2014-15.

The young tyros of then are now the senior statesmen. The quartet can give some sage advice to the younger colleagues on how to tackle the pressure points of a title clash.

Jammu and Kashmir, who have slayed fancied teams like Bengal and Madhya Pradesh en route to the final, do not have such a luxury but they have an experienced campaigner in Paras Dogra as captain.

The 41-year-old Dogra and head coach Ajay Sharma, veterans of many

battles, will have to soothe nerves in the dressing room as it gears up to take the final step forward and thwart Karnataka's designs for a ninth Ranji title.

Injury worries for J&K
Top-order batter Shubham Khajuria and left-arm spinner Vanshraj Sharma needed medical attention after the J&K cricketers suffered niggles during the training.

Khajuria seemed to have suffered a discomfort on the back, while Vanshraj appeared to have been struggling with his ankle and had to be stretchered out for medical attention.

The Teams :

Karnataka: Devdutt Padikkal (c), Mayank Agarwal, K.L. Rahul, Karun Nair, K.V. Anesh, R. Smaran, Shreyas Gopal, Krunthik Krishna, Vysakh Vijayakumar, Vidyadhar Patil, Vidwath Kaverappa, Prasad Krishna, Mohsin Khan, Shikhar Shetty, K.L. Shrijith.

Jammu and Kashmir: Paras Dogra (c), Abdul Samad, Shubham Khajuria, Qamran Iqbal, Abid Mushtaq, Vivrant Sharma, Rohit Sharma, Umran Malik, Yudhvir Singh, Auqib Nabi, Sunil Kumar, Lone Nasir, Mujtaba Yousof, Mufsaif Ajaz, Sahil Lotra, Vanshaj Sharma, Umar Nazir Mir, Kanhaiya Wadhawan, Yawer Hassan.

Match starts at 9.30 am. (PTI)

Devdutt banks on Karnataka batters' form in Ranji final against J&K



HUBBALLI (KARNATAKA), Feb 23: Skipper Devdutt Padikkal termed the excellent form of his top-order batters as a confidence booster ahead of Karnataka's Ranji Trophy final against Jammu and Kashmir, beginning here on Tuesday.

Apart from Devdutt, other frontline batters such as KL Rahul, Karun Nair and R Smaran are in fine fettle in this Ranji season, fuelling Karnataka's campaign.

"As a group, we're all ready and prepared for this opportunity and we have the experience and know-how to play big games. So, hopefully, our experience will come handy for us," Devdutt said on the eve of the Ranji Trophy final here on Monday.

"Apart from me, there are other international batters like KL Rahul, Mayank, Karun ... all are experienced and they have been batting well," he added.

The Karnataka batters showed their strength, scoring over 1000 runs across two innings against Uttarakhand in the semifinal in Lucknow.

Devdutt said such efforts will enhance the bowlers' confidence.

"Obviously, scoring over 1000 runs in a game is definitely a big confidence boost for everyone. Not just the batsmen, to be honest. Even the bowlers, knowing that the batting line-up is able to put on a show like that, it gives them a lot of confidence as well.

"It gives them that freedom to really enjoy themselves with the ball. It was a really good game for us in the second semifinal and it puts us in a good state to really take that momentum towards the final," he said.

On the other hand, Jammu and Kashmir do not have such pedigree batters or a glittering team history, but they compensate that with oodles of determination.

It was evident in their wins over more fancied teams like Bengal, and skipper Paras Dogra hoped for an encore.

"We're always keeping things very simple. We're not playing a very complicated game. Before coming to Karnataka, we played in Kalyani (vs Bengal) and Indore (vs Madhya Pradesh). We have won there.

"It's a confidence booster when we win against big teams at their home. We showed that we can do it, and we are enjoying each other's company, and hopefully, we can give a good account of ourselves in the final," said Dogra. But is there a bout of nerves ahead of their maiden Ranji Trophy final?

"No, everyone is enjoying it. They are relaxed. Obviously, it's a very big game. So, we're just trying to be very calm and composed. We'll stick to our basics, which have taken us this far. We have a good skill level and we have a good batting side as well," Dogra said. (PTI)

Bindra's tenure as IOC athletes commission vice chair ends

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: Indian shooting legend Abhinav Bindra on Monday announced the end of his eight-year tenure as vice chair of the International Olympic Committee's athletes commission, describing his stint as one of the most meaningful chapters of his sporting journey.

The 43-year-old Bindra, who became India's first individual Olympic gold-medallist in the 2008 Beijing Games, has been replaced by Kenyan rugby player Humphrey Kayange in the panel that was rejigged at the ongoing Winter Olympics in Italy.

"Serving athletes from across the world has been one of the most meaningful chapters of my journey in sport. To be entrusted with their voices, their concerns, their hopes and their dreams is a responsibility I have never taken lightly. "Every conversation, every decision, every moment at the table was guided by one simple belief that athletes must always remain at the centre of the Olympic Movement," Bindra posted on 'X'.

Describing his colleagues as extraordinary, Bindra said each one of them tried to strengthen athlete representation and ensure that their voice is heard and respected.

"I leave this role with deep pride in what we have built and with optimism for what lies ahead. The future of athlete representation is strong because it is driven by courageous, thoughtful and passionate individuals who believe in something larger than themselves," he said. (PTI)

IGPL secures USD 100 million franchise commitment, unveils team owners

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: The Indian Golf Premier League on Monday announced a USD 100 million capital commitment from 10 franchise partners across the country, with each investor pledging approximately USD 10 million over a 10-year period, signalling a long-term push to professionalise and expand the sport.

The IPL staged its inaugural pro tour last year, comprising 11 events played in a 54-hole, mixed-gender, no-cut format with a prize purse of Rs 1.5 crore per tournament. The tour included events in India, Dubai and Colombo.

The body had in July last year announced plans for a city-based franchise league, initially slated for a January-February window. While the event did not materialise as scheduled, IGPL on Monday confirmed the franchise ownership details for the upcoming edition.

The franchise rights have been awarded to Hyderabad (Phoenix), Mumbai (Atri), Kolkata (Flyingman Academy), Delhi (RVR Infra), Chennai (Vimtra Ventures), Visakhapatnam (Green Fuels), Goa (Auro Realty), Bengaluru (GolfKonnect), Punjab (Krishna Auto) and Gurugram (Honer Homes Consortium).

"This is not a traditional sports investment, it's a strategic platform for business amplification and nation-building through sports,"



Uttam Singh Mundy, CEO, IGPL said in a release.

"Our franchise partners come from Pharma, Infrastructure, Real Estate, and Venture Capital, and they see IGPL as a multi-decade opportunity to build a sports culture while leveraging the platform for their core businesses. The USD 100 million commitment reflects their conviction in our vision."

The IPL said the league format, tournament schedule, and player auction details will be announced in the coming weeks. Beyond league operations, the franchise partners have collectively committed USD 250 million towards infrastructure development, including plans to build compact eight to 10-acre golf facilities in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities and rural areas.

The IPL also released its 2026 calendar for the first leg of its tour, which will begin with the IGPL Invitational at Chandigarh Golf Club from March 11 to 13, followed by the IGPL Invitational Mauritius from April 9 to 11 at Heritage Golf Club, hosted by Leander Paes.

The tour will then move to Royal Johannesburg Golf Club in South Africa from April 15 to 17, before heading to Golf Club Lubumbashi in Congo from April 20 to 22.

Another IGPL Invitational is scheduled from May 27 to 29 at a venue yet to be announced, while the Bharath Classic 2026 will be staged from June 4 to 7, with the venue yet to be confirmed.

The IPL also outlined a global expansion roadmap, targeting a presence across India, Africa and

the Middle East in its inaugural year, with plans to operate in five countries within the next three to four years.

"We're not just creating a league we're building an ecosystem. From village courses to global tournaments, IGPL will make golf accessible, competitive, and commercially viable," Mundy said.

"Our three-continent launch strategy and infrastructure mandate position us as a transformative force in global golf, not just Indian golf."

Former India all-rounder Yuvraj Singh is co-founder and brand ambassador of the IGPL, which has the backing of the Sports Ministry, the Indian Golf Union, the Women's Golf Association of India and the Asian Tour.

Jeev Milkha Singh, Gaganjeet Bhullar, Jyoti Randhawa, Shiv Kapur, SSP Chavrasia and Gaurav Ghei are associated with the league as mentors, competitors and ambassadors.

Interestingly, the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI) has also launched its inaugural edition of '72 The League' with the first day of play scheduled for Tuesday at the ITC Classic Golf & Country Club in Gurugram.

The league, which will rotate across three premier Delhi-NCR courses, is a fast-paced match-play team format featuring singles, four-ball, and foursomes. (PTI)

Ten Doeschate terms move 'tactical', Kotak says player informed

AHMEDABAD, Feb 23: India's call to bench vice-captain Axar Patel in a high-stakes Super Eight clash against South Africa inevitably triggered murmurs about hierarchy and messaging within the group but assistant coach Ryan Ten Doeschate and batting coach Sitanshu Kotak asserted that the decision was born purely out of tactical compulsions.

India lost to South Africa by 76 runs, and a rusty Washington Sundar's complete flop show with both bat and ball and being put on the park at the expense of senior player Axar has raised questions whether only one man in the team management is taking all tactical calls, including the questionable ones.

"Yeah, we spent so much time deliberating about the eleven over the last couple of days. We were kind of looking at match-ups more in the middle. In hindsight it looks like the right decision (to play Axar), but at the time we felt we needed Rinku as an eighth batter. The decision was based around there," the straight-talking Ten Doeschate replied to a query from the PTI during the post-match press conference Sunday night.

He repeatedly stressed that the decision isn't a reflection of how Axar is perceived in the team or whether the vice-captain is dispensable. "It's certainly not to take anything away from Axar and his leadership and how important he is to the team," Ten Doeschate said.



Axar Axing

Batting coach Kotak informed that Axar was provided proper reasoning by head coach Gautam Gambhir and captain Suryakumar Yadav.

"Look, Surya and Gautam both spoke to Axar about the decision (to drop him). The reason to play Washy was that they had three left-handers in top five -- Quinton de Kock, Ryan Rickleton and David Miller -- and hence there was a feeling that an off-spinner (takes the ball way from left-hander) should play," Kotak said during a chat at ICC Mixed Zone.

"Now both De Kock and Rickleton were dismissed by Bumrah and hence Washy wasn't required to bowl more than two overs (in the game). The actual plan was to bowl Washy inside the Powerplay but that you know can change as per match situation," Kotak said.

Kotak was, however, emphatic in his denial that axing of a vice-captain in a marquee match isn't a vote of no-confidence by the team management. (PTI)

Rohit Majgul secures qualification for CWG and Asian Games



AHMEDABAD, Feb 23: Gujarat's Rohit Majgul (-66kg) has secured qualification for the Commonwealth Games and the Asian Games to be held later this year after impressive performances in the judo selection trials held in New Delhi.

In the best of the three final, Majgul took on Haryana's Garvit and their decisive bout went into golden score, where the Gujarat judoka executed an O Goshi to score a waza-ari and claim a victory.

Majgul, who is from a tribal village named Talala in Gir Somnath district, had remained unbeaten in the last two senior nationals. He has been training at the Vijayi Bharat Foundation in Godhavi for nearly four years.

"Qualifying for the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games is a dream come true for me. Every bout at the trials tested my limits, but I trusted my training and my coaches," Majgul said in a release.

"O Goshi" is a throwing technique in which the attacker loads the opponent onto the hip and rotates them forward to the mat, while "Waza-ari" is awarded when an opponent lands largely on their back. (PTI)

Twin Milan and Cortina Olympic cauldrons are extinguished, signaling the end of Winter Games

VERONA (ITALY), Feb 23: The Milan Cortina Olympics ended as the twin flames in co-host cities Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo were extinguished during a closing ceremony inside the ancient Verona Arena, roughly mid-distance between the far-flung mountain, valley and city venues that made these the most spread-out Winter Games ever.

In declaring the 2026 Games over, International Olympic Committee President Kirsty Coventry told local organizers that they "delivered a new kind of winter games and you set a new, very high standard for the future." The next Winter Games will be held in neighboring France, which received the Olympic flag in the official handover earlier in the ceremony. Following the same spread-out model, the 2030 Winter Games will stage events in the Alps and Nice, on the Mediterranean Sea, while speedskating will be held either in Italy or the Netherlands.

A total of 116 medal events were held in eight Olympic sports across 16 disciplines, including the debut of ski mountaineering this year, over the course of 17 days of competition. With the final events wrapping up just hours before the ceremony, the 50-kilo-

meter mass start men's and women's cross country medals were awarded by Coventry inside the Arena.

Host Italy won its highest Winter Olympic tally ever with 30 medals — 10 gold, six silver and 14 bronze, crushing the previous record of 20 set at the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994.

"Your outstanding performance united Italians everywhere and played a fundamental role in the success of the games," Giovanni Malagò, the president of the Milan Cortina Foundation told the Italian athletes sitting behind him wearing headbands emblazoned with 'Italia.'

The closing ceremony paid tribute to Italian dance and music — from lyric opera to Italian pop of the 20th century to the DJ beat of Gabry Ponte, who got the 1,500 athletes on their feet and dancing while color confetti exploded on stage. Italian Achille Lauro delivered the last word with the song "Incoscienti Giovani," or reckless young people, just before athletes who so aptly harnessed their youthful energy for these Games filed out.

The 2½-hour ceremony opened with a whimsical tribute to Italian lyric opera, with the stage director rousing not only the clos-



ing ceremony cast, including Achille Lauro, but also long-dormant opera characters tucked away in crates within the amphitheater's tunnels.

On stage, Madama Butterfly in a bright pink and green costume and Aida in golden tiers were unpacked from mirrored crates while 17th century musicians played the joyous "Libiamo ne' lieti calici" from La Traviata, a nod to the Arena's long history as the venue for a summer opera festival.

The opera characters, led by the jester

Rigoletto, spilled out into the piazza outside, mixing with the bemused athletes who were flag-bearers for their countries, some of whom pulled out their phones to film.

In a later sequence, internationally acclaimed ballet dancer Roberto Bolle made his first-ever aerial performance inside a blazing ring meant to represent the sun. He was lowered to the stage that mimicked the Venetian lagoon, replete with gondolas, where he danced to a haunting song by Italian singer Joan Thiele.

In a key moment, the Olympic flame en-

cased in a Venetian glass vessel was carried into the Arena by Italian gold medalists from the 1994 Lillehammer Games. The Olympic rings illuminated in white appeared high on the stone stairs behind the stage, flanked by national flags, when one raised the flame in the center of the stage.

This was the first Olympics for Coventry, a two-time Olympic champion in swimming, who watched much of the ceremony alongside Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

Some 12,000 spectators joined the athletes and officials for the closing ceremony, which was much more intimate affair than the opening ceremony starring Mariah Carey and Andrea Bocelli inside Milan's San Siro soccer stadium, attended by more than 60,000 people.

The Milan Cortina Games spanned an area of 22,000 square kilometers (8,500 square miles), from ice sports in Milan to biathlon in Anterselva on the Austrian border, snowboarding and men's downhill in Valtellina on the Swiss border, cross-country skiing in the Val di Fiemme north of Verona and women's downhill, curling and sliding sports in co-host Cortina d'Ampezzo. (AP)

'Got to take him down'

David Miller talks about Proteas plan that nullified Varun



AHMEDABAD, Feb 23: All it needed was a still mind, limited movement and strong intent, said South African big-hitter David Miller as he opened up about how his team successfully nullified Indian mystery spinner Varun Chakravarty in their T20 World Cup Super Eight clash here.

South Africa defeated the defending champions by 76 runs here on Sunday after posting a formidable 187/7. The in-form Chakravarty was expected to be India's trump card but on a wicket that didn't offer much assistance, he went for 47 runs in his four overs with both Miller (63 off 35 balls) and Dewald Brevis (45 off 29 balls) taking him to cleaners.

"I think it's just about really

making sure that we were on in terms of if he bowls a bad ball we got to put it away - so a little bit more intent and it wasn't spinning too much tonight, so you can kind of trust the line," Miller told reporters after the match.

"And once we felt that, then we felt, OK, we've got to take him down, because he is a threat to every team that he does play against. So it was definitely something that we did speak about," he explained.

This was the first big knock of the tournament for the 36-year-old and was dotted with seven fours and three maximums. Miller said it was all about sticking to basic preparations which have given him fair amount of success and the reputation of being a game-changer in all

these years.

"It's about making sure that you really stick to the simple things and the basics and do that really well. Like I said, my intent always has to be up, making sure that I have limited movements, when the ball is bowled, so I'm nice and still, my breathing, running hard, all those simple things.

"It's cliché, but it really does, in the heat of battle, those are the things that I clutch to."

Asked about the biggest take-away from the win last night, Miller found it tough to hide his glee at beating the team that is widely tipped to become the first to retain the trophy.

"India are beatable. India, as I mentioned, is an incredible team. But for us in a tournament like this, it's about making sure that we do the simple things and make sure that we stay in our lane as a player and do the job and get the job done," Miller said.

"We're a mature team. A lot of guys have played together and a lot of cricket for South Africa and that goes a long way under pressure. So I think it's just staying in your lane, making sure that you get the job done and keep wanting more."

When he began his career more than a decade ago, Miller was dubbed the classic T20 swashbuckler, the ideal finisher who could clear the ropes at a whim.

He understands that he could have probably achieved more in all these years but he also knows that cricket's shortest and most glitzy format punishes as much as it rewards risk-takers.

"It's taken a bit of time. I've been playing the game for a while now and it's about making sure that I really do stick to (the basics), when there's high-pressured moments in front of a big audience like tonight.

"...this is a game of risks and you are going to fail as a cricketer. So it's about making sure that you playing to your terms," Miller quipped. (PTI)

Indian team think-tank to discuss dropping at least one out of form batter, hint coaches



AHMEDABAD, Feb 23: The Indian team management may drop at least one among three out-of-form batters and revisit its one-dimensional template of playing too many left-handers in the top-order, indicated head coach Gautam Gambhir's understudies Ryan Ten Doeschate and Sitanshu Kotak.

South Africa thrashed India by 76 runs in a Super Eight clash of the T20 World Cup here on Sunday and with two must-win games left, the team management might have to revisit the performances of Abhishek Sharma (15 runs in four games) and Tilak Varma (107 runs in five games at Strike Rate of 118).

Not to forget, the designated finisher Rinku Singh's aggregate of 24 runs in 29 balls at a disastrous strike rate of 82.75 is embarrassing to say the least.

"If head coach and team management feels we need to do something different we will do things differently. Definitely a thought now comes if we have to change, what do we change and how do we change," batting coach Sitanshu Kotak didn't make bones about the fact that the team is indeed in a spot.

"Now we have reached a point where we need to think if we need to do something different or stick with same combination," Kotak said as a matter-of-fact.

Ten Doeschate was a bit more forthcoming when he admitted that it is indeed a "concern" that there are no back-up specialist batters in the squad and Sanju Samson, de-

spite his wretched form, might be back in the mix.

The logic could be bringing in a right hander to break the monotony.

"You stick with the guys who you feel have performed really well over the last 18 months and maybe shy of a few runs now? Or do we twist and bring Sanju, who's also a fantastic player and obviously helps tactically with having a right hander at the top of the order," Ten Doeschate also echoed Kotak's sentiments but with more definitive answer that changes could be on cards.

"I'm sure that (Samson's inclusion) will be a talking point over the next few days going into these two very important games (Zimbabwe and West Indies)."

Ten Doeschate feels that Rinku, coming in at Nos 7 or 8, hasn't really helped his cause as it has been an incredibly difficult position to bat on.

"Rinku, I think that number seven, eight position has become incredibly tough in T20 cricket. You look where he walked in against Namibia, he's had to turn down the single three or four times, so yes, it looks like he scored two or eight balls, whatever.

"And then he comes in in a pretty hopeless situation again tonight, and he's opted to go for the boundary and try to get us as close as we can, and on a wicket that holds a little bit, that can happen. So he hasn't had the best opportunities, but that's the nature of the position as well. And we're at the phase now where it's only perform-

Not in our hands but hope to play in The Hundred: Sahibzada Farhan



PALLEKELE, Feb 23: Pakistan opener Sahibzada Farhan on Monday side-stepped queries on the speculation that players of his country would be ignored by at least four Indian-owned franchises in the 'The Hundred' auction, saying that the matter is beyond their control.

Manchester Super Giants (RPSG Group), MI London (Reliance), Southern Brave (GMR) and Sunrisers Leeds (Sun Group) are linked to team owners in the IPL and according reports in the British media, all of them would avoid Pakistani players.

"See, it's not in our hands to decide who will pick us or not. That is not in our hands. Wherever we get a chance, who are interested can pick us and we are ready to play in that league," Farhan said ahead of his team's T20 World Cup Super Eight match against England here on Tuesday.

"And we are not interested to play with the people - the way you have spoken," said Farhan when asked about Pakistan players not being picked in franchise leagues around the world with strong IPL ties.

"I have a lot of hope, every player wants to play for every league, and The Hundred is one of the best leagues. So, hope for the best," he added.

As many as 67 male and female cricketers from Pakistan, including almost the entire men's T20 World Cup squad, have registered for The Hundred.

Several Pakistan players, including Mohammad Amir, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shadab Khan and Haris Rauf, have featured in tournament. (PTI)

Assam Project on Forest and Biodiversity Conservation Phase II

Healthier Ecosystem, Happier Communities

APFBC is empowering communities through awareness, training, microplanning, asset support and production clusters, while conserving Assam's forests and biodiversity

- ▶ 260 awareness sessions were conducted for information dissemination on JFMC/EDC rules and regulations
- ▶ 135 Phase-I and 125 Phase-II micro plans prioritising local development needs through participatory planning, have been validated and approved
- ▶ 484 technical skill training batches have been initiated in 27 market driven trades
- ▶ 6,592 individuals including 4,639 women and 1,953 men have been trained
- ▶ 125 Self Help Groups formed under the project
- ▶ 2,570 beneficiaries received benefits of different Government Schemes through Convergence
- ▶ Banashristi – a brand to market products created by forest fringe communities promoted
- ▶ 7 Banashristi outlets opened across Assam and available on e-market places like Amazon and Flipkart for better market linkage
- ▶ 8 Production Clusters are being established to achieve economies of scale and lower costs by utilizing shared resources, infrastructure, and services. The clusters are established at Guwahati, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, Dhansiri (Udalguri), Digboi, Tinsukia, Golaghat and Nagaon
- ▶ Assets to improve productivity, raw material and working capital provided to beneficiaries

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