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DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2026

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## More people feared trapped ● Identity of victims yet to be ascertained

# M'laya coal mine disaster: 18 bodies recovered

HT Correspondent

SHILLONG, Feb 5: At least 18 labourers were killed, and several others feared trapped following an explosion at an "illegal" coal mine in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills district on Thursday.

Confirming this, East Jaintia Hills district police chief Vikash Kumar said, "18 bodies have been recovered so far."

He said that one person was injured and referred to Shillong from Sutnga PHC.

Rescue teams have been engaged in search operations, he said, adding that the incident occurred in the Thangsku area in the morning.

The incident occurred due to the dynamite blast.

"The exact number of labourers present inside the mine at the time of the explosion is yet to be



ascertained. More people are feared trapped," another senior police official said.

One person who sustained injuries in the blast was initially taken to Sutnga Primary Health

Centre before being referred to a Shillong hospital for better treatment, Kumar said.

The explosion is suspected to have occurred during coal mining activities at the site, which is be-

lieved to be an illegal operation. Asked whether the mine was operating illegally, Kumar said, "Yes, it seems like that."

He said the cause of the explosion is yet to be ascertained, and an inquiry will be conducted.

Police said the identities of the deceased were yet to be confirmed. While there were reports suggesting that the victims could be residents of Assam, officials said no such claims had been verified at the time of filing this report.

The Meghalaya Human Rights Commission (MHRC) also took suo motu cognisance and called for a detailed report from the state government.

Earlier, on January 14, a worker from Assam, Mosaid Ali (48), a resident of Jamuna Moudanga in Assam's Hojai dis-

trict, was killed in an accident at an illegal coal mine in Umthel village in the district.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) had imposed a ban on rat-hole coal mining and other unscientific mining practices in Meghalaya in 2014, citing environmental damage and safety risks, while also restricting illegal transportation of coal extracted through such methods.

Rat-hole mining involves digging of narrow tunnels, usually 3-4 feet high, for workers to enter and extract coal. The horizontal tunnels are often termed "rat-holes", as each just about fits one person.

The Supreme Court later upheld the ban and allowed mining only under scientific and regulated procedures with environmental safeguards.

## CM to file defamation case against Cong leaders on Feb 9

### Gaurav's family owns bank accounts in Pak, claims Himanta

GUWAHATI, Feb 5: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday claimed that state Congress president Gaurav Gogoi's family has "running" bank accounts in Pakistan.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a BJP function here, Sarma also alleged that the state Congress headquarters 'Rajeev Bhawan' has become a base for "anti-Assamese activities".

No immediate reaction has been available from the Congress on the allegations.

"Ask Gaurav Gogoi how many bank accounts his family has in Pakistani banks. His family's bank accounts are still running in Pakistan," Sarma told reporters here. The chief minister said he is giving only hints at the moment, while details will be shared during a press conference on February 8.

"One whose bank account is in Pakistan, just imagine how dangerous such a person can be," Sarma said.

The Assam CM and the BJP have been attacking Lok Sabha MP Gogoi over his wife's alleged connection with Pakistan's spy agency ISI. They even claim that the Congress leader has "direct links" with the neighbouring nation. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Kuki-Zo group declares boycott of 3 MLAs

IMPHAL, Feb 5: A day after three Kuki-Zo MLAs joined the government of Manipur, an organisation on Thursday declared "social boycott" of them for allegedly betraying the community and aligning with the Meiteis. Several groups also called for a "total shutdown" in the Kuki-majority Churachandpur district on Friday.

Manipur witnessed the outbreak of ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities in May 2023, leading to the imposition of President's Rule in February last year.

Amid a demand by the Kuki-Zo leaders for a separate administrative unit for the community, BJP MLA Yumnam Khemchand Singh on Wednesday was sworn in as the 13th Chief Minister of Manipur, nearly a year after the resignation of N Biren Singh as the CM.

Nemcha Kipgen, a BJP MLA who belongs to the Kuki community, and Naga People's Front legislator L Dikho, took oath as deputy chief ministers of Manipur.

There are 10 Kuki-Zo legislators in the Assembly, and seven

of them are from the BJP.

Hmar tribe MLA N Sanate was part of a BJP-led NDA team that met Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla in Imphal to stake claim for government formation in the state. Another Kuki Zo MLA, L M Khaute, was also part of the team.

Hmar people are part of the Kuki-Zo community.

In a statement on Thursday, the Kuki Zo Council (KZC) "strongly and unequivocally condemns the participation of certain Kuki-Zo MLAs in the formation of the Manipur government, which constitutes a gross violation of the Lungthu Resolution dated 13 January 2026".

According to the resolution, the Kuki-Zo community members will take part in government formation only if there is a written assurance from the central and state authorities that there will be a separate administration in the form of a Union Territory with a legislature.

It said that by joining the government, these Kuki MLAs have effectively aligned themselves with Meiteis, betraying their own people. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## CM claims downward trend of domestic discord cases

Himanta attends Mukhyamantrir Mahila Udyamita Abhiyaan prog in Jorhat

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Feb 5: Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma observed that different initiatives for women empowerment and welfare undertaken by his government in the past five years, had enabled vast improvement in the lives of families in the state with significant reduction in incidents of domestic discord and violence.

Speaking at the 'Mukhyamantrir Mahila Udyamita Abhiyaan' (MMUA), (popularly known as Lakhpati Baideo' scheme) cheque distribution ceremony at the Jorhat Stadium today, Sarma said that since the launching of Orunodoi scheme, a flagship initiative for women empowerment, had led to significant transformation in the lives of women with much positive change witnessed in the husband-wife relationship.

Stating that husbands were becoming supportive towards their spouses following enhancement in the economic scenario of the families, Sarma said that incidents of domestic discord and violence had come down notably.

Stating that the empowerment of



women had led to gaining respect from family members and society, he said that husbands were extending support in many ways to their spouses for coming out of the households for different activities related to financial and social matters.

Listing the series of schemes initiated by the Government for the benefit of women and girls, the Chief Minister said that the MMUA was one such step for boosting women-led ventures, promoting self-re-

liance, and ensuring sustainable livelihood opportunities at the grassroots level.

He said altogether 32 lakh women would be covered across the State under MMUA with the first installment of ₹ 10,000 initial seed capital installment the Government would spend ₹ 3200 crores for this initiative.

Informing that 18000 beneficiaries from Jorhat LAC would be benefiting under MMUA, Sarma said (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Drugs seized, 2 held in Guwahati

GUWAHATI, Feb 5: Two persons have been arrested and drugs worth ₹ 2 crore seized from their possession in Guwahati, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said. In an X post on Wednesday night, Sarma said the drugs were supplied from a neighbouring state, hinting at (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 1 held with elephant tusks in Darrang

GUWAHATI, Feb 5: A person was arrested in Assam's Darrang district with several elephant tusks, cumulatively weighing 9.6 kg, a statement said on Thursday.

The anti-smuggling unit of the Customs Division in Guwahati made the arrest from Hazarika para in the Sipajhar area, it said.

"The operation was launched based on specific intelligence developed by customs officers indicating that (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Centre's support in last 10 years transformed NE, says Khandu



ITANAGAR, Feb 5: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Thursday said the region has witnessed unprecedented transformation in the last 10 years, attributing it to sustained central support.

Participating in the Motion of Thanks on the

governor's address in the assembly, Khandu said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made a conscious effort to compensate "for decades of neglect" faced by the Northeast after Independence.

"When the PM speaks of Viksit Bharat @2047, he repeatedly acknowledges the deprivation the region suffered and the need to bridge that gap. The change seen across the Northeast today reflects that commitment," he said. Khandu said the governor's address comprehensively reflected the government's work in recent years.

He observed that infrastructure and connectivity, described as the main pillar of development, featured prominently, followed by emphasis on human capital, education, youth, rural economy, livelihoods of artisans, and the hydro power sector.

The chief minister said the state's engagement with the Centre has improved significantly. "Today, central ministers visit the state frequently and clear files in one go. This is possible because of the PM's affection for Arunachal Pradesh and the Northeast," he said. Khandu said that over Rs 3,000 crore has been invested under the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## SIR in Assam to be very extensive: Himanta

SIVASAGAR, Feb 5: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has said when the Election Commission decides to carry out a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in the state, it will be "very extensive and properly done".

After the assembly elections, SIR will happen in the state, Sarma told reporters on Wednesday during an official function at Sonari.

At present, a Special Revision (SR) of electoral rolls is underway in Assam.

"Here, the SIR will be very extensive and properly done. I had requested the Election Commission to do the SIR even now, but they conducted the SR due to non-publication of the NRC. We welcome the SIR," Sarma said.

The final NRC was released on August 31, 2019, excluding 19,06,657 people. A total of 3,11,21,004 names were included out of 3,30,27,661 applicants. But, it has not been notified by the Registrar General of India till date.

The draft roll after the SR reflected a total of 2,52,01,624 electors, representing a 1.35 per cent increase from the previous final roll published in January 2025.

A total of 7,86,841 additions and 4,47,196 deletions have taken place from January 6 to (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 'World moving towards new global order'

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The world is moving towards a new global order, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in the Rajya Sabha on Thursday while replying to the President's address, adding that India has emerged as a loud voice of the Global South.

The Prime Minister started his reply as Opposition parties raised slogans saying the "Leader of Opposition should be allowed to speak" amid the stand-off in the Lok Sabha. The Prime Minister took a dig at Rajya Sabha Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge, and suggested he can raise slogans while sitting.

Opposition MPs later staged a walkout. The Prime Minister said the world is moving towards a new global order after the Covid-19 pandemic.

"It is clear, the world is moving towards a new world order. After the second world war, a world order was created, now the world is moving towards a new world order. If we analyse it independently, it is leaning towards India," Modi said.

"The world is talking about the global south, India is a loud voice of the global south," he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Efforts on to create model tourist circuit in NE: Govt

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Efforts are on to create a model tourist circuit in the Northeast and the government is working in coordination with all eight states in the region for creating such a sustainable, inclusive and high-value tourism corridor, the Rajya Sabha was informed on Thursday.

Replying to supplementaries during Question Hour, Minister of State for Development of Northeastern region Sukanta Majumdar said the Ministry of DONER is extending all its support to all eight NER states to ensure a faster grounding of the investment proposals received during the Rising North East investor summit.

He said Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya are top-three states which have received maximum investment proposals after the summit.

"Under leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Northeast is going through transformation and it will become one of the driving engines of the Indian economy," the minister said.

"I wish to inform the members that the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is working in coordination with all eight NE states for creating sustainable, inclusive and high-value tourism corridor and efforts are on to create such a model tourist circuit," he said, replying to a supplementary from Nominated MP Harsh Vardhan Shringla. The minister said the model tourist circuit has been carefully identified based (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## UNESCO recognition plaque unveiled at Charaideo Moidams

# CM bats for research on state's heritage

SONARI, Feb 5: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday unveiled the plaque of UNESCO recognition of the Ahom-era 'Moidams' in Charaideo district as a world heritage site.

Moidam, the mound-burial system of the Ahom dynasty, were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2024.

Unveiling the plaque, Sarma said, "The recognition will always be one of the golden moments in Assam's history and will be cherished for generations to come." He also proposed key measures, including the promotion of academic research, regular maintenance, community partici-



pation and creation of buffer zones, to preserve the heritage.

The Moidams at Charaideo are the royal burials mounds of the Ahom kings and queens. Often

compared to the pyramids of

Egypt, they stand as enduring marvels of medieval architecture, reflecting the exceptional craftsmanship and engineering skills of

the region's artisans and masons.

Around 90 structures of Moidams are found within the Charaideo necropolis. These were created by building an earth mound over a hollow vault constructed of brick, stone or earth, and topped by a shrine at the centre of an octagonal wall.

The Tai-Ahoms migrated to present-day Assam in the 13th century and selected Charaideo as their first capital and the location for the royal necropolis. For 600 years, till the 19th century, they created Moidams that work with the natural features of hills, forests and water, creating a sacred geography by accentuating the natural topography. (PTI)

## BJP and Cong blasted for betraying trust of KA people

### 'Long walk' demanding creation of autonomous state culminates

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 5: A gruelling five-day "long walk" advocating for the creation of an autonomous state reached its destination on Thursday.

Organised by the ASDC Youth Front (ASDC YF) and the KSA (Jemson Timung group), the march concluded at the ASDC central committee office in Diphu after covering over 100 kilometres from Parokhuwa.

The movement aims to pressure the Union Government into initiating tripartite talks involving the Ministry of Home Affairs and all legitimate stakeholders of the region.

The marchers kicked off their journey on February 5, facing significant physical and logistical hurdles. Notably, the protesters were forced to navigate village routes after police restricted their use of the National Highway.

Despite these challenges, the group maintained discipline as they passed through Dokmoka, Phuloni, Bokolia, Silbheta, Longnit, and Manja Town.

"The members endured pain and obstacles, even putting their lives at risk, to ensure the aspirations of Karbi Anglong are heard," stated leaders during the final leg of the march.

Addressing media persons at

the ASDC Central Committee office, Gulson Bey, president of the ASDC Youth Front, accused both the BJP and Congress of betraying the trust of the people in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao for over 15 years.

Criticising the ruling dispensation, ASDC YF accused the BJP of misleading the public by claiming talks are already underway in New Delhi while allegedly excluding major stakeholders. The Congress Party was criticized for failing to raise the Autonomous State issue in Parliament and the State Assembly despite having 99 MPs and 22 MLAs. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# India, US likely to sign trade agreement by mid-March: Goyal

**NEW DELHI, Feb 5:** India and the US are likely to sign the first tranche of the much-awaited bilateral trade agreement by mid-March, that would lead to Washington lowering import duties on Indian imports, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Thursday.

Following the signing of the pact, India will begin reducing import duties on certain goods imported from the US.

Goyal also said that the two countries are expected to finalise and sign a joint statement on the first tranche of the bilateral trade agreement within 4-5 days, following which tariffs imposed by America will come down to 18 per cent.

The two countries finalised the agreement earlier this week. Under this, tariffs on Indian goods entering the US will be reduced to 18 per cent from 50 per cent.

At present, Indian goods attract 50 per cent import duty, comprising a 25 per cent reciprocal tariff and an additional 25 per cent levy for purchasing Russian crude oil.

"The first tranche of the bilateral trade agreement (BTA) is almost ready, and we expect that in the next 4-5 days, we will finalise and sign a joint statement between the US and India. And based on that, the first phase of this partnership will begin," he told reporters here.

He added that a formal agreement is being drafted, which may take a month or a month and a half, he said.

## OPPO launches Reno15c in India

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 5:** OPPO India has expanded its Reno15 Series with the launch of the Reno15c, designed to make the signature Reno experience more accessible to a wider audience of travellers, creators and photography enthusiasts. The phone is now available across Amazon, Flipkart, mainline retail outlets, and the OPPO E-store.

The Reno15c features a 7000mAh battery with 80W SUPERVOOC™ fast charging, a 6.57-inch AMOLED display with FHD+ resolution and a slim, lightweight design at 8.14mm and 195g. Its Dynamic Stellar Ring Design and coral-fleece-like velvet finish give the phone a distinctive yet elegant look, available in Twilight Blue and Afterglow Pink.

Built for everyday durability, the Reno15c offers IP66, IP68 and IP69 ratings, along with OPPO's All-Round Armour Body, combining cushioning and aerospace-grade aluminium for shock resistance. The device is camera-focused, featuring a 50MP main camera, 8MP ultra-wide, 2MP macro and a 50MP ultra-wide selfie camera. It supports 4K HDR video recording at 60fps, enhanced Ultra-Steady Video, Dual-View Video and on-device video editing. Creative features like Popout and AI Editor 3.0, along with AI-powered photography tools, make it ideal for creators. Powered by the Snapdragon 6 Gen 1 Mobile Platform, the Reno15c promises smooth multitasking, stable gaming and improved energy efficiency. ColorOS 16 with OPPO AI Hub and Google Gemini integration delivers a smart, intuitive user experience with AI tools for photos, writing and productivity.

### NAME CORRECTION

I Nizam Uddin, S/O Late Abdul Monaf, Vill-Islam Nagar, P.O.- Nilbagan, P.S.-Hojai, Dist.-Hojai, (Assam) That, my mother's actual and correct name is Kamala Bibi as per Certified Electoral Roll of 1966 of 93 No. Hojai LAC, Part No. 30, Vill-Islampur, P.S. & Dist-Nagaon, Assam vide Sl. No. 372, House No. 74. That, in my Passport vide No. J8662010 wherein my mother's name has been inadvertently recorded as Kamala Begum instead of Kamala Bibi. That, the aforesaid, Kamala Bibi & Kamala Begum are the names of same and single person i.e. of my mother.

### NAME CORRECTION

I Najmina Yesmin Nehar, W/O- Nizam Uddin, Vill-Islam Nagar, P.O.- Nilbagan, P.S.-Hojai, Dist.-Hojai, (Assam) That, my actual and correct name is Najmina Yesmin Nehar as per my Aadhaar Card vide No. 2032-6987-6168 & PAN Card vide No. BPZPN5221D. That, in the Passport of my husband namely Nizam Uddin vide No. J8662010 wherein my name as his spouse has been inadvertently recorded as Najmina Begum instead of Najmina Yesmin Nehar. That, the aforesaid, Najmina Yesmin Nehar & Najmina Begum are the names of same and single person i.e. of mine.



adding it is likely that the formal agreement will be signed by mid-March.

The reduced 18 per cent tariffs on Indian goods will come into effect through an executive order of the US, which would be issued in a day or two after the signing of the joint statement.

Goyal added that there is no investment commitment in this pact.

Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said that the legal agreement will give us the authority to reduce tariffs on American goods.

"Indian tariff reductions (will happen) only after a legal agreement," Agrawal said, adding Indian tariffs are MFN (most favoured nation) levies, and American import duties are executive tariffs.

Goyal added that "we hope to do things fast because there are further concessions that we will get after the legal agreement".

About the USD 500 billion purchase part of the deal, the minister said that with the fast-paced growth at which India is going ahead, the country will need large volumes of energy, data center equipment, and ICT products.

"Our steel capacity is going to double from today's 140 million tonnes to about 300 million tonnes in the next few years. And therefore, when we estimated what we will need from the USA, we came to a figure of at least 500 billion dollars. We can clearly see before our eyes the potential that we can procure from the US over the next five

years," Goyal said.

India's aircraft demand alone, he said, "orders placed on Boeing and yet to be placed but ready, are nearly 70-80 billion dollars. If you add the engines and other spare parts, it will probably cost 100 billion dollars," he said, adding that for data centers, huge concessions have been announced in the Budget.

"Now imagine if we get 100-150 billion dollars of investments in data centers, we will obviously need equipment for those data centers," he said. The minister further said that to meet the USD 500 billion bilateral trade target between the two countries, set out in February 2025, India will certainly need to do a lot more exports and a lot more sourcing between the USA and India.

On this, the secretary said that all the things that India has committed to buy as part of this deal with the United States, the country's current purchases from the globe are over USD 300 billion. The US can provide all these goods, such as Oil, LPG, LNG, aircraft, ICT products, laptops, smartphones and data centers equipment, which India is purchasing from other nations.

"In the next five years, these purchases are going to be 2 trillion dollars. If we can buy 500 billion dollars from the US, it will only add to our diversification and resilience in our supply chain," Agrawal said.

The signing of the joint statement will happen virtually. (PTI)

## Stock markets snap 3-day rally; Sensex tumbles 504 points ahead of RBI policy decision

**MUMBAI, Feb 5:** Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty halted their three-day rally to close with deep cuts on Thursday, in line with bearish global markets, as participants turned cautious ahead of the RBI policy announcement amid geopolitical uncertainties.

Intense selling in metal, IT and capital goods stocks also dampened market sentiment, traders said.

In a bearish session, the 30-share BSE Sensex further dropped 503.76 points, or 0.60 per cent, to settle at 83,313.93. During the day, it tanked 666.07 points, or 0.79 per cent, to 83,151.62.

A total of 2,447 stocks declined while 1,737 advanced and 158 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty declined 133.20 points, or 0.52 per cent, to end at 25,642.80.

"Indian equities saw consolidation, as weakness was followed by a sharp rally in recent sessions, driven by optimism around the US-India trade deal, suggesting profit booking was at play.

"Global cues added further pressure, with concerns over a broad-based tech sell-off in international markets and heightened US-Iran tensions leading to risk-off sentiment," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

Market participants are now turn-

ing their attention to the upcoming RBI policy meeting, Nair added.

The decision of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) will be announced by RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra on Friday.

From the Sensex constituents, Eternal, Bharti Airtel, Bharat Electronics, ITC, Infosys, Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank and Asian Paints were among the major laggards.

In contrast, Trent, Tata Steel, State Bank of India and Bajaj Finance were the gainers.

Among sectoral indices, capital goods dropped 1.07 per cent, metal (1.05 per cent), consumer durables (0.88 per cent), BSE Focused IT (0.78 per cent), IT (0.76 per cent) and telecommunication (0.72 per cent).

BSE PSU Bank and oil & gas were the gainers.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi ended nearly 4 per cent lower. Japan's Nikkei 225 index and Shanghai's SSE Composite index also ended in the negative territory, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng index settled higher.

European markets were trading lower.

US markets ended mostly lower on Wednesday. The Nasdaq Composite index tumbled 1.51 per cent, and the S&P 500 declined by 0.51

per cent. The Dow Jones Industrial Average ended 0.53 per cent higher.

"Indian equity markets traded in a tight range, signalling a wait-and-watch phase as investors remained cautious in the absence of fresh domestic triggers. While overall sentiment remained stable, the benchmarks struggled to sustain momentum at higher levels, reflecting a lack of follow-through buying despite earlier positives," Ponnudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

Market participants remain on the sidelines, awaiting clearer signals from global macro developments, trends in foreign institutional flows, and further clarity on the progress of US-Iran negotiations to determine the market's next decisive move, he added.

Foreign institutional investors bought equities worth Rs 29.79 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) also bought stocks worth Rs 249.54 crore in the previous trade.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, dropped 1.32 per cent to USD 68.54 per barrel.

On Wednesday, the Sensex ended 78.56 points or 0.09 per cent higher at 83,817.69. The Nifty went up by 48.45 points or 0.19 per cent to settle at 25,776. (PTI)

## Budget 2026 aims to propel India toward a 'Viksit Bharat'

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 5:** The Union Budget 2026 lays out a transformative roadmap to accelerate India's economic growth and advance the vision of a "Viksit Bharat". The budget emphasises scaling up manufacturing across seven strategic sectors and supporting champion MSMEs, aiming to strengthen domestic capabilities while positioning India as a global manufacturing hub.

A key focus is on the construction equipment industry, with initiatives to boost domestic production of high-value capital goods such as tunnel boring machines, earthmoving equipment and crane systems. This move is expected to increase demand for locally manufactured advanced equipment, foster innovation and enhance India's competitiveness in the global construction ecosystem.

Infrastructure development also receives a major push with the proposed establishment of seven high-speed rail

corridors designed to improve regional connectivity, urban mobility and productivity. These corridors are anticipated to serve as growth connectors, attracting investment and facilitating seamless movement of people and goods across regions. The budget complements these measures with structural reforms, including a review of the Foreign Exchange Management framework, steps to deepen the corporate bond market and enabling non-resident investors to participate in equities through the Portfolio Investment Scheme. Together, these reforms aim to create a stable and attractive environment for long-term capital flows and enterprise growth.

Overall, Budget 2026 seeks to strike a balance between immediate growth, structural reforms and long-term competitiveness, setting India on a path to become a world-class manufacturing and infrastructure hub while generating opportunities for domestic and global stakeholders.

## Nemichand Bamalwa Jewellers opens flagship store in Guwahati

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 5:** Nemichand Bamalwa Jewellers, a nearly 40-year-old name in Indian jewellery, has launched its flagship showroom in Guwahati, marking a major milestone in luxury retail in the Northeast. The store opens to the public on 7th February 2026, offering customers direct access to the brand's signature collections, including wedding, bridal and party wear jewellery crafted from gold, natural diamonds, Jadau and Polki.

The brand is known for pioneering the 22/22K gold jewellery standard, ensuring that gold purity remains 22K even after melting, setting a benchmark in transparency and customer trust. Previously, soldering in jewellery often reduced overall gold content, but



NCB's approach ensures no loss in value for customers.

The showroom was inaugurated by noted personality Nishita Goswami and reflects the brand's philosophy of combining international luxury standards with local warmth. Directors Pramod, Vinay and Ravi Bamalwa emphasised

that the store represents not just a retail outlet but a meaningful presence built on openness, honesty and community trust.

With fair pricing and world-class craftsmanship, Nemichand Bamalwa Jewellers continues to strengthen its legacy while expanding its footprint in the Northeast.

Contd. from Page 1...

## CM to file defamation case

Referring to the press conference by Gogoi on Wednesday where he alleged that Sarma's family has grabbed around 12,000 bighas (over 3,960 acres) of land across the state, the CM said that he will file a defamation case against all those who addressed the media.

"On February 9, I will file a case against all the Congress leaders. It is a party which has geared up to sell Assam. They did wall writing saying a new greater Assam will be formed. What is it? A greater Assam with Miyas? People are seeing this and will give a befitting reply," he added.

Sarma announced on Wednesday that he will file a defamation case against Gogoi, Leader of the Opposition in Assam Assembly Debarbra Saikia, All India Congress Committee General Secretary (in-charge of Assam) Jitendra Singh and former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel for making "false and malicious" statements. (PTI)

## Kuki-Zo group declares

"The KZC condemns all Kuki-Zo MLAs who have participated in the formation of the Manipur government, and declares a social boycott against them in all Kuki-Zo areas," the statement read.

The organisation urged the Kuki-Zo people not to cooperate or associate with them in any social, customary, or public matters. This boycott shall remain in force until they realign themselves with the collective position of the Kuki-Zo people, it said. The KZC said any community MLA who chooses to disregard its collective decision shall be doing so in their individual capacity and that the organisation will not be held accountable for consequences arising out of the "unilateral decisions".

Responding to the development, the Joint Forum of Seven (JF7), a tribal organisation based in Churachandpur district, called for a "total shutdown" in Kuki Zo-dominated areas from 6 am to 6 pm on Friday. It urged all community members to join the protests across villages in a democratic way, reiterating the demand for a separate Kuki administration. Some Kuki militant groups have also issued a strong warning to the MLAs for participating in government formation.

On Wednesday night, agitators burnt tyres and placed bamboo sticks on the road near Leimakhong in Kuki-dominated Kangpokpi district to protest against Nemcha Kipgen's swearing in as a deputy CM.

The Kuki Liberation Army (Lethkolun), in a statement, said it is issuing a "clear and final warning" that any Kuki Zo representative who chooses to participate in the formation of a popular government shall be deemed to have acted in betrayal of the community people. "Any untoward development arising from such participation shall rest solely and squarely on the shoulders of the participating Kuki Zo MLAs," it said.

Meanwhile, the Hmar Inpu, an apex body of the Hmar tribe, claimed it has received credible inputs that certain radical elements may attempt to incite violence, targeting private properties and residences of elected representatives. In a statement, it said the outfit will view any attempt to vandalise or target properties of their MLAs as "an act of aggression" on the community, and cautioned that if any such unlawful act occurs, it will not remain a silent spectator.

Manipur has been witnessing ethnic violence since May 3, 2023, after a tribal solidarity march was taken out in the hill districts, in protest against the majority Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Since then, at least 260 people, including members of both the Kuki and Meitei communities as well as security personnel, have been killed in the violence, while thousands were rendered homeless. (PTI)

## Efforts on to create model

on their cultural significance, ecological uniqueness, tourism potential and readiness for integrated infrastructure development.

"The overarching objective of the initiative is to create a world-class tourism infrastructure and visitor amenities, promote distinct regional experiences, ensure convergence and national schemes, faster community-led entrepreneurship and employment and enough tourism contribution to inclusive regional development. We have proposed eight tourism circuits," Majumdar said.

In his written reply, the minister said, "The initiative is aligned with the national vision of tourism-led economic growth, cultural preservation, and enhanced national and global visibility of the Northeastern Region."

Listing out the eight model tourist circuits, he said the government has proposed Itanagar-Chullyu-Ziro in Arunachal Pradesh, Jorhat-Kaziranga-Tezpur circuit in Assam, Imphal-Moriang-Imphal circuit in Manipur, Guwahati-Shillong-Sohra-Nongriat circuit in Meghalaya, Lengpui-Aizawl-Thenzawl circuit in Mizoram, Dimapur-Kohima-Kisama-Dzukou circuit in Nagaland, Namchi-Temi-Ravangla circuit in Sikkim and Agartala-Sepahijala Wildlife Sanctuary-Tripura Sundari Temple-Gunabati Temples-Neermahal-Chabimura in Tripura.

"As on 01.04.2025, 12 Railway projects (08 New Lines, 04 Doubling), of a total length of 777 Km, costing ₹ 69,342 crore falling fully/partly in North Eastern Region (NER) have been sanctioned," the minister added. (PTI)

## Drugs seized, 2 held in

an inter-state network. "Major narcotics crackdown at Ananda Nagar by @GuwahatiPol; 360 g heroin worth ₹ 2 cr seized, 2 accused arrested. Supply traced to neighbouring state," he added.

"SOAP of sin, busted within. Swift action, Strong message - zero tolerance. #AssamAgainstDrugs," Sarma said. The CM, however, did not name the neighbouring state. (PTI)

## 1 held with elephant tusks

an individual in possession of elephant tusks was seeking prospective buyers," the statement said. Acting on the input, a team of officers searched a residential premises, leading to the recovery of the contraband wildlife items, it said.

"The seized items along with the apprehended individuals are being handed over to the jurisdictional forest authority for further investigation and necessary legal action," it added. (PTI)

## Centre's support in last 10 years

Chief Minister's Comprehensive Road Development Plan.

He also cited the Centre's Vibrant Village Programme as a game-changer for border areas, with ₹ 1,000 crore already sanctioned for Arunachal Pradesh.

The initiative, he said, has boosted the rural economy, promoted tourism up to the Line of Actual Control, generated local livelihoods, and reversed migration from villages to towns.

He said the new terminal building at Donyi Polo Airport at Hollongi, near here, has been inaugurated, and the airport has received the best airport award under the UDAN scheme.

He also said the state has made significant strides in the education sector through various reforms, while the health sector has also seen marked improvement.

To harness the demographic dividend, the government has launched multiple youth-centric initiatives, including skill development programmes, start-ups and manufacturing units, he said.

"As many as 237 start-ups have already been established in the state," Khandu said.

Describing tourism as the future driver of the state's economy, the chief minister urged MLAs to assist the government in developing the sector. He also reiterated the need to amend the state hydropower policy to ensure greater benefits for project-affected people.

Referring to the 'Cabinet Aap Ki Dwar' (Cabinet at Your Doorstep) initiative, Khandu said it has helped the government understand grassroots needs and design region-specific schemes and projects.

He announced that a day-long workshop would be convened soon to allow members to suggest improvements to make policies more holistic.

Earlier, BJP MLA Mahesh Chai moved the motion, which was seconded by another legislator of the party, Hage Apa. Later, the House adopted the motion by voice vote, before Speaker Tesam Pongte adjourned the assembly sine die. (PTI)

## SIR in Assam to be very

December 27 last year. During the SR process, 4,78,992 deceased electors and 5,23,680 shifted electors were identified. Another 53,619 multiple entries were identified, officials said.

The Election Commission, however, said that these names have not yet been deleted. These will only be processed for removal or shifting after formal applications are received during the current claims and objections period.

The final electoral roll is scheduled to be published on February 10. (PTI)

## 'World moving towards new

He mentioned the trade deals being finalised with different countries.

"We are doing future-ready trade deals with a lot of countries. In the past few days, we have had nine major trade deals, and the mother of all deals was the one with the European Union," he said.

He also took a jibe at the Opposition, which had staged a walkout, and said, "They got tired and left. But some day they will have to reply... How did they bring India to a point that no country was coming forward to have a trade deal with us."

He also accused former Congress-led governments of destroying India's image.

He further said "the whole world is appreciating" the India-US trade deal. He added that the trade deal will especially be beneficial for the Indian youth. (PTI)

## CM claims downward trend

that so far 27,10,000 women across 109 Assembly constituencies have received the first installment and remaining would be paid soon. Sarma stated that the Government will provide training and market linkages to the MMUA beneficiaries to see that their ventures turn out to be successful.

## BJP and Cong blasted

respectively. The core demand of the protesters is a tripartite talk that moves beyond "one or two parties." The ASDC YF and KSA insist that the Home Ministry must invite a broad spectrum of social and political organisations, including the participating organisations ASDC, ASDC Youth Front, KNCA, KAD-HASDCOM, Student Groups, Various factions of the KSA, Cultural & Social, Karbi Lammet Amei (KLA), and Karbi Cultural Society (KCS).

They suggested that the Central Government should organise a consultative meeting where these stakeholders can collectively shortlist a delegation to represent the people of Karbi Anglong in New Delhi.

The march may have ended, but the organisers emphasised that the democratic movement is far from over. Leaders Premson Bey, Gulson Bey, Jemson Timung, and Mandal Enghi affirmed that protests will continue until a positive response is received from the Ministry of Home Affairs.

CM says scheme has benefited over 26.5 lakh women in Assam

## Himanta distributes MUA cheques in Sivasagar with Akhil Gogoi by his side



**HT Correspondent**  
**SIVASAGAR, Feb 5:** Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sharma on Wednesday distributed cheques to beneficiaries under the 'Mahila Udyamita Asani' scheme at a meeting held at the Boarding Field

here, with his arch political rival and Sivasagar MLA Akhil Gogoi sharing the stage and appreciating the CM throughout the programme.

Later, Akhil Gogoi said he was happy that the chief minister did

not speak much on politics or from a political angle during the event.

Dr Sharma addressed the 106th such meeting held since April 1, 2025, when the scheme was launched. Speaking to the media, he said the scheme has benefited

26.5 lakh women in the state so far and the target is to increase the number to 35 lakh beneficiaries. He also said the Chief Minister's Atmanirbhar Scheme would continue in parallel.

In a significant remark, Dr Sharma said that on February 7 the matter would be placed before the state cabinet for discussion, following which people would come to know how someone could be part of a larger global conspiracy to weaken India from within in collaboration with parties in the US, England and elsewhere. He clarified that it was not related to Gaurav Gogoi or any particular individual, but involved a wider network working consciously or unconsciously against the country's interests.

The chief minister added that what he would reveal on February 8 would only be the tip of the iceberg and that the Government of India might take up the matter for further investigation using its digital resources and Interpol assistance.

### Assam State Women's Commission chairperson Anoorlata Deka visits Tamulpur

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 5:** Chairperson of the Assam State Women's Commission, Anoorlata Deka, on Wednesday participated in a women's awareness meeting held at the auditorium of Tamulpur College at Barnagar in Tamulpur.

The programme began with a welcome address by District Commissioner Simi Karan. Addressing the gathering, Deka delivered a detailed speech on women's safety and empowerment. "Even if I cannot deliver justice, I want to be the courage of women," she said while interacting with the women present.

She noted that women often fall victim to injustice and harassment in different spheres of society and urged them to seek help by contacting the women's helpline number 181 or the mobile number 94351 96263. She also stressed the need to prominently display these numbers at public places, schools and colleges.

Deka explained in detail the functions and roles of the Assam State Women's Commission, the One Stop Centre and the Women's Cell and appealed to women to remain positive and avoid negative discussions.

The meeting was attended by Executive Secretary of the Women's Commission Antara Gogoi, Additional Commissioner Dr Dipankar Nath, Assistant Commissioner Kabita Phangso, Anganwadi and ASHA workers and members of self-help groups. The information was shared in a statement issued by Public Relations Officer Bijoy Bezbaruah.

### Karbi Anglong journalists felicitated with 'CM's Goodwill Gift'

**HT Bureau**  
**DIPHU, Feb 5:** In a gesture of appreciation toward the media, 39 accredited and government-recognised journalists from Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong were felicitated with the 'CM's Goodwill Gift' on Thursday at the office of the District Information & Public Relations Officer (DIPRO) in Diphu. The event recognised the "selfless service" of journalists in strengthening the connection between the government and the public.

The program began with the felicitation of Chief Guest Surjya Rongphar, Executive Member (EM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) in charge of Art & Culture, Health and Information & Public Relations. Zahid Ahmed Tapadar, Deputy Director of Information & Public Relations (Hills), highlighted the media as a "strong tool" for social change and essential for publicising government welfare and development schemes. He also reminded attendees of state benefits for media professionals, including specialised health schemes, media fellowships and one-time grants.

Senior journalist Sonju Bora spoke on the challenges of reporting in difficult conditions, emphasising that the recognition reflects the government's acknowledgement of sincere and truthful journalism. Bora noted the enduring importance of print media over social media, stating, "Whatever is printed in a newspaper is a document... newspapers serve as preserved records." EM Rongphar echoed the sentiment, noting print media's reliability compared to digital



platforms.

During the event, Diganta Teron, president of the District Press Club of Karbi Anglong (DPCKA), urged EM Rongphar to follow up with KAAC Chief Executive Member Dr Tuliram Ronghang regarding the promised allotment of land and construction of the DPCKA office-cum-guest house.

The 'CM's Goodwill Gift' included a mobile handset, a professional diary and pen, a biography of Bharat Ratna Dr Bhupen Hazarika and the book 'Atal Avichal Agragami Assam'. Notable recipients included Sonju Bora, Kamrul Khan, Kiri Ronghang (Editor, Samphri Kimi), David Hanse (Editor, The Arlang Daily), Debojyoti Bora (Dainik Janambhumi), Dipen Bora (Prag News), Augustine Teron (The Hills Times) and Danielson Bey (Executive Editor, Thekar). DIPRO Utpal Dimasa also attended the ceremony.



BJP State president Dilip Saikia interacts with media person in Guwahati on Thursday. MP Lok Sabha Bansuri Swaraj also seen. HT Photo

### Injured father-son return home after attack, seek aid for treatment

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 5:** The father and son of Anthaigwalo village, who were seriously injured in an attack by miscreants last month, have returned home after receiving initial medical treatment but are now facing severe financial difficulties in continuing their care.

The injured, Prabhat Brahma

and his son Jubiraj Brahma, narrated the sequence of events leading to the horrific incident that occurred on the evening of January 19 along the Karigaon-Gaurinagar-Mansing Road in Kokrajhar district.

According to the family, on January 19 at around 7.30 PM, contractor Raja Bismit, along with Prabhat Brahma and Jubiraj

Brahma, had gone to Audang Bazaar from their workplace to purchase a shovel. While returning, miscreants suddenly began pelting stones at their Scorpio vehicle on the Gaurinagar-Mansing road.

The continuous stone-pelting shattered the front windshield of the vehicle, causing the driver to lose control. The vehicle subse-

quently overturned on the road.

After the vehicle overturned, the miscreants allegedly dragged out all three occupants and assaulted them with sticks and sharp weapons. Contractor Raja Bismit succumbed to his injuries and died on the spot due to the brutal attack, while Prabhat Brahma and his son sustained serious injuries.

### Abhi-Neel murder trial enters final stage in Nagaon court

Court to hear final arguments before verdict in seven-year-old case



HT Correspondent

**NAGAON, Feb 5:** The trial in the high-profile Abhi-Neel murder case has entered its final stage in the Nagaon District and Sessions Court over seven years after the brutal killings. The court has completed examination of witnesses and is now hearing arguments from both sides. The prosecution, led by government advocates Jiyaur Kamar, Suman Chakraborty and Bhaskar Dutta, demanded the maximum punishment for the accused. The defense, led by advocate Manas Sarania, is set to present its arguments. A date for the final verdict is expected to be fixed after February 7.

The case pertains to the murder of Abhijit Nath and Nilutpal Das at Panjuri village near Dokmoka in Karbi Anglong district on June 8, 2018. A total of 48 people were arrested, with 45 jailed in Nagaon Central Jail and three in Jorhat Juvenile Jail. The trial was shifted from Diphu to Nagaon following a writ petition by the victims' families.

Ajit Kumar Nath, father of Abhijit, expressed faith in the judiciary and hoped the accused would face the maximum punishment. The verdict is eagerly awaited by the families and the public.

### Long march demanding Autonomous State concludes

**HT Bureau**  
**DIPHU, Feb 5:** A gruelling five-day "long walk" advocating for the creation of an Autonomous State concluded on Thursday at the ASDC central committee office in Diphu. Organised by the ASDC Youth Front (ASDC YF) and the KSA (Jemson Timung group), the march covered over 100 kilometres from Parokhuwa.

The movement aims to pressure the Union Government into initiating tripartite talks involving the Ministry of Home Affairs and all legitimate stakeholders of the region.

The marchers began their journey on February 1, facing significant physical and logistical hurdles. Notably, the protesters had to navigate village routes after police restricted their use of the National Highway. Despite these challenges, the group maintained discipline as they passed through

Dokmoka, Phuloni, Bokolia, Silbhetta, Longnit and Manja Town.

"The members endured pain and obstacles, even putting their lives at risk, to ensure the aspirations of Karbi Anglong are heard," stated leaders during the final leg of the march. Addressing media persons at the ASDC Central Committee office, Gulson Bey, president of the ASDC Youth Front, accused both the BJP and Congress of betraying the trust of the people in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao for over 15 years.

Criticising the ruling dispensation, ASDC YF accused the BJP of misleading the public by claiming talks are already underway in New Delhi while allegedly excluding major stakeholders. The Congress Party was criticised for failing to raise the Autonomous State issue in Parliament and the State Assembly despite having 99 MPs and 22 MLAs, respectively.

### West KA to set up EVM demonstration centres for voter awareness

**HT Correspondent**  
**HAMREN, Feb 5:** The District Administration of West Karbi Anglong will set up EVM Demonstration Centres (EDCs) for both Legislative Assembly Constituencies to enhance voter awareness and confidence.

The centres will start functioning from 11:00 AM on January 7, 2026, at the Office of the District Commissioner, Hamren and the Donka Revenue Circle Office. Voters can familiarise themselves with the functioning of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs).

In addition to the static centres, mobile EVM demonstration vans—one for each constituency will visit fairs, markets, selected polling station locations and other public places across the district, covering 111-Rongkhang (ST) and 112-Amri (ST) constituencies.

The initiative aims to educate voters on the EVM voting process, address doubts and misconceptions and encourage informed participation in the upcoming Assam Legislative Assembly elections. The District Administration urged the public to actively participate in the demonstrations and exercise their democratic right to vote.

### NFR sets record with rooftop solar, expands electric traction

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 5:** Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has achieved a record 9.27 MWP rooftop solar capacity during FY 2025-26, a 373% increase over the previous year, bringing its cumulative solar capacity to 18.4 MWP.

In electric traction, TRIP inspection sheds at New Jalpaiguri and Dibrugarh were commissioned to enhance locomotive inspections and 31 train pairs were converted from diesel to full electric traction, saving 26 diesel locomotives. KAVACH, the indigenous automatic train protection system, has been installed in 81 of 285 electric locomotives. For safety and training, NFR introduced a working model of the Automatic Block System at New Bongaigaon and sectional videography at Katihar, Alipurduar, Rangia and Tinsukia divisions to improve route learning and situational awareness.

### MDA campaign against filariasis from Feb 10 in Rangapara tea gardens



HT Correspondent

**TEZPUR, Feb 5:** A coordination meeting on Mass Drug Administration (MDA) for elimination of lymphatic filariasis, organised by the National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme (NVBDCP), Sonitpur, was held on Wednesday under the chairmanship of District Commissioner Ananda Kumar Das at the DC's conference hall here.

The meeting was attended by Rangapara Municipal Board chairperson Hari Sadhan Das, Joint Director of Health Services, Sonitpur, Dr Biman Sharma, representatives and medical officers of concerned tea garden managements, block development officers, officials of the National Health Mission (NHM), Sonitpur and other officials from the health department and line departments. During the meeting, District Vector Borne Disease Consultant (DVBDC), Sonitpur, Baharul Islam informed that 11 tea gardens under Rangapara have been identified for the MDA campaign, targeting around 1.40 lakh eligible beneficiaries. The campaign will be conducted from February 10 to 19, with booth-based drug distribution during the first three days.

It was also informed that house-to-house drug administration will be carried out throughout the campaign period by teams comprising ASHA and Anganwadi workers. All eligible persons above two years of age will be covered under the programme and beneficiaries were advised not to consume DEC tablets on an empty stomach.

The inauguration of the MDA campaign is scheduled to be held on February 10 at Naharani Tea Estate Hospital, Rangapara.

Emphasising the need for coordinated efforts, the district commissioner urged all stakeholders to work together to ensure the effective implementation of the campaign for elimination of lymphatic filariasis.

### Gyan Bharati Public School students excel in International Olympiads

**HT Correspondent**  
**BISWANATH CHARALI, Feb 5:** Students of Gyan Bharati Public School, Sootea, shone at the International Mathematics and English Olympiads organised by the International Olympiad Foundation (IOF), New Delhi in association with the Institute of Company Secretaries of India in December 2025.

A total of 46 students from Classes 6 to 10 appeared in the Mathematics Olympiad. Bidisha Saikia of Class 6 won a Silver medal, while Panya Madhu

Boruah (Class 6), Masum Khan and Nisthajita Hazarika (Class 7), and Anuska Kalita (Class 8) won Bronze medals.

In the English Olympiad, 36 students participated. Four students—Sudiksha Devi (Class 6), Nimisha Hazarika (Class 8), Panya Madhu Boruah (Class 6) and Bhargav Pritom Sandilya (Class 7)—won Gold medals. Banya Saikia (Class 9) won Silver and Panchi Katak (Class 8), Sidhi Prasad (Class 6), Mayur Hazarika and Anmol Chetry (Class 7) won Bronze medals.

### Manas hosts international training on captive elephant welfare

HELP Foundation leads four-day programme for mahouts from Manas and Kaziranga

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 5:** Manas National Park and Tiger Reserve (MNP & TR) has successfully conducted a four-day international training programme aimed at improving the management and welfare of captive Asian elephants at the park in Baksa district.

The programme, which concluded on Wednesday, brought together experts from the Australian charity Human Elephant Learning Programs (HELP) Foundation, along with teams from Kaziranga National Park and the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI). With nearly one-third of the world's critically endangered Asian elephant population living in captivity, the training focused on implementing science-based and ethical management practices. The HELP Foundation team worked closely with specially selected mahouts from Manas and Kaziranga, promoting welfare-friendly methods that replace traditional techniques with positive, stress-free veterinary procedures for both elephants and medical staff.



Dr Andrew McLean, lead trainer from the HELP Foundation, expressed satisfaction with the progress made during the programme. "We are pleased to work with the staff from Kaziranga and Manas National Parks. Their commitment to elephant welfare is authentic and commendable. We last worked with these mahouts several years ago, and their retention of the principles is

excellent," he said. Highlighting Manas National Park's role in global conservation initiatives, Dr C Ramesh, IFS, Field Director of Manas National Park, said the park is proud to be at the forefront of elephant welfare by adopting world-leading, scientifically backed methods. He added that the initiative reflects the positive outcomes of sustained collaboration among conservation partners. The programme also highlighted the strong partnership between Australia and India in wildlife conservation. Mark Trayling, chair of the HELP Foundation, said both countries share a common goal of ensuring the best possible lives for their wildlife and described Manas as an internationally recognised conservation success story.

The training initiative adds to the "Manas success story", complementing the park's achievements in increasing rhino and tiger populations, while ensuring that its captive elephants, vital to forest patrolling and management are cared for under the highest global standards of ethics and welfare.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

No one is perfect – that's why pencils have erasers.  
- Wolfgang Riebe

## New government in Manipur

NDA legislature party leader Y Khemchand Singh, a veteran politician, administrator and Taekwondo black belt, was sworn in as the chief minister of Manipur on Wednesday. Biren Singh relinquished the post on February 9 last year amid rumblings within the state BJP seeking a change of leadership in strife-torn Manipur. Nemcha Kipgen, who belongs to the Kuki community, and Naga People's Front legislator L Dikho took oath as the deputy chief ministers. BJP's Govindas Konhoujam and K Loken Singh of NPP were also sworn in as ministers. Kipgen took oath virtually from Manipur Bhavan in New Delhi. However, there are indications of a split in the Kuki-Zo MLA group, although numerically that won't stand in the way of ministry formation. Political activity in New Delhi involving a majority of the NDA MLAs and the Union home ministry's administrative initiatives on February 3 helped in working out an arrangement under which BJP's Meitei leader of standing Y Khemchand Singh, who is a former Speaker, an ex-minister and a graduate in martial art, "emerged as the most acceptable" legislature party leader. Kuki BJP MLA and a former minister and more importantly a woman Nemcha Kipgen made deputy chief minister. There are 10 Kuki MLAs, of whom seven belong to BJP and Tuesday's meeting was attended by five of them, which signalled dissent in the Kuki MLA group. The possibility of there being one more deputy chief minister from the National People's Party (NPP), which is a partner in the NDA coalition, is also very much there.

The choice of Meitei leader Khemchand, Kuki leader Kipgen and the BJP leadership's readiness to offer a deputy chief minister's post to NPP lend themselves to interesting interpretations. For Khemchand, it is a recognition of his efforts over the past several months to reach out to the Kuki-Zos. Recently, he had travelled to two Kuki villages, Litan in Ukhrul and Chassad in Kamjong, both of which are Naga majority Hill districts. On that occasion, he also visited the Kuki relief camp at Litan Sareinkhong Baptist Church and interacted with the inmates there. Secondly and of considerable political import is BJP's decision to not consider former chief minister and a Meitei veteran N Biren Singh for a fresh innings as CM.

The persistent Kuki-Zo demand for a separate administrative mechanism in the format of a Union Territory with legislature can be traced to this feeling. Kipgen's choice for a deputy chief minister's post is clearly an attempt to pacify the aggrieved Kuki-Zos and helps BJP in claiming credit for elevating a woman to a politically important position in this backward north-eastern state.

## Union Budget 2026-27: Redefining the Northeast's development horizon

The Union Budget for 2026-27 marks a significant moment for India's Northeastern region, positioning it not merely as a peripheral beneficiary of national growth but as an integral engine of India's future development. Presented on February 1, 2026, by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the budget outlines a reform-oriented roadmap that seeks to balance infrastructure expansion, human capital development, ecological sustainability, and cultural preservation. While framed within a broader national growth strategy, the budget carries particular importance for the Northeast, a region that is strategically located, culturally rich, and economically emerging, yet historically underserved. Assam, as the largest economy in the region and a gateway connecting South and Southeast Asia, occupies a central place in this vision, reflecting the government's intent to integrate the Northeast more deeply into India's long-term economic and geopolitical framework.

A major highlight of the budget is the enhanced allocation for the Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region, known as DoNER, which has been increased to ₹ 6,812.30 crore for 2026-27 from ₹ 5,915 crore in the previous year. This year-on-year growth underscores sustained federal commitment and signals continuity rather than episodic attention. Beyond DoNER, the total investment envelope for the Northeast, cutting across central ministries, special schemes, and regional programs, has reached a record ₹ 11,486 crore. This unprecedented scale of funding reflects a shift in policy thinking, where the region is no longer approached through fragmented sectoral interventions but through integrated development planning that recognizes its unique geographical, social, and economic characteristics.

Fiscal devolution also features prominently in the budget's approach to strengthening the Northeast. The region's share in tax devolution has increased from 3.128 percent to 3.258 percent, enhancing the financial autonomy of Northeastern states and enabling them to undertake development projects tailored to local priorities. This increase is not merely symbolic, as it empowers state governments to improve infrastructure, social services, and employment opportunities without excessive dependence on centrally sponsored schemes. For Assam and its neighboring states, this enhanced fiscal space strengthens institutional capacity and reinforces cooperative federalism, which is essential for long-term stability and growth in a diverse and sensitive region.

Capital investment support under special assistance to states forms another cornerstone of the budget. Assam is set to benefit

significantly from the Centre's expanded capital support window of approximately ₹ 2 lakh crore, facilitating the acceleration of major infrastructure projects, urban renewal initiatives, and logistics development. Improved transportation corridors, upgraded urban infrastructure, and strengthened logistics networks are expected to enhance connectivity within the region and with the rest of India. This focus on capital expenditure reflects an understanding that sustainable growth in the Northeast requires strong physical foundations capable of supporting trade, mobility, and private investment.

One of the landmark announcements in the budget is the ₹ 500 crore allocation for the rehabilitation of former United Liberation Front of Assam cadres and their families. This initiative represents a rare convergence of economic policy and peace-building, as it aims to provide livelihoods, skill development, and social reintegration to individuals affected by decades of insurgency. By addressing long-standing socio-economic grievances and promoting peaceful livelihoods, the program seeks to convert a history of conflict into an opportunity for inclusive development. Complementary allocations under this umbrella include ₹ 200 crore for the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and ₹ 156 crore for the Bodoland Territorial Council, reinforcing decentralized governance and addressing the aspirations of indigenous and tribal communities.

The budget also prioritizes urban transformation, with a dedicated allocation of ₹ 5,000 crore for city development across the region. Cities such as Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Silchar, Imphal, and Agartala are identified as emerging urban hubs capable of driving regional growth. Funds are earmarked for public transport systems, waste management and sanitation, digital governance platforms, affordable housing, and smart infrastructure. By strengthening urban ecosystems, the budget aims to create local economic hubs that generate employment, reduce migration to metropolitan cities, and improve quality of life for urban and peri-urban populations.

Infrastructure and connectivity form the backbone of the Northeast's development strategy in the budget. Recognizing the region's historical isolation, the budget emphasizes multimodal connectivity through roads, railways, waterways, and digital networks. Strategic corridors extending toward northeastern borders are expected to facilitate trade, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges while also serving national security interests. Projects such as the Guwahati-Siliguri corridor, though nationally significant, are projected to yield substantial regional benefits by improving access to

markets and services. Strengthened connectivity is seen not only as an economic enabler but also as a social integrator that can bridge geographic and cultural divides.

DoNER's targeted infrastructure schemes further reinforce this emphasis. The Prime Minister's Development Initiative for the North East, with an allocation of ₹ 2,300 crore, provides flexible financing for region-specific projects in infrastructure, connectivity, and social development. Similarly, the North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme, with ₹ 2,500 crore earmarked, focuses on water supply, electrification, urban upgrades, logistics nodes, and last-mile connectivity. These initiatives are designed to address basic service gaps while laying the groundwork for future economic activity, particularly in remote and hilly areas where development challenges are most acute.

Agriculture, forestry, and rural livelihoods receive renewed attention in the budget, reflecting the ecological sensitivity and agrarian character of much of the Northeast. The growth narrative of the region is closely tied to its natural resources, and the budget recognizes this by promoting environmentally aligned agricultural practices. High-value crops such as organic produce and agarwood are identified as areas of special focus, supported by enhanced horticulture initiatives and market linkages. By promoting value addition, export potential, and sustainable resource use, the budget aims to increase rural incomes while preserving ecological balance.

Tourism and the cultural economy emerge as transformative sectors in the 2026-27 budget. The Northeast's rich heritage, diverse traditions, and natural beauty are positioned as key assets for economic growth. A dedicated framework is outlined to develop Buddhist circuit tourism across states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura. Infrastructure support for pilgrimage and meditation centers, accessible visitor services, digital cultural trails, and international linkages is expected to enhance the region's visibility on the global tourism map. By expanding tourism infrastructure, the budget seeks to generate employment in hospitality, transport, handicrafts, and local services, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Human capital development is another central pillar of the budget's vision for the Northeast. Investments in skilling and vocational training are designed to align local talent with emerging economic opportunities. Programs targeting youth aim to increase employability in services, improve digital literacy, and support specialized training for sectors such as tourism, healthcare, and cre-

ative industries. Enhanced skill financing and placement assistance are expected to reduce migration pressures by creating viable employment closer to home, thereby strengthening local economies and social cohesion.

Education and institutional support also receive expanded attention, particularly in remote and tribal areas. Improved access to quality education, digital learning platforms, and research capacity building are intended to enhance learning outcomes and local participation in emerging sectors. These measures reflect an understanding that long-term development depends on empowering communities with knowledge, skills, and institutional support rather than relying solely on physical infrastructure. Healthcare access represents a major social investment in the budget. The proposed upgrade of the National Mental Health Institute at Tezpur into a Regional Apex Institute marks a significant step toward addressing mental healthcare needs in the Northeast. Enhanced district and community hospitals, expanded telemedicine services, diagnostic facilities, and preventive care initiatives aim to reduce reliance on distant urban centers. By strengthening healthcare infrastructure, the budget seeks to improve quality of life while also building resilience in a region prone to natural disasters and social stress.

The role of micro, small, and medium enterprises is reinforced as a backbone of the Northeastern economy. The budget strengthens this sector through improved credit access, technology adoption support, market linkage programs, and startup facilitation. Entrepreneurship among youth and women is encouraged through targeted schemes that connect local production with digital marketplaces and logistics networks. The creative economy, encompassing handicrafts, textiles, cultural arts, and eco-tourism services, is positioned as a sustainable growth avenue that leverages traditional skills for modern markets.

Taken together, the Union Budget 2026-27 presents a comprehensive and forward-looking blueprint for the Northeast. It combines enhanced fiscal support, decentralized planning, infrastructure expansion, ecological sensitivity, and human development into a coherent strategy. For Assam and the wider region, the challenge now lies in effective implementation, institutional coordination, and transparent governance. If executed with consistency and cooperation between the Centre and states, the financial groundwork laid in this budget has the potential to transform the Northeast's development trajectory, turning historical disadvantages into economic opportunities and integrating the region more fully into India's growth story. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

## Patience as power: India turned tariff coercion into diplomatic leverage

By: Lalit Garg

In international politics and global trade, no agreement is confined merely to numbers or tariff percentages. Every such understanding reflects a nation's sovereignty, the firmness of its leadership, and the direction of its future. The recent trade consensus between India and the United States—under which the proposed 50 percent tariff has been reduced to 18 percent—must be viewed in this broader perspective. This development is not just an economic relief; it is a significant and far-reaching indicator of shifting global power equations and India's growing negotiating strength.

The proverb "better late than never" finds full relevance here. When the United States initially exerted pressure by imposing steep tariffs on Indian products, apprehensions were widespread that an emerging economy like India would eventually be forced to yield. Recent global trade history bears testimony to the fact that powerful nations often pursue their interests through pressure tactics. However, the fact that the trade process initiated in February 2025 has moved in a positive direction by February 2026 clearly shows that India neither acted in haste nor compromised its national interests. It took time, assessed circumstances carefully, and ultimately secured a balanced and dignified outcome.

The immediate impact of reducing tariffs from 50 percent to 18 percent was visible in the business world and stock markets. Investor confidence revived, exporters received relief, and positive market signals emerged. Yet, the true significance of this decision extends far beyond these short-term effects. It confirms that India is no longer merely a rule-follower but has emerged as a nation that actively participates in shaping and redefining global trade rules. A superpower like the United States softening its stance is a direct reflection of India's economic strength, strategic patience, and political self-confidence. One of the most defining features of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy has been dialogue without submission to pressure. Whether in defense cooperation, energy security, or trade negotiations, India has consistently moved forward with its national interests at the core. In this trade agreement as well, India presented its terms clearly—without yielding, without faltering, and without appearing weak. This is precisely why the United States was eventually compelled to revise its proposals. This outcome represents not merely a trade victory, but an example of political maturity and resolute leadership. The agreement is expected to enhance the global competitiveness of Indian industries. Lower tariffs mean Indian products will gain stronger access to the American market, increasing their reach and providing fresh momentum to the "Make in India" initiative. Sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, agriculture-based products, and emerging technology industries are likely to benefit significantly in the long term. India is no longer just a source of cheap labor or raw materials; it is steadily evolving into an economy focused on value-added manufacturing and innovation.

Prime Minister Modi's description of this India-US trade agreement as the "outcome of sustained patience," delivered with calm confidence during a parliamentary party meeting, encapsulates his diplomatic approach. This agreement was not the result of any sudden development but of a year-long process involving strategic restraint, expanded al-

ternatives, and balanced dialogue. Despite criticism from the opposition and immediate pressures, the government-maintained composure, fully aware that haste in global trade and geopolitics often proves costly.

America's eventual flexibility was not born of emotional friendship but of strategic necessity. Over the past year, India clearly demonstrated that it had multiple options—energy cooperation with Russia, a historic free trade agreement with the European Union, and an increasingly vital role in global supply chains. Had Washington persisted with unilateral pressure, American companies would have risked losing access to one of the world's fastest-growing large markets. Dramatic claims by Donald Trump regarding \$500 billion in imports, zero tariffs, and abandoning Russian oil were part of this pressure strategy—claims that India neither publicly contested nor accepted. Modi's silence on these assertions reflected India's view of the situation not as a final confrontation but as a phase of directional recalibration.

In contrast, the Indian opposition exposed its political impatience and strategic immaturity throughout this episode. It attempted to corner the government by framing the tariff issue in terms of immediate gains and losses, failing to grasp that international trade negotiations demand time, patience, and multi-layered calculations. The opposition overlooked the fact that in diplomacy, waiting is sometimes the most decisive move, not a retreat. Today, as the United States abandons its rigid stance and India stands once again at the forefront of global competition, it is evident that Modi's policy was not only pressure-free but deeply far-sighted. This approach is positioning India as a confident, influential power capable of setting the terms of engagement rather than merely accepting them.

A crucial dimension of this development is that it signals the decline of pressure-driven politics in global trade. For decades, large economies have used tariffs, sanctions, and policy coercion to force smaller or emerging nations into submission. India has not only challenged this pattern but has proven that confidence, economic capability, and political will can transform pressure into constructive dialogue. In the context of India-US relations, this agreement also marks the emergence of a new political framework. The relationship is no longer confined to strategic or defense cooperation; it is advancing toward a higher level of economic partnership. Its impact will extend beyond the two nations, strengthening the foundations of a multipolar global order. The world is gradually recognizing that future leadership will not rest with a single power but will emerge through balanced partnerships—and India is prepared to play a central role in that evolving architecture.

Undoubtedly, this trade agreement is the product of mature diplomacy and visionary leadership. In the realms of international politics and global trade, decisions are never merely economic calculations; they are reflections of sovereignty, self-respect, and leadership maturity. A delayed but correct decision is far more valuable than a hurried and flawed agreement. India exercised patience, preserved its dignity, and ultimately achieved results aligned with its national interests. Under Narendra Modi's leadership, India is not only secure but is moving confidently toward the future—and it is this confidence that fuels its ascent toward global power status. (The author is a journalist and columnist)

## Pariksha Pe Charcha 2026: Empowering students, transforming lives

By: Er Prabhat Kishore

Examinations are often a source of stress for students and their families. This is a common challenge faced by students of all ages, especially teenagers who are preparing for significant milestones such as board exams or competitive exams. The intense focus on academic performance, coupled with expectations from society and family, often leads to stress, anxiety, and depression, which impact mental health. To transform the narrative of exam-related stress, "Pariksha Pe Charcha (PPC)" has been initiated by Hon. Prime Minister on 16th February 2018 at Talkatora Stadium, New Delhi. This is the PM's annual interactive event, in which students, teachers, and parents from across the country and abroad join him to discuss exam stress and celebrate examinations as an Utsav and an integral part of life. The Prime minister shares valuable tips on various topics like how to take board and entrance exams, stress management, students' personal growth, career ambitions etc. Pariksha Pe Charcha (PPC) is the PM Modi's Masterclass on acting exams. It opens space for honest talk on preparation, pressure, and purpose. The event emphasizes innovative approaches to tackle exam-related anxiety, fostering a celebratory attitude towards learning and life. Society, teachers, and parents must collaborate to create an environment where students can thrive without undue stress. With the right approach, students can beat exam pressure and unleash their full potential. The PPC programme has witnessed extraordinary growth since its launch in 2018. The 1st edition of PPC (on 16th February, 2018 with 22000 participants), the 2nd edition (on 29th January, 2019 with 1.03 lakh participants), the 3rd edition (on 20th January, 2020 with 2.63 lakh registrations), the 4th edition (on 7th April 2021 through virtual connection during COVID19 pandemic—14.02 lakh registrations, including 10.5 lakh students, 2.6 lakh teachers and 92 thousand parents), the 5th edition (on 1st April, 2022 with 15.73 lakh registrations, including 12.12 students, 2.71 lakh teachers and 90 thousand parents/1203553 participants, including 969836 students, 47200 teachers and 186517 parents), the 6th edition (on 27th January, 2023 with 38.79 lakh registrations, including 31.24 lakh students, 5.60 lakh teachers, 1.95 lakh parents /848991 participants or viewers, including 718110 students, 42337 teachers, 88544 parents), the 7th edition (on 29th January, 2024 with 2.2624 Crore registrations including 2.0562 Crore students, 14.93 lakh teachers and 5.69 lakh parents), and the 8th edition (on 10th February, 2025 with 35668817 registrations) has created history in the education sector across the world.

In 2025, PPC 8.0 has set a remarkable Guinness World Record as students from 245 countries, teachers from 153 countries and parents from 149 countries participated in the event. It reflects the event's immense popularity and relevance.

Over the years, PPC has evolved into an opportunity that aims to transform exam-related stress into positive energy. By offering real questions and offering actionable solutions,

the PM has bridged the gap between policy and practice, empowering students to thrive under pressure. The event's inclusivity, digital reach, and innovative approach ensure its continued success as a cornerstone of student engagement in Bharat. With each passing year, PPC reinforces the message that exams are not the end but a beginning.

The 9th edition of the PPC is scheduled to be held on 6th February 2026. To select participants, an online Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) competition has been conducted on the MyGov Portal from 1st December 2025 to 11th January 2026 for students of classes 6 to 12, teachers and parents. Students from all types of management schools i.e. Govt schools, Kendriya Vidyalayas, Sainik schools, Eklayva Model Residential schools, CBSE schools have participated in the event.

The competition is the mode through which students, teachers and parents has been invited to take part in the PPC programme. The themes of the event include "Make Exams a Celebration", "Contribution of Our Freedom Fighters", "Save the Environment", and "Clean India". Selected questions of participants, shortlisted by NCERT, will feature in the programme. Selected students will get an opportunity to directly participate in the PPC event with PM and interact with him. Each participant will get a specially designed certificate of Participation. 2500 participants will get PPC Kit by the Education Ministry, Government of India. 10 Exam-Warriors will get chance to visit PM house.

High enrolment States had tried for registration of at least 50% of the class 6 to 12 enrolment, whereas other States/UTs & ABs should set target of 100% registration of class 6-12 students. All teachers of class 6 to 12 was to be reached out. People must join hands in celebrating the Utsav of examination "Pariksha Pe Charcha" as envisioned by our Honorable Prime Minister in order to make learning more joyful and meaningful for our future nation builders. Along with students, society, family, and teachers must put exam in right perspective rather than making it a life and death situation punctuated by undue stress and pressure. Pariksha Pe Charcha is an interactive initiative of the Prime Minister that provides a vibrant platform for students, teachers, and parents to engage on examinations, stress management, and related aspects of life, with the aim of transforming examination-related stress into a celebration of learning. It is organized annually to provide a platform for discussions on examinations, preparation strategies, and related issues.

The event is conducted ahead of the board and competitive examinations season and aims to address the concerns raised by students and other stakeholders. It opens space for honest talk on 3 Ps- Preparation, Pressure and Purpose. Pariksha Pe Charcha has evolved as a global event, which is evident from the fact that PPC 8.0 saw participation from students in over 245 countries, teachers from 159 countries, and parents from 149 countries. For PPC 9.0, 41756407 students, 2477885 teachers and 612716 parents of Bharatvarsha have registered themselves, while 69874 students from 245 other coun-

tries, 54448 teachers from 171 countries and 2135 parents from 170 countries has registered themselves to be part of the event.

The event has expanded steadily from around 22,000 in PPC 1.0 in 2018 to 3,56,68,817 registrations in PPC 8.0 in 2025. PPC 8.0 edition in 2025 was recognized by Guinness World Records for recording 3,56,68,817 registrations. PPC 9.0 edition in 2026 has surpassed last year's Record with 4,49,24,465 online participant registrations.

Out of total 614851 parent registrations, 98553 parents are of class-6 children, 87731 of class-7 children, 93714 of class-8 children, 100940 of class-9 children, 97711 of class-10 children, 66530 of class-11 and 69672 parents are of class-12 children. 64.33% of parents are male while only 35.59 % of parents are female. Out of total 2483333 teachers' registration, 201261 teachers are from 18-25 age group, 616991 from 25-35 age group, 806605 from 35-45 age group, 627302 from 45-55 age group and 229124 are from 55-65 age group. 48.21% of teachers are male while 51.79 % of teachers are female.

Out of total 41826281 student registrations, 18.83% students have self-registration, while 81.17% students have registered themselves through teachers. 48.81% of the children are boys while 51.16% are girls. The higher representation of female students as well as female teachers reflects women empowerment in a changing Bharat. Age-wise participation of children is as follows:- Below 12 years-5980242, between 12 to 14 years-12240569, between 14 to 16 years-12931333, between 16 to 18 years-8647327, between 18 to 20 years-1756772 and above 20 years -268237 students. Class-wise child registration is as - 6th class - 6063993, 7th class - 6241224, 8th class- 6428028, 9th class - 7281112, 10th class - 6745084, 11th class-4604336, and 12th class -4462503. Uttar Pradesh stood first in overall registration as well as student registration, while Bihar stood second in overall registration and first in teacher registration. Chhattisgarh stood first in parent registration. As part of the annual run-up to Pariksha Pe Charcha, a series of student-centric engagements are organized for students in schools from 12th January (Swami Vivekanand Jayanti celebrated as the National Youth Day) to 23rd January, 2026 (Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Jayanti celebrated as the Parakram Diwas), such as Swadesh Sankalp Daud-Students Run/Walk for Self-Reliance, Vande Mataram- Manta of Freedom, Indigenous Games Sessions, Meme Creation, Nukkad Natak on Exam and Life Skills, Short Videos & Student Testimonials, Student Anchor- Student Guest interactive Sessions, Yoga-cum Meditation Sessions, Poetry and Songs by Students, Poster Making Activities, Quiz on Operation Sindoor, etc. Altogether 36 Students have been selected, one each from every State/UTs, to interact with Prime Minister. Prime Minister's interaction with students on Pariksha Pe Charcha is scheduled to be on AIR on 6th February 2026 at 10.00 AM.

The "Pariksha Pe Charcha" event has evolved into a nationwide Jan Andolan, encouraging students and youth to approach examinations with confidence and positivity and to celebrate the exam season as an Utsav. (The author is an engineer and academician)

# Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha - The largest religious organisation

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuvan

Founded on the spiritual philosophy and egalitarian social system of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva, the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha is not merely confined to being a religious institution; it is a vast and profound flow of consciousness in the social life of Assam. Born during a critical period of crisis for the culture, tradition, and spiritual values of the Assamese nation, the relentless movement for social reform and human development that this organization has carried out over the last nine decades has few parallels in world history. The historical context in which the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha was born in the 1930s was a juncture for Assamese society. Amidst the social chaos, religious anarchy, and erosion of traditional values spreading across the Brahmaputra Valley, the need for a strong platform to give correct direction to society was acutely felt. Formed with the noble efforts of a few philanthropists with the aim of fulfilling that necessity, this Sangha has today assumed the form of a massive giant tree. Currently, it has given a new dimension to the identity of the Assamese people on the global stage. A theoretical and thoughtful analysis of the working method, philosophy, and far-reaching impact of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha reveals that it is truly a way of life that has become one with the soul of Assamese society.

The most important and remarkable aspect of the constitution and management method of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha is the pure democratic character inherent within it. It is observed in most religious institutions of the world that the position of the religious guru or head remains hereditary or reserved for a specific upper class. However, the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has completely debunked this traditional and feudal concept to introduce a novel model

of democracy in the religious sphere. There is no place for lineage glory or aristocracy here; only devotion, merit, and a mindset of social service are considered the yardsticks of excellence. Even a person coming from a family of the lowest strata of society, if he acquires knowledge of the scriptures and dedicates himself to the welfare of society, can ascend to the highest position of this vast organization. This system proves that in the realm of spirituality, all humans are equal and the right to receive God's blessing is not determined by birth, but rather by deeds. This process of creating leadership through elections and nominations at every level, starting from the primary branches at the village level to the district and central levels, has created a new trend of leadership in Assamese society. As a result, people at the grassroots level of society have also received the opportunity to become partners in managing a large organization, which has enhanced their self-confidence and social dignity.

The stance adopted by the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha regarding spiritual philosophy is extremely clear and scientific. The core theory of the 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' propagated by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva is single-minded devotion to one God and envisioning the presence of that God in all living beings of the universe. Many superstitions, evil customs, and unnecessary rituals that had entered society over the course of time had polluted this pure philosophy. People had deviated from the main spiritual goal by indulging in sacrifices, ostentation, and meaningless activities in the name of religion. The Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha stood against these erroneous concepts of society with great courage and logic and shouldered the responsibility of restoring and establishing Sankaradeva's original philosophy in society. The Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha believes that religion does not mean fear



or blind devotion; religion is a disciplined and holy system of living. Merely sitting on the floor of the Namghar and singing hymns is not religion; rather, practicing qualities like truth, non-violence, and benevolence in daily life is true religion. The initiated members of the Sankaradeva Sangha go to every corner of society and propagate through religious discussion meetings that one does not need to wander in forests or perform expensive worship rituals to find God; the name chanted with a pure mind and devotion is the path to salvation. This simple yet profound philosophy has heralded a renaissance in the spiritual world of Assam.

It is not enough to merely praise the contribution of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha in the field of social reform and the propagation of humanism; there is a need to understand it deeply. The greatest curse of the Indian social system is the caste system and untouchability. In Assam too, this disease had weakened the society at various times. But the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has declared a crusade against this discrimination since its inception. In the eyes of the Sangha, everyone from Brahmins to people of the most backward classes of society is equal. When millions of people forget caste, creed, and color to sit together and partake of prasada or participate in congregational prayers at the vast sessions of the Sangha, a rare scene of humanity is witnessed there. This collectiveness has played a crucial role in breaking down the walls of division from society. Furthermore, the Sangha has played the role of a strict guardian in preventing the moral degradation of society. Public opinion built by the Sangha against social evils like drug abuse, gambling, and the dowry system is very strong. In areas where the influence of the Sangha is greater, the crime rate and family unrest are seen to be comparatively lower. The Sangha not only imparts religious education but also creates the necessary civic awareness to build a healthy, strong, and clean society. The model of economic self-reliance of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha is a subject of research for sociology and economics. How a massive organization, with which millions of people are associated, survives without taking any government funds or donations is an astonishing question. The answer lies within the Sangha's philosophy of 'Muthi Chau' and 'Dharm Bharal'. Cherishing the eternal tradition of Assamese society, the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha teaches every family to save a handful of rice or its equivalent value daily for the Sangha. When this small sacrifice is accumulated in a collective form, it transforms into a huge fund. This

economic model not only makes the Sangha self-reliant but also awakens a sense of ownership in the minds of its members. Every member feels that there is a contribution of their own in the laying of every brick of the Sangha. This self-reliant economy has made it unnecessary for the Sangha to beg or bow its head before anyone, as a result of which the Sangha can always express its opinion fearlessly and impartially. Providing scholarships to poor students of society, offering medical aid, and helping the distressed during disasters—all these works have become possible through this indigenous fund.

The stream of intellectual movement created by the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha in the field of education and literature-culture has cast a far-reaching impact on the construction of the nation's future. A society cannot run on emotions alone; for that, the foundation of knowledge and logic needs to be solid. Realizing this truth, the Sangha has laid special emphasis on education. Through the establishment of Sankaradeva University, the Sangha has opened the doors to higher education and research. The contribution of the Sangha in the field of literature is also incomparable. The massive mission started by the Sangha to recover, preserve, and publish old manuscripts after preparing correct texts has enriched the treasury of Assamese literature. The mouthpieces and other publications of the Sangha have built an environment of healthy intellectual practice in society. The role of the Sangha is also pioneering in the practice and propagation of Sankar art and culture. The Satriya dance and Borgeet, which were once confined within the four walls of the Sattras, have today shone on the world stage due to the efforts of the Sangha. The Sangha has made society understand that culture is not merely a medium of entertain-

ment, but is indeed a part of spiritual practice. In the context of the frustration and directionless state seen among the youth society in present times, the role of the 'Yuva Bahini' of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has become extremely relevant. At a time of intense aggression by Western consumerist culture, our younger generation is on the verge of losing its roots. At such a juncture, the Sangha is uniting the youth and giving them lessons in discipline, restraint, and social service. The role played by the members of the Yuva Bahini as volunteers not only in religious work but also during various crises of society is truly inspiring. Similarly, the contribution of the Sangha's 'Aimatri Sammilan' and 'Seva Bahini' in bringing women power to the mainstream of society cannot be denied. The dignity that Sankaradeva gave to women has been re-established by the Sangha. Women have been given the opportunity to lead in religious discussions, organizational activities, and social reform programs, rather than keeping them confined within the four walls of the house. As a result, the process of women's empowerment has accelerated, and the self-confidence of women in society has increased. The Sangha has adopted the philosophy that when the mother is cultured and spiritual, the entire family enjoys the benefits.

Today, the branches of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha have expanded not only to the villages of Assam but also to various parts of India and even abroad. The Sangha has acted as a powerful connecting link in uniting Assamese people living outside Assam for work and keeping their language, culture, and traditions alive among them. Representatives of the Sangha have participated in international religious conferences held in various countries of the world and presented the universal philosophy of Sankaradeva. Just as Sankaradeva established the Indian philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Ku-

tumbakam', meaning the whole world is one family, in Assamese society, the Sangha has presented it before the world community. Against the backdrop of violence, intolerance, and religious polarization currently prevailing in the world, the relevance of Sankaradeva's philosophy of liberalism and harmony has increased manifold. The Sangha has endeavored to illuminate the name of Assam on the bosom of the world with that message.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha is not only the largest religious organization in Assam; it is an unsleeping sentinel and the conscience of Assamese national life. The Sangha has been bearing the heavy responsibility of keeping alive the dream of a new society that Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva saw in the fifteenth century and translating it into reality in the twenty-first century. Even amidst political instability, social conflict, and economic uncertainty, the Sangha has kept the Assamese people bound by a cord of unity and kept the lamp of hope burning. It has taught us that religion does not mean running away from life, but rather, dedicating oneself to the welfare of society while living within society is true religion. When the gathering of millions of devotees raises the sound of Hari-nam shaking the sky and air, there is not only religious emotion there; there is a cosmic energy that provides spiritual strength to the nation. May this journey of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha for human welfare and world peace be triumphant, and may the 95th Session of the Sangha held at the Jyoti Vishnu Samanway Kshetra in the historic Jamugurihat be successful in every way. That is our earnest desire. (The author is the recipient of the 'Yuba Lekhak Samman - 2025' from the Government of Assam. He can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com)

## The 95th Sankar Sangha Conference at Jamugurihat

By: Satvabrat Borah

The Jyoti Vishnu Samanway Kshetra at Jamugurihat is slowly transforming into a living space of faith, service, and spiritual anticipation. From the 6th of February, for three continuous days, this sacred ground will host the 95th State Conference of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, an event that goes far beyond the idea of a routine organisational gathering. It is becoming a collective spiritual experience, one that draws together devotion, culture, discipline, and the shared emotional inheritance of the Assamese people.

As the days draw closer, the atmosphere across Jamugurihat has taken on a distinct rhythm. Roads are busier, conversations more animated, and faces reflect a quiet pride mixed with excitement. Everywhere one looks, there is movement with purpose. Volunteers walk briskly with tools and plans in hand, elders discuss arrangements with calm authority, and young people offer their energy with a sense of belonging. The entire region seems to be breathing in unison, preparing itself for a moment that carries both historical weight and spiritual depth.

For generations, the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has remained inseparable from the social, cultural, and religious life of Assam. Its state conferences have always been more than assemblies of delegates or discussions on organisational matters. They are occasions where ideals are revisited, faith is renewed, and collective conscience is awakened. The 95th edition holds special significance simply because it represents continuity. Ninety five chapters of commitment, service, and spiritual discipline have led to this moment, and that legacy is deeply felt in every preparation underway.

Jamugurihat itself appears reborn in anticipation. The Jyoti Vishnu Samanway Kshetra, surrounded by pathways, prayer spaces, and temporary structures, has become a hive of activity. From early morning until late into the night, the area remains alive with coordinated effort. The organising committee and various branch committees have been working relentlessly, often without rest, driven by devotion rather than obligation. Some oversee the construction of the main stage, ensuring it reflects both dignity and simplicity. Others focus on accommodation, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, and food arrangements. Each task, no matter how small, is treated as sacred duty.

What stands out most clearly amid this organised intensity is the shared sense of responsibility. There is no loud assertion of authority, no visible competition for credit. Instead, there is quiet cooperation, an understanding that this event belongs to everyone. This collective mindset mirrors the very philosophy preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva, where service to society is seen as an extension of devotion itself. One of the most remarkable aspects of this conference is the massive accommodation facility being created for nearly fifteen thousand members of the central service corps. Providing shelter to such a large number of volunteers in an orderly, clean, and dignified manner is no small task. Yet, what might seem overwhelming has been embraced as an opportunity for service. The camps are being constructed with care, ensuring comfort while main-

taining discipline. More than physical shelters, these camps are expected to become living examples of fraternity, self control, and shared purpose.

The spirit of innovation blended with emotion finds expression in the construction of a special bridge named Mayabini. Built to ease the movement of volunteers between the accommodation camps and the dining areas, the bridge carries meaning beyond its functional role. Dedicated to the memory of the beloved Assamese artist Zubeen Garg, it stands as an emotional tribute. For many, Zubeen Garg's music has always served as a bridge between hearts, between pain and hope, between tradition and modern expression. Naming the bridge Mayavini transforms it into a symbol of emotional continuity, much like his songs that still resonate deeply within the collective consciousness of Assam.

The conference itself will unfold over three days filled with prayer, discussion, music, and reflection. Religious discourses, naam kirtan, cultural performances, organisational meetings, and social discussions will collectively shape the experience. The space will echo with devotion while also encouraging dialogue on contemporary challenges faced by society. Yet among all scheduled events, the flag hoisting ceremony on the morning of 8th February at nine o'clock carries exceptional symbolic weight. The act of hoisting the flag of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha represents renewed commitment to its ideals of equality, compassion, and moral responsibility. The ceremony will be performed by senior officer bearer Bhubendra Nath Deka, marking a moment of collective resolve.

This year, the cultural dimension of the flag hoisting ceremony is being envisioned on an unprecedented scale. To commemorate the 95th conference, ninety five gayan bayan artists will perform together in a synchronized presentation. Organised under the initiative of the Tezpur district cultural wing, this collective performance is expected to become a historic visual and spiritual moment. Gayan bayan is not merely a musical tradition. It is the rhythmic expression of devotion, discipline, and spiritual concentration rooted in the Vaishnavite heritage of Assam. Seeing ninety five artists perform together is likely to leave a lasting imprint on all who witness it.

The preparation for this grand performance has been meticulous. Artists from across the Tezpur district have been undergoing regular training sessions at the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha regional kirtan hall in Jamugurihat. These sessions are not limited to musical practice alone. They have evolved into spaces where discipline, coordination, humility, and cultural responsibility are taught and reinforced. In many ways, these rehearsals reflect the broader purpose of the conference itself, which is to nurture values alongside tradition.

Equally impressive is the work being undertaken by the arch construction committee. Day and night, they are engaged in building a massive main gateway measuring one hundred and six feet in length and twenty eight feet in height. This gateway is being designed not only as an entrance but as a visual narrative. Alongside depictions of Srimanta Sankaradeva's literary

and cultural creations, elements of the district's unique heritage and traditions are being carefully incorporated. In addition to the main gateway, four large arches and nearly thirty additional decorative gateways are being erected across the region, bringing the total number to thirty four. Together, they transform the landscape into a celebratory corridor of faith and identity.

Beyond infrastructure and programs, the emotional participation of the local population adds a deeper layer of meaning to the event. Residents of Jamugurihat have embraced the conference as a collective responsibility. Homes are being prepared to welcome guests, families are contributing resources according to their capacity, and many individuals are volunteering their time and effort without expectation of recognition. Shops, transport services, and food providers are experiencing increased activity, creating a sense of economic vitality. Yet the most significant impact remains intangible. It lies in the renewed sense of unity and shared cultural pride.

State conferences of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha have historically played a vital role in shaping Assamese society. Time and again, they have reaffirmed the values of naam dharma, social equality, human dignity, and tolerance. In an age increasingly marked by speed, competition, and division, such gatherings offer rare moments of collective pause. They invite people to sit together, to listen deeply, and to reflect honestly. They remind individuals that progress without moral grounding risks losing its soul.

The upcoming 95th conference at the Jyoti Vishnu Samanway Kshetra promises to continue this legacy. Alongside religious observances, discussions will address social responsibility, the importance of education, ethical living, and cultural preservation. For younger generations, the conference offers an invaluable opportunity to connect with their roots. It allows them to experience tradition not as a distant concept but as a living, breathing practice shaped by community participation. In its essence, this conference stands as a symbol of harmony. It brings together religion and social consciousness, tradition and modern organisation, service and spirituality. The combined efforts of the organising committee, branch committees, volunteers, artists, trainers, and ordinary citizens reflect the strength of collective purpose. Each individual contribution, no matter how small, becomes part of a larger narrative of unity.

As Jamugurihat prepares to welcome thousands of participants, there is a shared hope that the 95th State Conference will not only succeed logistically but will also leave behind a lasting spiritual imprint. It is expected to claim a special place in history, remembered not merely for its scale or milestones but for the sincerity of its spirit. For future generations, it will stand as an example of how faith, culture, and community can come together to create something enduring and meaningful.

The Jyoti Vishnu Samanway Kshetra will not simply host an event. It will witness a convergence of hearts, values, and aspirations. And in that convergence, the timeless teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva will once again find renewed voice in the lives of the people.

## Unity in Sankaradeva's ideals: 95th Sangha Session

By: Lalit Nath

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva was a great social reformer, religious preacher and the life-force of Assamese culture. Drawing upon the devotional tradition of Sanatan Dharma, he initiated an unprecedented spiritual and cultural awakening in Assam. By assimilating the essence of the pan-Indian Bhakti movement and philosophical thought and harmoniously blending them with local folk culture, he shaped his religious philosophy to suit the soil of the land. Through the propagation of 'Eka-Sarana Harinama Dharma' or Neo-Vaishnavism, the great saint established unity in language, culture and ideals, making an invaluable contribution to forging a vast and united Assamese nation.

Eka-Sarana Namadharm emphasized building a liberal humanistic society beyond caste distinctions and religious narrowness. In his ideals, there was no place for religious bigotry or ethnic divisions, instead, he seated people from diverse castes—Brahmins, Shudras, Chandals and various tribal communities—on the same platform, spreading the message of equality, brotherhood and humanism. Due to this egalitarian outlook, luminaries such as Naga Narottam, Muslim Chand Sai, Goro Gobinda, Mising Paramananda, Brahmin Gopal Charan Dwija, Ram Saraswati, Bhattadeva, Ahom Narahari, Sutar Joyram, Bania Haridas, Jayantiya Madhai, Karbi Joyhari and Kaivarta Purnananda—altogether twenty-five Mahantas—sought refuge at his feet.

With the motto "Ek jati ek pran" he established equality and generosity in society. To give practical shape to this humanistic philosophy and unite people of all classes through devotion for social harmony, he established Namghars. Even today, the Namghars and Sattras he founded remain the democratic, cultural and spiritual nerve centers of Assamese society. In these Namghars, people from all castes, classes and religions participate equally in Hari-nama Kirtan, embodying Sankaradeva's ideal of "Ek jati ek pran" and fostering a unique tradition of equality, brotherhood and cultural unity in Assamese society.

Sankaradeva's ideals are not merely religious but a rare synthesis of language-literature, poetry, dance, painting, education, culture, songs, drama and humanity. QHis creative works and life philosophy have given the Assamese nation a distinct identity and a universal outlook. In Assam's current context, one of the most important ideals to be adopted by every Assamese is his invaluable contribution to the process of nation-building. In this regard, Jyotiprasad Agarwala's statement is noteworthy: "Today, the problems we Assamese face—with our hill brethren and newcomers—are the same problems our cultural guru faced. By blending Brajvali and Assamese in his songs and verses, he demonstrated a policy of linguistic harmony. In fine arts too, he showed a synthesis of indigenous Assamese treasures with those from other regions."

In today's era, amid various divisive forces, Mahapurusha Sankaradeva's universal humanism and the democratic essence of his culture have become more relevant and urgent than ever. The art and culture he created, along with his liberal vision, remain the backbone of Assamese society, preserving our cultural identity while inspiring harmony with all. His monotheistic Eka-Sarana Namadharm not only showed the path of spirituality but also eradicated caste and class divisions in society, propagating equality and unity.

To keep this ideal alive, the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha—one of the largest religious and cultural organizations in Northeast India—was formed. Established in 1930, this organization has been fulfilling its objectives by eradicating superstitions, blind beliefs and divisions from society through the propagation of the great saint's Bhakti Dharma, preservation of Assamese language, literature and culture, promotion of social unity and humanitarian service. The annual state sessions are a grand manifestation of these ideals. Through mass gatherings of lakhs of devotees, Harinama Kirtan, religious discourses, cultural programs and service activities, Sankaradeva's message spreads deep into society.

This year's 95th state session holds special signifi-

cance. It will be held on February 6, 7 and 8, 2026, at the 'Jyoti-Vishnu Samanway Kshetra' in the Dhalabil-Nahbari-Chaibari area of Jamugurihat, Sonitpur district. The name 'Jyoti-Vishnu Samanway' symbolizes the integration of the ideals of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava with Sankaradeva's Bhakti Dharma, highlighting the diversity and unity of Assam's cultural heritage. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's thoughts were deeply influenced by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva. He viewed Sankaradeva not merely as a religious guru but as the primary guide of Assamese cultural awakening. In his writings, Jyotiprasad clearly stated that Srimanta Sankaradeva was the first to introduce Assamese people to Krishna culture on a grand scale. After Sankaradeva, thinkers and litterateurs like Lakshminath Bezbarua and Jyotiprasad Agarwala deeply understood the significance of Krishna culture and enriched Assamese society and culture by giving new meaning to Sankaradeva's ideals in the modern context. Bishnuprasad Rava regarded Srimanta Sankaradeva as a great symbol of Assamese nationalism.

According to him, Sankaradeva's Bhakti Dharma and social reforms laid the foundation for Assamese unity, equality and brotherhood. Hence, Bishnu Rava composed many songs to awaken national consciousness and keep Sankaradeva's ideals alive, carrying messages of national unity, social reform and harmony among diverse ethnic groups. Naming the venue 'Jyoti-Vishnu Samanway Kshetra' aims to beautifully connect Sankaradeva's Bhakti Dharma with the cultural-national ideals of Kala Guru Bishnuprasad Rava and Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala, fostering deep brotherhood and unity among all ethnic groups, religions and communities. This nomenclature adds a new dimension to Assam's diverse cultural heritage, promoting religious harmony and overall national integration. A key attraction of these preparations is the shining example of religious harmony. Local people from various communities are enthusiastically contributing voluntary labour to the session preparations. Notably, over a hundred Muslim residents from Bakola and Chaibari villages in Jamugurihat have spontaneously participated in constructing shibirs and other works, including cutting thatch and bamboo.

This scene vividly brings Sankaradeva's ideals to life—there is no division in the name of religion, only service to humanity. Their cooperation is transforming the Jyoti-Vishnu Kshetra into a pilgrimage site of great convergence, proving that there is no place for division in Sankaradeva's Namadharm. In today's divided society, such scenes remind us that true religion always advances on the path of harmony. Under the supervision of Naduar MLA Padma Hazarika, 39 sub-committees are meticulously handling hospitality, food supply and services. The reception committee members are appealing for everyone's cooperation. The atmosphere at Jamugurihat's Jyoti-Vishnu Kshetra is now festive. Local people, along with devotees, youth and mothers from far and near, are wholeheartedly engaged. The vast Kirtan Griha, built with bamboo, thatch and local wood, resonates with the sweet echoes of Hari-nama, turning the entire Jyoti-Vishnu Kshetra into a second Vaikuntha Dham.

Massive mandaps, temporary shibirs, Mayabini Setu, dining halls, stages, a unique flag altar and other structures have already been completed. Sevaks and Sevikas are tirelessly offering service day and night. This session is not merely a religious event but a grand festival of Assam's cultural unity and diversity. The gathering of lakhs of devotees will showcase the capability and unity of the Assamese nation. For today's youth, such events are essential. Sankaradeva's ideals will inspire them anew—where service, devotion and harmony can build a healthy society.

Seeing the environment in Jamugurihat, one believes that Mahapurusha's Bhakti Dharma will continue to unite Assam in the future. Only when we all, irrespective of caste and religion, realize the immortal message of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva—

"Parar dharmak nihingsiba kadachit, kariba bhutak daya sakaran chitta." Can we build a healthy and strong Assamese society.

## Trump delivers blunt warning to Khamenei Iran, US agree to hold nuclear talks today

**DUBAI, Feb 5:** Nuclear talks between Iran and the United States will take place Friday in Oman, the Iranian foreign minister said, as tensions between the countries remain high following Tehran's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests last month.

The announcement by Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Wednesday came after hours of indications that the anticipated talks were faltering over changes in the format and content of the talks. US President Donald Trump, meanwhile, sent a blunt warning to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ahead of the talks.

"I would say he should be very worried," Trump said of Khamenei in an interview with NBC News.

Earlier Wednesday, a regional official said Iran was seeking a "different" type of meeting than that what had been proposed by Turkey, one focused exclusively on the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, with participation limited to Iran and the United States. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to brief the media.

The Trump administration confirmed the US will take part in high-level talks with Iran in Oman instead of Turkey as originally planned, according to a White House official. The official, who was not authorised to comment publicly and spoke on the condi-



tion of anonymity, said that several Arab and Muslim leaders urged the Trump administration on Wednesday not to walk away from talks even as Iranian officials pressed to narrow the scope of talks and change the venue for the negotiations. The official added that the White House remains "very skeptical" that the talks will be successful but has agreed to go along with the change in plans out of respect for allies in the region.

Tensions between the countries spiked after Trump suggested the US might use force against Iran in response to the crackdown on protesters. Trump also has been pushing Tehran for a deal to constrain its nuclear program.

**Rubio hopes talks will go beyond nuclear ones**  
Iran's reformist President Ma-

soud Pezeshkian on Tuesday said he had instructed the foreign minister to "pursue fair and equitable negotiations" with the US, in the first clear sign from Tehran it wants to try to negotiate. That signalled the move is supported by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say on all matters of state and previously dismissed any negotiations.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the US hoped to discuss a number of concerns beyond the nuclear issue, including discussions on Iran's ballistic missiles, support for proxy networks across the region and the "treatment of their own people."

"The leadership of Iran at the clerical level does not reflect the people of Iran. I know of no other country where there's a bigger dif-

ference between the people who lead the country and the people who live there," he told reporters.

Vice President J D Vance told "The Megyn Kelly Show" that diplomatic talks with Iran are challenging because of Tehran's political system, overseen by Khamenei.

"It's a very weird country to conduct diplomacy with when you can't even talk to the person who's in charge of the country. That makes all of this much more complicated, and it makes the whole situation much more absurd," Vance said, noting that Trump could speak directly by phone with the leaders of Russia, China or North Korea.

Vance said Trump's bottom line is that Iran cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon, asserting that other states in the region would quickly do the same.

Iran long has insisted its nuclear programme is peaceful. However, Iranian officials in recent years have increasingly threatened to pursue the bomb. Vance said he believed Trump would work to "accomplish what he can through non-military means. And if he feels like the military is the only option, then he's ultimately going to choose that option."

**Talks expected even after US shot down Iranian drone**

On Tuesday, a US Navy fighter jet shot down an Iranian drone that approached an American aircraft

carrier. Iranian fast boats from its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard also tried to stop a US-flagged ship in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf, the Navy said.

Iran did not immediately acknowledge either incident, which strained but apparently did not derail hopes for talks with the US.

On Wednesday, Iranian military chiefs visited a missile base in an attempt to highlight its military readiness after a 12-day war with Israel in June devastated Iran's air defences. The base holds the Khorramshahr missile, which has a range of more than 2,000 kilometres and was launched towards Israel during the war last year.

**Turkey urges diplomacy**

Also Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated Turkey's opposition to foreign intervention in neighbouring Iran, calling for the resolution of issues through dialogue. Turkey has been urgently working for the past week to bring the US and Iran to the negotiating table, and was previously expected to host the talks.

"We believe that external interventions involving our neighbour Iran would pose significant risks for the entire region," Erdogan said during a visit to Cairo. "Resolving issues with Iran, including the nuclear file, through diplomatic means is the most appropriate approach." (AP)

## Israel strikes Gaza, killing 24, and says an attack by militants wounded 1 soldier



**DEIR AL-BALAH(GAZA STRIP), Feb 5:** Israeli strikes pounded Gaza on Wednesday, killing at least 24 Palestinians, including two babies, and straining an already fragile ceasefire deal, hospital officials said. Israel said some of the strikes came in response to a militant attack on Israeli soldiers that seriously wounded one.

Deadly Israeli strikes have repeatedly disrupted the truce since it took effect on October 10. The escalating Palestinian toll has prompted many in Gaza to say it feels like the war is continuing unabated. Among the Palestinians killed Wednesday were at least five children, seven women and an on-duty paramedic, according to hospital officials.

"The genocidal war against our people in the Gaza Strip continues," said Dr Mohamed Abu Selmiya, director of Gaza City's Shifa Hospital, in a Facebook post. "Where is the ceasefire? Where are the mediators?"

Israel strongly denies accusations that it is committing genocide in Gaza. The war began on October 7, 2023, when thousands of Hamas-led militants poured into southern Israel after a surprise barrage of rockets, killing 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and abducting 251.

Deadly strikes have continued despite ceasefire deal  
The ceasefire pact attempted to halt the more than 2-year-old war between Israel and Hamas. While the heaviest fighting has subsided, it has been marred by repeated flare-ups of violence.

A total of 556 Palestinians have been killed by Israel and 1,500 wounded since the ceasefire went into effect, according to Gaza health officials. Those killed include 197 children and 82 women, according to the Gaza health ministry. Israel's military says four of its soldiers have been killed since the ceasefire began.

Israel's military has said its strikes are responses to Hamas violations of the ceasefire or militant attacks on its soldiers. Eight Arab and Muslim countries, including mediators Egypt and Qatar, recently condemned what they called Israel's "repeated violations" of the deal.

An Israeli military official, speaking on the condition of anonymity in line with military policy, told The Associated Press that Israel's latest attacks were in response to militant gunfire that badly wounded a reservist soldier Wednesday morning.

Early morning strike kills 11, including two children  
Israeli troops fired on a building in the Tuffah neighbourhood in north Gaza, killing at least 11 people, most from the same family, said Shifa Hospital, which received the bodies. The dead included two parents, their 10-day-old daughter Wateen Khabbaz, her 5-month-old cousin, Mira Khabbaz, and the children's grandmother.

The Israeli military said the attack was a real-time response to gunfire that targeted its soldiers.  
Mourners gathered in the courtyard of Shifa Hospital Wednesday morning for funeral prayers.

"What did this child do? ... Why are they killing the children?" asked a relative of the family, Mohammad Jaser.

"We don't understand why this is happening to us. What do we do? Where do we go? This isn't life," he said.

Two young children were seen kneeling at the body of their father as a woman told them to bid him farewell. A young girl kissed the dead man's cheeks. (AP)

## Trump, Xi discuss Iran in wide-ranging call as US presses China

**WASHINGTON, Feb 5:** President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he and Chinese President Xi Jinping discussed the situation in Iran in a wide-ranging call as the US administration pushes Beijing and others to further isolate Tehran.

Trump said the two leaders also discussed a broad range of other critical issues in the US-China relationship, including trade and Taiwan and his plans to visit Beijing in April.

"The relationship with China, and my personal relationship with President Xi, is an extremely good one, and we both realise how important it is to keep it that way," Trump said in a social media posting about the call.

The Chinese government, in a readout of the call, said the two leaders discussed major summits that both nations will host in the coming year that could present opportunities for them to meet. The Chinese statement, however, made no mention of Trump's expected April visit to Beijing.

Trump and Xi discussed Iran as tensions remain high between Washington and Tehran over Iran's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests last month. The US president says he is weighing taking military action against the Middle Eastern country.

Trump is also pressing Iran to make concessions over its nuclear programme, which his Republican administration says was already set back by the US bombing of three Iranian nuclear sites during the 12-day war Israel launched against Iran in June. White House officials on Tuesday said special envoy Steve Witkoff is slated to take part in talks with Iranian officials later this week.

Trump announced last month that the US would impose a 25 per cent tax on imports to the United

States from countries that do business with Iran. China is Iran's biggest trading partner.

Years of sanctions aimed at stopping Iran's nuclear programme have left the country isolated. But Tehran still did nearly USD 125 billion in international trade in 2024, including USD 32 billion with China, USD 28 billion with the United Arab Emirates and USD 17 billion with Turkey, the World Trade Organisation says.

China also made clear that it has no intention of stepping away from its long-term plans of reunification with Taiwan, a self-governing, democratic island operating independently from mainland China, though Beijing claims it as its own territory.

The Trump administration in December announced a massive package of arms sales to Taiwan valued at more than USD 10 billion that includes medium-range missiles, howitzers and drones. The move continues to draw an angry response from Beijing.

"Taiwan will never be allowed to separate from China," the Chinese government statement said. "The US must handle the issue of arms sales to Taiwan with prudence." Neither Trump nor the Chinese government in its statement raised whether the US leader's repeated calls for a US takeover of Greenland, the Arctic territory controlled by Denmark, came up during the conversation.

Trump has made his case for the US taking over the strategic island as necessary to rebuff Chinese and Russian encroachment, even as experts have repeatedly rebuffed Trump's claims of Chinese and Russian military forces lurking off Greenland's coastline. Denmark and Greenland as well as several European government leaders have pushed back against Trump's takeover calls. (AP)

## US seizes over 200 website domains tied to India-based orgs for running illegal online pharmacies

**NEW YORK, Feb 5:** US federal authorities have seized more than 200 website domains tied to an India-based transnational criminal organisation having illegal online pharmacies allegedly responsible for at least six fatal and four non-fatal overdoses. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) field offices throughout the country also conducted multiple operations leading to the arrest of four individuals, it said in a statement said on Wednesday.

The DEA, with the cooperation of the US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York, announced the seizure of more than 200 website domains tied to the India-based transnational criminal organisation (TCOs) working within the United States allegedly responsible for at least six fatal and four non-fatal overdoses as part of Operation Meltdown.

These TCOs tied to these illegal online pharmacies have been under investigation by DEA's Rocky Mountain Field Division since 2022.

The DEA said that leveraging its global reach, the agency actively collaborates with Government of India law enforcement partners to identify, investigate, and dismantle dangerous criminal organisations that engage in these types of illegal drug trafficking operations. Through joint operations, the DEA will continue to pursue significant enforcement actions against illicit pharmaceutical distributors at the source and remains steadfast in its efforts to disrupt the flow of illicit pharmaceuticals that threaten public health and safety of American citizens, it said.

Authorities said that beginning January 27, 2026, DEA field offices throughout the United States conducted multiple operations leading to the arrest of four individuals along with the issuance of five Immediate Suspension Orders (ISO) and one Order to Show

Cause (OTSC).

These actions were in addition to the US Government shutting down more than 200 online pharmacies accused of filling hundreds of thousands of orders of diverted pharmaceuticals and counterfeit pills without valid prescriptions.

Investigators determined the operators of these online pharmacies and their co-conspirators were illegally dispensing and shipping diverted medications, without valid prescriptions, to customers throughout the United States, violating federal rules and regulations and dangerously infiltrating a closed system of distribution intended to keep patients safe.

Over the course of this investigation, DEA identified thousands of customers who purchased medication through these online pharmacies. Subsequently, DEA has sent more than 20,000 letters to the public requesting information in support of this ongoing investigation.

"This case demonstrates how foreign-based traffickers exploit our healthcare system, hide behind the internet, and use people inside the United States to move dangerous drugs under the guise of legitimate commerce," DEA Administrator Terrance Cole said.

"Illegal online pharmacies put poison in American communities. They sell counterfeit and unapproved pills and do not care who gets hurt or who dies. Actions like this save lives. They protect the American people. If you run these sites, supply them, move the money, ship the product, or help them operate, we will find you, we will dismantle your operations, and we will hold you fully accountable under US law."

Earlier in 2024, DEA had issued a Public Service Announcement warning Americans about an increase in illegal online pharmacies. (PTI)

## At least 216 terrorists, 36 civilians and 22 personnel killed in Balochistan: Pak Army

**ISLAMABAD, Feb 5:** At least 216 terrorists, 36 civilians and 22 personnel were killed in the days-long operation launched in response to terror attacks at multiple places in the restive Balochistan province, the Pakistan Army said on Thursday.

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the Pakistan military's media wing, announced in a statement that it has "successfully concluded" the operation, code named Radd-ul-Fitna-1, that was launched on January 26.

The Pakistan Army said that the operations were initiated in Panjgur and on the outskirts of Harnai district after credible and verified intelligence confirmed the presence of terrorists.

"During this phase, security forces undertook operations against identified terrorist hideouts, resulting in the elimination of 41 terrorists," it said. It said subsequently, aggressive and steadfast responses by the security forces effectively thwarted the attacks.

"As a result of these well-coordinated engagements and subsequent clearance operations, 216 terrorists have been sent to hell, significantly degrading the leadership, command-and-control structures and operational capabilities of terrorist networks," the ISPR said. The army said 36 civilians, including women and children, and 22 personnel of the security forces and

law enforcement agencies were killed in the operations.

The statement alleged that "Indian-sponsored terrorist elements were seeking to disrupt peace and development" in the region.

India has earlier categorically rejected as baseless Pakistan's allegations of an Indian hand in attempts to disturb peace in Balochistan, and said it is Islamabad's usual tactic to deflect attention from its "internal failings".

Meanwhile, railway services have been restored in Balochistan province after remaining suspended for the last five days, a Pakistan Railways official said on Thursday.

Pakistan Railways spokesperson Muhammad Kashif said that after the outbreak of terror attacks in different parts of the province since Saturday, all railway traffic from Quetta had been suspended because of security reasons. He said that during the attacks, several railway tracks were damaged which also led to the suspension of railway services.

On Tuesday, Pakistan's National Assembly adopted a resolution urging the government to adopt an "aggressive" national response to tackle the threat of external sponsors of militancy and their internal facilitators. (PTI)

## Malaysia bans e-waste imports, India-US energy corridor talks focus on India's growth-linked energy priorities

**KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 5:** Malaysia has announced an immediate and full ban on the importation of electronic waste, as the government vowed the country would not be a "dumping ground" for the world's waste.

The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission said in a statement late Wednesday that all electronic waste, commonly known as e-waste, would be reclassified under the "absolute prohibition" category effective immediately. This removes the discretionary power previously given to the Department of Environment to grant exemptions for importation of certain e-waste.

Environmental advocates have long urged stronger action. E-waste — discarded electronic products such as comput-

ers, phones and appliances — can contain toxic substances and heavy metals including lead, mercury and cadmium that pollute soil and water resources if improperly processed or dumped.

"E-waste is no longer permitted," MACC chief Azam Baki said in the statement, vowing "firm and integrated enforcement action" to prevent illegal imports.

Malaysia has previously grappled with large volumes of imported e-waste, much of it suspected to be illegal and hazardous to human health and the environment. Authorities have seized hundreds of containers of suspected e-waste at ports in recent years and issued notices for return to exporters. The ban comes as authorities widen a corruption inquiry tied to e-waste management. (AP)

**HOUSTON, Feb 5:** India's ambition to maintain high economic growth is closely linked to long-term energy security, Consul General D C Manjunath said, underlining the importance of dialogue and cooperation with the US industry to ensure reliable and affordable energy supplies, while advancing cleaner technologies and innovation.

The Consulate General of India (CGI) in Houston on February 4 convened a high-level US-India Energy Roundtable on the Global Energy Outlook 2026 at its office here, in partnership with the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF).

The closed-door meeting brought together over 30 senior executives from global energy, engineering, and technology firms, including ExxonMobil, Chevron, Honeywell, GAIL, Larsen & Toubro,

Weatherford, LanzaTech, S&P Global, McKinsey, and the Society of Petroleum Engineers.

The Consulate General of India said the roundtable was part of its ongoing effort to provide a platform for dialogue between policymakers and industry leaders on shared energy challenges and commercial opportunities.

The roundtable follows the February 2026 India-US trade framework, which identified energy and technology cooperation as core drivers of bilateral growth.

Participation by companies such as LanzaTech and Honeywell reflected growing commercial interest in sustainable aviation fuels and carbon recycling technologies relevant to India's industrial and aviation sectors, officials said. (PTI)

## Famine spreads to more towns in Sudan's Darfur region, hunger experts warn as war rages on

**CAIRO, Feb 5:** Famine is spreading in war-torn Sudan's western Darfur region and has now engulfed two more towns there, a global hunger monitoring group said Thursday.

The announcement came after the group said last year that people in Darfur's major city of el-Fasher, overrun by the paramilitary forces after an 18-month siege, were enduring famine.

Since April 2023, war has gripped much of Sudan after a power struggle erupted between the East African country's military and the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. The conflict has triggered what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The report on the spread of famine by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, came as an attack Thursday by the RSF on a military hospital in southern Sudan killed 22 people, including the hospital's medical director and another three members of the medical staff.

The attack, in the town of Kouik in South Kordofan province, also left eight people wounded, the



Sudan Doctors' Network, a group of medical professionals tracking the war said. It was not immediately clear how many of the casualties were civilians.

**A harrowing report**

The IPS report said famine has now been detected in the towns of Umm Baru and Kerno in Darfur. In November, the group said el-Fasher — a major city in the region — was enduring famine and also the city of Kadugli in South Kordofan. At the time, it also said 20 other areas across Sudan were at risk of famine.

In Umm Baru, nearly 53 per cent of children aged between 6

months and nearly 5 years suffered from acute malnutrition, while 32 per cent of children in Kerno face the same ordeal.

"These alarming rates suggest an increased risk of excess mortality and raise concern that nearby areas may be experiencing similar catastrophic conditions," the report said.

The fall of el-Fasher in October 2025 to the RSF set off an exodus of people to nearby towns, straining the resources of neighbouring communities and driving up food insecurity rates, the report said.

The IPC has confirmed famine only a few times, most recently in

2025 in northern Gaza during the Israel-Hamas war. It also confirmed famine in Somalia in 2011, and in South Sudan in 2017 and 2020.

With this report, the total number of famine-stricken areas in Sudan rises to nine. In 2024, famine had struck five other areas in North Darfur and also Sudan's Nuba Mountains region.

The UN estimates that over 40,000 people have been killed in the war in Sudan, but aid agencies consider that the true number could be many times higher. Over 14 million people have been forced to flee their homes.

After the RSF overran el-Fasher, which has been one of the army's last strongholds in Darfur, fighting has recently concentrated in regions of Kordofan. However, the Sudanese military has since been making gains in Kordofan by breaking a siege in Kadugli and the neighbouring town of Dilling.

The IPC report also warned that more people might face extreme hunger in Kordofan, where the conflict has disrupted food production and supply lines in besieged towns and isolated areas. (AP)

# Panchayati Raj, APSSB and Jan Vishwas laws amended to streamline governance

## Arunachal Assembly passes three amendment bills



**ITANAGAR, Feb 5:** The Arunachal Pradesh Assembly on Thursday passed three Bills in their amended form through voice votes, a day after they were tabled in the House.

The Bills included amendments to the Panchayati Raj law, the Arunachal Pradesh Staff Selection Board (APSSB) Act and provisions aimed at decriminalising

minor offences to promote trust-based governance.

Panchayati Raj Minister Ojing Tasing introduced the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Bill, while Chief Minister Pema Khandu tabled the Arunachal Pradesh Staff Selection Board (Amendment) Bill.

The Arunachal Pradesh Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provi-

sions) Bill was introduced by Law, Legislative and Justice Minister Kento Jini.

According to the statement of objects and reasons, the Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Bill seeks to amend the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1997, to streamline administrative procedures, remove procedural bottlenecks and ensure more effective functioning

of panchayati institutions across the state.

The Staff Selection Board (Amendment) Bill proposes changes to two sections of the APSSB Act, 2018, recognising the critical role of the chairperson and providing for a fixed tenure.

The amendment aims to address administrative disruptions caused by frequent transfers and postings of All India Service officers, which have affected the continuity of the Board's functioning.

The statement further noted that enabling the appointment of retired officers from organised services, who possess vast experience and can serve for longer continuous periods, would ensure smooth and uninterrupted functioning of the APSSB, thereby enhancing its overall effectiveness.

The Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill was introduced to amend certain enactments with the objective of decriminalising and rationalising offences.

The move is aimed at strengthening trust-based governance and improving ease of living and doing business in the state, the statement added. (PTI)

## Sikkim CM turns 58; PM, other leaders greet him



**GANGTOK, Feb 5:** Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang turned 58 on Thursday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other leaders greeted him on his birthday and wished him a long and healthy life. The CM also sought the blessings of his mother, Dhan Maya Tamang, on the occasion.

"Birthday wishes to Sikkim CM Shri Prem Singh Tamang Golay ji. Praying for his long and healthy life in service of the people," Modi said in his congratulatory message on X.

Tamang thanked the prime minister and said, "Thank you, Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji, for your warm birthday wishes and kind prayers. I am deeply grateful for your constant guidance and encouragement. With your blessings, I remain committed to serving the people of Sikkim with dedication and sincerity."

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, Sikkim Governor Om Prakash Mathur, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and other leaders also greeted Tamang and he thanked them all.

The CM also sought the blessings of his mother on the occasion.

"On the occasion of my birthday, I felt truly blessed and deeply humbled to seek the loving blessings of my beloved mother. Her prayers, unconditional love and quiet strength have been my greatest source of guidance and inspiration and this moment made the day profoundly meaningful for me," he said in an X post. (PTI)

## Mizoram Cabinet reiterates opposition to Indo-Myanmar border fencing bid

State says fencing is Union subject, cites ethnic and humanitarian concerns



**AIZAWL, Feb 5:** The Mizoram Cabinet has reiterated its opposition to the Centre's plan to fence the Indo-Myanmar border, while acknowledging that it has no legal authority to block the move, an official said.

A meeting of the council of ministers, chaired by Chief Minister Lalduhoma, on Wednesday reaffirmed the state government's stand against erecting a fence along the 510-km-long Mizoram sector of the international border.

"The cabinet maintains that the state government stands by its original position. However, as border fencing is a Union subject, the state government does not have the power to oppose it," the official said.

The cabinet's reiteration follows a resolution adopted unanimously by the Mizoram Assembly in February last year opposing the Centre's proposal to fence the border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with Myanmar.

The state government's cautious stance comes amid mounting pressure from influential civil society organisations.

On January 16, the state apex students' body, Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) and the Zo Reunification Organisation (ZORO), which represents the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people across the globe, submitted a joint memorandum to Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaffirming their opposition to the Centre's plan to fence the Indo-Myanmar border.

They warned that a fence would cause deep physical and psychological separation between ethnic Mizo communities living on either side of the border.

Moreover, leaders of Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA) also reiterated their opposition to the Centre's plan during a meeting with Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan in New Delhi in January.

Six Mizoram districts share a 510-km long border with Myanmar's Chin state and the Mizos share ethnic ties with the Chins.

More than 30,000 people from Chin state displaced by the military coup in 2021 are currently sheltered in Mizoram. (PTI)

## Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry team visits Sikkim

**GANGTOK, Feb 5:** A delegation from the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry visited Sikkim to discuss potential avenues for collaboration and mutual knowledge exchange to strengthen regional trade, officials said.

The delegation, led by its president Tandy Wangchuk, held a discussion with Commerce and Industries secretary Karma D Youtso and other officials on Wednesday.

They explored opportunities for cross-border cooperation, sharing best practices and identifying areas of mutual interest that could enhance industrial development, investment in priority sectors, growth of the MSME sector and developing market linkages, officials of the state Commerce and Industries Department said.

Both sides emphasised the importance of institutional linkages, policy dialogue and private sector engagement to promote sustainable economic growth and regional integration, they said.

The interaction marks an important step towards deepening economic ties between Bhutan and Sikkim with a shared commitment to fostering regional and cross-border trade, investment and knowledge partnerships for long-term mutual benefit, the officials added. (PTI)

## 48 PMGSY roads damaged by landslides, rain in Arunachal: Minister

**ITANAGAR, Feb 5:** As many as 48 roads constructed under the Prime Minister Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) scheme in Arunachal Pradesh have been damaged over the past two years due to recurrent landslides and heavy monsoon rainfall, the Assembly was informed on Thursday. Replying to a query by BJP MLA Tai Nikio during question hour, Rural Works Department (RWD) Minister Pasang Dorjee Sona said the fragile terrain, high rainfall and geological vulnerability of the state significantly contribute to such damage.

The minister said restoration could not be undertaken for all affected roads due to the absence of dedicated maintenance funds for flood-related damage.

"Despite this, the department carried out emergency restoration works on ongoing projects with the help of existing contractors, even though such activities were beyond the scope of the agreements," he added. Sona informed that the department has sought ₹ 181 crore as gap funding from the state finance department for restoration of the damaged roads.

"Once funds are made available, restoration works will be taken up," he said.

The minister added that the state government has also approached the Centre for financial assistance to restore the damaged roads, but no response has been received so far from the concerned ministry.

Responding to a supplementary question, the minister said the Centre has conveyed that no additional funds would be sanctioned for incomplete roads under PMGSY-I, citing that sufficient time had already been provided for execution of works. (PTI)

## NPF extends support to new Manipur government

Party congratulates CM and DY CM, expresses hope for peace and stability

**KOHHIMA, Feb 5:** The Central Headquarters of the Naga People's Front (NPF), based in Kohima, extended warm congratulations to Yumnam Khemchand Singh on his appointment as the Chief Minister of Manipur. The party also congratulated Losi Dikho, NPF MLA and Nemcha Kipgen on their appointment as Deputy Chief Ministers.

In a statement, the NPF said it reaffirmed its commitment to extending constructive support to the BJP-led government in the larger interest of peace, progress and prosperity for the people of Manipur. The party emphasised that its support would be guided by the broader goal of ensuring stability and development

in the state.

The NPF also congratulated the newly installed government of Manipur, marking the end of nearly a year of President's Rule in the state. The party noted that the formation of a new elected government was a significant step forward for democratic governance in Manipur.

Expressing confidence in the new leadership, the NPF stated that it hopes the government will work sincerely towards restoring peace and stability, addressing the ongoing ethnic situation through reconciliation and promoting inclusive and people-centric development across the state. (NNN)

## Ladakh, Kerala delegates soak in 'Mekhela Wednesday' at Nagaland University

**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, Feb 5:** Delegates from Ladakh and Kerala experienced a unique cultural moment on Wednesday as they participated in and celebrated 'Mekhela Wednesday' at Nagaland University's Medziphema campus. As part of the Ashtalakshmi Darshan Youth Exchange Programme, an initiative of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and the North Eastern Council, the Medziphema campus is hosting 40 students and four teachers from Ladakh and Kerala from February 1 to 14, a university release said on Thursday.

The visiting delegates witnessed and actively took part in 'Mekhela Wednesday', a mid-week cultural practice of the School of Agricultural Sciences (SAS), Medziphema campus, where women faculty and staff

don mekheles — the traditional wrap-around attire — along with other indigenous garments.

The practice is aimed at fostering a sense of togetherness and cultural pride, as participants come together, even briefly, to celebrate tradition and capture shared moments through photographs.

Sharing her experience, Dr Garima Gupta, one of the teachers in charge of the Kerala team, said wearing the mekhela was a beautiful and deeply enriching experience for the delegates. "It allowed our students to connect with the culture of Nagaland in a very personal way. Such initiatives make cultural exchange truly meaningful," she said.

The 'Mekhela Wednesday' initiative is both a workplace practice and a mission-driven movement aimed at preserving traditional weaving skills

and sustaining the livelihoods of local weavers. Highlighting this aspect, Prof J Longkumer, associate dean (students welfare), said that wearing mekheles encourages people to buy them, which in turn empowers weavers and helps conserve the traditional art of loom weaving.

Echoing similar sentiments, Dr Rinchen Dolma, teacher in charge of the Ladakh team, said the experience offered students an opportunity to understand how culture, livelihood and identity are interwoven in the Northeast. She added that the warmth and sisterhood witnessed on the campus would remain with them long after their return.

Through this initiative, women of the Medziphema campus continue to support and promote traditional crafts and the communities that sustain them.

## Arunachal targets 19 GW hydropower expansion with ₹ 1.9 lakh crore investment: Dy CM

**ITANAGAR, Feb 5:** Arunachal Pradesh has set a target to add 19 GW of hydropower capacity with an estimated investment of ₹ 1.9 lakh crore as part of a strategic shift towards large and mega projects, Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein informed the Assembly on Thursday.

Replying to a question by BJP member Tapi Darang during Question Hour, Mein, who also holds the power and hydropower portfolios, said the state has declared 2025-2035 as the "Decade of Hydropower" to accelerate development in the sector.

He said the northeastern state accounts for nearly 40 per cent of the country's hydropower potential, with 58,000 MW capacity, positioning the state as a key contributor to India's clean energy transition and its net-zero emissions target by 2070.

"With central support, the state is reviving 13 stalled hydropower projects with a combined capacity of 12.2 GW and has signed MoUs with four central public sector undertakings (CPSUs) in 2023," Mein said.

Of these, three projects — Heo (240 MW), Tato-II (700 MW) and Tati-I (186 MW) — have already received approval from the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), with work underway at project sites, he added.

The projects are being developed through joint ventures between the state government and CPSUs, with the state holding a 26 per cent equity stake, the deputy chief minister said.



"The Centre is supporting the projects by financing 24 per cent equity through Central Financial Assistance (CFA), capped at Rs 750 crore per project. Under this mechanism, CFA support of ₹ 6,565 crore will be extended through equity participation," Mein said.

He further added that the state will receive

12 per cent free power from hydropower projects and is expected to earn an estimated revenue of ₹ 4,520 crore between 2025 and 2035, rising to about ₹ 4,100 crore annually thereafter.

Additionally, the projects are likely to generate around ₹ 821 crore per year for local area development, while dividends



**HT Correspondent**

**AGARTALA, Feb 5:** Ahead of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) elections, former Tripura chief minister and CPI (M) leader Manik Sarkar on Wednesday rejected claims by the BJP and Tipra Motha of winning all 28 council seats, asserting that such predictions would collapse if voters are allowed to cast their ballots freely and fairly.

Taking a dig at both parties, Sarkar said it was illogical for each to predict a clean sweep. "If both the BJP and Tipra Motha say they will win all 28 seats, then the council should have 56 seats. But the reality is there are only 28," he remarked.

Referring to the 2019 ADC elections, the CPI (M) veteran alleged that the polls were marred by violence and intimidation. "That election was not conducted through proper voting. CPI (M)

workers and candidates were attacked on a large scale. If we can reach the people this time and they are allowed to vote properly, their claim of winning all seats will be proven wrong," Sarkar said.

He stressed that the final outcome of the elections would depend entirely on whether democratic rights are safeguarded. "The result will depend on whether people are permitted to vote freely," he said.

Sarkar also appealed to voters to exercise their franchise to counter what he described as authoritarian tendencies. "If people want to free themselves from fascist-like behaviour, they must use their voting rights responsibly," he added.

Commenting on the Union Budget, the former chief minister criticised the BJP-led central government, alleging that it was designed to benefit big corporate houses. "This budget serves those who exploit and loot while misleading the poor and working class. There is no point expecting anything different from the BJP. Its real character is now fully exposed," he said.

## Law and order foremost priority of new Manipur gov't: Guv

**IMPHAL, Feb 5:** Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla on Thursday said law and order remains the foremost priority of the newly formed government and recovery of illegal arms was central to restoring normalcy in the northeastern state.

Bhalla also said 7,313 arms, 83,512 rounds of ammunition and 5,195 explosives have been recovered in the state since the ethnic violence erupted in May, 2023. Addressing the seventh session of the 12th Manipur Legislative Assembly, the governor said, "as this legislature assembles for the first session of the year, it offers a moment to proceed with major purpose and shared resolve".

The government has also proposed a renovate-own-operate-transfer (ROOT) policy for small hydropower projects to attract private investment, optimise asset utilisation and ensure energy security," he said.

The state is revamping its Small Hydropower Policy 2017, to align with technological advancements in the sector, Mein said.

On major ongoing projects, the deputy chief minister informed that two units with a combined capacity of 500 MW of the 2,000 MW Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project have been commissioned, with the remaining three units scheduled for commissioning by March this year.

Full commissioning of all eight units of the project is expected by December this year, Mein said.

The 2,880 MW Dibang multipurpose project is under construction and is targeted for completion by February 2032, he added. (PTI)

# Our budget reflects financial discipline. We have balanced welfare spending with fiscal prudence Bengal interim budget pro-people, reflects fiscal discipline: Mamata

**KOLKATA, Feb 5:** West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday said that the interim budget tabled by her government in the assembly is "pro-people" and shows fiscal discipline, "unlike the directionless and rudderless" Union Budget.

Speaking at a post-budget press conference after the assembly earlier in the day witnessed the tabling of the ₹ 4.06 lakh crore interim budget, Banerjee said the state government prioritised the welfare of ordinary people despite what she termed as "sustained financial deprivation" by the Centre.

"Our budget is pro-people, not directionless and rudderless like the Union Budget," the chief minister said, maintaining that the state adhered to fiscal discipline even while expanding social sector spending.

Alleging that the Centre owed West Bengal nearly ₹ 2 lakh crore in legitimate dues, Banerjee said funds for key schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, rural housing, rural roads and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have remained blocked for years.

"Despite the state being financially deprived by the Centre, we have brought in a pro-people budget. Our commitments have not been compromised and all promises have been fulfilled. This is not an election gimmick," she said, adding that the announced hike in grants



and allowances would be made available immediately.

Rejecting criticism over the state's fiscal management, Banerjee said her government had brought discipline in borrowing under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) framework.

"Our budget reflects financial discipline. We have balanced welfare spending with fiscal prudence," she said.

The chief minister said the government's welfare initiatives had helped lift 1.72 crore people out of poverty, calling it part of what she described as a "century of state-sponsored social welfare schemes" in West Bengal.

Highlighting achievements in

rural infrastructure, Banerjee said the state has built one crore rural houses so far, including 32 lakh in recent years, and constructed 2.2 lakh km of new rural roads. Drinking water coverage, she said, expanded from around two lakh households to 1.87 crore.

On urban development, she said modernisation of cities would be carried out without causing inconvenience to residents, with surveys to begin soon, while the Ghatol master plan to address flooding issues was already under implementation.

Referring to measures for front-line workers, Banerjee said ASHA workers must get maternity leave and enhanced incentives, adding

that their salaries have been hiked along with additional benefits.

Expressing gratitude to state government departments and people, she said employment generation has improved despite nationwide economic challenges.

The chief minister also hit out at the BJP, alleging that Bengalis were being subjected to "targeted terror" since the party came to power at the Centre.

"Are we responsible for terror attacks in the country?" she asked, referring to recent incidents elsewhere, and dismissed attempts to blame the state government.

On the Anandapur fire incident, Banerjee said it involved a private company and occurred on Republic Day, adding that state ministers were present at the site and necessary action was taken.

Drawing a comparison with other states, she criticised what she termed "controversial" welfare measures elsewhere.

"In Bihar, bulldozers were run after announcements. Their schemes are not meant for everybody. Our schemes are universal," she said.

Responding to queries on the Supreme Court's order on dearness allowance, Banerjee said the state government has not yet received a copy of the order.

"We need to study and review it. A committee has been formed for the purpose," she said. (PTI)

# Pune land 'scam': Kharge panel still to submit report No clean chit to anyone yet, says Bawankule

**MUMBAI, Feb 5:** Maharashtra Revenue Minister Chandrashekhar Bawankule on Thursday said the Vikas Kharge-led committee probing the alleged Pune land scam has not yet submitted its report, ruling out a clean chit to anyone at this stage.

He was responding to questions tied to media reports claiming relief to the late deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's son Parth Pawar in the matter. Parth Pawar's mother Sunetra Pawar is now a deputy CM in the state.

The sale of 40 acres of land in Pune's upscale Mundhwa area for ₹ 300 crore to Amadea Enterprises LLP, in which Parth Pawar is a majority partner, had come under scrutiny after it emerged that the plot belongs to the government and could not be sold. The firm was also allegedly exempted from paying Rs 21 crore in stamp duty. The committee has sought an eight-day extension to submit its findings, and the government will grant the request, Bawankule told reporters in Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar.

"The report has not been officially submitted to the state government. Therefore, there is no scope for giving a clean chit to Parth Pawar or anyone else. I urge people not to speculate on such a serious issue and confuse the public," he said.

The five-member committee, headed by Additional Chief Secretary (Revenue) Vikas Kharge, is examining alleged procedural lapses in the registration of the purchase deed related to the Mundhwa land.

The probe focuses on aspects such as valuation, documentation and the role of officials involved in the registration process. The panel was constituted in early November amid political controversy and was initially asked to submit its report by December 6 last year.

The deadline was later extended twice after the committee sought more time to examine records and responses from multiple departments.

While earlier indications suggested the panel could submit its report by February 6, Bawankule said on Thursday that an additional extension would now be granted. The committee also includes the Pune divisional commissioner, the commissioner of land regis-



tration and director of land records, the inspector general of registration and controller of stamps, and the Pune district collector.

Meanwhile, Pune-based RTI activist Vijay Kumbhar criticised the repeated extensions, alleging that the probe was being delayed and could eventually turn into a formality.

In a post on X, Kumbhar claimed that those responsible for preventing alleged irregularities were themselves part of the committee, making a fair outcome unlikely. He also raised questions over alleged unpaid stamp duty, arguing that public revenue could not be protected by "clean chits" or shell entities.

State activist Anjali Damania has also questioned the delay in the inquiry.

In a post on X earlier this month, she had said that if government functioning was treated as "business as usual" following Ajit Pawar's death in a plane crash, the investigation into the Mundhwa land deal should not be stalled. She demanded that the committee's report be made public without delay.

The state government, however, has maintained that appropriate action will be taken after the report is formally submitted.

Asked about the name for the mayor's post in Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar, Bawankule said two to three shortlisted names have been sent to the state BJP chief Ravindra Chavan. "The decision will be taken in a core committee meeting today," he said. (PTI)

# Bengal assembly polls: CPI(M) wants all forces opposed to TMC, BJP to fight together

**KOLKATA, Feb 5:** Even though the possibility of an alliance with the Congress before the assembly polls in West Bengal rests on thin ice, the CPI(M) on Thursday said that it wants all forces against the Trinamool Congress and the BJP to come together and fight against them.

CPI(M) West Bengal state secretary Mohammed Salim said that they were talking to everybody for the purpose.

"We want all forces against the TMC and BJP to come together and fight against them," he said addressing a press conference at the party state headquarters here.

Regarding Congress joining the anti-TMC and anti-BJP bandwagon, he said that the grand old party's state leadership has said that the lower level workers will take a call on the issue.

The Left parties fought the last assembly elections in 2021 in alliance with the Congress and Indian Secular Front (ISF). However, all of them drew a blank and only the ISF won a single seat.

Salim stated that there has not been any fruitful discussion so far with the Congress on a pre-poll alliance or seat sharing for the West Bengal assembly elections due in three months.

Asked whether the suspended



TMC MLA Humayun Kabir, who has recently formed Janata Unnayan Party, came up during discussions at the state committee meet, Salim said, "When the CPI(M) deliberates before an assembly elections and its organisational preparedness, it does not discuss any specific person."

Last week, Salim held a meeting with the Kabir at a hotel in New Town here, giving rise to speculation of a tie-up between the two parties before the upcoming state assembly elections.

After meeting the former Trinamool Congress MLA, who recently courted controversy over the foundation stone laying programme of a mosque modelled on the Babri Masjid in Murshidabad district, Salim said, "I wanted to know from him (Kabir) what he wants to do and what is

his objective."

The CPI(M) leader also welcomed Thursday's Supreme Court order on payment of dearness allowance by the state government to its employees.

In a relief to nearly 20 lakh government employees, the apex court directed the West Bengal government to pay dearness allowance to them for the 2008-to-2019 period, saying it is a legally-enforceable right.

Maintaining that the Mamata Banerjee government has been making excuses that the state's coffers are dry, Salim questioned what happens to the huge earnings claimed by her government.

"This victory in the court of law shows that perseverance pays as the employees did not give up despite punitive actions like transfers for their agitations demanding DA hike," Salim said.

The CPI(M) leader criticised Governor C V Ananda Bose's speech at the commencement of the Budget session in the West Bengal Assembly on Thursday, saying that it did not mention the strife in Murshidabad district's Samsanjaj during anti-Waqf protests claiming at least three lives in April last year or the recent violence at Beldanga over alleged attacks against migrant labourers in some states. (PTI)

# Over 3,800 Indian nationals deported from US in 2025: Govt tells Parliament

**NEW DELHI, Feb 5:** Over 3,800 Indian nationals were deported from the US in 2025, the government informed the Rajya Sabha on Thursday.

The figures include 3,414 Indians deported through Washington till mid-December, according to the data shared in a tabulated form in a written response to a query by Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh.

Congress member Randeep Singh Surjewala asked the number of Indian nationals deported from the United States and other countries during the last five years, preventive measures including registration or licensing of travel agencies and border coordination taken to protect vulnerable youth, and whether any targets or timelines have been fixed to reduce the illegal "Dunki route" migration.

The phrase "donkey route" or "Dunki route" refers to the route used for illegal immigration, largely in context of North America.

In 2025, over 3,800 Indian nationals were deported from the US, according to the data shared in the written response.

The tabulated data also included locations of Indian consulates in the US and the corresponding number of deportations in 2025, viz., consulates of India in New York (47), Atlanta (31), Houston



(234), San Francisco (49) and Seattle (31).

Singh said the government of India works in close coordination with the US and other foreign governments on all matters pertaining to deportation of Indian citizens.

"Such deportations are subject to an unambiguous verification of their Indian nationality," he said.

The government is in constant dialogue with the US government regarding the need for "humane treatment" of Indian nationals during such deportation operations. "We have registered our concerns with the US authorities, particularly with respect to use of restraints on the deportees, especially women and children," the MoS said.

Based on the accounts and testimonies given by returning deportees, the central and respective state governments along with the relevant law enforcement agencies

have registered a number of cases, and investigations as well as actions are ongoing against several illegal recruitment agents, criminal facilitators and human trafficking syndicates that run these rackets, the government said.

The government accords utmost priority to the safety, security and well-being of Indian nationals proceeding for employment abroad. According to The Emigration Act 1983, no person or agency can function as a recruiting agent (RA) without a valid licence issued by the registering authority who is the Protector General of Emigrants.

"Mandatory registration of RA is aimed to reduce fraud and exploitation of prospective Indian emigrants proceeding for employment abroad. It is also mandatory for ECR passport holders proceeding for employment to any of the 19 notified Emigration Check Required (ECR) countries to obtain Emigration Clearance (EC) from the office of the Protector of Emigrants (PoE)," he added.

The ministry also issues advisories through eMigrate portal, social media handles and other modes of publicity about the perils of fake job rackets and ways to prevent the same. Till December 2025, "a total of 3,505 unregistered agents in country have been notified on the eMigrate portal," he said. (PTI)

# 'Bengal budget size in FY27 crosses ₹ 4 lakh cr, fiscal indicators improve'

**KOLKATA, Feb 5:** West Bengal has witnessed a major expansion of its economy over the past decade, with the budget outlay touching a record high of over ₹ 4 lakh crore in the current year, principal chief adviser to chief minister Amit Mitra said on Thursday.

Addressing the media after the presentation of the Vote on Account in the Assembly, Mitra said the budget size has increased nearly five times from around ₹ 84,000 crore in 2010-11, reflecting a significant scaling up of the state's economy under the present dispensation.

"The state's own tax collection has risen 5.4 times to an estimated ₹ 1,18,669 crore in the current budget from ₹ 21,129 crore in 2010-11, while the nominal Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) is projected to grow four times over the same period," he said.

Highlighting capital expenditure as a key indicator of development, Mitra said capital outlay has increased 18.5 times to around ₹ 43,000 crore from ₹ 2,226 crore in 2010-11.

Moreover, over 45 per cent of the state's capital expenditure is now directed towards asset creation, converting borrowed funds into infrastructure and social assets, he added. (PTI)

# SC rescues homebuyers of Supertech, upholds NCLAT order asking NBCC to take over stalled projects

**NEW DELHI, Feb 5:** Coming to the rescue of thousands of hassled homebuyers waiting for the delivery of their dream homes for almost two decades, the Supreme Court on Thursday upheld an NCLAT order asking the State-owned NBCC to complete 16 housing projects of debt-ridden realty firm Supertech Limited expeditiously.

The court also restrained all the tribunals and high courts from passing any order that may lead to the stalling of the construction work to be completed by the National Buildings Construction Corporation (NBCC) Limited.

A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joydip Bagchi used its extra-ordinary power under Article 142 of the Constitution to uphold the December 12, 2024 order of the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT), asking the NBCC to take over the projects in the interest of the homebuyers.

The bench noted that Supertech, according to many homebuyers, had booked around 51,000 houses for delivery during 2010-12. The CJ said the first and foremost consideration for the bench was to "protect the interest of homebuyers to ensure that they are able to secure the homes for which they are waiting for the last two decades" and their hard-earned money has allegedly been siphoned off by the real estate firm.

The CJ made it clear that the interest and dues of the financial and operational creditors of Supertech can be taken care of only after the delivery of fully-furnished houses to the hassled homebuyers.

The bench also made it clear that the



houses must contain all the assured facilities like water, electricity, sewage connections, besides roads and parks in the neighbourhood. It said the financial and operational creditors of Supertech will have to take the hair cut as found just and equitable by the tribunals -- the NCLAT and the NCLAT.

"We find that the order passed by the NCLAT on December 12, 2024, in bringing the NBCC on record for the completion of the pending housing projects is neither unfair nor contrary to the provisions of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC)," the bench ordered while taking the recourse of Article 142. Article 142 grants the Supreme Court plenary power to pass any decree or order necessary for doing "complete justice" in any case.

The bench directed the NBCC to undertake the projects and complete those expeditiously as envisaged by an expert committee set up by the NCLAT.

It also directed the NCLAT to provide support to the NBCC in the completion of the projects.

"With an aim to ensure that no impediment is caused to the completion of the stalled projects, we direct that no tri-

bunals and high courts shall pass any interim directions that may lead to the stopping of the projects undertaken by the NBCC," the bench said. Disposing of the pleas, it also allowed the parties to approach the apex court in view of any development that may come in the way of the ongoing projects.

On February 21, 2025, the top court stayed an order appointing the NBCC as the project management consultant to complete the 16 projects of Supertech at a cost of nearly ₹ 9,500 crore.

It had said it would examine whether the NCLAT had followed the procedure under the IBC while appointing the NBCC as the project management consultant.

The NCLAT, on December 12, 2024, asked the NBCC, a public sector undertaking (PSU) under the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, to complete the 16 housing projects, comprising 49,748 homes in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Karnataka.

Around 27,000 homebuyers await receiving houses in these projects.

The NCLAT judgment came after the October 1, 2014 order of the top court that allowed the insolvency appellate tribunal to examine and decide a proposal of the NBCC seeking to complete the stalled projects.

The NCLAT had directed the NBCC to "start the process of award of work before March 31, 2025" and ensure the awarding of the contract within a month thereafter. It was also ordered that the construction work for the 16 projects shall start from May 1, 2025.

It had ordered the "constitution of an apex court committee and project-wise court committee" for each project.

The NBCC was asked by the NCLAT to nominate a member to each project-wise court committee.

The NBCC had sought to complete the projects, launched in the National Capital Region (NCR), Dehradun and Bengaluru, but the completion of the residential units took a hit owing to a financial crisis faced by the realty major, leading to insolvency proceedings beginning 2021. The NBCC had submitted the terms of reference for undertaking the pending projects of Supertech before the NCLAT.

The PSU had proposed to complete the 16 projects in three phases. Under Phase 1, it had proposed to complete Eco-Village-2 (Greater Noida), Romano (Noida), Capetown (Noida), Czar suites (Greater Noida), Eco-village-3 (Greater Noida), Sports Village (Greater Noida) and Eco-citi (Noida).

Under Phase 2, the NBCC, according to its application before the NCLAT, had proposed to undertake Northeye (Noida), Upcountry (Yamuna Expressway), Eco-village-1 (Greater Noida), Meerut Sports City (Meerut) and Green Village (Meerut).

For Phase 3, the NBCC had proposed to undertake Hilltown (Gurugram), Araville (Gurugram), Rivercrest (Rudrapur), Doon Square (Dehradun) and Micasa (Bengaluru).

The Union Bank of India initiated insolvency proceedings against Supertech under section 7 of the IBC on March 20, 2021, claiming more than ₹ 431 crore as on January 31, 2021, along with the accrued interest. (PTI)

**অসম লোকসেৱা আয়োগ**  
ASSAM PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION  
Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-781022.

No.119PSC/DR-48/3/2023-24

**NOTIFICATION**

It is for information to all concerned that the Assam Public Service Commission will hold interview/viva-voce for the posts of Lecturer in D.I.E.Ts under the Directorate of SCERT, Assam as per programme given below at its office at Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-22 as per Advt. No.15/2024 dated Guwahati, the 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2024.

Sl. No	Name of the Post & Department	Date of Interview/Viva-voce	Reporting Time
1	Lecturer, Curriculum Material Development and Evaluation (CMDE), D.I.E.Ts	19 <sup>th</sup> , 20 <sup>th</sup> , 21 <sup>st</sup> , 23 <sup>rd</sup> and 24 <sup>th</sup> February, 2026	09:00 A.M.
2	Lecturer, In-Service Education, Field Interaction & Innovation Coordination (IFIC), D.I.E.Ts	25 <sup>th</sup> and 26 <sup>th</sup> February, 2026	

Kindly note that the candidates appearing for interview/viva-voce must bring the following testimonials in original along with self attested photocopies in chronological order, thereof for verification/scrutiny on the day of interview.

- H.S.L.C. Admit Card, Marksheet and Pass Certificate.
- H.S.S.L.C. Marksheet and Pass Certificate.
- Degree Marksheet and Pass Certificate.
- Masters Degree Marksheet and Pass Certificate.
- B.Ed, M.Ed. Marksheet and Pass Certificate.
- CGPA Conversion Formula of the respective universities.
- Separate Bachelor and Master degree mark sheet/certificate in case of integrated courses
- NET/SLET/Ph.D Certificate.
- Experience Certificate(s).
- Caste/PwBD certificate (if applicable).
- No Objection Certificate from their respective employer for State Govt. employee of Assam / Permanent Residential Certificate/Employment Exchange Registration Certificate
- Declaration Form A.
- Any other documents relevant as per advt.

The Accepted and Rejected list of candidates is already uploaded in the Commission's official website. No intimation letter to the eligible candidates shall be sent separately by post. The intimation letters shall be uploaded on 12/02/2026 in the APSC's website ([www.apsc.nic.in](http://www.apsc.nic.in)). The candidates shall have to download their own intimation letter from the aforesaid website.

Sd/-  
Secretary,  
Assam Public Service Commission  
Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-22

DIPR /D/ HLT 292 6-Feb-26

## TTD LADDU ROW

## One-man committee to take corrective measures: Naidu

AMARAVATI, Feb 5: Describing the alleged ghee adulteration in Tirupati laddu as the "greatest sin against god", Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday announced setting up a one-man committee to take corrective measures following a SIT report.

Even a 2022 Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) report when the YSRCP was in power clearly stated there was adulteration, he said.

Addressing a press conference, Naidu said after he became the CM in 2024, as part of the "cleansing process" of TTD, ghee samples were sent to NDDB-CALF which clearly stated that the commodity was adulterated with animal fat.

NDA alliance leaders Pawan Kalyan, PVN Madhav and others accompanied the chief minister during the press conference.

"Adulteration of Tirumala laddu prasadam is a grave offence against devotees' faith...no report has given a clean chit to YSRCP in the matter," said Naidu.

He described the alleged ghee adulteration as the "greatest sin against God".

"The NDDB clearly stated that (ghee was adulterated with animal fat). I said the same. Today SIT has submitted the report. The SIT report on ghee clearly says that it was adulterated with palmolein oil and chemicals," the CM said.

The SIT has submitted a report to take administrative action on certain people.

Referring to the SIT and laboratory reports, he said ghee was prepared using



chemicals and palm oil, and other adulterants, calling it a grave wrongdoing and an unforgivable sin.

Naidu alleged that lakhs of devotees were given adulterated laddus over the last five years, causing fear and mental distress.

Naidu said the previous Jagan Mohan Reddy-led government committed a "sin" by allegedly indulging in adulteration.

He alleged that several temples were attacked during the previous regime.

Asserting that nobody took on Sri Venkateswara Swamy in history, Naidu emphasised that even the Britishers had

improved Tirumala's traditions and practices.

Rejecting claims of a clean chit, the CM clarified that the CBI report does not certify anywhere that there was no adulteration, and said that the accused are spreading false narratives and launching counterattacks to divert attention.

He warned that 'intimidation and rowdiness' would not succeed and asserted that strict punishment would be ensured for the guilty.

Based on the CBI's communication, the government has constituted a one-man committee to conduct a comprehensive ex-

amination of the report, identify lapses, and fix responsibility.

It is everybody's responsibility to protect the sanctity of Tirumala and these kinds of alleged adulteration issues must be condemned, he said.

"It should be terrifying to repeat a desecration like this. We will not spare the ghee adulteration issue. The previous rulers had committed a major blunder by supplying laddu prasadam made with adulterated ghee to lakhs of people," said Naidu.

In the past five years, devotees were scared of eating laddu prasadam and battled mental issues over this matter, asserted Naidu, alleging that despite adulterating it the YSRCP leaders are launching attacks to 'divert the matter'.

Describing Venkateswara Swamy as his "family god", CM Naidu said he believes that the Lord had saved him when Naxalites attacked using claymore mines in October 2003.

"That was a rebirth granted to me by Lord Venkateswara," he said, recalling the claymore mine attack involving 23 mines.

Meanwhile, Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan said the government speaks with "responsibility and caution on sensitive issues of faith".

"No report has given a clean chit so far. Allegations involving animal fat are extremely sensitive and cannot be spoken about lightly," he said, adding that the government spoke only after "examining evi-

dence" which was found in the NDDB CALF test report.

He said the issue concerns Hindu faith and sentiments, and accused the opposition of attacking the government and spreading false propaganda instead of apologising if mistakes were committed.

He warned that those who tamper with matters of faith and God would ultimately face severe consequences in life.

Andhra Pradesh BJP president PVN Madhav slammed YSRCP and said the Tirumala laddu issue reflected "adulterated thinking and corrupt governance" of the previous regime.

"Preparing laddus with chemically processed and adulterated ghee is dangerous, and deeply hurts devotees' sentiments, and plays with public health. The present government is committed to restoring transparency and sanctity in temple administration," he said.

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) is the custodian of the Lord Venkateswara temple, a rich hill shrine flocked by lakhs of devotees from all over the world.

A controversy broke out in September 2024 after Naidu said in an NDA meeting that substandard ingredients and animal fats were used in making the laddu prasadam of the temple.

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) of the CBI is probing the matter and has recently submitted its final chargesheet to the Nellore ACB court. (PTI)

## Very little opportunity for House to run: Cong

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Amid the logjam in the Lok Sabha, the Congress on Thursday hit out at the government and said all opposition parties are united that if Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi was not allowed to speak on the most important order of business, there is very little opportunity for the House to run.

The opposition party also recalled that on June 10, 2004, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was prevented by the BJP from speaking on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address.

"There is only one issue in Parliament that is agitating the opposition that the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha has been prevented from speaking. When he began to speak raising fundamental issues of security, foreign and defence policy, the prime minister did not want to hear, the home minister did not want to hear, the defence minister did not want to hear," Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said.

"The Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge has said that the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha are two inter-linked pillars of Parliament. When one is undermined the other is weakened. The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha has been prevented from speaking for the past four days...All Opposition MPs in the Rajya Sabha walked out in protest of the denial of opportunity for the LoP Lok Sabha to speak," Ramesh told reporters in Parliament House complex.

The Congress leader further said that he would like to remind Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP that on June 10, 2004, then Prime Minister Singh, did not reply to the Motion of Thanks because he was prevented from doing so.

"The debate had taken place and here the debate has not taken place. Then, the following year, on March 10, 2005, he thanked the President twice, for 2004 and 2005. This is the BJP's track record," he said.

Today, the LoP has not been allowed to speak and all opposition parties are united that if the LoP is not allowed to speak in the most important order of business in which the Budget session commences -- the motion of thanks to the President's address, there is very little opportunity for the House to run, Ramesh said.

Ramesh posted on X a video of Singh's speech on March 10, 2005, recalling that the then PM had referred to the fact that he was prevented from replying to the Motion of Thanks on June 10, 2004.

On Wednesday night, Ramesh had said that to recall and remind on June 10 2004, the then prime minister was prevented by the BJP from speaking on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address.

"On March 10, 2005, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh began his speech on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address thus: 'Mr. Speaker, Sir, I deem it a great privilege to be standing here today to express the gratitude of our Government to the respected Rashtrapatiji for his address to members of both Houses of Parliament.

"Sir, this is a hard earned privilege for me since I have had to wait out the entire year to perform this happy task. I would like to take this opportunity to doubly thank the President for his Address last year and his Address this year," Ramesh recalled. (PTI)

## SC directs West Bengal govt to pay DA to its employees from 2008-2019



NEW DELHI, Feb 5: In a relief to nearly 20 lakh government employees, the Supreme Court on Thursday directed the West Bengal government to pay dearness allowance to them for the 2008-to-2019 period, saying it is a legally-enforceable right.

A bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and Prashant Kumar Mishra directed the state government to pay 25 per cent of the outstanding DA to its employees by March 6.

The court said once DA is defined by linking it to the All-India Consumer Price Index (AICPI) as in the statutory rules, the state could not modify the manner of calculating it through later office memoranda.

"To receive dearness allowance is a legally-enforceable right that has accrued in favour of the respondents-employees of the state of West Bengal... The employees of the appellant-state shall be enti-

tled to release of arrears in accordance with this judgment for the time 2008-2019," the bench said, while holding that the employees are not entitled to DA twice a year.

The apex court said dearness allowance emerges as a practical instrument of protection in the hands of a welfare state, which safeguards its employees from the adverse effects of rising prices.

DA is not an additional benefit but a means to maintain a minimum standard of living, it said.

Considering the financial implications involved, the bench also formed a committee comprising former apex court judge Indu Malhotra, former high court judges Tarlok Singh Chauhan and Goutam Bhaduri and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or the seniormost officer in his establishment, nominated by him.

The court directed the committee to determine, in consultation with the state authorities, the total amount to be paid and the schedule of payments, and periodically verify the release of the amounts.

The payment of the first instalment, subject to the determination of the committee, should be paid

by March 31, it said.

"It stands clarified that those employees of the state who have retired in the pendency of this litigation shall also be entitled to benefits in accordance herewith," the bench said.

It directed the state government to file a status report after the payment of the first instalment and posted the matter for compliance on April 15.

"It is hereby concluded that DA, by its very nature, is non-static, fluid and subject to change. How that change is to be carried out is through the All India Consumer Price Index. The first memorandum also the subsequent memoranda fall prey to the fatal flaw that they do not make reference to the AICPI, which is absolutely essential to the determination of DA, which in turn is indispensable to the computation of the total amount of 'existing emoluments'.

"As a necessary follow-up thereto, it must be observed that the incorporation of the AICPI cannot be termed as a one-time measure and once DA was defined using it, to take a different path would be impermissible," the bench said. (PTI)

"It is an absolute lie. There is no question of anybody raising hands on the prime minister, trying to hurt him or any such thing. There is no question. So it is absolutely wrong for anybody to say that there was any such plan, there was no such plan," Priyanka Gandhi told reporters in the Parliament House complex.

"But if you are going to allow your members to quote books, talk nonsense, the opposition benches are going to protest. I am sorry, the prime minister is hiding behind the speaker. They are making the speaker say all this because yesterday he did not have the guts to come in the House...because three women were standing before his bench, what nonsense is this," the Congress MP said.

She urged the media to ask the prime minister, Home Minister Amit Shah and the government why the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha was not allowed to speak. (PTI)

## PM hiding behind speaker, 'lie' that there were plans to hurt him: Priyanka

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Thursday alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was "hiding behind" Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and described the claim that there was any plan to hurt the PM as an "absolute lie".

Her remarks came after Birla said in the Lok Sabha that he had asked Modi not to come to the House to deliver his address following concrete information that many Congress MPs could carry out an "unexpected act" by reaching the spot where the prime minister sits.

Lashing out at opposition members, the speaker said the conduct of some of them in his office on Wednesday was not appropriate and was, in fact, was "like a black spot".

According to Priyanka Gandhi, the government is making the speaker "say all this" because on Wednesday the prime minister did not have the guts to come to the House.

"It is an absolute lie. There is no question of anybody raising hands on the prime minister, trying to hurt him or any such thing. There is no question. So it is absolutely wrong for anybody to say that there was any such plan, there was no such plan," Priyanka Gandhi told reporters in the Parliament House complex.

"But if you are going to allow your members to quote books, talk nonsense, the opposition benches are going to protest. I am sorry, the prime minister is hiding behind the speaker. They are making the speaker say all this because yesterday he did not have the guts to come in the House...because three women were standing before his bench, what nonsense is this," the Congress MP said.

She urged the media to ask the prime minister, Home Minister Amit Shah and the government why the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha was not allowed to speak. (PTI)

## RS witnesses noisy scenes, walkout over Rahul being disallowed to speak in LS

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The Rajya Sabha on Thursday witnessed heated exchanges and Opposition walkout after Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge raised the issue of Rahul Gandhi not being allowed to speak in the Lok Sabha.

Kharge raised the issue of Gandhi, but when he started to read excerpts from an unpublished book of former army chief M M Naravane, he was disallowed, leading to a walkout by Opposition benches.

Soon after the House mourned the passing of a former MP and tabling of listed papers during the Zero Hour, Kharge raised the issue of his counterpart in the Lok Sabha, Gandhi, not being allowed to speak.

"He (Gandhi) wanted to speak about the country's interest," Kharge said.

Before he could complete, Chairman C P Radhakrishnan gave the floor to the Leader of the House and Union Minister Jagat Prakash Nadda, saying the proceedings of the Lok Sabha cannot be discussed in the Upper House as per the rulings of the Chair.

He said if the Congress party was interested, its leaders should advise their Lok Sabha MPs to join the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address to the joint sitting of Parliament in the Lower House, and proceedings in the Rajya Sabha should be allowed to continue uninterruptedly.

The chairman thereafter called for the listed Zero Hour mentions to be taken up. At this point, Congress MPs started shouting slogans about democracy being "throttled".

The Chairman then gave the floor to Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijji, who said he was surprised by the issue being raised in the Rajya Sabha after three days of smooth debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President.

"We all are expecting everyone to follow the rules and traditions... All the members (MPs) are waiting to listen to the speech of the Prime Minister today. If the Congress party does not want to listen to the Prime Minister, (it is their) personal choice. We don't want to impose on them, but other members want to listen to the Prime Minister. How can they stop (that)," he said.

He repeated Nadda's submission that the proceedings of the Lok Sabha should not be mentioned in the Rajya Sabha with its own procedure and set of rules for the conduct of business.

"Your Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha (Rahul Gandhi) does not follow rules... does not follow the ruling of the Speaker," he said, asking Kharge why he did not stop Gandhi from going astray.

"Instead of counselling him, you yourself are doing this," he said, adding that the House should be allowed to function as per the rules and not bring in extraneous issues.

Kharge said Congress does not want to disturb the proceedings of the House. Lok Sabha isn't functioning for the past four days because the Leader of the Opposition is not being allowed to speak, he said.

Parliament is made up of both houses. It is not made up of one House, he said.

"These two (Houses) are pillars (of Parliamentary democracy), but one pillar is paralysed to hide your failures... when Gandhi wants to speak (on the failures), you are irritated," he said, referring to the government.

Chairman Radhakrishnan said what happened in the Lok Sabha should not be discussed in the Upper House. (PTI)

## 12 Maoists with Rs 46 lakh bounty surrender in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur

BIJAPUR (CHHATTISGARH), Feb 5: Twelve Naxalites carrying a collective bounty of Rs 46 lakh surrendered before the police in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district on Thursday, a senior official said.

The cadres, including eight women, belonging to the "south sub zonal bureau" of Maoists, turned themselves in before senior police officials here under the Bastar police's "Poona Margem" (from rehabilitation to social reintegration) initiative. Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Kumar Yadav said.

They were also impressed by the state government's surrender and rehabilitation policy, the official said.

Of them, Somadu Madkam (42), a divisional committee member and in charge of the Katakalyan area committee of Maoists, Hungi Kunjam (19), and Payaki Kunjam (22), both party members of different units, carried a reward of ₹ 8 lakh each.

Three other cadres carried a bounty of ₹ 5 lakh each, one cadre ₹ 2 lakh and five cadres ₹ 1 lakh each, he said.

They also surrendered an AK-47 rifle, two Self Loading Rifles (SLRs), 250 gelatin sticks, 400 detonators, one plastic drum filled with gunpowder and one bundle of cordex wire, the official said. (PTI)

## Top Naxalite Udham Singh killed in encounter in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur

BIJAPUR, Feb 5: A senior Naxalite carrying a reward of Rs 8 lakh on his head was gunned down on Thursday by security forces in an encounter in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district, police said. He was identified as Udham Singh, a 'divisional committee' member of the south Bastar division of the outlawed Communist Party of India (Maoist). Singh was in charge of platoon number 13 of the south Bastar division, the official added.

Acting on specific intelligence inputs about the presence of Singh and other armed cadres in the forest and hilly areas under Tarrem police station limits, security personnel launched an operation, Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Kumar Yadav said. Personnel belonging to District Reserve Guard (DRG) and CRPF's elite CoBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action) commandos were involved in the operation, he said.

"The exchange of fire took place between security forces and the Maoists at around 7.30 am. After the firefight stopped, the body of Udham Singh was recovered. An AK-47 rifle, two magazines with 28 rounds, cordex wire, a wireless set, a mobile phone, pouch, backpack, tiffin bag and other Maoist items

were seized from the encounter site," the SP said.

A native of Kottaguda village in Basaguda police station area of Bijapur district, Singh had joined the Maoist outfit as a party member in 2002-03 and had remained active along the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border. He was associated with the Pamed area committee for the past three years, the official said.

"Nine cases related to Naxalite incidents were registered against him at various police stations of the district. He was allegedly involved in the 2023 attack on a police party in Gundam forest area under Tarrem police station area, the 2024 police-Maoist encounter in Putkel-Chipurhatti forest under Basaguda police station area, and the attack on Jidpalli camp in 2024," the SP informed.

As many as 163 Maoists were killed in separate encounters in Bijapur district in 2025, while 11 Maoists have been neutralised so far in 2026, Yadav informed.

Bastar Range Inspector General of Police Sundarraj Pattlingam said security forces have been working with vigilance, restraint and determination to maintain peace and public safety in the Bastar region. (PTI)

## Refund partial fare to rail passengers who pay charge but don't get full berth under RAC: Par panel

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Charging full fare for tickets booked under the RAC category, where the ticket holder has to travel without a full berth, is not justified, a parliamentary committee has said.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC), in its report "Punctuality and Travel Time in Train Operations in Indian Railways" tabled in Parliament on Wednesday, said that "charging full fare for tickets under RAC (Reservation Against Cancellation), where the ticket holder continues in the RAC category after chart preparation without a berth facility, is not justified."

The committee suggested that the railway ministry "should devise a mechanism to refund partial fare to the customer/traveller who could not get a full berth but had to pay full charges at the time of boarding."

Under the current practice, the railways charge full fare from a passenger to book a berth in trains under the RAC category. However, the passenger may remain in the RAC category and share the berth with another RAC passenger. Both passengers pay full fare to the railways.

The committee urged the railways to refund partial fare to such passengers and apologise it of the steps taken in this regard.

Addressing the need to review the criteria for Superfast trains in Indian Railways, the committee noted that in May 2007, the railways decided that if the average speed of a



train, in both up and down directions, is a minimum of 55 kmph on broad gauge and 45 kmph on metre gauge, it would be treated as a Superfast (SF) train.

It said that the audit observed that the benchmark of 55 kmph for classifying a train as Superfast is itself low.

"There has been no change in the criteria of classification of SF trains since 2007," the committee said. It also noted that out of 478 Superfast trains, the scheduled speed of 123 Superfast trains is less than 55 kmph.

In its response, the ministry told the committee that scrutiny of the list of 123 trains

categorised as Superfast revealed that 47 trains have speeds over 55 kmph as per the current data. As for the remaining trains found to be operating at less than 55 kmph, the ministry said that the provision of additional stoppages after commencement of regular operations had affected the average speed of a few trains.

"The committee while expressing concern over categorisation of trains running at a mere speed of 55 kmph as 'Superfast Trains', convey their unhappiness over lack of adherence to the limit set by the ministry itself," the report said.

It added, "The committee are forced to conclude that the demarcation of trains as superfast was to apply higher charges. As and when the speed of trains fell below, the Indian Railways should have removed the train from the Superfast category and revised the fare." The committee further considered the Superfast benchmark of 55 kmph "too conservative and anachronistic", and not in consonance with present times, especially when some East Asian countries like China and Japan run trains at speeds far beyond India's benchmarks.

"The committee recommend the ministry to review and rationalise the criteria for categorising the trains as 'Superfast' comparable with global standards approximating to 100 kmph and explore the feasibility of achieving a consistent speed of 100 kmph not just at the terminating point, but throughout the entire journey -- from the originating station, through intermediate stops, and up to the terminating point -- by the year 2030," the report said.

"The committee are also of the view that introduction of new trains tends to cause delays due to halting of other existing Express/Superfast trains for enabling them to pass and, therefore, recommend that the ministry should focus more on ensuring that the existing express and superfast trains run on time over other newly introduced trains," it added. (PTI)

## 'Mirzapur: The Movie' set for September 4 re-release in theatres



Amazon MGM Studios and Excel Entertainment on Wednesday announced that "Mirzapur: The Movie", the cinematic adaptation of the popular series "Mirzapur", will be released in theatres on September 4.

The film marks the big-screen debut of one of India's most successful and fan-favourite streaming series and promises a larger-than-life cinematic experience set in the gritty world of "Mirzapur".

The makers said the movie will unveil an untold chapter from the "Mirzapur" universe.

"Ab dekhiye bhaukaal bade parde par. Watch #MirzapurTheMovie releasing at your nearest theatres on 4th September," Amazon MGM Studios posted on Instagram alongside a poster.

Produced by Ritesh Sidhwani and Farhan Akhtar and co-produced by Kassim Jagnagia and Vishal Ramchandani under the banner of Excel Entertainment, the film is directed by Gurmeet Singh and written by Puneet Krishna.

First launched on Prime Video in 2018, "Mirzapur" quickly emerged as a breakout hit and went on to become one of the most-watched and talked-about Indian web series, earning a massive fan following for its raw depiction of crime, power struggles and lawlessness in the Purnvanchal region of Uttar Pradesh.

The series, headlined by Pankaj Tripathi, Ali Fazal and Divyenndu, has three seasons.

"Mirzapur: The Movie" brings back key characters from the franchise, including Kaleen Bhaiya (Tripathi) and Guddu Pandit (Fazal), and also marks the much-anticipated return of Munna Bhaiya, played by Divyenndu.

The ensemble cast also features Jitendra Kumar, Ravi Kishan, Abhishek Banerjee, Rasika Duggal, Shweta Tripathi, Shriya Pilgaonkar, Harshita Gaur, Sushant Singh, Mohit Malik, Sheeba Chadha, Rajesh Tailang, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Sonal Chauhan, Pramod Pathak and Anangsha Biswas. (PTI)

# ADARSH-SHANAYA EXCITED FOR 'O' ROMEO' DESPITE BOX OFFICE CLASH WITH THEIR MOVIE 'TU YAA MAIN'

Actors Adarsh Gourav and Shanaya Kapoor say they are just as excited to watch Shahid Kapoor and Vishal Bhardwaj's upcoming film "O Romeo" as they are about their own survival thriller "Tu Yaa Main".

The two movies are set for a box office clash when they hit the cinema halls across the country on February 13.

Adarsh said he has been a huge fan of acclaimed director Bhardwaj and looking forward to "O Romeo", the filmmaker's fourth collaboration with Kapoor after "Kaminey", "Haider", and "Rangoon".

"A part of me is like, 'Oh s\*\*t, we're coming out on the same day.' But also the greed of just getting to watch Shahid Kapoor and Vishal Bhardwaj is very tangible for me. I've been a huge 'Kaminey' and 'Haider' fan and Vishal Bhardwaj since 'Makdee' days. I'm very excited to see 'O Romeo'," Adarsh told PTI in an interview.

Shanaya, who made her debut with 2025's "Aankhon Ki Gustaakhiyan", echoed, saying that she loved the trailer of "O Romeo".

"When the teaser and the trailer dropped, we were like, 'Dude, this is insane, this is a kick a\*\* trailer.' Everyone's excited about it. It is an iconic pairing comeback of Vishal sir and Shahid, and to see them finally back on the screens, it's exciting," she said.

The 26-year-old said she hopes audiences turn up in theatres to watch both "O Romeo" and "Tu Yaa Main".

"You want everyone to be back in the theatres, you just want everyone to have a good time and watch a good film. Both ('Tu Yaa Main' and 'O Romeo') are different genres and films, you get that even with a glimpse of the teaser, trailer, and songs. I'm excited as an audience that everyone's back in the theatre and it's a fun time."

"O Romeo", inspired by a chapter of author Hussain Zaidi's book "Mafia Queens of Mumbai", tells the gripping tale of gangster Hussain Ustara, played by Shahid.

The movie's star-studded cast also includes Triptii Dimri, Nana Patekar, and Disha Patani, with Vikrant Massey making a special appearance.

Adarsh also shared his enthusiasm for his actor friend Avinash Tiwari, who plays the antagonist in "O Romeo".

"I'm rooting for my man, Avinash Tiwari. I'm so happy that he's getting these kick-a\*\* roles, he looks so good in the trailer. He's got the best one-liners. So, I'm really rooting for him. I hope that both films do well," he said.

"Tu Yaa Main" tells the story of two social media influencers, portrayed by Shanaya and Adarsh, whose romantic getaway takes a deadly turn when they find themselves trapped in a swimming pool with a crocodile.

"Tu Yaa Main" is produced by Aanand L Rai, Himanshu Sharma, and Vinod Bhanushali. (PTI)



## Hansal Mehta sets new series 'Family Business' at Netflix, Anil Kapoor, Vijay Varma star

Filmmaker Hansal Mehta returns to Netflix with his new show "Family Business", centred on a power struggle between an industrialist and his protegee, played by Anil Kapoor and Vijay Varma.

The first look and teaser of the series was shared by the streamer on Tuesday during an event where Netflix unveiled its India slate for the coming year.

Mehta, who earlier worked with Netflix for "Scoop", has co-created the series with Niren Bhatt. The series also features Nandish Singh Sandhu, Rhea Chakraborty and Tina Desai. Kapoor joked that all the young people involved with the show have given him a run for his money.

"There's so much competition and to be competing with all of them keeps me young. I'll soon be completing 50 years (in the business) but I feel young," Kapoor, who made his acting debut in 1979 with a small role in "Hamare Tumhare", said.

Varma, who has had several projects with Netflix including "JC 814: The Kandahar Hijack", "Darlings", "Jaanejaan", "Murder Mubaarak" and "Lust Stories 2", said he feels like the streamer's "ghar jamai".

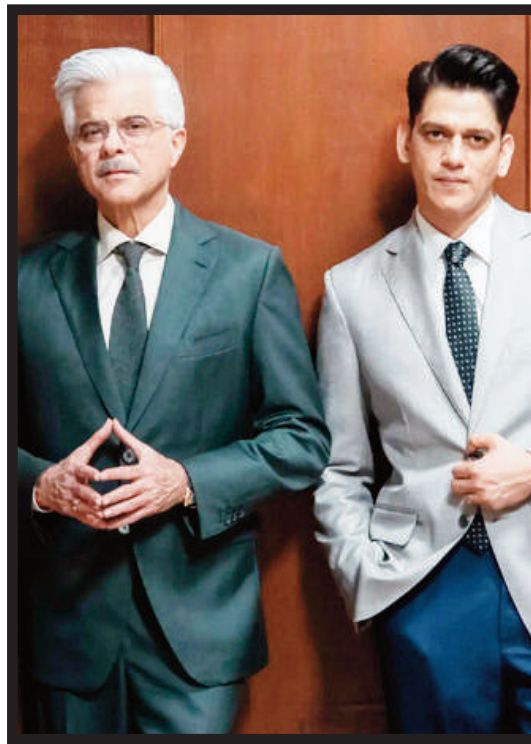
"I was doing a shoot for Netflix last night and here I'm today for 'Family Business'. I

feel good that I've a healthy love relationship with them, Netflix is my 'sasural' (in-laws' place). It's been great to collaborate with one of my favourite directors Hansal sir, he is kicking it, his work is so refined and cutting edge, and I'm glad I got to play such a beautiful part. "To be working with the evergreen, magnanimous and stud boy and dashing and youngest actor I've ever worked with is Anil Kapoor. His energy, zest for life and perfection to craft... I've had a great time shooting with him. I've worked for the first time with Rhea and Nandish," he added. Netflix highlighted the casting as central to portraying the shifting power dynamics at the heart of the story. Mehta said though the budget was small, like their show, their ambition was huge.

"It's a privilege to have Anil sir working with us on this show. I'm working with Vijay for the first time and to be working with this ensemble was great," Mehta said.

Mehta and Vikram Malhotra of Abundantia Entertainment have produced the show. Smriti Jain and Gaurav Mishra serve as executive producers.

"We've been waiting to be on Netflix and I couldn't be happier that we are making our debut with Netflix on 'Family Business'," Malhotra said. (PTI)



## Sunny Deol to headline Netflix's legal thriller 'Ikka'

Bollywood star Sunny Deol, who is riding high on the success of "Gadar 2" and "Border 2", is all set to make his OTT debut with Netflix's upcoming legal drama-thriller "Ikka", the streamer announced on Tuesday.

The film is part of Netflix's new slate and follows a high-profile advocate as he is arm-twisted into taking up a case, compelling him to deploy every trick of the trade as professional duty clashes with unresolved grudges.

"Dhurandhar" star Akshaye Khanna will play the antagonist in it.

Directed by Siddharth P. Malhotra, "Ikka" is written by Althea Kaushal and Mayank Tewari.

"It is a script that I wanted to make since I did Hichki. We only wanted Sunny and Akshaye sir for this and luckily they all said yes," Malhotra said.

The film is produced by Malhotra and Sapna Malhotra under the banner of Alchemy Films, with Sapna Malhotra also serving as executive producer.

The cast includes Dia Mirza, Tilotama Shome, Sanjeeva Shaikh, Jyoti Mukerji, Shishir Sharma and Akansha Ranjan, alongside Deol and Khanna. (PTI)



## Audience more accepting, you can start afresh: 'Bhabhiji...' star Shubhangi Atre on new beginnings



The audience has become more accepting and an actor does not need to stay tied to a particular role, says Shubhangi Atre, who is bidding goodbye to her popular screen persona of Angoori Bhabhi with the new movie "Bhabhiji Ghar Par Hain! - Fun on the Run".

Atre took on the role of Angoori Bhabhi on the popular sitcom "Bhabhiji Ghar Par Hain" in 2016 after actor Shilpa Shinde left the serial due to her differences with the makers. Shinde is back on the show's 2.0 version.

She is happy that she got to play the character for one last time in the film.

She is also looking forward to exploring different opportunities that will lead her

beyond her image of a homely wife whose broken English leads to funny moments on the show.

"Social media has come to have a huge benefit for actors. It gives you a platform to showcase different looks. Earlier, if you played a character on TV, you became that. In shows like 'Ramayan', Arun Govil ji used to be greeted like Lord Ram, people would touch his feet whenever he stepped out. The advantage of social media is that people know me as Angoori on the show, but they also know me as Shubhangi," the actor told PTI in an interview.

Recalling an incident where she met a group of women at the airport while on her way to meet her mother in Bhopal.

"They were going on a jungle safari and the moment they spotted me, they got their pictures clicked and asked me why I left the show. When I told them that I wanted to do something else as an actor, they very sweetly offered what all I should explore next," she said.

"That way, the audience has also be-

come very accepting... Now you don't need to stay tied to an image. There is no stigma like that... It takes some time but after a short break, you can start afresh," she added.

Saumya Tandon, Atre's co-star in the show, recently played the wife of Akshaye Khanna's Rehman Dakait in "Dhurandhar" and received a lot of praise for her portrayal. Atre said she immediately called Tandon to congratulate her after seeing the movie, a blockbuster hit now.

"She was so beautiful, graceful and poised... She could speak through her eyes... If you can do that, then that's the best thing as an actor. I remember when I worked with Anurag Basu, he told me, 'Shubhangi, you don't need to say too many dialogues, I want you to speak through your eyes'. She has done great in 'Dhurandhar'. Now I also want to experiment with new characters after 'Bhabhi ji... There are some offers for my next," she said.

Atre, who began her career in 2009 with the popular show "Kasauti Zindagi Kii" and later appeared in

"Kasturi" as well as an Anurag Basu story on Tagore, is best known as Angoori and for her catchphrase "Sahi pakde hain". The dialogue has now become a part of her, so much so that she ends up saying it everywhere.

"The other day I was shopping for sarees and I was pointing towards a particular sari, and when the shopkeeper picked that up, I instantly said, 'Sahi pakde hain'."

How did the film version, also starring Vidisha Srivastava, Aasif Sheikh, Rohitashv Gour, Ravi Kishan, Mukesh Tiwari and Nirahua in pivotal roles, evolve?

The actor said it was a decision taken by the makers and the channel but the team wanted to do a film as the show has been popular for years with each of its characters etched in public memory.

"We got to know in November 2024 that they are planning to make a movie and we were all very happy and excited. It was the dream of our writer Manoj Santoshi ji. He passed away. This is the best tribute for him from all of us because this was very close to his

heart. The show is also very dear to our director Shashank Bali. I was very happy because we shot in Mussoorie and I love mountains," she said.

When she first joined the show in 2016 at the peak of its popularity, the actor said she was scared to step into a character that had already become popular but she felt relieved when fans embraced her version.

"As they say, I climbed into an already moving car, but thankfully all the actors supported me in a big way and welcomed me with a lot of love. I think if you do something with heart, it will definitely reach others. I am from Madhya Pradesh, my mother is a housewife. I have seen women whose world revolves around their husbands... I was scared but also determined that I will do a good job. God was so kind to me that people easily accepted me as Angoori," she said.

Leaving Angoori behind is hard but the film serves as the best closure, said Atre, adding that she will always cherish the memories of being part of the show and its team for 10 years. (PTI)

# Doubles is not a sideshow: Yuki Bhambri on re-invention and right support

**BENGALURU, Feb 5:** For a player once tipped to be among India's finest singles exponents, Yuki Bhambri's career arc has followed an unexpected but instructive path. Injuries stalled his singles rise soon after he broke into the ATP top-100, sponsorship uncertainty compounded the challenges, and the promise many saw remained largely unfulfilled in that format.

Yet, at 30-something, Bhambri finds himself in the middle of the most productive phase of his professional life as India's leading doubles player.

In the last 18 months he won four ATP titles, made a Grand Slam semifinal and is a case study of what structured support can do to elite talent.

In a candid conversation with PTI, Bhambri pushed back against the idea that doubles is merely a consolation act, reflected on whether his singles career could have been different, and cautioned that India risks falling further behind countries like China and Japan unless systemic changes are implemented sooner rather than later.

**Doubles deserves respect, not dismissal**

In a sport where singles format commands the spotlight, Bhambri is firm that doubles must stop being treated as a "fall-back" or a sideshow.

"When we grow up, everyone wants to be a singles Grand Slam champion, there's no denying that. That was my dream too," Bhambri said ahead of the Davis Cup tie against the Netherlands.

"But doubles exists because there is a market for it, people want to watch it, and excellence is required to succeed in it."

Drawing a comparison with cricket's multiple formats, Bhambri argues that tennis, too, should embrace plurality.

"Cricket celebrates Test specialists, ODI players and T20 stars. Tennis has singles and doubles. It's the same sport, just a different format. One format shouldn't be disrespected because the other exists."

For Bhambri, the appeal of doubles lies not in compromise but in competitive opportunity.

"In doubles, I walk into every tournament believing I can win the title, whether it's an ATP 500, a Masters or a Grand Slam. That expectation didn't always exist for me in singles, especially at the bigger events," said Bhambri who is now enjoying a career-best doubles rank of 20 in the world.

The last 18 months: proof of what support can change

Bhambri's four ATP titles -- the biggest being the ATP 500 Dubai Championships last year -- and deeper Grand Slam runs, have coincided with the launch of the 'Doubles Dream Project', an initiative that provides India's top doubles players access to international coaching, trainers, analytics and logistical backing.

"The biggest change in my career has been the support structure. For the first time, all I had to do was focus on tennis."

The arrival of former world No.1 doubles player Raven Klaasen as a travelling



coach, through Rohan Bopanna's project, proved transformative.

"There was no trial and error anymore. You were shown clearly how doubles is supposed to be played...the movement, the positioning, patterns, accountability. When you follow that structure, results follow."

Bhambri pointed to the broader impact on Indian doubles players over the same period as evidence.

"In a short span, you saw different Indians winning ATP titles across the world. That doesn't happen randomly. Imagine what could happen if this kind of structure was implemented across the system."

**Do Indians peak late?**  
It has been a never-ending debate in the

country's tennis whether Indians peak late. After all, the results suggest so. Bhambri, at 33, has his take. "We do peak late, but the reasoning in my opinion is that I think we understand the game late, the knowledge that we get is late."

"It's not that we Indians don't work hard. We are the hardest workers in the world in any field, whether it is sports, or jobs. Even the Indian kids work extremely hard."

"We just don't have access to what is required to be a world-class champion."

**The singles 'what if'**  
The conversation inevitably turns to the question Indian tennis followers have debated for years: could Bhambri's singles career have unfolded differently?

"Maybe," he admits. "Injuries played a

big role, but proper guidance also helps in preventing injuries and managing careers better."

"For the first time in the last 18 months, there were no problems, no confusion. Everything was taken care of. The results are there for everyone to see."

Bhambri does not dwell on regret, but the implication is clear: elite talent needs elite systems.

China, Japan and the widening gap Bhambri says India is already playing catch-up with Asian rivals who have invested heavily in structured development.

"When I first went to China years ago, their men's tennis wasn't strong. Today, they have Grand Slam performers, Olympic champions, and multiple top-200 players in both men's and women's tennis."

Japan, he adds, has long had a steady pipeline of professionals, while China's rise over the past decade has been rapid and deliberate.

"They brought in foreign coaches, educated local coaches, used former players, and created a proper structure. India has the resources, but we need collective commitment."

Japan has five players in the top-200 in both men's and women's singles while China has three men's singles players in the ATP chart and six in WTA rankings, led by Olympic champion Qinwen Zheng.

He felt, like many others, that state associations need to do more.

"If their votes depend on it, their lives depend on it, the needle could move a little bit more. And, like I said, no one's questioning their ability, but the results are not really there."

"That doesn't mean that everybody hosts an ATP event. They can start their level from Futures, from Under-14 events, from Under-18 events, from hosting Nationals, even that, good grassroots level."

**Did he have more singles potential?**  
Bhambri does not shy away from the question of unfulfilled promise.

"In 2018, I genuinely felt I could break into the top 50. I had momentum and belief. Athletes are rarely satisfied. If I had reached 45, I would think I could reach 30. If 30, then 10. That hunger never ends."

What matters, he says, is peace with effort.

"I know I gave everything I had."

Is a Grand Slam title essential for completeness?

With multiple Indian greats -- Leander Paes, Mahesh Bhupathi, Sania Mirza and Rohan Bopanna -- having won Grand Slam titles, Bhambri was asked whether his career would feel incomplete without one.

"I honestly don't know. I want to win one. I'm working towards it. I believe it's possible."

But he is realistic about how satisfaction works in sport.

"Even if I win one, I don't know if that feeling of 'completeness' will come. Athletes always feel they could do more." (PTI)

# Hockey India announces 24-member squad for FIH men's Pro League

**NEW DELHI, Feb 5:** Hockey India on Thursday announced a 24-member Indian men's team for the opening leg of the FIH Pro League to be held from February 10 to 15 at the Birsamunda International Hockey Stadium in Rourkela, Odisha.

Hockey India had announced a list of 33 probables last month for the coaching camp ahead of the season, which has now been pruned to a 24-member squad for the Rourkela leg of the event.

The home leg will feature international heavyweights Argentina and Belgium besides India.

"It's an exciting mix of youth and experience. We have young talents like Rosan (Kujur), Manmeet (Singh) and Amandeep coming through, while the presence of senior players, including those from the India A setup, adds valuable experience," chief coach Craig Fulton said in a release.

"That balance is important for us. Belgium and Argentina are quality sides, but we believe in our abilities and are focused on delivering our best performances."



The Indian squad features a blend of experienced players and young talent across departments as the team looks to make a strong start to its Pro League campaign on home soil.

Goalkeeping duties will be handled by Suraj Karkera and Pawan. The defensive unit includes captain Harmanpreet Singh, Amit Rohidas, Jarmanpreet Singh, Jugraj Singh, Sumit, Sanjay and Nilam Sanjeev Xess.

Defender Amandeep Lakra also finds a place in the squad following an impressive outing in the recently concluded Hockey India League, where he was adjudged the Player of the Tournament.

The midfield will be anchored by Rajinder Singh, Manmeet Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Hardik Singh, Moirangthem Rabichandra Singh, Nilakanta Sharma and Rosan Kujur.

Among the notable inclusions is

21-year-old Rosan Kujur from Odisha, who has earned his maiden call-up to the senior national squad. Kujur was part of the Indian junior team that won the bronze medal at the FIH Junior World Cup 2025 in Chennai.

He also enjoyed a breakthrough domestic season, playing a key role for Vedanta Kalinga Lancers, who lifted the Hockey India League 2025-26 title.

Manmeet Singh of Punjab has also been included following a string of impressive performances. He was part of the Indian junior team that claimed bronze at the Junior World Cup in Chennai last year and also featured for HIL GC during the Hockey India League.

India's forward line comprises Abhishek, Sukhjeet Singh, Shilpanand Lakra, Selvam Karthi, Mandeep Singh, Arajjeet Singh Hundal and Aditya Arjun Lalage.

India, who finished eighth among nine teams last season, will open their campaign against Belgium on February 11, followed by a match against Argentina a day later. (PTI)

# Will ICC knock out India if it refuses to play in another country: Hussain backs Bangladesh



**LONDON, Feb 5:** Calling for consistency in world cricket, former England captain Nasser Hussain has questioned the ICC's handling of Bangladesh's T20 World Cup ouster and asked whether the governing body would have been as strict if India had refused to play in a country at short notice.

The International Cricket Council replaced Bangladesh with Scotland in the T20 World Cup after the former refused to play their matches in India citing security issues.

"If India, a month before a

tournament, said 'our government does not want us to play in a country for a World Cup', would the ICC have been so firm and said, 'You know the rules, bad luck, we're knocking you out?'" Hussain asked on the 'Sky Sports Cricket Podcast'.

The 57-year-old stressed the need for equal application of rules.

"The only question all sides ask for is consistency. Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India must be treated the same. Yes, India fans may say, 'Cry more, we have the money!' But with power comes responsibility," he said.

Bangladesh's refusal to travel to India for its share of matches came after its pacer Mustafizur Rahman was ousted from the IPL on BCCI's instructions.

The Indian Board did not specify the reasons but it came amid increased attacks on Hindus there.

Following Bangladesh's ouster, Pakistan decided to boycott their high-stake T20 World Cup match against India on February 15 in Colombo with the country's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif stating that this decision is a show of solidarity with Bangladesh.

Hussain warned that the sport was "risking shooting itself in the foot" if politics continued to dominate decisions in world cricket.

"I'm amazed at how well Pakistan have done and continue to do with everything that they are working against. And I actually quite like Bangladesh sticking to their guns, standing up for their players," Hussain said.

"I quite like Pakistan sticking up for Bangladesh as well. At some stage, someone should say, enough with this politics, can we just get back to playing cricket."

ICC has warned Pakistan that it might face serious consequences for its decision. (PTI)

# Honoured to carry Olympic flame at Winter Olympics: Bindra



**NEW DELHI, Feb 5:** Olympic gold medalist shooter Abhinav Bindra on Thursday said he is "truly humbled" and "honoured" after carrying the Olympic torch ahead of the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics, describing it as a symbol of unity and perseverance.

The Winter Olympics begin on Friday at Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo in Italy.

"Honoured to carry the Olympic flame at @milanocortina26. A symbol of unity, perseverance, and shared human aspiration," Bindra wrote on 'X' along with a few pictures taken on a rainy day.

Bindra, a gold winner in the 10m air rifle event in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, was selected as one of the torch-bearers in October last year.

The Winter Olympics will conclude on 22.

This will be the fourth Winter Olympics to be hosted by Italy. The edition will feature 116 medal events across 16 disciplines, an increase of seven events and one discipline from Beijing 2022. (PTI)

# He always wanted us to go in attacking mood: Shanaka on Rathour

**COLOMBO, Feb 5:** Sri Lanka captain Dasun Shanaka on Thursday lauded batting consultant Vikram Rathour for his "value addition" ahead of the T20 World Cup, saying his emphasis on adopting an aggressive approach has helped the batters play more freely. Rathour, who helped India secure the 2024 T20 World Cup during his five-year stint with the team, was appointed Sri Lanka's batting consultant last month for the ICC showpiece.

"Vikram Rathore being a good addition to our side," Shanaka said while addressing a captains' day event alongside seven other skippers from participating teams.

"His knowledge and his nature -- he always wanted us to go in the attacking mood which allows most players to free themselves which I really do like, he is a good value addition to the team."

Shanaka and his players have come under pressure following unimpressive home performances since the beginning of the year.

Sri Lanka lost 1-2 to Pakistan in a T20I series in

early January and were comprehensively beaten by England in both white-ball series that concluded earlier this week.

The Sri Lankan batting unit struggled in both series, though the captain defended his batters.

"Don't see any failures in the batters it always depended on the wickets and the choice of shots we played," Shanaka said, adding that there will be improvements in the World Cup.

The team faced anger from irate local fans at Pallekele after losing the T20I series two days ago.

"I hope for support from the fans. It is important for us to play well for their sake and for the good of the team. We are aware of the national pride," Shanaka said.

"Fans have been supporting us. I will tell the fans that we didn't play well in the last 3 games to get the correct results though we tried hard. We are sorry for that."

Sri Lanka will play their first match of the T20 World Cup against Ireland on Sunday. (PTI)

# Health care executive Terry Clark is appointed CEO at the PGA of America

**FRISCO (USA), Feb 5:** The PGA of America has appointed UnitedHealth Group executive Terry Clark to be the next CEO, the second time in its last three hires the organization has chosen a business leader who was on its board of directors. Clark, the chief marketing officer at UnitedHealth Group, has been an independent director on the board of PGA of America since 2024. He replaces Derek Sprague, a past PGA president who resigned to spend more time with his family in upstate New York.

Clark takes over at a time of high turnover at the PGA of America, the organization of 30,000 golf professionals that runs the PGA Championship for men, women and seniors, and the Ryder Cup when it is held in America. Along with Sprague leaving, four C-suite executives have taken new jobs in the last year, including Jeff Price (chief commercial officer) and John Easterbrook (chief membership officer).

Seth Waugh, a longtime CEO at Deutsche Bank Americas, was serving as independent director for the PGA when he became its CEO in 2018 and served for six years. His tenure included moving headquarters from

South Florida to a new facility north of Dallas.

"Terry has earned the board's trust through years of disciplined leadership, sound judgment, and a deep respect for the PGA of America, our members, and our mission," said Nathan Charnes, the vice president who is in line to become the PGA's next president in November.

"At a time when continuity, stability, and long-term focus are essential, the board is confident Terry is the right leader to guide the Association forward and continue advancing the game in meaningful and sustainable ways." Clark also has been chief marketing and customer officer at Optum, a division of UnitedHealth Group. Optum is one of the key sponsors of The Players Championship.

"My focus will be on providing clarity, strengthening our culture, and empowering our teams to support our members and PGA of America golf professionals at the highest level, while elevating our major championships and marquee events as defining stages for the game, our partners, and the communities we serve," Clark said in a statement. (AP)

# We don't want to put any team on a pedestal, says USA's Harmeet Singh

**MUMBAI, Feb 5:** His life has come a full circle having represented Mumbai in the Indian domestic circuit but USA all-rounder Harmeet Singh doesn't want his side to put any team "on a pedestal", urging them to showcase same brand of cricket that they displayed two years ago in the T20 World Cup. USA will take on T20 World Cup co-hosts India in their tournament-opener here on Saturday.

The USA side had shocked former champions Pakistan and put up an impressive show against India while making it to Super Eight in the last edition and Harmeet said his team aims to carry on playing the same style of cricket.

"They (India) are a formidable side. Last year (edition), the brand of cricket that we played, we plan to come out and showcase it again. We don't want to put any team on a pedestal," Harmeet told PTI in an exclusive interview.

"We want to go out there and play the best (cricket) again that we can and results will follow. When you put a bigger team ahead of us, at the end of the day in T20 cricket, you can't play with only names, you have to perform every day," he said.

The US is again placed in a group which has Pakistan, Namibia and the Netherlands apart from India.



"T20 being the shortest format, the odds can change really fast. Two bad overs here and there, can change the game completely. On a good day, (if) we start on the right foot, anything can happen," Harmeet said.

Harmeet, who played for India in the U-19 World Cup in 2012, moved to the US in early 2020. Now a key member of the side, he will be back at the hallowed turf of Wankhede Stadium where he played alongside some of the members of the current Indian team.

"Born and raised in Mumbai and especially playing at the Wankhede, all the memories come

back," the 33-year-old said.

"I'm looking forward... USA has given me a lot, the opportunities which I was claiming here, now playing cricket for USA, enjoying my time, (I'm) excited for this game and hopefully I can make the most out of the opportunity," he said.

"There are a lot of batch-mates of mine who are currently playing for India and here I am now playing against them with whom I once shared the dressing room with."

"... Yeah, definitely a full circle. The best part is (that) I kept playing and kept pursuing the sport and now here I am playing (for the US)."

Harmeet said the USA team has had a "great build-up" to the World Cup.

"Build-up has been great because most of our group has been playing a lot of cricket in terms of franchise cricket, and then now coming straight to the camp," he said.

"We had a three-week camp in Sri Lanka and now we're here for almost a week before the World Cup. We practised and trained well together, we're ready and I feel we'll give it a good go at the World Cup," Harmeet added.

Apart from Harmeet, the USA side features two more "Mumbaikars" in Shubham Ranjane and Saurabh Netravalkar, who are set to take the field against India. (PTI)



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## U19 World Cup: Buoyed by George, Mhatre finding form, India keyed up for final vs England

**HARARE, Feb 5:** In pursuit of a record-extending sixth title, the Indian Under-19 cricket team would bank on its swashbuckling batting line-up when it takes on a gritty England in what promises to be an evenly-matched summit clash of the ICC Under-19 World Cup here on Friday.

India's successful chase of a massive total to humble Afghanistan in the semifinal where skipper Ayush Mhatre and opener Aaron George finally produced innings of substance, augurs well for the five-time champions, aiming to regain the trophy they last lifted in 2022.

India have shown tremendous resolve from the very first group match against the United States. In the semifinal, they decimated a hardened Afghanistan side to maintain an blemish-free record despite being in pursuit of a 300-plus target.

They now face another unbeaten team in England.

India will be aware that England have reached this far after knocking out defending champions Australia and will be high on confidence.

To pull off the win, India will need a collective performance befitting the quality in their line-up, studded with batting prodigy Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, whose firestorm approach has left opposition teams struggling for answers.

Sooryavanshi, who turns 15 next month, has already struck three half-centuries and a blazing century in the final could be the driving force that propels India to the title.

However, he will need to exercise caution against an England



side boasting of a strong pace battery, led by Manny Lumsden, who has been pivotal to their campaign. He could prove more than a handful if India's top-order batters indulge in nonchalant shot selection.

India's record in the finals of the global age-group tournament has been brilliant. This marks their 10th appearance in the summit clash.

Having beaten England in their only previous final meeting -- in the 2022 West Indies edition -- history is also on their side.

The return to form of Mhatre, who finally broke his half-century drought in the semifinal against Afghanistan, has given India plenty to cheer about.

Adding more heft is a solid middle order with Vihaan Malhotra

contributing several fine innings and wicketkeeper-batter Abhigyan Kundu proving his worth with two half-centuries and assured work behind the stumps.

India's pace attack of Deepesh Devendran, Henil Patel and R.S. Ambrish has stood up well so far, but the challenge could be sterner against an England side that thrives on pace bowling. India may therefore look to lean more on their spin duo of Kanishk Chouhan and Khilan Patel for greater control, though the final call will depend on the pitch conditions.

The absence of an Indian bowler in the tournament's top five wicket-takers, led by England's Manny Lumsden with 15 scalps, could be a mild concern.

However, India's strength has

been collective bowling performances even though there have been occasional lapses, as seen when Afghanistan piled up a stiff 300-plus total in the semifinal.

England will lean heavily on their prolific run-getters.

Ben Mayes is in sublime form after a highest score of 191 and two half-centuries, making him the tournament's second-highest run-scorer with 399 runs.

Skipper Thomas Rew has also been in good touch, smashing a century in the semifinal against Australia and adding two unbeaten half-centuries to tally 299 runs, the fourth-highest aggregate in the competition.

But their openers, Ben Dawkins and Joseph Moores, have clearly been struggling.

On the bowling front, Lumsden has been incisive, and England will be hoping he receives crucial support from right-arm quick Sebastian Morgan and left-arm James Minto as they bid for their second U19 World Cup title, the first coming way back in 1998.

**Teams :**

**England:** Thomas Rew (c, wk), Ralphe Albert, Ali Farooq, Ben Dawkins, Caleb Falconer, Farhan Ahmed, Alex French, Alex Green, Luke Hands, Isaac Mohammed, Manny Lumsden, Ben Mayes, James Minto, Joseph Moores, Sebastian Morgan.

**India:** Ayush Mhatre (c), Vihaan Malhotra, Aaron George, RS Ambrish, Kanishk Chouhan, Deepesh Devendran, Henil Patel, Khilan Patel, Abhigyan Kundu, (wk), Mohamed Enaan, Udhav Mohan, Harvansh Pangalia, Kishan Singh, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, Vedant Trivedi.

Match starts at 1:00pm. (PTI)

## Man City beats Newcastle 3-1 to advance to English League Cup final

**MANCHESTER, Feb 5:** It's Manchester City vs. Arsenal in the English League Cup final.

The current top two in the Premier League will go head-to-head at Wembley Stadium next month after City beat Newcastle 3-1 on Wednesday to complete a 5-1 win on aggregate in the semifinals.

Both City and Arsenal are still in contention for a clean sweep of trophies this season. The League Cup is the chance to lift the first piece of major silverware this term and to potentially inflict a psychological blow in the race for the title.

"We're here to win trophies and we give our best every day to reach these finals and win the silverware," City forward Omar Marmoush - who scored two goals on the night - told Sky Sports.

Arsenal currently leads the standings by six points ahead of second-place City. Both teams are through to the round of 16 in the Champions League and the fourth round of the FA Cup.

The League Cup final is on March 22.

"It's a pleasure to play against Arsenal, the best team right now in Europe, maybe the world," City manager Pep Guardiola said. "As much (as) we (can) play against them, it will make us a better, better team."

Two first-half goals from Marmoush at the Etihad effectively finished off Newcastle in a semi-final where City led 2-0 from the first leg. Tijjani Reijnders added another before the break.

Newcastle scored a consolation through substitute Anthony Elanga and prevented what looked like being a rout after the



first 45 minutes.

Arsenal booked its place in the final with a 1-0 win against Chelsea on Tuesday to seal a 4-2 aggregate victory.

**A growing rivalry**

The final will continue the recent rivalry between the clubs, which has seen City beat Arsenal to the title in 2023 and '24. On both occasions Arsenal had led the way before being overhauled.

Mikel Arteta's team is ahead again this season and aiming to win the title for the first time since 2004.

The League Cup would be Arteta's first major trophy since his debut season as Arsenal manager when he won the FA Cup in 2020.

He was formerly Guardiola's assistant at City and victory in the final would see him finally beat his former boss to a major trophy.

Guardiola, meanwhile, will get the chance to win a 16th major

trophy since taking over at City in 2016 and his fifth League Cup.

City is looking to win it for the ninth time and move within one of Liverpool's record haul of 10 in the competition.

Arsenal has won the trophy twice - most recently in 1993.

This year's final will be a repeat of 2018, when Arteta was part of Guardiola's coaching team as City triumphed.

**Marmoush double**

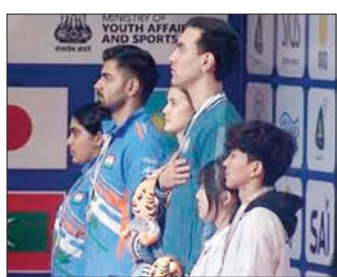
Marmoush bundled in City's opener in the seventh minute when Dan Burn's tackle rebounded off the Egypt international and into the net.

His second came from another defensive error in the 29th when Kieran Trippier's attempted clearance looped up for Marmoush to head in from close range.

Reijnders drove home the third from inside the box three minutes later.

Elanga's goal came in the 62nd and Newcastle had chances to score more. (AP)

## Asian Championship: Suruchi-Rana clinch air pistol mixed team silver



**NEW DELHI, Feb 5:** Indian shooting prodigy Suruchi Singh and world champion Samrat Rana dazzled but had to settle for silver in the 10m air pistol mixed team event at the Asian Championship here on Thursday.

India, buoyed by Esha Singh's women's air pistol gold on Wednesday, had another fruitful day, though the top podium eluded them in the senior section.

The Suruchi-Rana duo scored 479.6 -- a new world and Asian junior record -- but Uzbekistan clinched gold with a world-record 481.3.

The Indian duo hit the ground running, posting 100.5 in the first series to lead the four-team final. But the Uzbek pair, Nigina Saidkulova and Mukhammad Kamalov, surged ahead by the third series and held their advantage through the 'Elimination' stage to claim gold.

Chinese-Taipei finished third with a score of 412.2.

The 19-year-old Suruchi Singh -- who bagged four ISSF World Cup gold medals last year and topped the season-ending World Cup Final in Doha -- and Samrat dominated the qualification round with a total of 583.

The Vietnamese duo, Vinh Thu Trinh and Minh Cong Lai, also scored 583, but the Indians pushed them to second place on 'Inner 10s' -- 22 to 18 -- highlighting just how razor-close the contest was.

The second Indian pair, double Olympic bronze medalist Manu Bhaker and Sharvan Kumar, tallied 571, finishing ninth and missing out on the final. (PTI)

## We've been able to build depth in squad: Australia captain Marsh on absence of Cummins, Hazlewood

**COLOMBO, Feb 5:** Australian captain Mitchell Marsh on Thursday placed faith in his team's depth to cover the absence of injured pacers Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood during the ICC T20 World Cup, beginning from Saturday.

Cummins was ruled out of the marquee event with a back strain and Hazlewood will miss a couple of matches in the group phase because of an Achilles niggle.

"I think we've got a lot of bases covered. One of the great things about Pat and Josh especially, being all three format players, is that we've been able to build a lot of depth within our squad and the guys that have come in have played a lot of cricket for our group," Marsh said during Captains' Briefing ahead of the World Cup here.

Marsh hoped that the Australian spinners will be at their best on Sri Lankan pitches, which are generally a paradise for slow bowlers.

"We've got a lot of confidence in them to go out there and do the job when required and then we'll just pick teams based on the conditions. Matthew Kuhnemann has been great for us."

"We've also got Adam Zampa and then we've got a few spinning all-rounders, like most teams will," he added.

Australia's build-up to the World Cup was not an ideal one as they lost an away T20I series against Pakistan 0-3.

But Marsh did not read too much into it.



"Yeah, look, Pakistan was Pakistan. We had a few guys missing and we came here with a long lead-in, a good training session. We have a practice game ahead and then a long build-in to our game. So, we will be very well prepared for our first game," he said.

Australia are placed in Group B alongside Ireland, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe and Oman.

Marsh termed it a tricky draw but said his side has the wherewithal to ace the challenge.

"Yeah, we've got great respect for all the teams that we're going to be playing against. Over the last 18 months, I feel we've been one of the most consistent sides in the world. We come to this World Cup really confident, knowing that conditions will be different at times."

"But we've got guys that have experienced that all over the world," he said.

Netherlands skipper Scott Edwards said they are looking to play against India at Ahmedabad. (PTI)

## Our flight is booked, we are going: Suryakumar on India's T20WC match against Pak



**MUMBAI, Feb 5:** India skipper Suryakumar Yadav on Thursday said his team will travel to Colombo for its ICC T20 World Cup match against Pakistan even though the neighbouring country has announced a boycott of the game.

The Indian skipper did, however, acknowl-

edge that the situation is not easy for those involved in the issue, including the ICC that has warned Pakistan of serious consequences.

"I feel it is not an easy job. It is not my call. I am sure they (the ICC) might be working out something as well but it has come from the other government or the nation, how can they (the ICC) help as well?" Suryakumar said during the pre-tournament captains' press conference here at the BCCI headquarters.

India are scheduled to face the arch-rivals on February 15 but Pakistan's cricket team has been told by its government to skip the game after Bangladesh were replaced by Scotland for refusing to play in India on account of "security concerns".

"...their (Pakistan's) decision is not in my control. I wish I could take their decisions, but then it is their call," Suryakumar said.

"We have been told that we have to play a game there (in Colombo) on (February) 15th. We played them three times in the Asia Cup, we played some good cricket. We won (all the

## Mumbai, Karnataka brace for 'mini India' showdown in marquee Ranji QF match

**MUMBAI, Feb 5:** The T20 World Cup fever might be seeping in, but the Ranji Trophy quarterfinals clash between star-studded Mumbai and Karnataka has the potential to offer its own thrills over the next five days, starting from Friday.

Both the teams have pedigree -- Mumbai has an eye-watering 42 Ranji titles and Karnataka an impressive eight, but the past has little bearing on such knockout matches. But that said, Mumbai's aura in such matches is undeniable, which is now enhanced by the return of regular skipper Shardul Thakur and India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal.

Beyond them also, Mumbai have a plethora of match-winners with the bat in Sarfaraz Khan, Shams Mulani, Tanush Kotian, Tushar Deshpande etc.

So, it came as little surprise that Mumbai entered the knockout phase as Group D toppers.

"If you ask anyone, Mumbai have the most experienced players in knockout games. I trust in my and the boys' preparation," Thakur said. Mumbai, however, are sweating on Sarfaraz's fitness. The middle-order batting mainstay, who smashed a double century (227) earlier in the season, has been battling a hamstring issue and viral fever. "Our team physio and doctors are in constant touch. Every two-three hours they are checking on his health and we are hoping that he will play tomorrow," said Thakur.

Siddhesh Lad, who led Mumbai in the absence of Thakur, has been there most consistent scorer with 737 runs, and the management will hope him to continue in the same manner.

But if any team is capable of stopping Mumbai in their tracks, it is Karnataka. They made a dramatic entry into knockouts, finishing second in Group B behind Madhya Pradesh.

Karnataka pulled off a thrilling five-wicket win over Punjab in their last league match to seal a last-eight berth.

The return of Karun Nair will certainly boost their batting line-up which also has KL Rahul, Devdutt Padikkal, Mayank Agarwal, R Smaran, and pacer Prasidh Krishna.

Having replaced Agarwal as captain, Devdutt underlined his form with a blistering 85-ball 120 against Punjab to power his side to the knockouts.

"Leading Karnataka is something that I have always dreamt of. At the same time it was a lot about what everybody did in the game," Devdutt said on the eve of the match here. On his batting resurgence after a mini slump, Devdutt said: "Technique wise not much has changed. It's more mentally. I have tried to be more hungry. Keeping wanting to score runs every time I go out to bat."

"It's very easy to be complacent after matches) and we were very happy. "Similarly, if we get an opportunity in Colombo, we will definitely play," he added.

India will take on the USA in their T20 World Cup opener here at the Wankhede Stadium on Saturday. The defending champions and the USA are placed in Group A along with Pakistan, Namibia and the Netherlands.

"Our mindset is pretty clear. We have not said no (to playing against Pakistan). They have. ICC has given the fixture. Our flight is booked and we are going there (to Colombo)," Suryakumar added.

He was then asked what his message would be to the powers-that-be who can ensure that the contest between the arch-rivals takes place.

In his reply, the Indian captain conceded that the issue at hand is complex but reiterated that his side will "definitely" be there for the game.

"I know it will be a difficult situation... But as I said, if we are told and the fixtures are ready, we will definitely go ahead," he added. (PTI)

## T20 World Cup: Associate nations looking to make most of their time in the sun

**MUMBAI, Feb 5:** They might not have a rich cricket legacy, but Nepal, last minute entrants Scotland and first-timers Italy are dreaming big to make a strong impression on the dazzling stage of the T20 World Cup, beginning here on Saturday.

All the three Associate nations had contrasting qualification campaigns for the T20 showpiece. Nepal are a team on the rise, Scotland replaced Bangladesh who withdrew from the event citing security concerns in India while Italy's presence in the World Cup is a testament to the game's growth in Europe.

Leaders of the respective teams are fully mindful of the opportunity at hand.

"Football is the main sport in Italy but the opportunity for us to play in the T20 World Cup is hugely important for the country and it is about putting Italy on the cricketing map," Italy captain Wayne Madsen, who played field hockey for South Africa said at the captains' press conference ahead of the World Cup.

For Scotland, the event presents a challenge of a different kind, having not known about their participation until late last month.

"The preparation has been different from other teams but we will look to make the most of playing at this level. It's a great opportunity in front of us," said Scotland captain Richie Berrington. (PTI)