

6 WORLD
8 NATION

- Modi holds wide-ranging talks with Israeli President Herzog
- US, Iran to hold third round of nuclear talks as more American forces deploy to Mideast
- BJP will win West Bengal polls, drive out every single infiltrator: Amit Shah
- Gujarat assembly: Cong stages walkout

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FARMERS' WELFARE: PROSPERITY IN EVERY FIELD
SECURE FARMERS, STRONG RURAL ECONOMY

₹7,500+ crore income support under PM-KISAN, empowering 19+ lakh farmers

Nearly ₹2,050 crore through Agriculture Infrastructure Fund, boosting farm storage & market linkages

DEVELOPED ASSAM DEVELOPED BHARAT PM MODI'S VISION

CBC 01101/13/0021/2526

CM launches series of cash benefit schemes with eye on Assembly polls
Nearly 1 lakh students, researchers among beneficiaries

GUWAHATI, Feb 26: Ahead of the Assembly polls, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday launched a series of schemes offering cash benefits to nearly one lakh students and researchers.

At a function here, Sarma rolled out 'Jibon Prerana', 'Jibon Anuprerana', and 'Nijut Babu Asoni' for direct cash transfers to fresh graduates, researchers, and undergraduate and post-graduate students.

Under the Chief Minister's Jibon Prerana scheme, the government will offer ₹ 2,500 every month for one year to 48,319 fresh graduates to support their career pathways.

Through the 'Jibon Anuprerana' scheme, a one-time assistance of ₹ 25,000 to ₹ 40,000 will be extended to 2,112 researchers, including Divyang scholars, to foster innovation.

According to the Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Babu Asoni' scheme, the state government will provide monthly support to 47,395 first-year undergraduate and postgraduate boys to help prevent dropouts.

Under the existing 'Nijut Moina' scheme, the state government has been providing monthly stipends up to ₹ 2,500 to all girl students from class 11 to postgraduation since 2024, aiming to prevent child marriages and arrest dropout (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Assembly polls: KA admin issues prohibitory order

HT Bureau
DIPHU, Feb 26: With the 2026 Assam Legislative Assembly elections drawing near, the Karbi Anglong district administration has issued a comprehensive prohibitory order to maintain law and order across the hill district.

The directive was issued by District Magistrate and District Election Officer Aranyak Saikia, IAS, covering the three Assem-

Assam cabinet nod to hike tea garden wages by ₹ 30 ahead of polls

GUWAHATI, Feb 26: The Assam government on Thursday decided to increase the daily wages of tea garden workers by ₹ 30, ahead of the assembly elections.

Following this decision, wages in the Brahmaputra valley will rise to ₹ 280, and will be ₹ 258 in the Barak valley.

Addressing a press conference, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said the decision was taken at a meeting of the state cabinet.

"As an interim measure, the cabinet has decided to increase the wages by ₹ 30 with effect from April 1," he said.

The minimum daily wage of tea garden workers was last hiked by ₹ 18 in October 2023. The elections to the (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Demography change in Assam is an alarming call: Himanta

Staff Reporter
GUWAHATI, Feb 26: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said that the changing demography of the state is an "alarming call" and asserted that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will focus on safeguarding constituencies where protecting Assam's future remains a top priority.

Speaking to reporters here, Sarma said the issue of demographic change has far-reaching implications for the state's social harmony, cultural identity and long-term development.

"Assam's changing demography is an alarming call. Keeping this in mind, the BJP will focus on safeguarding most constituencies where protecting Assam's future remains our priority," he said.

The chief minister underlined that the party's political strategy will be guided by the need to preserve (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

CM's 'hate speech' issue: HC issues notice

GUWAHATI, Feb 26: The Gauhati High Court on Thursday issued a notice to Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in connection with a bunch of PILs, accusing him of giving "hate speech".

Notices were also issued to the state government and the DGP in connection with three different petitions on the matter.

A division bench comprising Chief Justice Ashutosh Kumar and Justice Arun Dev Choudhury heard the three petitions. The court (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

BJP on mission to build developed India: Dilip

HT Correspondent
JORHAT, Feb 26: "Delivering good speeches alone does not make someone a good ruler. India must establish itself on the world stage as a developed nation through its own capability," Assam BJP state president Dilip Saikia said while addressing a BJP Youth Conference at the Kenduguri Kala-Kriti Centre in Teok constituency on Thursday.

Saikia stated that the BJP is moving forward with the goal of building a developed India by taking along people from all sections of society.

Calling the day significant for Jorhat, he paid tribute to martyrs Maniram Dewan and Piyali Barua and reiterated the BJP-led alliance government's commitment to safeguarding Assam for future generations.

He said that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the government is working to connect youth with employment-oriented opportunities and promote self-reliance.

Describing the youth of Assam as the state's greatest asset, Saikia said the government is progressing with the (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

MINISTRY OF PORTS, SHIPPING AND WATERWAYS

INDIA'S RIVERS ARE NOT JUST SYMBOLS OF HERITAGE, THEY ARE HIGHWAYS OF PROGRESS.
 ~ Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India

Inauguration of Inland Waterways Infra Projects on National Waterway-2 (River Brahmaputra)

Customs and Immigration Complex – Bogibeel
 Customs and Immigration Complex – Dhubri
 Heritage Building – Dibrugarh

Key Facilities

- Customs and Immigration Complexes at Bogibeel and Dhubri
- Dedicated Customs and Immigration Wing
- Arrival and Departure Waiting Halls
- Administrative Block
- Staff Amenities and Rest Areas
- CCTV Surveillance and Integrated Security Systems

Key Features

- Heritage Building, Dibrugarh
- Restoration of Structural Integrity and Architectural Features
- Upgradation to Modern Operational and Safety Standards
- Administrative and Operational Infrastructure for IWAI
- Support Facilities Aligned with NW-2 Activities
- Enhanced Institutional Workspace within a Preserved Heritage Structure

How These Projects Benefit the People

- Strengthen India-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) Routes and cross-border trade
- Reduce logistics costs through efficient inland water transport
- Improve passenger and cargo movement along the Brahmaputra
- Enhance regulatory oversight
- Promote river cruise tourism and local economic growth
- Support regional connectivity and Northeast development initiatives

Projects reinforce the Brahmaputra as a vital economic lifeline and position National Waterway-2 as a dependable, sustainable mode of transport for trade, tourism and mobility.

To be inaugurated by
SARBANANDA SONOWAL
 Union Minister of Ports, Shipping & Waterways

In august presence of

CHARAN BORO Minister of Transport, Govt of Assam	PRASANTA PHUKAN Minister of Power, Govt of Assam	JOGEN MOHAN Minister of Public Works, Hills Areas, Co-operation & Indigenous and Tribal Faith & Culture Departments Govt of Assam	BIMAL BORAH Minister of Industries & Commerce, Govt of Assam	RUPESH GOWALA Minister of Labour Welfare, Tea Tribes & Adivasi Welfare, Govt of Assam
RAMESWAR TELI MP, Rajya Sabha	TERASH GOWALLA MLA, Duliyan LAC	CHAKRADHAR GOGOI MLA, Moran LAC	BINOD HAZARIKA MLA, Lohowai LAC	PONAKAN BARUAH MLA, Chabua LAC
TARANGA GOGOI MLA, Naharkatia LAC	SANJOY KISHAN MLA, Tinsukia LAC	SUREN PHUKAN MLA, Digboi LAC	BHASKAR SHARMA MLA, Margherita LAC	BOLIN CHETIA MLA, Sadiya LAC

Venue : Chowkidingee Field, Dibrugarh | Date & Time: Friday, 27 February 2026, 02:30 PM

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CBC 37211/13/0006/2526

Samsung plans to take AI to entry-price smartphones, expand portfolio of Galaxy A series in India

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA (US), Feb 26: Leading consumer electronics maker Samsung will democratise Artificial Intelligence technology for its smartphones as it aims to bring this feature to entry-level devices, said a company official.

The company, which launched its third-generation Galaxy AI series phone S26 here, believes that artificial intelligence (AI)-powered phone is going to dominate the smartphone segment, said Samsung India, MX Business, Senior Vice President, Raju Pullan.

Samsung recently launched the Galaxy A07 5G smartphone in the Indian market, with starting price of ₹ 15,000 in the affordable segment, which has AI-powered features to support users' everyday tasks. "We are now taking the AI features right up to the entry price point, and that's how we will expand the overall category," Pullan told PTI on the sidelines of the S26 launch.

"AI enablement has gone right up to ₹ 15,000 or the entry price point, so our objective will also be to invest at retail to scale them up," said Pullan, adding that besides "expanding the retail footprint across the country", it is also investing in "tech (experience points) at the retail stores by educating them." Pullan further said: "We are going to tier II & III cities as well, and more than 10,000 stores will have these experience points across the country. That's how we will build up the overall franchise of the Galaxy across the A to the S series." Over Finance Plus, he said it's an "important strategic platform" as affordability will be a core to Samsung's overall business strategy.

"We are working with affordability partners, both NBFC partners as well as the banks," he said.

Pullan also mentioned that he is "seeing an escalation in the pricing on the phone", where "affordability will play a key role in driving the overall category." He also acknowledged the mid-segment phone, which are below USD 500 (₹ 45,000) has now become "extremely competitive, extremely dense" where several manufacturers are operating in the segment.

"We will see the market grow with differentiated products there," he said, adding that Samsung will continue to participate in every price point with product differentiation.

Over the launch of S26, he added a "tectonic shift" is happening in the smartphone industry with the launch of S26, the third-generation Galaxy AI phone. "I think the era of smartphones for us is no longer going to be there. It's going to be an era of the AI Phones," he said, expecting that its AI features will take the smartphone to the next level.

According to the latest Counterpoint data, Samsung has a 13 per cent share of the Indian smartphone shipment market, while Cupertino-headquartered Apple has a 12 per cent share in the December quarter of 2025.

The report highlighted that though India's smartphone shipments declined 4 per cent on a year-on-year basis in Q4 2025, the ultra-premium segment (above ₹ 45,000) captured a share of 17 per cent in Q4 2025, its highest ever, which underscores the sustained premiumisation of the market. Chinese makers such as Vivo and Oppo lead the Indian smartphone market with 24 per cent and 15 per cent market share in Q4 of 2025. (PTI)



"We are on that. We are seeing the line of sight on the hundred million, which we will cross this year in 2026," he said, adding, "We are expanding the portfolio."

Besides, Samsung will invest in retail infrastructure, focusing on smaller tier II & III cities and through its 'Finance Plus' help its Galaxy smartphones with easy finance options.

"AI enablement has gone right up to ₹ 15,000 or the entry price point, so our objective will also be to invest at retail to scale them up," said Pullan, adding that besides "expanding the retail footprint across the country", it is also investing in "tech (experience points) at the retail stores by educating them." Pullan further said: "We are going to tier II & III cities as well, and more than 10,000 stores will have these experience points across the country. That's how we will build up the overall franchise of the Galaxy across the A to the S series." Over Finance Plus, he said it's an "important strategic platform" as affordability will be a core to Samsung's overall business strategy.

"We are working with affordability partners, both NBFC partners as well as the banks," he said.

ICI Prudential Life launches Dividend Leaders 50 Index Fund

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 26: ICI Prudential Life Insurance has launched the Dividend Leaders 50 Index Fund under its Unit Linked Insurance Plans (ULIPs), targeting customers seeking stability and long-term wealth creation through investments in fundamentally strong companies with a consistent dividend payout history.

The fund tracks the BSE 500 Dividend Leaders 50 Index, which comprises 50 companies selected from the broader BSE 500 universe that have consistently paid dividends over the past 10 years.

The index is rebalanced annually. The fund follows a passive, index-mirroring approach, replicating the index composition instead of actively selecting stocks.

Manish Kumar, Chief Investment Officer of ICI Prudential Life Insurance Company Limited, said the Dividend Leaders 50 Index Fund provides customers with a disciplined and transparent way to participate in equity markets.

He noted that the fund's strategy rests on four pillars: dividend-focused stock selection, quality checks to ensure strong financials and stable cash flows, diversification across sectors, and a rule-based investment process with periodic review and rebalancing.

He stated that the fund aims to empower customers to remain invested with confidence, knowing their portfolios are aligned with financially strong and time-tested companies, while also benefiting from life cover under ULIP products.

According to the index factsheet, the BSE 500 Dividend Leaders 50 Index has delivered annualised total returns of 33.63 per cent over three years, 30.96 per cent over five years and 20.40 per cent over ten years as of January 30, 2026.

The company clarified that regulatory norms may at times restrict investments strictly in line with index weights, which could lead to a possible tracking error.

The Dividend Leaders 50 Index Fund is available with select ULIP products such as ICI Pru Signature Assure, ICI Pru SmartKid Assure and ICI Pru Smart Insurance Plan Plus (SIP+), among others offered by the company.

Goyal meets Lutnick, discusses trade and economic partnership

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal on Thursday said he has held a meeting with US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick and US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor and discussed ways to expand trade relationship between the two countries.

"Hosted US Secretary of Commerce @HowardLutnick & @US-AmbIndia Sergio Gor. Engaged in very fruitful discussions to expand our trade and economic partnership," Goyal said in a social media post.

The meeting holds immense importance as both countries are looking to finalise the legal text for the first phase of a bilateral trade agreement.

Chief negotiators of both sides were scheduled to meet this week in Washington to finalise the legal text for the pact but it was postponed following the US Supreme

Court order striking down President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs.

After the court order, the US imposed 10 per cent tariffs on all the countries for 150 days with effect from February 24. Trump has announced to increase it to 15 per cent, but there is no official order on that yet.

Goyal on Tuesday had said "as soon as" there is more clarity on the tariffs front in the US, India will resume trade talks with America.

In a major setback to Trump's pivotal economic agenda in his second term, the US Supreme Court ruled that the tariffs imposed by Trump on nations around the world were illegal and that the president had exceeded his authority when he imposed the sweeping levies by using the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) of 1977.

The US had imposed a 25 per cent reciprocal tariff on India in August 2025. Later, an additional 25 per cent duty was imposed for buying Russian crude oil, taking the total tariffs on India to 50 per cent.

India and the US, earlier this month, agreed on a framework to finalise an interim trade deal, under which Washington will cut down the tariffs to 18 per cent. To sign and implement the first phase of the bilateral trade agreement, the framework has to be converted into a legal document.

During 2021-25, the US was India's largest trading partner in goods. The US accounts for about 18 per cent of India's total exports, 6.22 per cent of its imports, and 10.73 per cent of its bilateral trade.

In 2024-25, bilateral trade were USD 86.5 billion in exports and USD 45.3 billion in imports. (PTI)

event, including H&M, Nike, MANGO, Levi's, U.S. Polo Assn., Anouk, Libas, Skybags, CeraVe, Bath & Body Works and M.A.C.

Speaking on the occasion, Ritesh Mishra, Head of Category and Revenue at Myntra, said the Birthday Blast is a special milestone celebrating the platform's journey with millions of customers and brand partners across the country, adding that the company remains focused on enhancing customer experience and setting new benchmarks in fashion, beauty and lifestyle e-commerce.

This edition of MBB will also feature more than 30 brand launches across fashion, beauty and home categories, including Hasbro, Malabar Gold, Mivi and Uriage.

Within its D2C and Rising Stars portfolio, brands such as Rare Rabbit, Smith, Nobero, Rain & Rainbow and Chumbak will be introduced.

The Beauty and Personal Care segment will showcase over 4,500 brands, including global labels such as Victoria's Secret, LANEIGE, COSRX, Huda Beauty and Pixi Beauty, while Myntra Luxe will feature premium names such as Guess, Michael Kors, Armani Exchange, Paco Rabanne and Este Lauder.

Several brands are projected to attract heightened traction during the

fixed April 21 as the next date of hearing.

"The respondents have to reply to the notices before the next date. The court has not issued any other order," Advocate Santanu Borthakur, who assisted the counsels for one of the petitioners, told PTI.

One petition was filed by Sahitya Akademi awardee litterateur Hiren Gohain, former DGP Harekrishna Deka and senior journalist Paresh Malakar on February 24. The CPI and CPI(M) had also filed separate petitions on February 21 over the matter. The Supreme Court on February 16 refused to entertain petitions seeking action against Sarma in a similar matter. The petitioners alleged that the remarks made by Sarma could divide society.

"The Respondent No. 3 (Sarma), while addressing reporters openly admitted to having directed members of his political party to deliberately file complaints against Bengali-origin Muslims, referred to by him pejoratively as 'Miyas', with the express object of causing them harassment and hardship," alleged the petition filed by the three prominent citizens.

"...the Chief Minister of the State of Assam is sullying his high constitutional office and violating his constitutional oath of office by indulging in blatant 'hate speech' against a minority community in Assam," it alleged. The PIL also alleged that Sarma is making speeches and releasing videos that are overtly inciting violence against the minority community by instigating civilians to take law and order into their own hands.

It alleged that Sarma has indulged in "blatant hate speech" against the minority community in Assam by calling for their social and economic boycott and using derogatory words to describe them, and propagating harmful stereotypes about them. It also alleged that the CM has been "instigating violence and hatred with references to the community's dress and language, instigating communal disharmony, and directing his officials to use their public office in a malafide manner to harass the minority community".

"The petitioners, inter alia, seek a complete cessation of any hate speech by Respondent No 3 (Sarma) and his associates, especially speech instigating civilians to take law and order into their own hands by acting against a particular minority community in Assam," it said.

The PIL also demanded an enquiry by a Special Investigation Team (SIT), chaired by a retired high court judge, against the CM and appropriate action. "In the present case, despite widely disseminated and publicly recorded speeches that prima facie disclose incitement to discrimination, social and economic boycott of a minority community, no suo motu FIR has been registered by the state authorities.

"Such continued inaction, particularly where the perpetrator occupies the highest constitutional office in the state, creates a chilling effect on victims and witnesses, renders ordinary statutory remedies illusory, and fosters a climate of impunity," it claimed. (PTI)

BJP on mission to
vision of transforming India into a developed nation. Praising the chief minister as a dynamic leader dedicated to Assam's development, Saikia remarked that the Prime Minister has visited Assam 40 times and has focused on action rather than mere speeches.

Referring to the Assam Movement (1979-1985), in which 860 youths sacrificed their lives, he paid homage to the martyrs. Criticising the Congress party, Saikia alleged that during its tenure jobs were secured through money power instead of merit, depriving deserving candidates.

He claimed that the BJP-led government has restored merit-based recruitment and brought optimism among youths. He announced that 1.5 lakh youths would be provided employment in the coming year.

Saikia further asserted that leadership requires understanding people's emotions and sentiments, not just good oratory skills. Accusing Congress of working against indigenous interests, he urged youths to take decisive steps to protect Assam's identity in the upcoming elections.

He noted that there are 72 lakh young voters in Assam and called upon them to safeguard indigenous rights. Jorhat District BJP Youth Morcha president Deep Kalita, in his welcome address, expressed confidence in the alliance candidate's victory in Teok. He criticised MP Gaurav Gogoi's style of politics and urged party workers to dedicate themselves fully to the BJP until the elections conclude. Jorhat District BJP president Shantanu Pujari informed that youth representatives from 249 booths attended the conference.

He described the 2026 elections as crucial for protecting the future, heritage and traditions of the Assamese community, highlighting the government's initiatives in preserving cultural and historical sites.

Also present was BJP National Secretary and Kaziranga MP Kamakhya Prasad Tasa, who said that people feel secure under the BJP-led alliance government.

He spoke about efforts to address unemployment, protect "jati, mati, bheti" and promote youth self-reliance. Former MLA Rana Goswami and several party leaders, including Kushal Pegu and Dipak Nath, attended the programme, which saw participation from hundreds of young men and women.

Kolkata Port begins first-ever night pilotage to cut vessel turnaround time



KOLKATA, Feb 26: Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port Authority (SMPA) on Thursday said it has, for the first time in its 155-year history, carried out night-time pilotage in the Upper Reaches of the Hooghly river, a move expected to reduce vessel turnaround time and improve overall port productivity.

Upper Reaches refers to the upstream stretch of a river closer to the inland port, and, in this case, the segment of the Hooghly River between Diamond Harbour and Kolkata.

Kolkata Port said its experienced pilots safely navigated container vessel Sinar Pangalams Sulu on her inward voyage through the narrow channel of the Kolkata

Dock System (KDS) during hours of darkness on the night of February 25, a statement said.

SMPA said the successful night transit follows a trial movement undertaken on May 2, 2025, with outward-bound container vessel Sinar Penida, which laid the groundwork for round-the-clock navigation.

The inbound vessel, with a length overall of 128 metres and a draft of 6.1 metres, completed the transit under challenging navigational conditions, marking the maiden operational use of night navigation in the Upper Reaches.

The stretch of the Hooghly River from Diamond Harbour to Kolkata, spanning around 40 nautical miles, is considered one of the most difficult riverine routes due to its narrow channel, shifting sandbanks, frequent crossings and strong crosscurrents. Traditionally, pilotage in this sector was restricted to daylight hours.

Chairman Rathendra Raman said the achievement marks a significant step towards enabling 24x7 vessel movement in the river system and reflects the port's thrust on technological advancement and operational preparedness.

Port officials said the introduction of night navigation at the Upper Reaches is expected to optimise berth utilisation, ease vessel congestion and improve cargo handling efficiency at KDS, strengthening Kolkata's position as India's premier riverine port. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Nearly 1 lakh

rates. Elections to 126 constituencies are likely to take place in March-April. Rolling out the schemes, Sarma said, "The boys have ample reasons to cheer. Male students from economically underprivileged backgrounds enrolled in UG and PG courses will now get a monthly financial assistance to carry on with their education." Along with 'Nijut Moira', the 'Nijut Babu' will cover 10 lakh students, and bolster the government's efforts to promote higher education, and develop critical thinking among youths, while warding off the social evil of child marriage, he added. At the same function, Sarma also virtually launched 31 advanced technology labs, set up in collaboration with Tata Technologies, across ITIs and polytechnic institutes to equip the youths with cutting-edge manufacturing and automation skills. (PTI)

Assembly polls: KA

tools. The transportation of explosives and highly inflammable substances has also been strictly prohibited for the entire election period. The measures are aimed at preventing intimidation, curbing potential violence, and ensuring a peaceful and fair electoral process.

In a major security-related decision, the District Magistrate has directed all licensed arms holders in the district to surrender their weapons without delay. License holders have been instructed to deposit their arms and ammunition at the nearest police station and obtain proper receipts in accordance with Rule 48 of the Arms Rules, 2016. Banks and recognised financial institutions have been exempted from the order to ensure the security of monetary assets. The district administration stated that the prohibitory order has come into force immediately and will remain effective until the completion of the entire election process.

Authorities have warned that strict legal action will be taken against anyone found violating the order.

With polling expected in the March-April window, the administration has emphasised its commitment to ensuring a peaceful democratic process across Karbi Anglong.

Demography change in

the interests of indigenous communities while ensuring inclusive development for all sections of society.

He said the BJP-led government has consistently taken steps to address concerns related to illegal immigration, land protection and cultural preservation.

Referring to the upcoming Jana Ashirwad Yatra of the BJP in Assam, Sarma said the outreach programme is not merely aimed at highlighting the achievements of the state government, but also at connecting directly with people across the state. "The Jana Ashirwad Yatra of BJP Assam is not just about sharing the achievements of our government, but also about seeking the blessings of the people," he said.

He added that the yatra provides an opportunity for party leaders to listen to the aspirations and concerns of citizens at the grassroots level, helping shape policies and programmes in line with public expectations.

Sarma said the BJP government's initiatives in areas such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, employment generation and social welfare have laid a strong foundation for Assam's growth.

At the same time, he stressed that safeguarding the state's identity and demographic balance remains central to the party's vision. The Chief Minister expressed confidence that people of Assam would continue to support the BJP, acknowledging its efforts to ensure stability, development and protection of the state's interests.

"The trust and blessings of the people are our biggest strength. With their support, we are committed to building a secure, developed and culturally vibrant Assam," Sarma said.

The Jana Ashirwad Yatra is expected to cover several districts in the coming days, ahead of key political engagements in the state.

CM's 'hate speech'

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"The petitioners, inter alia, seek a complete cessation of any hate speech by Respondent No 3 (Sarma) and his associates, especially speech instigating civilians to take law and order into their own hands by acting against a particular minority community in Assam," it said.

The PIL also demanded an enquiry by a Special Investigation Team (SIT), chaired by a retired high court judge, against the CM and appropriate action. "In the present case, despite widely disseminated and publicly recorded speeches that prima facie disclose incitement to discrimination, social and economic boycott of a minority community, no suo motu FIR has been registered by the state authorities.

प्रकाशन नोटिस - न अदालत सभ जेज मो मद्रौरा, जिला सारण हकियत मोकदमा नं० 342/2024 मुमताज साह नो० मुईयान इदीश साह नो० मुदालहम नोटीस बनाम- जुली कुमारी जोजे राकेश सिंह स्थाई ग्राम-पो- जैथर, थाना- तरेग, जिला-सारण, वर्तमान पता- सी/जीरो गेरुआ, उदालगुरी, आसाम, पिनकोड-784525 विदित हो कि उपरोक्त हकियत मोकदमा मुईयान द्वारा आपके विरुद्ध दाखिल किया गया है जिस वाद में निम्नलिखित नोटिस एवं सम्मन आपको मिलने के बावजूद भी आप मोकदमा में उपस्थित नहीं हुए हैं। इसलिए इस प्रकाशन के माध्यम से सूचित किया जाता है कि उक्त वाद में सुनवाई की अगली तिथि दि०-26.3.26 को निर्धारित की गई है। उक्त तिथि को आप स्वयं या अपने अधिवक्ता के माध्यम से समय 10:30 बजे दिन में उपस्थित होकर अपना पक्ष रखे अन्यथा आपके अनुपस्थित रहने की स्थिति में एकपक्षीय सुनवाई की जायेगी। इसे सख्त साविकिद जाने। आज दिनांक 17-2-26 को मेरे हस्ताक्षर जो मोहर से जारी किया गया। सभ जेज मद्रौरा, सारण।

Pradhan Mantri Divyasha Vayoshri Kendra inaugurated in Kokrajhar

Centre to provide assistive devices and rehabilitation services to elderly and disabled

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Feb 26: Marking a significant milestone in strengthening inclusive healthcare infrastructure in the district, a Pradhan Mantri Divyasha Vayoshri Kendra (PMD-VK) was inaugurated on Thursday at RNB Civil Hospital, Kokrajhar. The centre was formally inaugurated by District Commissioner Pankaj Chakravarty in the presence of SDO (C) Gossaigaon, Lourembam Nelson Mangangcha, senior officials of the Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation of India (ALIMCO) and officers of the district administration and health department.

Addressing the gathering, the District Commissioner stated that the establishment of the centre marks an important milestone for Kokrajhar district and will play a crucial role in promoting dignity, independence and inclusion for



persons with disabilities and elderly citizens. DC Pankaj Chakravarty further highlighted that accessibility measures, such as availability of wheelchairs at polling stations and facilitation of home voting for senior citizens during the forthcoming Assembly

elections, will also be ensured, thereby strengthening inclusive democratic participation.

During the inaugural programme, assistive devices including tricycles, wheelchairs, hearing aids and other supportive appliances were ceremonially

distributed among 35 selected beneficiaries. Notably, this newly established PMD-VK at Kokrajhar is the fourth such centre in Assam and has been set up to provide direct and localised services to eligible beneficiaries under the Assistance to Disabled Persons (ADIP) Scheme and the Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana (RVY) through ALIMCO under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. The initiative for the establishment of the centre in the district began in November last year through the efforts of the then District Commissioner of Kokrajhar, Masanda M. Pertin, in coordination with SDO (C) Gossaigaon and Derhasat Basumatary, EM (Health), BTC, among others, reflecting sustained administrative commitment towards inclusive welfare in the district.

NABARD projects ₹ 3245.15 cr credit potential for Nagaon, ₹ 1257.70 cr for Hojai

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Feb 26: Continuing its annual exercise under the Lead Bank Scheme and Priority Sector Lending guidelines, NABARD has prepared the Potential Linked Credit Plans (PLPs) for FY 2026-27 for Nagaon district and Hojai district. The plans, prepared by DDM-NABARD Rajendar Perna, map the realisable developmental potential in agriculture, MSME, export credit, education, housing, social infrastructure including renewable energy and informal/micro credit sectors.

For Nagaon district, the total potential is estimated at ₹ 3,245.15 crore, with ₹ 1,536.89 crore for agriculture, ₹ 1,400.78 crore for MSMEs and ₹ 307.48 crore for other priority sectors. The digital PLP was launched by DDC Debajani Choudhury during the DCC/DLRC meeting at the DC office in the presence of ADC Gopal Sharma, LDO, LDM, DDM-NABARD and other officials.

In Hojai, the estimated potential is ₹ 1,257.70 crore, comprising ₹



678.02 crore for agriculture, ₹ 634.85 crore for MSMEs and ₹ 146.83 crore for other sectors. The PLP was launched digitally by DC Bidyut Bikash Bhagawati during the DCC/DLRC meeting at the DC office on February 24 with participation from LDO S D Bodalkar, LDM M N Bora, DDM-NABARD Rajendar Perna and representatives of banks and line departments. The digital PLPs leverage tech-

nology for efficient credit projections and adopt a bottom-up approach, incorporating consultations with LDMs, bankers and line departments under the supervision of district commissioners and NABARD Assam Regional Office. They aim to enhance capital formation in agriculture and create innovative channels for rural credit delivery in both farm and non-farm sectors.

Cattle stolen in Samar Dalani

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARALI, Feb 26: A cattle head was stolen from the Samar Dalani area under Biswanath district in the early hours of Thursday. According to reports, a cow belonging to Prem Chetry, a resident of Samar Dalani under Sootea police station was taken from his cowshed.

The owner checked the cowshed around 3 AM but discovered the cow missing at 5 AM. Family members informed the Sootea police about the incident and a team from the police station subsequently visited the house to investigate.

Local residents have urged the administration to take prompt action to address the issue and ensure the safety of cattle in the area.

Mohbondha Eraltoli field to provide jobs with new warehouse

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Feb 26: Mohbondha Eraltoli and Karaikhua fields under the West Jorhat Revenue Circle are set to become a source of employment for local youth with the construction of an international-standard warehouse by Logi Park Jorhat Private Limited.

Speaking at a press conference, Siddhartha Baruah, founding partner of the company, said the project is a "green" initiative focused solely on storage, not manufacturing, ensuring no environmental pollution. The warehouse will be built on degraded agricultural land, which has remained barren due to soil extraction by nearby brick kilns.

Baruah clarified that only 24 bighas of land were purchased with the consent of owners, dismissing claims of fraud or excessive land use. No construction has started yet, only boundary demarcation and pit filling are underway. Local residents and VDP members attended the press briefing.

NFR GM conducts annual safety inspection of Mariani-New Tinsukia section

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 26: Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, General Manager of Northeast Frontier Railway, conducted the Annual Safety Inspection of the Tinsukia Division on Wednesday, covering the 152-km Mariani-Simaluguri-New Tinsukia section. The inspection aims to strengthen operational safety, infrastructure reliability and passenger amenities.

The GM began at Mariani, reviewing crew booking procedures, resting facilities and Automatic Block Signalling System works. He inaugurated a newly installed Solar Power Plant and a Large Format Display system for real-time operational monitoring. At Nakachari, signalling systems, the Relay Room, the Electronic Intrusion Detection System and Level Crossing Gate No 102 were inspected with emphasis on safety compliance.

At Simaluguri, the GM conducted a speed trial on the Mariani-Simaluguri section in preparation for increasing sectional speed from 100 kmph to 110 kmph. He also inspected Level Crossing Gate ST-115, Point Nos 31 and 31A, the Power House, ABSS works, Railway



Health Unit, Railway Colony and inaugurated a new Railway Playground and staff quarters.

Further inspections included Minor Bridge No 524, track maintenance practices, Naharkatiya Traction Sub-Station, Important Bridge No 561 and Switch Expansion Joint to

ensure structural integrity and safe operations.

The inspections reaffirm NFR's commitment to high operational safety standards, infrastructure modernisation, adoption of green energy and enhancement of staff welfare and passenger services.

AMTRON, CCHRC organise 3D digital dental scanning camp in Silchar

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 26: AMTRON, in collaboration with Cachar Cancer Hospital & Research Centre (CCHRC), successfully organised 3D Digital Dental Scanning Camp at the Dental OPD of CCHRC Silchar on February 25-26, aimed at delivering advanced digital dental care to underserved communities.

A total of 15 patients were examined using state-of-the-art 3D dental scanning technology and all 15 were provided with Removable Partial Dentures (RPDs) through a complete digital workflow.

The camp was led by Biswajit Barik on behalf of AMTRON, with coordination and stakeholder engagement managed by team member Ashima Sinha.

The organisers extended their gratitude to Dr Kapil, Dr Abhishek Sarkar and Dr Suman from CCHRC for their valuable support and collaboration in making the initiative a success.

The initiative underscores AMTRON's commitment to leveraging advanced 3D digital technology to strengthen healthcare delivery and expand access to quality dental prosthetic care in local communities.

KADBSS felicitates Dr Premananda Mushahary as new vice-president

HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, Feb 26: In a vibrant ceremony held on Thursday, the Karbi Anglong District Bodo Sahitya Sabha (KADBSS) formally felicitated Dr Premananda Mushahary, the newly elected vice-president of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and a distinguished Sahitya Akademi Award winner.

The event took place at 11:30 AM at the Anandaram Mushahary Memorial Auditorium, located within the Bodo Sahitya Sabha office premises in Langhin, Karbi Anglong.

Dr Mushahary, who secured his position as vice-president through an election held on February 22, was greeted with immense enthusiasm by the local community and literary figures. The felicitation was marked by the traditional presentation of the Bodo Aronai, a symbol of respect and honour.

The ceremony saw a massive turnout from various primary units of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha across the district. Representatives from Diphu, Howraghat, Daima Daicha,



Howraghat Tinali, Amoni, Manikpur, Dengao, Parkhowa and Langhin were in attendance.

In addition to the primary units, several presidents and secretaries of leading Bodo organisations in Karbi Anglong were present to offer their congratulations and support to Dr Mushahary for his up-

coming tenure.

"The election of a scholar like Dr Premananda Mushahary brings great hope for the further enrichment of Bodo literature and culture, specifically for the community residing in the hill areas," was a common sentiment shared by attendees.

Hailstorm turns Tapat into winter-like landscape

HT Correspondent

KHERONI, Feb 26: In a dramatic turn of weather, the Assam-Meghalaya border region of Tapat was transformed into a winter wonderland on Thursday as a severe hailstorm swept through the area.

What began as a much-anticipated downpour to cool the parched earth quickly escalated into an intense hailstorm, covering the landscape in a thick, white "carpet of ice." Local residents, while accustomed to seasonal rains, described the scene as surreal with the intensity of the hailstones turning the green hills of West Karbi Anglong into a vista resembling a snow-clad mountain range.

While the sight provided a momentary "dream-like" escape from the heat, local farmers are reportedly concerned about potential damage to crops and livestock due to the sheer volume and force of the falling ice.

Small fish farmers get luxury through 'phygital' training

HT Correspondent

JAGIROAD, Feb 26: A pilot project to modernise fish farming and improve financial prospects for farmers was launched on Thursday at Jagibhakatgaon in Morigaon district by Biozatra Science and Technology Private Limited. The 18-month program combines theoretical and field-based training with digital technologies through a hybrid ("phygital") approach.

Under the initiative, 100 women fish farmers from the Sampabati Meen Palan Samabai Samiti Cooperative Society will learn advanced techniques to increase productivity, reduce risks and access formal finance and insurance. The program is being implemented in collaboration with institutions including NABARD, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, State Fishery Department, CIFRI and other cooperatives.

Speaking at the launch, Manash P Bhuyan, Strategic Advisor of Biozatra, highlighted the vision behind the project, while NABARD Chief General Manager Loken Das emphasised the role of institutional finance in promoting sustainable rural livelihoods. Professor Subasish Dutta of IIT Guwahati explained why Assam's farmers lag behind counterparts in other states and the factors affecting market access.

Jayatu Kanta Bhuyan, Director of Biozatra, introduced the "Jalyan Innovations" platform, designed to integrate analytics and digital tools for farm management.

Two-day livestock training and input distribution held at Bahalpur



HT Correspondent

BILASIPARA, Feb 26: A two-day training and awareness programme for farmers and livestock rearers was held at Bahalpur under a joint initiative of National Council of Agricultural Research, the Eastern Regional Station of Indian Dairy Research Institute (NDRI) and the Dhubri Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) under Assam Agricultural University.

As part of the "Farmer-Livestock Reared Livelihood Enhancement" initiative, improved ducklings, poultry chicks, livestock feed, tin sheets and other essential inputs were distributed to over 200 farmers from Dhubri district. Experts from NDRI, including Dr Anupam Chatterjee, Dr Dilip Kumar Mondal and Dr Champak Bhakat, highlighted the income-generating potential of modern livestock practices, emphasising women's economic empowerment. Dr Fakr Uddin Ali Ahmed, Head Scientist at Dhubri KVK, spoke on scientific livestock management, covering feed planning, vaccination, sanitation, disease control and improved breeding techniques. The programme concluded with distribution of the improved livestock and inputs to participating farmers, aiming to strengthen rural livelihoods sustainably.

Training aims to empower master trainers and women entrepreneurs under PMKVY 4.0

IIE launches ToT programme to boost entrepreneurship in Northeast

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 26: In a major push to fortify the entrepreneurial landscape of Northeast India, the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE) has officially launched a specialised Training of Trainers (ToT) programme. This initiative, under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 4.0 (PMKVY 4.0), aims to build a high-caliber cadre of Master Trainers and Facilitators dedicated to grassroots economic transformation.

The 15-day residential programme, which commenced on February 25, was virtually inaugurated by Swati Sharma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). The launch saw participation from high-ranking officials, including Hena Usman (Joint Secretary, MSDE) and Pritam Dutta (Director, MSDE & IIE), signalling a unified commitment to regional development.

The programme is a critical



component of the MSDE-MoRD Convergence Framework, designed to synchronise skill development with rural livelihood goals. By professionalising 100 Master Trainers and 900 Facilitators, the initiative seeks to create a "force multiplier" effect across the eight Northeastern states.

These trained professionals will provide hands-on mentorship to women entrepreneurs under the Lakhpati Didi initiative, which targets a sustainable annual income of at least ₹ 1 lakh for rural women through diversified micro-enter-

prises.

The initial batch includes 32 participants from Assam and Tripura. Aligned with National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) standards, the programme blends entrepreneurial theory with practical business competencies.

Training modules include behavioural simulations, financial workshop-style calculations, digital onboarding and field-based enterprise mapping. Participants will undergo rigorous field assessments by IIE and State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM) officials.

"This convergence is about more than just training; it's about creating a robust, professional ecosystem that supports the last-mile entrepreneur. We are building the infrastructure that will allow rural innovation to thrive," stated Prasanta Goswami, Course Director at IIE.

Beyond traditional business management, the ToT curriculum emphasises digital onboarding—ensuring that the next generation of Northeastern entrepreneurs is equipped to navigate the modern digital economy. By the end of the 2025-26 fiscal year, the programme aims to have a certified pool of experts ready to scale enterprise promotion across the region.

The initiative marks a significant milestone in accelerating inclusive growth and ensuring that the entrepreneurial potential of the Northeast is fully realised through structured support and expert mentorship.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

The struggle you're in today is developing the strength you need tomorrow. - Robert Tew

Trump's tariffs and Supreme Court blow

The US Supreme Court's striking the Donald Trump's tariffs has pulverised the president in more ways than one. Trump had sworn by tariffs as the ultimate tool in his hands; the judgement has shown Trump his place—he is not supreme. Politically, it could not have been more damaging than coming before the midterm elections. The judgement has exposed Donald Trump as only a petulant, impulsive, unthinking, dogged person no matter what he would pursue his schemes of vengeance. With this judgment in place, Donald Trump's forthcoming meeting with Xi Jinping would be blatantly one-sided. But on the ground, the United States is now grappling with the question whether the Federal government will refund the tariffs they collected under Donald Trump's executive orders imposing large reciprocal tariffs on imports from select countries. The government representatives are confused and different people are saying different things. The Democrats have seen their opportunity and planning to bring legislation to force the government to return all tariffs collected. On some estimates, the US Federal government owes \$1,700 to each US family on the tariffs collected. The Democrats are saying this was a tax on individuals.

The US Federal government agencies had earlier assured that in case the Supreme Court struck down the tariffs as legal, every penny of tariffs collected would be returned to those who paid them. That could mean a two stage repayments of tariffs collected. But now the Federal government is saying something like the repayments should depend on the verdicts in lower courts. It is not that this is unprecedented. Earlier also in 1998, the Supreme Court had ruled some tariffs illegal and repayment were made. However, the amounts involved in that case were minuscule compared with the present one—\$738 million collected in tariffs in 1998 compared with \$134 billion now in the wake of the Liberation Day tariffs.

Any repayments of the tariffs collected would have to be a two-stage process; first to the corporate entities who paid the tariffs initially; then at the next stage to the final customers who paid it in terms of higher prices. All these components would have to be broken up and re-compensated in proportion. Experts believe that it could take years for the process to be completed and reams of data surfing to exactly quantify the amounts to be paid to different entities. However, in these days of meticulous data in the digital infrastructure for payments and transactions, it should not be that difficult to ascertain the payments chain. And going by the post-tariff trade data as the US department revealed, these tariffs and higher prices did not much dampen the US demand for imported products.

Modi's Israel visit: Strategic timing and regional calculus

Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrives in Tel Aviv on February 25 for a two-day state visit at a moment of unusual turbulence in West Asia. The trip comes as the possibility of a wider confrontation involving the United States and Iran continues to unsettle the region's fragile equilibrium. It is Modi's first visit to Israel since his landmark 2017 tour and his first since the Gaza war erupted in October 2023, making the diplomatic timing particularly consequential. Beyond ceremonial optics, the visit reflects New Delhi's careful attempt to balance strategic interests with political sensitivities in a region where alignments are rapidly shifting and where India's stakes—economic, security, and diaspora-related—have grown substantially over the past decade. India's position since the October 7 attacks by Hamas has illustrated this balancing act. New Delhi strongly condemned the assault that triggered the devastating Gaza conflict, aligning itself with the global denunciation of terrorism. Yet it simultaneously reiterated its long-standing support for a two-state solution for Palestine, signalling continuity in India's historic diplomatic posture. This calibrated response underscores the principle of de-hyphenation that has increasingly guided India's West Asia policy: maintaining robust bilateral ties with Israel while preserving political and developmental engagement with the Palestinians. Modi's current visit therefore must be read not as a departure from India's traditional stance, but as an evolution shaped by contemporary geopolitical realities and India's expanding strategic ambitions.

At the core of India-Israel relations remains the dense web of defence and security cooperation that has steadily deepened over the years. While the partnership spans agriculture, innovation, water management, and high technology, defence ties form the central pillar of the relationship. India has emerged as the largest purchaser of Israeli military equipment over the past decade, particularly between 2015

and 2019, acquiring drones, missile systems, advanced sensors, surveillance platforms, and border-control technologies. These procurements have been driven not merely by operational necessity but also by India's broader military modernisation agenda and its push toward indigenised defence manufacturing. Israeli firms, known for rapid innovation and battlefield-tested systems, have been viewed in New Delhi as valuable partners capable of bridging critical capability gaps while facilitating technology transfer. The significance of Modi's 2017 visit to Israel still reverberates through the bilateral relationship. That trip, the first ever by an Indian prime minister, formally elevated ties to a strategic partnership and marked a psychological turning point in India's West Asia diplomacy. The symbolism was reinforced when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Dipak Kurmi

India the following year, highlighting the mutual political investment in the relationship. Since then, defence cooperation has continued to widen, including joint development projects and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. The momentum was further strengthened in November 2025, when Israel's Defence Secretary travelled to India and signed an important memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation, signalling that the partnership is moving from a buyer-seller dynamic toward deeper co-development and co-production frameworks.

Current discussions between Modi and Netanyahu are expected to focus heavily on expanding intelligence cooperation, joint weapons development, and technology transfer arrangements that would support India's domestic manufacturing goals. For New Delhi, the attraction lies not only in acquiring cutting-edge systems but also in embedding Israeli expertise within India's defence ecosystem. For Tel Aviv, India represents a vast and reliable strategic market as well as a partner with growing geopolitical weight. This convergence of interests explains why defence ties continue to anchor the broader relationship even as both countries diversify cooperation into civilian sectors.

The visit also unfolds against the backdrop of emerging regional architectures that could reshape West Asian geopolitics. Netanyahu has recently described India as a central pillar in his proposed Hexagon of Alliances, a grouping envisioned to bring Israel closer to Greece, Cyprus, and several Arab partners in order to counter what Tel Aviv calls radical adversaries. While the proposal reflects Israel's search for new security coalitions, New Delhi's response is likely to remain cautious. India traditionally avoids formal military blocs that could constrain its strategic autonomy or complicate

its ties with other regional actors. Whether India lends even tacit legitimacy to this emerging framework will be closely watched by observers who view India's global image as rooted in multi-alignment rather than bloc politics. Parallel to the security agenda is the economic and connectivity dimension, particularly the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. Both Modi and Netanyahu are expected to exchange views on advancing this ambitious project, which aims to link India with Europe through West Asia via ports, railways, and digital infrastructure. Israel's geographic position makes it an important node in this envisioned corridor, and progress on the initiative could significantly reshape trade routes and supply chains. For India, the corridor offers a strategic alternative to existing maritime chokepoints and complements its broader connectivity diplomacy. For Israel, participation enhances its economic centrality in the region and strengthens ties with major Asian markets.

Domestic political dynamics within Israel, however, may cast a shadow over the visit's optics. Modi

is scheduled to address the Knesset, becoming the first Indian leader to do so, a symbolic milestone in bilateral relations. Yet the moment risks being entangled in Israel's intensely polarised political climate. The country is heading toward highly contentious elections in October, and internal divisions have sharpened amid the ongoing debate over judicial overhaul. Opposition leader Yair Lapid has warned of a possible boycott of Modi's address unless the Supreme Court chief is invited in keeping with parliamentary convention. His remark that Israel does not want India embarrassed by a half-empty chamber reflects the domestic sensitivity surrounding the visit.

These internal tensions highlight the delicate environment in which foreign leaders must now operate when engaging Israel. The judicial overhaul debate has deeply split Israeli society, triggering protests and institutional friction that have drawn international attention. For Modi, whose diplomatic engagements typically emphasise stability and long-term partnerships, navigating these domestic crosscurrents will require careful messaging. India's long-standing practice has been to avoid commenting on partners' internal political disputes, and New Delhi is expected to maintain that line during the visit. Nevertheless, the optics of the Knesset address will be closely scrutinised for signals about the health of Israel's political consensus and the resilience of its democratic institutions.

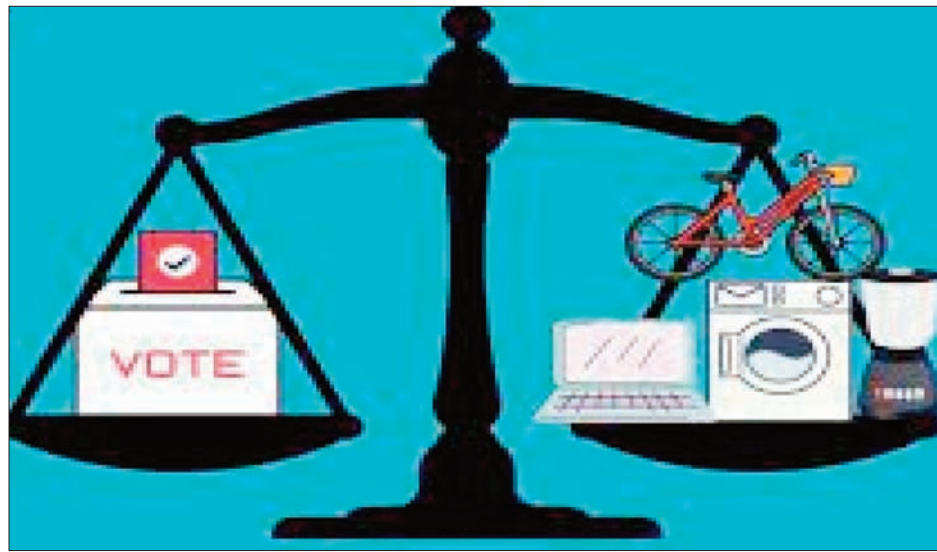
Another layer shaping the visit is the broader regional uncertainty stemming from the Gaza war and the possibility of wider escalation involving Iran. India has significant stakes across West Asia, including energy security, trade flows, and the welfare of a large expatriate population. Any expansion of conflict could disrupt shipping lanes, spike oil prices, and complicate India's diplomatic balancing. Modi's engagement with Israeli leadership therefore also serves the purpose of strategic consultation at a time when the regional security environment remains fluid and unpredictable.

The fact that the two prime ministers have remained in regular contact, including conversations on December 10 and January 7, underscores the importance both sides attach to sustained high-level communication.

India's participation as an observer in the first Board of Peace meeting in Washington, part of an initiative led by former US President Donald Trump, adds another dimension to the evolving diplomatic picture. While New Delhi has not formally joined the initiative, it has welcomed elements of the Gaza peace plan associated with it. Modi's earlier phone call congratulating Netanyahu on progress under the plan suggested a willingness to remain constructively engaged without fully committing to any single diplomatic framework. This approach is consistent with India's broader foreign policy style, which seeks flexibility and room for manoeuvre in a complex multipolar environment.

Ultimately, Modi's February visit to Tel Aviv reflects continuity wrapped in strategic recalibration. The fundamentals of the India-Israel relationship—strong defence cooperation, expanding technological collaboration, and growing political comfort—remain firmly in place. At the same time, the regional context has become more volatile, Israel's domestic politics more polarised, and India's own global ambitions more pronounced. Navigating these intersecting pressures will require diplomatic finesse from both sides. If managed carefully, the visit could further institutionalise a partnership that has matured significantly since 2017 while preserving India's carefully balanced West Asia policy. In a region where alignments shift quickly and symbolism often carries strategic weight, the true measure of the trip will lie not in ceremonial milestones but in whether it advances India's long-term objective of combining strategic depth with diplomatic equilibrium. *(The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)*

Freebie culture: A threat to a vibrant democracy



By: Lalit Garg

The tragedy of Indian democracy is that as elections approach, the spirit of public service often transforms into populist politics. Political parties have turned freebie schemes into a shortcut to electoral success. The growing tendency to secure votes by offering immediate financial benefits to voters is becoming increasingly entrenched. With assembly elections due in the coming months and political activity intensifying in states such as Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, the influence of this culture has become even more visible. Against this backdrop, the Supreme Court of India has made serious observations on the unchecked expansion of free schemes. These remarks are not merely legal in nature; they serve as a warning about the very soul of democracy.

The fundamental objective of democracy is public welfare. It is the responsibility of the state to support the poor, the marginalized, and the vulnerable. Social security programs, access to education and healthcare, and guarantees of a minimum standard of living are hallmarks of a welfare state. However, problems arise when the line between genuine public interest and electoral gain becomes blurred. There is a clear distinction between targeted support that empowers individuals and excessive generosity that fosters dependency. While some schemes promote self-reliance, others offer temporary relief that gradually cultivates a habit of dependence.

When states already struggling with revenue deficits announce free electricity, free travel, or direct cash transfers, a crucial question arises: where will the resources come from, and who will ultimately bear the cost? Fiscal discipline forms the foundation of any state's economic health. If public coffers are depleted for short-term political advantage, long-term development inevitably suffers. Funds that should be invested in infrastructure, strengthening hospitals, improving educational quality, and generating employment are instead diverted to harvesting votes. This trend is troubling not only economically but also morally. In a democracy, the independ-

ence of the voter is paramount. If voters are indirectly influenced through financial inducements, the spirit of free and informed choice is compromised.

The Supreme Court has rightly questioned why states do not focus more on employment generation and skill development. Sustainable empowerment comes through dignified work. When individuals earn through their own skills and labor, they develop self-respect and confidence. Continuous reliance on free benefits, on the other hand, weakens the culture of effort and fosters passivity. Over time, such dependency nurtures a mindset of inertia, which is dangerous for the strength of democracy. Democracy is not merely about casting votes; it is about active and responsible citizenship.

The fairness of pre-election announcements also deserves scrutiny. When large-scale financial distributions take place during the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, opposition parties view them as unfair competition. In such circumstances, the responsibility of ensuring neutrality rests with the Election Commission of India. It must ensure that no political party gains electoral advantage through indirect inducements. Violations of the Code are not minor technicalities; they represent an erosion of democratic ethics. If strict action is not taken, this tendency will deepen further in the future.

There is no denying that states have a primary duty to care for weaker sections of society. However, when revenue-deficit states spend massive sums on free schemes, the strain on the public exchequer intensifies. Ironically, funds that should be directed toward improving infrastructure, strengthening healthcare systems, enhancing educational facilities, and creating sustainable employment are diverted for short-term political gain. The real need is to empower citizens through skill development and capacity building so that benefits are lasting and transformative rather than temporary and cosmetic.

It must also be acknowledged that not every welfare measure is inherently wrong. Emergency relief during pandemics or natural disasters, and affirmative support for disadvantaged communities under the principles

of social justice, are legitimate responsibilities of the state. The problem arises when an avalanche of announcements floods the electoral season without due regard for long-term fiscal consequences. Such conduct reflects a lack of ideological depth and long-term vision, where immediate gains take precedence over sustainable governance.

The strength of democracy depends not only on institutions but also on the vigilance of citizens. When voters prioritize immediate gains over long-term development, they inadvertently undermine their own future. A mature electorate looks beyond promises and examines intent, financial feasibility, and long-term impact. It asks what the economic condition of the state will be five years hence, what direction development will take, and how many employment opportunities will be created. In a democracy, the vote is not merely a right; it is also a profound responsibility. India aspires to establish itself as a strong democracy on the global stage. We speak of becoming a "Vishwaguru," a guiding force for the world. But if our politics remains entangled in populism, such aspirations will ring hollow. The pride of being the world's largest democracy will be meaningful only when our policies are visionary, balanced, and sustainable. Moving beyond the culture of freebies and promoting productivity, innovation, and entrepreneurship is the true path to progress.

This is a time for introspection. Political parties must recognize that empowering citizens is not achieved by distributing money alone. Education, skills, healthcare, and employment are the four pillars that determine a nation's strength. Increased investment in these areas will foster self-reliance and reduce the burden on the state. At the same time, citizens must resolve to prioritize long-term development over short-term temptations. The resilience of democracy will be secured only when both governance and the electorate fulfill their respective responsibilities with integrity.

Undoubtedly, to ensure electoral fairness, it has become essential to closely examine populist schemes announced or implemented before elections. Allegations have been made in Bihar that during the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, large sums were distributed under certain schemes, raising concerns about the sanctity of the electoral process. In such cases, the Election Commission of India must maintain vigilant oversight to prevent indirect bribery of voters. Any partisan conduct during elections is detrimental to a vibrant democracy.

The practice of distributing freebies weakens the roots of democratic governance. It undermines the work ethic and fosters a culture of state dependency and passivity. If left unchecked, this trend will lead to economic imbalance and political distrust. Therefore, transparency in policymaking, fiscal discipline, and electoral integrity must be accorded the highest priority. That alone will safeguard democracy and lay the foundation for a brighter national future. *(The author is a journalist and columnist who can be*

A plate for ₹6.78: Is the country's future so cheap

By: Dr Satyawan Saurabh

In India, education is considered the strongest foundation for nation-building. It is repeatedly said that children are the future of the country, and investing in their development is true development. But when we consider the cooking cost of just ₹6.78 (primary) and ₹10.17 (upper primary) per student per day for the millions of children studying in government schools, this idealism seems to clash with harsh reality.

Naturally, the question arises—can we really provide nutritious, adequate and respectable food to children with this much money, or are we unknowingly playing a collective joke with the future of children?

The Midday Meal Scheme has been one of India's most ambitious and impactful social programs. Its objective was not only to alleviate child hunger, but also to combat malnutrition, increase school attendance, and promote social equality. For children, particularly those from poor, Dalit, tribal, and marginalized backgrounds, this scheme often serves as the only guaranteed meal of the day. Therefore, it is crucial that the cost of this scheme be realistic, sensitive, and humane.

Today's economic landscape is no secret. Inflation is constantly rising. Vegetable prices fluctuate daily, pulses and oil are becoming increasingly out of reach of the common man, the cost of gas cylinders is troubling every household, and even basic nutritional items like milk are becoming increasingly expensive. In such a situation, the assumption that a balanced and quality meal for a child can be prepared for just a few rupees seems far from ground reality.

The breakdown of cooking costs outlined in government orders and guidelines may seem balanced on paper, but in practice, it becomes a nearly impossible challenge. When you add in the costs of vegetables, pulses, milk, spices, oil, gas, and other essentials, the agreed amount is often exhausted on the first day. As a result, schools have to compromise on either the quality of food or the quantity—and sometimes both.

Children bear the greatest brunt of this. Lack of variety, nutritional deficiencies, and tastelessness in food also affect

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme for millions of children studying in government schools costs just ₹6.78 (primary) and ₹10.17 (upper primary) per student per day—does this provide both nutrition and dignity?

children's appetites. Many children don't finish their meals, and some experience poor school attendance, and some gradually disengage from their studies. This impact isn't immediately visible in statistics, but in the long run, it profoundly impacts children's learning, health, and self-confidence.

Another often overlooked aspect of this entire system is the cooks and school staff. Cooks, working for meager salaries, are expected to prepare quality meals for hundreds of children every day. Often, they must borrow locally, pay out of their own pockets, or face complaints and criticism. This situation is not only unfair but also goes against the very spirit of the scheme.

The irony is that while we use big words like "a well-nourished India," "a new education policy," and "human resource development," we are, on the other hand, extremely stingy when it comes to budgeting for children's food. Isn't this a glaring contradiction? Do we truly believe that quality education is possible without quality nutrition?

Both research and experience prove that education and nutrition are deeply intertwined. A hungry or malnourished child cannot concentrate or be interested in learning. A weak midday meal scheme will directly impact learning levels, attendance, and dropout rates. This is not just a welfare scheme, but an issue of national development and social justice.

Another serious problem is that cooking costs are often determined on a uniform basis, despite inflation and market rates varying across the country. While the cost difference between rural

and urban areas is clear, the fixed amount remains roughly the same. This makes it even more difficult for schools in many areas to effectively implement the scheme.

The need of the hour is for governments to treat this issue not as a mere administrative formality, but as a moral and humanitarian responsibility. Cooking costs should be regularly and automatically assessed, linked to inflation and local market prices. Monitoring systems should also be strengthened to ensure that the increased funds are actually spent on children's meals.

It's also essential to incorporate the voices of teachers, principals, and cooks working at the grassroots level into policymaking. They face the real challenges of this system every day, and their experiences are far more valuable than any file noting.

Governments must understand that the Midday Meal Scheme is not a burden, but an investment in the future. If children's meals are healthy today, the country's economy, society, and democracy will also be stronger tomorrow. But if we continue to treat children's meals as an expense and rely on a minimal budget, future generations will suffer the consequences.

Ultimately, the question remains—is it truly possible to nourish children for ₹6.78 or ₹10.17, or is it just a numbers game? There's still time for policymakers to acknowledge this reality and make bold decisions. Because this debate isn't just about food—it's about children's dignity, health, and the nation's future. *(The author is a poet and social thinker)*

How climate change is reshaping Arctic geopolitics

By: Pier Paolo Raimondi

Once a remote and largely inaccessible region, the Arctic has become the focus of far-reaching international developments. In recent years, competition among major powers – USA, Russia and China above all – has intensified, threatening to erode the region's long-standing cooperative model, often summed up by the slogan "High North, Low Tension". A particularly revealing case is Greenland, which has emerged as a focal point of Arctic competition, as underscored by US President Donald Trump's stated ambition to secure control of the island.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic had been widely regarded as a rare example of sustained international cooperation, despite underlying disagreements among some of its most influential states. In 1996, the Arctic states, a grouping of eight countries including USA, Russia, Canada and Denmark, established the Arctic Council. This intergovernmental body is tasked with promoting sustainable development and scientific cooperation across the region.

Today, however, great-power rivalry increasingly appears to be taking on the characteristics of a zero-sum game, with states focused on maximising relative advantage. This shift is not limited to so-called revisionist powers such as Russia and China, but also involves the United States, the main guarantor of the existing international order. Inevitably, this evolving geopolitical landscape has drawn the Arctic ever more firmly into global strategic calculations.

Competition in the region is further fuelled by another structural transformation: climate change. Global warming is already reshaping the Arctic, long shielded by extensive ice cover. Temperatures in the region are rising four times faster than the global average. Data published

by NASA shows September sea-ice extent has declined by about 12% per decade compared with the 1981-2010 average. A 2023 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that the share of multi-year ice aged at least five years fell by around 90% between 1979 and 2018.

Melting ice is creating new security challenges but also economic opportunities, from resource extraction to the development of shipping routes, inevitably attracting the interest of Arctic and non-Arctic states alike. Advertisement

Greenland at the heart of Arctic competition. Greenland encapsulates several major global trends intersecting with Arctic stability and sustainable development, linking local, regional and global dynamics.

The world's largest island is home to fewer than 60,000 people, making it one of the least densely populated territories on the planet. Formally part of the Kingdom of Denmark for centuries, its relationship with Copenhagen has evolved from colonial rule to overseas territory and, eventually, to recognised semi-autonomous status. This autonomy has fuelled independence movements despite persistent socio-economic constraints.

Greenland, which has a predominantly indigenous Inuit population, remains heavily dependent on Danish financial transfers, estimated at around 500 million euros a year, accounting for roughly half of government revenues and about 20% of its GDP. While support for independence has grown, the outcome of the most recent local parliamentary election in March 2025 – with Denmark's ruling Social Democratic Party suffering big losses in municipal elections – suggested a broadly shared and cautious approach to the process.

Against this complex domestic backdrop, external actors have sought influence on the is-



land. US interest in Greenland predates the Trump administration. Trump's declaration that Washington needed control of the island "one way or another" for reasons of "absolute" national security highlighted its strategic value.

Greenland's location had already drawn US attention at the start of the Cold War. Since 1951, Denmark and the United States have maintained a defence agreement covering Greenland, which hosts the Pituffik Space Base, formerly known as Thule Air Base, a key US facility supporting NATO's space surveillance and missile-defence systems.

Melting ice and new maritime routes. After the Cold War, Western countries reduced their focus on the Arctic, a trend that has reversed in recent years. Rising tensions with Russia and China, combined with ice melt and studies highlighting Arctic mineral potential, have renewed interest from both governments and private actors.

Trump's 2019 proposal to buy Greenland was not unprecedented. In 1946, President Harry Truman offered to purchase the island from Denmark, largely

because of its uranium reserves, seen as critical for military and civilian development. Ice melt is also opening new possibilities for international shipping. Greenland's geography places it between two potential Arctic sea routes: the Northwest Passage, running along North America's northern coast, and the Transpolar Sea Route, which would cross the Arctic Ocean near the North Pole. As ice retreat accelerates, these routes could shorten travel times and reduce transport costs. While the transpolar route remains unlikely in the medium term, it could prove transformative if ice conditions deteriorate further.

Projections suggest the Arctic could experience its first ice-free day before 2030. In any case, Arctic routes could offer alternatives to traditional chokepoints such as Suez and Bab el-Mandeb, which are increasingly exposed to security risks. Arctic transit increased by 37% between 2013 and 2023, driven by ice melt and stronger political engagement. For now, most Arctic shipping occurs along the Northern Sea Route off Russia's coast, supported by more developed infrastructure and strong

political backing. Still, economic incentives are prompting governments to plan the development of the other two routes.

Greenland could play a significant role in the supporting infrastructure for Arctic shipping, providing ports, refuelling services, monitoring and security. Yet turning these ambitions into reality would require substantial investment, skilled labour and prolonged ice-free periods. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates a 10-35% probability that the Arctic will be ice-free in September by the end of the century if global warming stabilises at 2 degrees Centigrade.

Resources, minerals and strategic rivalry. At the same time, Greenland's strongest pull lies in its natural resources, ranging from oil and gas to critical minerals. The US Geological Survey estimates that Greenland may hold up to 17.5 billion barrels of oil and 4 trillion cubic metres of gas. During the 2010s, Greenland sought to develop and monetise these resources, encouraged by high oil prices. However, exploration costs remain extremely high, at around USD 100 million per offshore

exploratory well under favourable conditions.

Harsh weather and limited infrastructure have undermined economic feasibility, while growing environmental concerns over climate change led Greenland in 2021 to suspend the approval of new exploration licences. Climate policy and the energy transition have since renewed interest in Greenland's mining sector. The island is rich in critical minerals such as graphite, copper, rare earths, lithium and uranium. Ice retreat could facilitate exploration and extraction, attracting governments and private companies alike.

Since Greenland controls its subsoil resources, mineral development is seen as a pathway to diversification and greater independence from Denmark. The island could emerge as a strategic player in critical mineral value chains, essential for digital, military and clean-energy technologies.

Because of their economic importance, critical minerals have become central to global geopolitical and industrial competition. Western economies remain heavily dependent on a small number of suppliers, notably China, which dominates refining and processing through decades of industrial policy, state support and fewer environmental constraints, reinforced by an assertive mineral diplomacy. Western governments are now trying to close that gap through diplomacy and investment, a process that has inevitably drawn Greenland into focus.

Estimates suggest Greenland hosts at least 39 of the 50 minerals considered critical to US national and economic security, and 25 of the 34 minerals identified by the European Commission as strategically important.

In November 2023, the European Union signed a memorandum of understanding with Greenland to promote a strategic partnership on sustainable raw-

material value chains. Greenland's natural resources minister has warned, however, that the island will not wait indefinitely for transatlantic partners to deliver concrete results.

Structural limits and unresolved trade-offs. Turning potential into reality depends on more than geology alone. Investment capacity, human capital, infrastructure, market conditions and political will are equally decisive, and Greenland faces significant constraints in each area. It is therefore unsurprising that its resource potential has yet to translate into large-scale success. As with US interest in Greenland's uranium during the post-war period, today's renewed focus reflects a return to older strategic patterns.

Extraction alone does not guarantee economic security. Investments must also extend to refining and processing to reduce dependence on China. Yet these activities carry significant environmental costs, often triggering local opposition.

In 2021, due to concerns over environmental risks, Greenland halted development of the Kvanefield rare earth and uranium project in the island's south. Building alternative, sustainable value chains would require close cooperation among Western partners. Greenland's mining future, and the competition surrounding it, illustrates how local, regional and global dynamics are increasingly intertwined.

Climate change is opening new opportunities for the Arctic and for Greenland in particular. Whether these translate into lasting political and economic gains will depend on how structural socio-economic and environmental challenges are addressed. Without overcoming at least the most critical constraints, ice melt alone will not ensure an expansion of Greenland's mining sector capable of delivering broad-based benefits. (Courtesy: The Wire)

Urban water contamination: Technocratic fixes, systemic risks

By: Soma Sarkar

Urban water crises can manifest through scarcity, inequity, and contamination. Of these, contamination remains chronically under-addressed. Public surveys indicate that water pollution is the top environmental issue worldwide. A recent incident in Indore, otherwise celebrated as the cleanest city in the country, has once again put the spotlight on water pollution. Municipal water supply contamination led to a microbial outbreak, resulting in the deaths of at least 15 people. But this is not an isolated case. From Flint, Michigan's water crisis to Shimla's 2016 Hepatitis outbreak, these incidents reveal the disconnects between surface-level metrics like tap connection coverage and the realities underneath.

Globally, the World Health Organization estimates 1.7 billion people consume water from sources contaminated with faeces, causing approximately 505,000 diarrhoeal deaths each year. According to the National Family Health Survey, 96 percent of households in India have access to an improved drinking water source. However, incidents like the one in Indore are a stark reminder that mere access to water without ensuring quality is not enough. Seen this way, urban water contamination is not an episodic failure but a systemic outcome of governance that overlooks ecological integrity and public health.

Recurrent Patterns of Contamination

Indore was hit with a severe water contamination crisis, triggering a diarrhoea and vomiting outbreak, which claimed at least 15 lives and affected many in Bhagirathpura. Following the tragedy, the municipal corpo-

ration has repaired several leaks in Narmada water pipelines, which are believed to be carrying contaminated water due to seepage from the nearby sewage network. An investigation found a public toilet block right above a leaking main water supply pipeline. While regular water samples are being collected and tested as part of ongoing monitoring, people have also been told to keep their home taps closed and not to use the water. Meanwhile, tankers are supplying water, which is to be boiled and filtered before drinking. Just a few months ago, students of Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) University near Bhopal protested the poor quality of water and the rising jaundice cases on campus.

Following the Indore incident, there was a continued uproar over typhoid outbreaks in Gandhinagar, Greater Noida, and Hyderabad caused by the contamination of drinking water with sewage and other pathogens. Fecal coliforms were also found in tap water in Kerala. Contrary to the belief that water contamination occurs primarily due to ageing infrastructure and poor maintenance, leaks were found in newly laid water pipelines in Gandhinagar, resulting in the mixing of sewage with the city's drinking supply.

In 2016, Shimla witnessed a jaundice outbreak due to contamination of the Ashwani Khad, a major source of drinking water that provides 10.8 MLD of water, accounting for 20 percent of the city's total water requirement. The contamination occurred due to sludge discharge from the malfunctioning Malaya sewage treatment plant, 4 kilometres upstream. The incident reflected a standard design and planning failure, with a

sewage treatment plant in such proximity upstream of a water source. The resulting water supply cut led to severe water shortages for months.

Similar cases of contamination have occurred repeatedly in cities across the world. The 2014 Flint water crisis in Michigan, United States, was a watershed environmental contamination event in contemporary American history. Flint switched its water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River while awaiting a new pipeline connection to Lake Huron that would link the city to the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). This decision was made based on cost considerations, after recognising that the Flint River was contaminated by industrial effluents. Eventually, complaints about dark, bad-tasting water led to itchy skin, rashes, and hair loss. Lack of chlorine in the water resulted in bacterial growth, causing an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease in 2014-2015, killing over 80 residents and infecting hundreds more. Finally, the supply of polluted water through the city's ageing pipes caused leaching, leading to systemic lead contamination in the city's drinking water. In an earlier case, an outbreak of Cryptosporidium and Giardia was found in Sydney's water supply in 1998, and health warnings were issued, including comprehensive boil water alerts. In 2025, trifluoroacetic acid and polyfluoroalkyl substances, which can affect fertility and cause certain cancers, were found in the tap water of some cities in France, including Paris.

These cases show that urban water contamination is not sporadic or geographically exclusive. The issue is embedded in how cities plan, build, and govern their water and sewage infrastructures: poorly designed networks, inadequate separation of sewage and drinking

water systems, and weak oversight. Technocratic Responses and Pitfalls

Authorities generally blame the intermittent water supply model for possible back siphonage of sewage when the pipes are empty or under low pressure between supply cycles. To address this issue, several cities have adopted 'transformative' technocratic interventions, such as the 24x7 water supply model, which ensures full water pressure in the network at all times to prevent sewage seepage. However, such models, besides being capital-intensive, also divert attention from the much more complex and core issues of institutional gaps, pipe leakages, and inequities. For example, the Nagpur 24x7 water supply pilot project continues to record non-revenue water at 27 percent of total supply, against the target of 15 percent. On the other hand, the Shimla 24x7 project was mired in a non-transparent bidding process and unexplained cost escalation. Simi-

larly, in Chandigarh, the 24x7 pilot project in Manimajra drew flak over the tripling of costs, reduced water pressures, and the non-replacement of old pipelines and existing house service connections. Beyond cost recovery and source sustainability challenges, such technocratic propositions include longer sewerage pipelines and pumping activities, which inevitably increase system operation and water production costs and increase the risk of leakages.

The growing urban water demand has also made cities explore distant water sources. For example, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's Gargai project, approved last year, seeks to supply an additional 440 MLD of water from the Palghar district, over 200 km away. The longer the pipeline, the higher the cost of building it, and the higher the risk of leaks. This increases water cost, making it inaccessible to low-income groups. Water projects must therefore be connected to local sources, with a sewage-first approach, including the rejuvenation of waterbodies.

These examples indicate that technocracy perpetuates growth biases, masking needs for unified governance and equity. Rather than reducing risk, such approaches may reproduce new vulnerabilities through expanded network lengths, higher leakage probabilities, escalating costs, and exclusionary tariff regimes.

The Way Forward

Urban water contamination cannot be framed as an episodic malfunction that is addressed through emergency responses or pilot-driven technological fixes. Since it is deeply intertwined with fragmented institutional arrangements, ageing infrastructure, poor maintenance, weak monitoring processes, and a persistent neglect of ecological and equity considerations, this crisis requires pragmatic, evidence-based interventions.

Institutional convergence on water supply, quality, and sewage management would reduce regulatory blind spots and improve accountability across the water cycle. States must undertake systematic audits of water supply sources and distribution networks for chemical and sewage contamination, and regularly identify, repair, or replace pipelines at risk. Water quality monitoring must extend beyond treatment plants to delivery points at the neighbourhood level to ensure that the water supplied meets quality benchmarks.

While pressure testing, acoustic leak detection, ground-penetrating radars, real-time leak detection systems, and the use of artificial intelligence have made leak detection more accurate and easier, interventions must move beyond mere leak repairs and prevention to establishing a comprehensive water quality governance framework. Urban local bodies (ULBs) and parastatal water authorities in cities such as Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai must ensure coordinated urban planning to synchronise activities and prevent inadvertent damage to water and sewerage networks during road excavation, pipeline installation, and infrastructure expansion. Further, all cities must have contingency plans in place to ensure that overall water supply is not compromised if the main supply line or source becomes contaminated.

Ultimately, a paradigm shift is required: from growth-centric, technocratic urban water management to an ecologically integrated and equity-first governance framework. This transition is essential not only to safeguard public health but also to uphold the Sustainable Development Goals and build cities that are resilient and adaptive to climate stress. (Courtesy: ORF)

Assam's changing rainfall challenge

By: Dipak Kurmi

Assam, long celebrated for its emerald landscapes, fertile floodplains, and the life-giving waters of the Brahmaputra River, now finds itself confronting an unsettling climatic transition. Historically, the state's ecological balance and agrarian rhythms were sustained by abundant and relatively consistent rainfall, which nourished its famed tea gardens and diverse cropping systems. Yet recent decades have revealed a profound alteration in weather behaviour. Even as Assam continues to endure destructive annual floods, a parallel and seemingly contradictory trend has emerged: rainfall is becoming increasingly erratic and, in many areas, deficient. Scientific assessments and long-term meteorological analyses suggest that the dependable pattern of moderate, well-distributed rain is giving way to prolonged dry spells punctuated by short bursts of extreme precipitation. This shift represents not merely a seasonal anomaly but a structural change in the state's hydro-climatic regime. The paradox of simultaneous flooding and water scarcity now defines Assam's emerging climate reality, raising serious questions about ecological resilience, agricultural sustainability, and long-term economic security.

Detailed examination of meteorological data from 1981 to 2017 reveals a gradual but discernible decline in average annual monsoon rainfall across Assam. While year-to-year variability has always characterised the monsoon system, the broader trend line now points toward increasing irregularity and deficit. Recent reports are particularly alarming, indicating that the state has experienced multiple consecutive years of below-normal monsoon performance. In 2025, several districts reportedly recorded rainfall deficits ranging from 40 percent to over 70 percent, a scale of shortfall that directly threatens agricultural output and rural livelihoods. Farmers who once relied on predictable seasonal cycles are increasingly forced into uncertainty, with sowing and harvesting schedules disrupted by unreliable precipitation. The emerging pattern suggests that Assam is not simply receiving less rain overall; rather, the temporal distribution of rainfall is undergoing a fundamental transformation. The traditional rhythm that once allowed soil moisture to build steadily through the monsoon months is weakening, replaced by an increasingly volatile and fragmented rainfall regime that complicates both planning and adaptation.

Equally troubling is the changing character of rainfall events themselves. Instead of the gentle, sustained showers historically associated with the region, Assam is witnessing a pronounced "fewer rainy days" phenomenon. Rain now tends to arrive in intense, highly concentrated bursts over very short periods, followed by extended dry intervals. This pattern produces a damaging dual effect. On one hand, sudden cloudbursts overwhelm drainage systems and trigger flash floods because parched or compacted soil cannot absorb water quickly enough. On the other hand, the same pattern

contributes to agricultural drought, as rapid runoff prevents adequate groundwater recharge and soil moisture retention. The result is a hydrological imbalance in which both excess water and water scarcity coexist within the same season. Scientists widely attribute this disruption to broader climate change dynamics, particularly warming in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, which are altering moisture transport pathways of the southwest monsoon. These oceanic temperature anomalies weaken the steady inflow of moisture into the northeastern region, thereby increasing rainfall volatility over Assam.

Human-induced environmental changes within the state are further compounding the problem. Accelerating deforestation, expanding urban footprints, wetland encroachment, and declining forest cover have collectively reduced the landscape's natural capacity to regulate local climate and hydrology. Forests once acted as moisture buffers, moderating temperature and aiding rainfall recycling through evapotranspiration. Their depletion has weakened these stabilising feedback loops. Rapid urbanisation, particularly around growing towns and peri-urban corridors, has also increased surface runoff by replacing permeable soil with concrete and asphalt. The cumulative effect is a landscape less capable of absorbing intense rainfall and more vulnerable to both flooding and drought stress. For Assam's economy, the implications are profound. Agriculture remains highly rain-dependent, and the globally significant tea industry is especially sensitive to moisture variability and temperature stress. Erratic precipitation disrupts not only crop yields but also plantation productivity, labour patterns, and rural incomes. The emerging climate trajectory therefore represents not merely an environmental concern but a structural economic risk that demands urgent policy attention.

Addressing this evolving crisis requires a shift from reactive disaster management to forward-looking climate adaptation. Improved water harvesting, restoration of wetlands, protection of remaining forest cover, and promotion of climate-resilient agricultural practices must become central priorities. Micro-irrigation, drought-tolerant crop varieties, and better monsoon forecasting systems can help buffer farmers against uncertainty. Equally important is strengthening local-level climate governance so that communities are equipped to respond to increasingly unpredictable weather patterns. The evidence is now unmistakable: Assam's rainfall is not simply declining but becoming dangerously erratic. Without timely intervention, the state risks entering a cycle of recurring hydrological extremes that could undermine both ecological stability and economic security. The moment calls for scientific vigilance, policy coherence, and community-level resilience-building to ensure that Assam's historically water-rich landscape does not gradually transform into a region defined by climatic uncertainty. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)



water systems, and weak oversight.

Technocratic Responses and Pitfalls

Authorities generally blame the intermittent water supply model for possible back siphonage of sewage when the pipes are empty or under low pressure between supply cycles. To address this issue, several cities have adopted 'transformative' technocratic interventions, such as the 24x7 water supply model, which ensures full water pressure in the network at all times to prevent sewage seepage. However, such models, besides being capital-intensive, also divert attention from the much more complex and core issues of institutional gaps, pipe leakages, and inequities. For example, the Nagpur 24x7 water supply pilot project continues to record non-revenue water at 27 percent of total supply, against the target of 15 percent. On the other hand, the Shimla 24x7 project was mired in a non-transparent bidding process and unexplained cost escalation. Simi-

Modi holds wide-ranging talks with Israeli President Herzog

'India an essential part of the great future of the Middle East'

JERUSALEM, Feb 26: Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Thursday held "extremely fruitful" and wide-ranging talks during which they explored avenues to further enhance cooperation in education, start-ups, innovation, tech and connectivity.

Modi called on Herzog at his official residence, where the two leaders first planted an oak tree together in the garden "as a symbol of friendship, growth, and the building of a shared future between the two countries", a press release from the Presidency said.

"Our talks were extremely fruitful and wide-ranging," Modi said in a post on X.

"Both leaders explored avenues to further enhance cooperation in education, start-ups, innovation, tech and connectivity," Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said in a post on X.

During the meeting, Modi thanked Herzog for the "very warm and grand reception" since he landed in Israel. "This shows the love that the people of Israel have towards India and Indians," he said.

He also seconded that the India-Israel relationship, across sectors, can do a lot for the global good, be it science, innovation or educational institutions.



"We have had very positive exchanges, especially in sectors such as water and agriculture. India is also implementing a lot of good Israeli solutions in our country, especially in the agricultural sector, and we have had great results because of that," Modi said.

"I have had the chance to meet you on different occasions in other parts of the world. You have been very clear with your thoughts, and you are also very committed to India. You respect India a lot. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your commitment and respect for India," he said.

The Prime Minister also ex-

tended an invitation to Herzog to visit India, saying 1.4 billion people of India are eager to receive him.

"I warmly invite you to visit India, and when you come, don't limit your visit to just Delhi, but take out more time to travel to other parts of India also," he said.

On his part, Herzog thanked Prime Minister Modi for making a historic second visit to Israel, expressing his deep appreciation for the Indian leader's "longstanding and steadfast support for the State of Israel, as well as the Indian people's deep friendship toward the people of Israel."

The two leaders discussed the critical importance of the strategic

partnership between Israel and India in a broad range of fields, including innovation, technology, academia, trade, and security, said the press release from the president's office.

They also spoke about opportunities to expand regional partnerships and alliances, including the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative, to the benefit of both our peoples, it said.

"Prime Minister Modi, your visit to Israel is exciting the Israeli people with your friendship, with your honesty and frankness, and with the expression of compassion, and with the alliance with Israel and its story," Herzog said.

"I believe that India is an essential part of the great future of the Middle East, and the Middle East is an essential part of the great future of India. I saw your record levels of economic growth, which is something that is attracting the whole world. It's fantastic," he said while applauding India's rapid growth.

Suggesting ways to enhance sharing of know-how, the Israeli leader suggested that Indian and Israeli universities have "a golden opportunity" to work together for the future. He strongly recommended the students' exchange between the two sides.

"This connectivity between Israel and India can change the entire geostrategic situation to the advantage of the Global South and the connectivity of the United States to Southeast Asia, through the eastern hemisphere," the Israeli President said.

"We know that you lead the world in so many fields....And finally, I will say that the Abraham Accords, which are a platform to improve the region towards peace, are an ideal partner for India, and the region is an ideal partner as well moving forward, so now we just have to implement it," he added.

Herzog thanked Prime Minister Modi for the invitation to visit India.

"I wholeheartedly accept the invitation. It is a dream of mine for many years, and many parts of India intrigue me and interest me with your amazing history and culture, including the incredible story of the Jews of India throughout the ages, so this will be a wonderful opportunity," Herzog said.

Modi arrived in Israel on Wednesday on a two-day visit to the country. It is his second visit to Israel in nine years. The India-Israel relationship was elevated to the level of strategic partnership during his first visit to that country in July 2017. (PTI)

US, Iran to hold third round of nuclear talks as more American forces deploy to Mideast



GENEVA, Feb 26: Iran and the US prepared to meet Thursday in Geneva for nuclear negotiations, talks viewed as a last chance for diplomacy as America has gathered a fleet of aircraft and warships to the Middle East to pressure Tehran into a deal.

US President Donald Trump wants a deal to constrain Iran's nuclear programme, and he sees an opportunity while the country is struggling at home with growing dissent following nationwide protests last month.

Iran meanwhile has maintained it wants to continue to enrich uranium even as its program sits in ruins following Trump ordering an attack in June on three of the Islamic Republic's nuclear sites.

If an American attack happens, Iran has said all US military bases in the Mideast would be considered legitimate targets, putting at risk tens of thousands of American service members.

Iran has also threatened to attack Israel following a bruising 12-day war last year, meaning a regional war again could erupt across the Middle East.

"There would be no victory for anybody — it would be a devastating war," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told India Today in an interview filmed Wednesday just before he flew to Geneva.

"Since the Americans' bases are scattered through different places in the region, then unfortunately perhaps the whole region would be engaged and be involved, so it is a very terrible scenario."

Araghchi again will sit across from Steve Witkoff, a billionaire real estate developer and friend of Trump who serves as a special Mideast envoy for the president. The two men held multiple rounds of talks last year that collapsed after Israel launched its war against Iran in June.

These latest talks are again being mediated by Oman, a sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula that's long served as an interlocutor between Iran and the West.

This time, Trump has pushed to halt Iran's enrichment of uranium entirely, as well as address Tehran's ballistic missile programme and its support of regional militant forces. Iran has maintained the talks must remain focused only on nuclear issues.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters Wednesday that Iran is "always trying to rebuild elements" of its nuclear programme. He said that Tehran is not enriching uranium right now, "but they're trying to get to the point where they ultimately can."

Iran has said it hasn't enriched since June, but it has blocked inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency from visit-

ing the sites America bombed. Satellite photos analysed by The Associated Press also has shown activity at two of those sites, suggesting Iran is trying to assess and potentially recover material there.

The West and the IAEA say Iran had a nuclear weapons programme until 2003. Before the June attack, it had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity — a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

US intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to restart a weapons programme, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so."

While insisting its program is peaceful, Iranian officials have threatened to pursue the bomb in recent years.

"The principle's very simple: Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon," US Vice President JD Vance told reporters at the White House on Wednesday.

Vance said Trump is "sending those negotiators to try to address that problem" and "wants to address that problem diplomatically."

"But, of course, the president has other options as well," Vance added.

If the talks fail, uncertainty hangs over the timing of any possible attack.

If the aim of potential military action is to pressure Iran to make concessions in nuclear negotiations, it's not clear whether limited strikes would work.

If the goal is to remove Iran's leaders, that will likely commit the US to a larger, longer military campaign. There has been no public sign of planning for what would come next, including the potential for chaos in Iran.

There is also uncertainty about what any military action could mean for the wider region. Tehran could retaliate against the American-allied nations of the Persian Gulf or Israel. Oil prices have risen in recent days in part due to those concerns, with benchmark Brent crude now about \$70 a barrel.

Iran in the last round of talks said it briefly halted traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all oil traded passes.

Satellite photos shot Tuesday by Planet Labs PBC and analysed by The Associated Press appeared to show that American vessels typically docked in Bahrain, the home of the US Navy's 5th Fleet, were all out at sea.

The 5th Fleet referred questions to the US military's Central Command, which declined to comment. Before Iran's attack on Qatar in June, the 5th Fleet similarly scattered its ships at sea to protect against a potential attack. (AP)

IMF sees 'buoyant' US economy accelerating this year



WASHINGTON, Feb 26: A "buoyant" US economy is poised to see accelerated growth and lower unemployment this year. But big federal budget deficits "represent a growing stability risk," the International Monetary Fund said Wednesday.

The 191-country lending organisation's assessment of the world's biggest economy was mostly positive. The IMF saw US gross domestic product — the country's output of goods and services — growing 2.4 per cent in fourth-quarter 2025 from the last three months of 2025, up from 2.2 per cent growth the year before.

It sees US unemployment dropping from 4.5 per cent in late 2025 to 4.1 per cent in 2026 and inflation falling to the Federal Reserve's 2 per cent target by 2027. IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said the Fed, which cut its benchmark interest rate three times in 2025, could afford to push it down to around 3.4 per cent from 3.6 per cent currently. But it should hold off on deeper cuts barring a "material worsening" in the American job market, she said.

The United States has been helped by strong productivity growth. But Georgieva said the US economy would have performed even better without President Donald Trump's big taxes on foreign imports. The fund's report warned that the president's protectionist trade policies "could represent a larger-than-expected drag on activity."

The IMF expressed concern about the federal government's debts, which it sees rising steadily from just under 100 per cent of US GDP last year to almost 110 per cent by 2031. (AP)

North Korea warns it could destroy South if threatened, but leaves door open for US dialogue

SEOUL (SOUTH KOREA), Feb 26: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un claimed his nuclear-armed country could "completely destroy" South Korea if its security were threatened, reiterating his refusal to engage with Seoul, state media said Thursday. However, he left the door open to dialogue with Washington as he concluded a ruling party congress outlining his policy goals for the next five years.

State media said that Kim also called for developing new weapons systems to bolster his nuclear-armed military, including intercontinental ballistic missiles that could be launched from underwater and an expanded arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons, such as artillery and short-range missiles, targeting South Korea.

He said the accelerated development of his nuclear and missile program "permanently cemented" the country's status as a nuclear weapons state, and called for the United States to discard what he perceives as "hostile" policies toward the North as a precondition for resuming long-stalled dialogue.

The Workers' Party congress, which began last

Thursday in Pyongyang, comes as Kim carves out a more forceful regional presence, leveraging his expanding military nuclear program and a growing alignment with Moscow that have deepened his standoffs with Washington and Seoul.

The official Korean Central News Agency said the North staged a military parade at the capital city on Wednesday as it wrapped up the congress, which Kim previously held in 2016 and 2021.

Kim's comments at the congress were widely anticipated as he has been issuing increasingly hard-line views toward South Korea since 2024, when he discarded the North's long-standing goal of a peaceful reunification between the war-divided Koreas and declared the South as a permanent enemy. But analysts expected Kim to take a more measured approach toward Washington to preserve the possibility of future dialogue, with the long-term aim of securing US sanctions relief and tacit recognition as a nuclear state.

Kim has recently been prioritising Russia in his foreign policy, sending thousands of troops and large amounts of military equipment to support

Moscow's war in Ukraine, possibly in exchange for aid and military technology. But it would make sense to keep his options open as the war in Ukraine could wind down, potentially making North Korea less valuable to Moscow, experts say.

In a report wrapping up the congress, Kim said his government was maintaining the "toughest stance" against Washington, but added there was "no reason we cannot get along" with the Americans if they withdrew their supposedly "hostile policy" toward the North. North Korea often uses the term to describe US-led pressure and sanctions over Kim's nuclear ambitions. His comments aligned with North Korea's previous position calling for Washington to abandon its demands for the North's denuclearisation as a precondition for resuming talks.

North Korea has repeatedly rejected Washington and Seoul's calls to resume diplomacy aimed at winding down its nuclear program, which derailed in 2019 following the collapse of Kim's second summit with US President Donald Trump during his first term. (AP)

Bangladesh court orders authorities to request Interpol red notice for arrest of British MP

DHAKA, Feb 26: A court in Bangladesh's capital on Thursday ordered authorities to request that Interpol issue a red notice for the arrest of a British lawmaker on charges of corruption in a private real estate project.

Tulip Siddiq, a former British minister and an MP from Hampstead and Highgate in London, faces charges of corruption in Bangladesh as the country's Anti-corruption Commission pursues a case against her.

Siddiq has already been sentenced to six years in jail in Bangladesh in three other corruption cases all involving her powerful aunt, the country's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Hasina was ousted in 2024 in a student-led mass uprising that ended her 15-year rule, and has been in exile in India since August 5, 2024.

Siddiq earlier rejected all allegations against her, termed the verdicts as a "complete farce," and said she is a British citizen, not a Bangladeshi national.

The commission said that Siddiq, using her connection with Hasina, influenced a process to award land to a private company in Dhaka's upscale Gulshan area. Siddiq is the daughter of

Hasina's younger sister Sheikh Rehana.

Dhaka Metropolitan Senior Special Judge Mohammed Sabir Faiz issued the order Thursday upon a petition by the corruption watchdog. The order came after the commission's Assistant Director A K M Mortuza Ali Sagar sought the order for a red notice through Interpol to facilitate her arrest.

There was no immediate reaction from Siddiq on Thursday.

In January last year, Siddiq resigned as a British government minister in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Keir Starmer under pressure because of her ties to Hasina.

Siddiq had said she had been cleared of wrongdoing but was quitting as economic secretary to the Treasury because the issue was becoming "a distraction from the work of the government."

Three days after Hasina's ouster, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus took over as interim leader and eventually oversaw an election on February 12. The new government of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, the son of Hasina's main political rival and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, has taken over. (AP)

Bill Gates 'spoke candidly' about Epstein ties, spokesperson says

NEW YORK, Feb 26: Bill Gates addressed his connection to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and "took responsibility for his actions" during a town hall meeting of his nonprofit Gates Foundation on Tuesday, the nonprofit said.

"Bill spoke candidly, addressing several questions in detail," a Gates Foundation spokesperson said in a statement. Gates appears multiple times in the Justice Department's release of documents connected to its investigation of the late financier. The Justice Department's files include email correspondence between Gates and Epstein about philanthropic projects, calendar entries documenting dates they got together, and photos of Gates at events the two men attended.

Gates has not been accused of any wrongdoing in connection to Epstein and denies any knowledge of Epstein's crimes. Gates has said he had met with Epstein to discuss philanthropy and believed he could help Gates raise money for issues like global health. "Every minute that I spent with him I regret and I apologise that I did that," Gates told Australia's 9News earlier this month.

Photos and mentions of Gates in the Epstein files have attracted increased attention since the Justice Department released millions of documents last month. (AP)

J&K's developmental budget more than double recent bailout package Pak sought from IMF: India

UNITED NATIONS/GENEVA, Feb 26: Slamming Pakistan at the UN, India has said the country lives in "la-la land" and finds it unbelievable that Jammu and Kashmir's developmental budget is more than double the recent bailout package Islamabad sought from the IMF.

Anupama Singh, First Secretary in the Permanent Mission of India to the UN in Geneva, exercised India's Right of Reply on Wednesday after Pakistan raised the issue of Jammu and Kashmir at the high-level segment of the 61st Regular Session of the UN Human Rights Council.

"India is compelled to exercise its Right of Reply in response to references made to it during the high-level segment by Pakistan and the OIC. We categorically reject these allegations," she said, referring to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Singh added that it is hard to take lectures on democracy from a country where civilian governments rarely complete their terms.

"They ring hollow. The record voter turnout in general elections and Assembly elections in Jammu & Kashmir, is a testimony to the fact that people of Jammu & Kashmir have rejected the ideology of terrorism and violence propagated by Pakistan and are surging ahead on the path of



development and democracy," she said.

In a strong retort, Singh said, "If the Chenab Rail Bridge, the world's highest bridge inaugurated in Jammu & Kashmir last year is fake, then Pakistan must be hallucinating or living in the la-la land."

"Or maybe, Pakistan finds it unbelievable that the developmental budget of Jammu & Kashmir is more than double the recent bailout package they sought

from the IMF," she said.

Last year, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had approved disbursement of about one billion USD to Pakistan under Extended Fund Facility (EFF), bringing total disbursements under the arrangement to about USD 2.1 billion.

"Despite Pakistan's efforts to destabilise the region through relentless state-sponsored terrorism, Jammu & Kashmir

continues to surge ahead — politically, economically and socially," she said.

"Pakistan would do well if it focuses on fixing its deepening internal crises than to mask them with grandstanding at such a platform — the world can certainly see through its charade," she added.

She said the OIC, by " parroting" Pakistan's propaganda, only reveals how deeply it has allowed itself to be co-opted by one member.

"Pakistan's incessant propaganda now reeks of envy. We have no desire to dignify such propaganda, however, we will make a few points, to dismantle it with facts," Singh said.

India asserted that "Jammu and Kashmir was, and will always remain an integral and inalienable part of India."

"No amount of wishful rhetoric or audacious propaganda by Pakistan can alter the immutable fact that the accession of Jammu & Kashmir to India was completely legal and irrevocable, and in accordance with Indian Independence Act (1947) and the international law.

"In fact, the only outstanding dispute regarding this region is the illegal occupation of Indian territories by Pakistan. We call upon Pakistan to vacate these areas, which remain under its forcible occupation," she said. (PTI)

Syrian government forces and Druze fighters exchange prisoners from summer clashes



AL MATUNA (SYRIA), Feb 26: Syrian government forces and Druze militiamen who control areas in the southern Sweida province on Thursday exchanged prisoners taken in clashes last summer, a rare step toward a possible political resolution of simmering tensions in the country. The exchange was the first major sign of progress in attempts by the United States and Jordan to broker a political settlement between the two sides.

The Syrian government side handed over 25 prisoners while local authorities in the Druze-run parts of Sweida released 61 at a checkpoint in the al-Matuna area in northern Sweida. The exchange was facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Syrian Interior Ministry spokesperson Nouredine al-Baba told journalists that the exchange deal was reached "through the combined efforts of international and local parties, and it reflects the Syrian state's commitment to all its citizens, from all backgrounds and affiliations and across all provinces."

Stephan Sakalian, head of the ICRC delegation in Syria, expressed "hopes that this opera-

tion will pave the way toward possible further releases and dialogue between all parties on other humanitarian concerns," including the fate of people who went missing during the violence. In mid-July, armed groups affiliated with Druze leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri clashed with local Bedouin clans, spurring intervention by government forces, which effectively sided with the Bedouins.

Hundreds of civilians, mostly Druze, were killed, many by government fighters. Tens of thousands of people, both Druze and Bedouins, were displaced in the fighting.

Since then, a large group of the militias banded together under al-Hijri, creating a de facto autonomous area in large swaths of the province, backed by neighboring Israel.

Since former Syrian President Bashar Assad was ousted in an offensive by Islamisted insurgents in December 2024, the new authorities in Damascus have struggled to unify the country and consolidate control over the territory. A deal reached last month with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces that have controlled much of the country's northeast was a significant step toward consolidation — and also left Sweida as the main area left outside government control.

The Druze religious sect began as a 10th-century offshoot of Islamism, a branch of Shiite Islam. Over half of the roughly 1 million Druze worldwide live in Syria. Most other Druze live in Lebanon and Israel, including in the Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria in 1967 and later annexed. (AP)

Focus on social infrastructure, connectivity and agriculture Mizoram CM tables ₹ 17,470 crore budget for 2026-27

AIZAWL, Feb 26: Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Thursday presented a ₹ 17,469.91 crore budget for the 2026-2027 fiscal in the state assembly, with focus on improving social infrastructure and boosting the agriculture sector.

The chief minister also presented the supplementary demands for grants for the current fiscal, amounting to ₹ 3,724.25 crore.

Presenting his third budget after the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) assumed power in December 2023, Lalduhoma, who also holds the finance portfolio, said his government will continue to implement its flagship 'Bana Kaih' (hand holding) scheme to improve the livelihoods of farmers.

He said the Mizoram government allocated ₹ 350 crore for implementation of the scheme and out of this, ₹ 150 crore has been earmarked for procurement of designated key crops.

Since its launch in September 2024, loan amounting to ₹ 34 crore has been extended to 384 beneficiaries, officially labelled as "progress partners," while financial assistance amounting to ₹ 22.62 crore has been provided to 2,713 progress partners under CM's special package of the flagship scheme, he said.

More than ₹ 280 crore has also been disbursed as support price for the procurement of ginger, unhusked paddy and dry broomsticks since then, he said.

Amid rising drug trafficking and substance abuse, Lalduhoma asserted that his government is committed to combating the menace.

A new budget head titled "Anti-Narcotics Activities" has been created under the Excise department with an initial allocation of ₹ 40 lakh, he said.

The initiative aims to accelerate enforcement, awareness campaigns and coordinated action against illegal trafficking and substance abuse.

The government has launched Operation Jericho, a joint crackdown by the state police, the excise department and Young Mizo Association (YMA), Mizoram's largest civil society organisation, to curb drug trafficking and addiction in September last year.



Lalduhoma said the government has recently secured ₹ 803.74 crore loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to strengthen healthcare and enhance implementation of the MUHCS.

₹ 183.25 crore has been earmarked for road maintenance or improvement of connectivity during the 2026-27 fiscal, he said.

Speaking to reporters after presenting the budget, Lalduhoma said the government has constituted a study team in a move towards fiscal consolidation and strengthening expenditure control.

He said that the government would take strict measures to avoid committing liabilities previously incurred by politicians and corrupted bureaucrats by awarding contracts without approved work orders following the misuse of sanctioning power.

He said that the government would leverage the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) scheme to augment capital expenditure and accelerate infrastructure development.

₹ 1,000 crore has been estimated to be received under this interest-free loan scheme, he said.

According to Lalduhoma, the state's share in the central tax pool has been raised from the current fiscal year's ₹ 6,964.85 crore to an estimated ₹ 8,608.08 crore in the coming financial year.

The state's own tax revenue for the 2026-27 has been projected at ₹ 1,616.25 crore and the government will take measures to enhance the collection of GST, which is the major contributor of state's own revenue, he said.

The gross fiscal deficit is estimated at ₹ 1,669 crore, which is 3.8 per cent of GSDP being projected at ₹ 39,526.42 crore during 2026-27, the CM said. (PTI)

Implemented in April last year, the scheme provides up to ₹ 5 lakh in annual coverage for cashless treatment at government facilities, as well as empanelled private and church-run hospitals.

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Union Minister inaugurates Taram Chu steel bridge in North Sikkim Bridge restores key Chungthang-Lachen connectivity after disasters

GANGTOK, Feb 26: Minister of State for Defence Sanjay Seth on Thursday inaugurated the newly-constructed Taram Chu steel bridge to restore connectivity along Chungthang-Lachen Road in North Sikkim.

In his address after inaugurating the steel bridge in North Sikkim's Chungthang town, he lauded the Border Roads Organisation and GREF personnel for completing the bridge within a short timeframe despite challenging terrain and adverse weather conditions.

Seth expressed gratitude to Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang and the state government for their continuous support and coordination throughout the restoration process.

"The newly-constructed Taram Chu steel bridge would not only restore normalcy for the people of Lachen and surrounding areas but also strengthen strategic mobility in this sensitive border region," the Union minister said.

He appreciated the Mangan district administration for extending full cooperation to the BRO for the execution of the project.

Reiterating the commitment of the Central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the development of Sikkim, Seth assured continued support to fulfil the aspirations of the state and its people.

Sikkim Welfare Minister and MLA of Lachen-Mangan, Samdup Lepcha, expressed his gratitude to



the MoS Defence for visiting North Sikkim and inaugurating the much-awaited bridge.

He said that North Sikkim and the people living in the region had faced immense hardships after the Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) and subsequent natural calamities two years ago, which severely disrupted connectivity and daily life.

He also thanked the GREF and BRO personnel for their tireless and dedicated service under extreme conditions.

Heavy rainfall, flash floods, cyclone Remal (June 2024), and devastating cloudbursts in May-June 2025 had caused extensive damage to infrastructure in North Sikkim, washing away several critical bridges, including the earlier structure over Taram Chu.

The destruction severely im-

rupted connectivity to Lachen, disrupting tourism, essential supplies and strategic movement.

The newly constructed 400-foot-long Bailey suspension steel bridge over Taram Chu and the restoration of the 28-kilometre Chungthang-Lachen axis represent a major milestone in post-disaster recovery efforts.

Designed to withstand high-altitude conditions, seismic sensitivity and extreme discharge levels typical of the region, the bridge is likely to be a resilient and durable structure.

The restoration re-establishes a vital lifeline between Chungthang and Lachen, ensuring smooth movement of civilians and tourists, reliable supply of essential commodities, enhanced disaster response capability and strengthened national security logistics. (PTI)

Two earthquakes jolt Sikkim, none injured

GANGTOK, Feb 26: Two earthquakes of magnitude 4.6 and 3.5 jolted Sikkim on Thursday, officials said.

The first quake, of 4.6 magnitude, hit the state at 11:24 AM. The epicentre of the quake was 4 km northeast of Yuksom in Gyalshing district at a depth of 10 km, according to the National Centre for Seismology (NCS).

The second earthquake of 3.5 magnitude jolted Mangan district at 12:17 PM. The epicentre was 11 km northwest of Gangtok, also at a depth of 10 km.

Officials said that there was no immediate report of any loss of life or damage to property in the two quakes. (PTI)

Development, culture must go together: Arunachal Dy CM Mein

ITANAGAR, Feb 26: Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein on Thursday said development must go hand in hand with cultural preservation and stressed that focused investments in infrastructure, agriculture and livelihoods in border areas will encourage reverse migration and ensure people return to their native villages with dignity and economic security.

Addressing the 48th Nyokum Yullo celebration at Tali in Kra Daadi district, Mein reaffirmed the government's commitment to border area development, stating that special policy focus is being given to remote and frontier regions.

He expressed confidence that improved infrastructure and livelihood opportunities would reduce migration and help people settle in their villages, an official release stated here.

"Nyokum Yullo is not just a festival but a reflection of the Nyishi community's deep spiritual bond with nature, unity and ancestral faith," the deputy chief minister said.

He appreciated the community for preserving traditional rituals, attire and indigenous knowledge despite rapid modernization and said protecting cultural identity while embracing progress is vital for safeguarding Arunachal Pradesh's heritage.

Highlighting the development of the Tali-Piporang area, Mein said agriculture remains the backbone of the local economy.

"Large cardamom continues to be the main cash crop supporting rural livelihoods, while orange cultivation and horticulture are expanding steadily," he said.

The deputy chief minister said six roads are being built under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana and four under the Vibrant Villages Programme to improve all-weather connectivity in remote and border areas. (PTI)

Congress starts organisational restructuring in Nagaland

KOHIMA, Feb 26: The opposition Congress is aiming to transform its organisation in Nagaland through a grassroots-driven, time-bound restructuring process, a senior leader said on Thursday.

Congress Seva Dal chief organiser Lalji Desai said efforts are being made as a part of the 'Sangathan Srijan Abhiyan'.

Addressing a press conference at Congress Bhavan in Kohima, Desai said Nagaland is the fifth state where he was overseeing the organisational exercise.

"The initiative seeks to gather feedback and suggestions from party workers at all levels -- from district and blocks to the booths," he said.

Desai emphasised that the exercise seeks to revive the Congress's traditional bottom-up approach by directly involving grassroots workers in decision-making.

"We are here to listen. There is 100 per cent time for a Congress worker. Anyone can meet us," he said, adding that his team will conduct both group and one-on-one meetings, including assembly-level interactions and consultations with senior leaders.

Asked about the state Congress's organisational weaknesses after remaining in the opposition for 23 years, he said the exercise aimed to identify potential leaders in every district to address this.

Desai said senior leaders from Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Delhi, including members of the Congress Working Committee are participating in district and block-level consultations.

He said that once district Congress committee presidents are appointed, they will undergo a mandatory 10-day training focused on organisational building and transformation.

"They will then be assigned specific tasks to establish two additional layers of party structure at the block and assembly levels, followed by expansion to the village level," he said.

"Within 45 days, we aim to ensure a functional organisation at every level," he said, adding that progress reports will be submitted to the AICC by March 7.

At present, the party has 12 district committees for the state's 17 districts.

"The party's organisational structure does not necessarily correspond to district boundaries and may vary based on political considerations. Any future expansion of district units will be decided jointly by the state Congress and the AICC," he said.

State Congress working president C Apok Jamir said the initiative, adopted during the party's session in Ahmedabad last year, aims to empower leaders at the grassroots level. (PTI)

Nagaland celebrates North East Festival of Rice



HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, Feb 26: The North East Festival of Rice - Grains of Heritage was celebrated at the Agri Expo site in Chumoukedima on Thursday, highlighting the cultural significance of rice.

The event, funded by the North Eastern Council (NEC), Shillong was organised by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), Nagaland chapter in collaboration with other departments such as the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).

Inaugurating the festival, Nagaland Adviser for Agriculture, Mhathung Yanthan, said rice is not merely an agricultural commodity but life, identity and heritage for the people of the Northeast.

"From cradle to grave, rice accompanies us. It sanctifies our festivals, anchors our harvests and shapes our

oral traditions," he remarked.

Mhathung underscored that the Northeast is globally recognised as a hotspot of agro-biodiversity, with Nagaland alone reportedly having over 200 identified indigenous rice landraces adapted to specific microclimates and terrains over centuries.

He, however, cautioned that many traditional varieties are at risk of degeneration and called upon scientists, researchers and stakeholders to deliberate intensively on their conservation and scientific advancement during the two-day workshop.

Drawing attention to climate change and its impact on agriculture, Mhathung noted that erratic rainfall, floods, droughts and pest outbreaks pose serious challenges to the food system.

He emphasised the need to develop climate-resilient and short-duration rice varieties that ensure higher productivity while preserving traditional germplasm.

"While we hold on to our heritage, we must also provide practical solutions to farmers," he stated.

The programme also featured special guest remarks by Dr Sandeep Ghatak, Director of ICAR, Umiam; Dr AK Mohanty, Director of ICAR-ATARI, Umiam; Sanuzo Nuinei, Director of the Department of Agriculture, Nagaland and Dr Prashanna Gogoi, Director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre.

The speakers emphasised sustainable agricultural practices, research support for farmers and the need to promote traditional grains in the face of modern challenges.

Nagaland calls for intensive biodiversity conservation

HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, Feb 26: Nagaland forest department stressed the need for focused and intensive conservation of forests at the annual review-cum-planning workshop of the Forest and Biodiversity Management in the Himalaya (Nagaland) Project (FBMP) at the forest office complex in Kohima on Thursday. The two-day workshop, co-financed by the Federal Republic of Germany through KfW, is aimed at reviewing progress and charting the roadmap for the next phase of implementation.

FBMP is part of the Government of Germany's financial cooperation with India, signed in 2016, focusing on sustainable and effective management of forests and biodiversity in Nagaland.

Addressing the inaugural programme of the workshop, Vedpal Singh, principal chief conservator of forests and head of forest force, Nagaland, emphasised the need to institutionalise all interventions under the project to ensure sustainability beyond individuals.

He stressed that review meetings must result in measurable and implementable decisions. He also cautioned against spreading resources too thinly and suggested intensive interventions in selected locations to create demonstrative and replicable models.

Highlighting the importance of visible and relatable issues, Singh called for strengthening components such as human-wildlife conflict mitigation to enhance public engagement and institutional support.

Y Kikheto Sema, principal secretary, environment, forest and climate change and chairman, Nagaland State Biodiversity Board in his address, stated that the project presents a significant opportunity for the state.

He observed that Nagaland, though financially constrained is rich in biodiversity and must leverage such grant-based projects effectively.

Sema pointed out that with most forest lands under community ownership, grassroots awareness and participation are essential for meaningful conservation outcomes.

He expressed concern over the decline in forest cover in recent years and underscored the need to address the root causes, including unsustainable practices. He advocated intensive engagement with communities, prioritisation of ecologically sensitive areas and focused interventions rather than thin dispersal of resources.

Emphasising that conservation must become a people's movement, he called for the involvement of schools, churches and community institutions in spreading awareness and protecting biodiversity for future generations.

Strong foundation in reading, basic maths key to better future: Arunachal CM

Inaugurates FLN Centre aligned with NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat Mission



ITANAGAR, Feb 26: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Thursday said that a strong foundation in reading and basic mathematics is essential for a child's future and warned that students who cannot read with understanding or solve simple math problems in primary classes may struggle in higher grades.

Stressing that early learning is the base of the entire education system, the chief minister said the government is committed to improving foundational skills in government schools through practical and child-friendly methods.

Khandu was speaking after inaugurating the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) Centre at Doimukh near here, a major step aimed at strengthening early childhood and primary education in the state, an official statement said.

The centre is aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the NIPUN Bharat Mission of the Government of India.

It is described as a first-of-its-kind initiative in the country focused on ensuring that every child achieves basic literacy and numeracy skills by the end of grade 3, while also respecting the local culture and needs of Arunachal Pradesh.

Khandu said the centre follows play-based and activity-based teaching methods. It encourages the use of mother tongue or local languages in early classes so that children can understand lessons

better and feel more comfortable in school.

"The Centre also provides regular assessment, extra academic support where needed and focuses on training teachers and involving the community in the learning process," he said.

The literacy programme includes storytelling, conversation, phonics-based reading, guided reading practice, dictation and writing exercises.

Apart from academics, the centre has a cultural heritage hub to introduce children to the rich tribal traditions and knowledge systems of Arunachal Pradesh, helping them stay connected to their roots.

A STEM and Space Lab with more than 80 scientific and space-related instruments has also been set up to encourage practical learning and develop scientific temper among students up to Class 12.

Khandu thanked Doimukh MLA Nabam Vivek and all stakeholders for their support and especially appreciated the district administration, particularly Deputy Commissioner Visakha Yadav for successfully implementing the project. (PTI)

Pakyong Airport to be renamed after Sikkim's first freedom fighter Trilochan Pokhrel: CM

GANGTOK, Feb 26: Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang on Thursday announced that the Pakyong Airport, the lone such facility in the Himalayan state will be renamed after freedom fighter Trilochan Pokhrel.

Trilochan Pokhrel, popularly known as "Gandhi Pokhrel" and considered the first independence activist from Sikkim was actively involved in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement, spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi. Tamang made the announcement while addressing the 31st Foundation Day celebration of the 'Akhil Sikkim Khas Chettri Bahun Kalyan Sangh', a tribal organisation at Rangpo ground close to the West Bengal border.

"The Pakyong Airport will be renamed Trilochan Pokhrel Airport in honour of the freedom activist who belonged to the Khas, Chettri, Bahun community," the chief minister said. Pakyong Airport was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on September 24, 2018.

On the 31st Foundation Day of the organisation, Tamang said this milestone stands as a testament to more than three decades of collective resolve, unwavering



unity and dedicated service towards the upliftment and well-being of the community. "Over the years, the Sangh has played a meaningful role in fostering solidarity, preserving our rich cultural heritage and strengthening the bonds that connect us not only within the community but across the broader fabric of Sikkim," he said.

Tamang said that Sikkim has always been known for its harmony in diversity, where different communities live together with mutual respect and shared aspirations.

Raju Bista, the MP of Darjeeling in neighbouring West Bengal, said that the 12 communities in Sikkim and 11 in his state have still not received Scheduled Tribe recognition and the matter is under the consideration of the Centre. (PTI)

'Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal are the states worst affected by demographic change'

BJP will win West Bengal polls, drive out every single infiltrator: Amit Shah

ARARIA (BIHAR), Feb 26: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday exuded confidence that the BJP will win the upcoming assembly polls in West Bengal, and drive out every single infiltrator from the state, which was among the ones worst affected by demographic change.

Shah said this in Araria district of Bihar, where he launched projects worth ₹ 175 crore of the Sashstra Seema Bal (SSB) and dedicated to the nation a couple of new border outposts.

It is the top priority of the BJP government to drive out every single infiltrator from the country, who are not just a threat to national security, but also feed on welfare benefits meant for people, thereby diluting the impact schemes run by the government could make, he said. "Infiltration on a large scale also results in encroachments in bordering areas. We are committed to demolishing these. Infiltration also poses the threat of demographic change, which can wreak havoc with the culture, and even geography, of a region," Shah said.

The Narendra Modi government at the Centre has decided to set up a high-powered committee to study and undo demographic change by identifying the most vulnerable areas, the Union home minister said.

"Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal are the states worst affected by demographic change. West Bengal goes to polls soon. We are confident that the BJP will win the elections. And, it is the top priority of every BJP government to drive out infiltrators," he asserted.

The BJP, which had been a marginal power in West Bengal until a decade ago, has over the years ex-



panded its footprint and emerged as the principal challenger to the Trinamool Congress headed by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who seeks a fourth consecutive term in office.

The elections to the 294-member assembly in West Bengal are likely to be held in March-April.

"The beginning of the crack-down on infiltrators, though, will be made in this Seemanchal region of Bihar, where I had the chance to stay for four days during the assembly elections held a few months ago. I thank the people of the state for their resounding mandate to the NDA," Shah said.

The BJP had contested the polls on the issue of infiltration, notwithstanding the criticism from the opponents, he said.

"Flushing out infiltrators is as much a part of our agenda in Bihar as the welfare of people. I promise to the people of the state and the entire country that every single infiltrator would be driven out before we next approach them for a fresh mandate," Shah said.

The SSB has an important role

to play in checking infiltration, he noted.

Responding to Shah's statement, opposition parties alleged that it was tantamount to "targeting Muslims" ahead of the polls in West Bengal where the minority community has a sizeable population.

"We always knew that the Home Minister had West Bengal polls in mind while touring Seemanchal. But he must not defame the people of the state, who remained loyal towards India during the traumatising Partition, by branding them as infiltrators," said AIMIM state president and MLA Akhtarul Iman. CPI(M) Liberation MLA Sandeep Saurav said, "Why is Amit Shah still whining about infiltration when not a single infiltrator could be traced in the mammoth SIR? He just wants to insult Muslims".

Shah also said at the Araria function that guarding the borders is easy where proper fencing is in place and relations with the neighbouring country are friendly. However, a different approach is needed when the boundary is

porous, he said.

"I would, therefore, urge top officials of the SSB and other agencies concerned to sit together and prepare an SOP for such areas. It is essential that our jawans manning the borders maintain good relations with the inhabitants of villages situated along the borders. Their feedback would come in handy to check smuggling and narcotics trade," Shah said.

The jawans should also have cordial relations with security personnel deployed across the border, the Union home minister said.

"The central government is also committed to the welfare of our jawans and their families. Schemes like CAPF Awas Yojana and CAPF Ayushman health insurance, besides scholarships for dependent family members, are in place. Ex gratia for those who suffer disabilities in the course of discharge of duties has also been hiked," he said.

Shah, who spoke in the presence of Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai and Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary, began his speech by paying tributes to freedom fighter and Hindutva icon Vinayak Damodar Sawarkar on his death anniversary.

"Veer Savarkar was not just a fearless patriot, but also a brilliant writer, who was at ease both in poetry and prose. It was his work that made people view the Revolt of 1857 as not a mere mutiny but the country's first war of Independence. He attacked social evils like untouchability and worked towards fostering nationalism till his death. I offer him my tributes on behalf of the nation," he added. (PTI)

Gujarat assembly: Cong stages walkout

GANDHINAGAR, Feb 26: Congress MLAs staged a walkout from the Gujarat Assembly on Thursday, alleging poor budgetary allocations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and minorities, as well as underutilisation of funds.

The Opposition began a protest while Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Manisha Vakil was replying to questions regarding grants allocated to 10 boards and corporations under her department.

Shailesh Parmar of Congress questioned the rationale behind the fund allocation.

"Is the allocation done on the basis of population or the economic condition of the applicant?" he asked. Communities comprising around 68 per cent of Gujarat's population are receiving relatively lower allocations, he claimed.

In response, Vakil presented figures of grants utilised over the past five years by boards and corporations under her department.

She said ₹ 332.29 crore was utilised in 2021-22, ₹ 467.27 crore the next year, ₹ 432.02 crore in 2023-24, ₹ 640.68 crore in 2024-25 and ₹ 243.99 crore until January in the current fiscal, totalling ₹ 2,116.25 crore.

Apart from these corporations, which provide loans to the beneficiaries, the department's overall allocation for SC-related schemes exceeded ₹ 7,000 crore, the minister said.

Congress MLA Amit Chavda alleged that substantial portions of allocated funds remained unspent. He claimed that in 2024, about 28 per cent of the allocation for the Safai Kamdar Development Corporation remained unutilised.

He alleged that 40 per cent of funds allocated for the Gujarat Minority Finance and Development Corporation, 35 per cent for the Gujarat Backward Classes Development Corporation, 58 per cent for the Thakor and Koli Vikas Nigam and 50 per cent for the Gujarat Gopalak Vikas Nigam were unspent.

"First of all, allocations are low in proportion to population, and even then, up to 50 per cent remains unutilised. What are the criteria for allocation, and why does so much funds remain unspent?" he asked.

Vakil said the figures cited by her were up to December and that expenditure typically increased in the last months of the financial year.

She said that against a provision of ₹ 101.10 crore in 2024-25 for Thakor and Koli Vikas Nigam, ₹ 86.14 crore had been spent up to December, while in 2025-26, against a grant of ₹ 101.65 crore, ₹ 23.69 crore had been spent so far.

The minister attributed unspent amounts to incomplete documentation, absence of property cards, KYC-



related issues and discrepancies in applications.

When Parmar insisted that Vakil give a clear reply to his original question regarding the criteria adopted for fund allocation, Vakil reiterated that apart from the funds given to these boards and corporations, the department spends a substantial budget for the backward classes.

As exchanges grew heated, Speaker Chaudhary cautioned members against interrupting the minister mid-reply and reminded Congress MLAs that supplementary questions could only be asked after the response was complete.

Unhappy with Vakil's answers, all 12 Congress MLAs walked out of the House, claiming the government was not providing clear answers and also alleged that the allocations for SCs, OBCs and minorities were inadequate.

After the walkout, Agriculture Minister Jitu Vaghani accused the Opposition of violating assembly rules by repeatedly standing up without permission and interrupting the minister.

Forest and Environment Minister Arjun Modhwadia alleged that the opposition staged the walkout to prevent the full financial details from being placed on record and termed it an attempt to gain publicity.

BJP MLA Ramanbhai Vora slammed the Congress for trying to gain "cheap publicity".

Speaker Chaudhary said members must seek permission before speaking and cannot insist that a minister provide a specific type of reply. He said Question Hour is crucial for addressing public issues and condemned the walkout.

"I formally reprimand the Congress members for their conduct," he said, adding that by walking out, they had also forfeited the opportunity to raise other questions listed by their party.

The Congress MLAs later returned to participate in the discussion on the Budget. (PTI)

Shah to address 'badlav' rally in Punjab's Moga on Mar 14

CHANDIGARH, Feb 26: Union Home Minister Amit Shah will address a 'Badlav' rally in Punjab's Moga on March 14, state BJP working president Ashwani Sharma said on Thursday.

Addressing the media here, Sharma said everyone in Punjab sees the BJP as a reliable and credible alternative to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which, he said, the people have decided to throw.

He said the BJP is committed to serving the people of Punjab, taking the state on the path of development, freeing it from the drug menace, bringing change in the lives of farmers and providing a corruption-free regime.

The rally is being seen as the beginning of the BJP's poll campaign in Punjab, where assembly elections are due in early 2027.

Lashing out at the Aam Aadmi Party government in Punjab, Sharma alleged that the Bhagwant Mann dispensation had "failed" on every front.

In its four years of power in Punjab, far from fulfilling electoral guarantees and promises, the AAP government has failed to ensure the rule of law in Punjab, taking "U-turns" on each of its promises, Sharma alleged.

Sharma alleged that drugs, illegal mining and corruption are "rampant" in the state.

"The health and education systems are deteriorating, and employees are not receiving salaries and pensions on time. Due to pending reimbursements, the state power utility and the Punjab Roadways are facing heavy losses and have been unable to pay salaries for months," he claimed.

Culprits in sacrilege cases have not been punished yet, he said.

Sharma also called into question the Mann dispensation's sincerity for failing to get the farmers a minimum support price on their crops.

Traders are distressed by what Sharma described as "tax recovery terror" of the Punjab government. In four years, the AAP government has neither built new roads in cities, towns, and villages nor even repaired potholes, he claimed.

Sharma alleged that the law and order in the state has "completely collapsed" and cited incidents of extortion and gun violence that recently took place in Punjab.

"Extortion calls are now being made not only to big businessmen but even to small grocery shopkeepers," he said.

The Pathankot MLA alleged that the Punjab Police, which once eradicated terrorism from the state, has been kept so busy by AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal and Mann in "settling political scores" with opponents. (PTI)

Ruling party merely places stickers on projects funded by Union govt: TN BJP

CHENNAI, Feb 26: Tamil Nadu BJP president Nainar Nagenthran on Thursday accused the DMK-led government in the state of "taking undue credit" for central welfare schemes, alleging that the ruling party was merely placing its stickers on projects funded and initiated by the Union government.

Speaking to reporters after inaugurating the NDA election office here, Nagenthran said basic facilities such as drinking water under the Jal Jeevan Mission, road infrastructure, and 60 per cent of housing costs are being funded by the Centre.

"Even free rations at shops are provided by the Centre, yet the state government just puts their stickers on these schemes to claim credit. You should ask the state government why they are not acknowledging these central contributions," he said.

On the AIADMK-headed NDA alliance, which includes the PMK, Tamil Maanila Congress, and several other regional parties, he said it was forged under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Launching a sharp attack on Chief Minister M K Stalin, Nagenthran termed the current administration a "family rule" rather than a government for the people.

He alleged a total collapse of law and order, claiming that the state has become flooded with synthetic drugs and ganja.

"They cannot even appoint a DGP properly. Students are carrying ganja and knives instead of books, and even teachers are being intimidated. Women and young girls, from 10 to 70 years old, are suffering from sexual violence," he alleged.



Nagenthran further claimed that the state's administration is inefficient, citing 34 custodial deaths and the lack of fulfillment of poll promises such as the old pension scheme and monthly electricity billing.

He dismissed the state's ₹ 1,000 assistance for women as a "calculated move" for the elections, noting it was denied for 28 months and currently excludes many eligible recipients.

"As our Prime Minister said, we need a double engine government -- under brother EPS (Palaniswami) in the state and PM Modi in the Centre -- to make Tamil Nadu and India prosper," he said, highlighting central investments worth thousands of crores in Thoothukudi and the introduction of eleven Vande Bharat trains.

Responding to a query regarding the launch of a new party by V K Sasikala, he said while many may start political parties, the people remain with the NDA. (PTI)

Mayawati slams Samajwadi Party over proposed 'PDA Day'

LUCKNOW, Feb 26: Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati on Thursday accused the Samajwadi Party of indulging in "political theatrics" by proposing to observe "PDA Day" on the birth anniversary of BSP founder Kanshi Ram and alleged that the Akhilesh Yadav-led party has historically been opposed to Dalits, OBCs and the Bahujan community.

SP chief Yadav coined the acronym PDA in June 2023, which stands for "Pichhde (backward classes), Dalits and 'Alpsankhyak' (minorities).

In a post in Hindi on X, Mayawati said the SP's "conduct, character and face" have historically reflected disrespect towards leaders and icons of the Bahujan society, and claimed that its move to mark Kanshi Ram's birth anniversary was aimed at garnering votes from marginalised communities. She claimed that the SP's "casteist" politics dates back to the

1993 BSP-SP alliance. Despite conditions laid down to curb atrocities against weaker sections, she said, then chief minister and SP patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav did not alter his approach, which led the BSP to withdraw support on June 1, 1995.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister also referred to the 1995 state guest house incident in Lucknow, calling it a "recorded instance of brutality" in which she was attacked. Mayawati further alleged that successive SP governments disrespected Kanshi Ram by changing the names of districts and institutions associated with him. She cited the renaming of Kanshi Ram Nagar district and changes to institutions named after the BSP founder in places including Saharanpur.

Targeting the SP leadership under Akhilesh Yadav, Mayawati alleged a continuation of what she termed anti-Dalit and anti-BSP

policies. She also levelled allegations against both the Congress and the SP over incidents of communal violence during their respective tenures.

She said it was due to the conduct of the SP that the BJP got an opportunity to exploit the situation for political gains and form its government in the state.

"The Samajwadi Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party have effectively fed off each other, becoming mutually convenient rivals while pursuing casteist and communal politics in the state.

"The BJP rule in Uttar Pradesh has adversely affected Muslims and the Bahujan community, while crores of ordinary people in the state are distressed in every way," she said.

From the beginning till now, the SP's casteist and communal attitude towards Dalits, OBCs, Muslims and the Bahujan society is not hidden from anyone, she said. (PTI)

Row over land rules clause: Oppn MLAs urge Gov to convene special assembly session

PANAJI, Feb 26: Opposition legislators in Goa met Governor P Ashok Gajapathi Raju on Thursday, requesting him to convene a special session of the assembly to discuss a controversial provision of the Town and Country Planning Act.

Revolutionary Goans Party (RGP) MLA Viresh Borkar has been protesting at Azad Maidan in Panaji for the last six days against Section 39A of the Town and Country Planning (TCP) Act, alleging that it is being misused to convert certain land into "settlement zones", where construction activity is allowed.

On Thursday, a delegation comprising Leader of Opposition Yuri Alemao, AAP MLAs Venzy Viegas, Cruz Silva and others met the governor at Lok Bhavan in Dona Paula near here.

"We met the governor and told him that the matter about 39A should be discussed and debated, considering the emergency situation," Congress leader Ale-

mao told reporters outside the Lok Bhavan.

The governor has summoned a 16-day budget session of the state assembly from March 6. Alemao said that in view of the deteriorating health of Borkar, there is an urgent need to discuss the issue and the demand for scrapping section 39A of TCP, and hence they want a special assembly session to be convened. He said that former Chief Justice (of Allahabad High Court) Ferdino Rebello has drafted a bill to save the lands of Goa by scrapping various sections of the TCP.

"We have told the governor that this bill is important when it comes to certain land conversions that are happening on a large-scale," the Congress leader said.

He claimed that despite their peaceful agitation, some people supporting the demand for scrapping the controversial TCP Act section were being threatened with legal action, which he described as "anti-democratic". (PTI)

Punjab edu min announces ₹ 400 crore digitalisation project for govt schools

CHANDIGARH, Feb 26: Punjab Education Minister Harjot Singh Bains on Thursday announced a Rs 400 crore digitalisation project that will replace outdated hardware and phase out obsolete computer systems from government schools.

Bains said the initiative, under 'Punjab Sikhya Kranti', will equip government schools with state-of-the-art technology and redefine classroom teaching across the state.

Sharing details, he said, "As many as 38,649 brand-new desktop computers equipped with the latest software are being deployed across 5,012 government schools."

These will be distributed to all senior secondary and high schools, and 50 percent of middle schools, ensuring that students have access

to the latest hardware and technology, he added.

Dedicated computer labs will be established in 5,000 government schools, ensuring that all secondary and senior secondary government schools have fully functional computer labs, the minister said.

He said, "To foster interactive learning, we are installing 8,268 interactive flat panels in 3,694 schools. Every senior secondary and high school will receive these panels, with larger schools receiving four, five or even eight units based on student strength."

This massive infusion of technology ensures that digital literacy and smart learning are no longer the privileges of private institutions but the fundamental right of every student in Punjab's public



school system, Bains added.

Describing the move as a decisive shift from traditional chalkboards to technology-driven smart classrooms, the minister noted

"The move would phase out obsolete computer systems. For too long, our students were working on computers so outdated that they barely functioned, still running on

old versions of Microsoft Paint. We are changing it permanently."

He emphasised that implementation has already begun and is not a future promise. "This is not just an announcement for tomorrow; deliveries have already begun in schools today. By March 20, every school in every district of Punjab will receive their new equipment," he added.

Bains reiterated that the mass-scale rollout of interactive flat panels marks a structural shift in pedagogy and said it will fundamentally change how lessons are delivered, understood and experienced.

Responding to a query regarding teacher eligibility test (TET) qualification, the minister said, "I want to assure every teacher, your jobs

are secure. No one will lose their job." He said he understands the anxiety among experienced teachers who have been serving for 20 to 25 years and assured that legal solutions are being explored.

The minister added that he remains in constant touch with teacher unions and is exploring every legal avenue.

The Supreme Court last year made TET mandatory for all serving teachers in schools. The apex court in September 2025 ruled that all in-service teachers who have not passed the eligibility test will have to acquire the qualification within two years to continue in service. However, those teachers who have less than five years' service left may continue in service without qualifying the TET. (PTI)

AI Summit protest

Delhi, Shimla police drama enters wee hours after IYC activists' arrest

SHIMLA, Feb 26: The high voltage drama with the Himachal Police "detaining" a 20-member Delhi Police team extended into the wee hours of Thursday, even after the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate (ACJM) granted transit remand for three Youth Congress activists arrested in connection with the "shirtless protest" at the AI Summit to New Delhi.

On Wednesday, the Himachal Pradesh Police registered a kidnapping case against the Delhi Police personnel and "detained" their vehicles at the Shogi border near Shimla. This occurred while they were en route to the national capital with the three Youth Congress members in custody.

The three accused, along with the members of the Delhi Police, were taken to the residence of ACJM II Ekansh Kapil at 1.30 am after undergoing medical examinations at the Deendyal Upadhyay Zonal Hospital in Shimla late Wednesday night. Afterwards, they resumed their journey.

However, early Thursday morning, the Delhi Police team was detained again at Kanlog. The police team was instructed to return to the national capital with the accused, along with a few additional police personnel, while the remaining members were asked to stay behind and cooperate with the investigation into the kidnapping case against them. The Shimla police also asked the Delhi team to hand over the copy of the digital evidence they possessed, which had allegedly been gathered when they picked up the activists in Rohru.

The Delhi Police insisted that the safety of the three accused was their responsibility and that they would not leave any of their members behind. They later continued their movement towards Shogi.

At the Shogi border, however, the Delhi team was detained yet again by the Shimla police at 4 am.

Meanwhile, the Shimla police barricaded a vehicle belonging to



the Delhi Police, which is believed to contain CCTV footage and other evidence. The Delhi Police stated that this vehicle holds digital evidence, accompanying documents, and arms.

During the standoff, the Shimla police sought the keys to the barricaded vehicle, but the Delhi Police refused to hand them over.

A personnel from the Delhi Police informed the Shimla police that a seizure memo had been provided and that the relevant documents were shown to the ACJM, based on which they were granted transit remand. The Delhi Police stated that they received 18 hours of transit remand, of which 4.5 hours have already elapsed.

Both the Delhi and Shimla police teams declined to comment to the media. The information about the standoff was gathered based on what the PTI reporter at the scene observed and heard.

Speaking to the media earlier, advocate for the accused, Sandeep Dutta, stated that the arrest was illegal because the proper procedures were not followed. He opposed the transit remand on the grounds of illegal detention and the lack of proper documentation.

Advocate Nand Lal, representing the Delhi Police, stated that the transit remand application was pre-

sented and approved.

The conflict began on Wednesday morning when members of the Delhi Police arrested the three Youth Congress activists, linked to the February 20 protest at the AI Impact Summit, from a hotel in the Chirgaon area of Rohru subdivision in Shimla district. They were intercepted by local police and brought back to Shimla. Three police vehicles ferrying the accused - Saurabh, Siddharth and Arbaz - who are allegedly not residents of the state, were intercepted in Shimla and Solan district and subsequently produced before a local court. On Wednesday evening, when the Delhi Police attempted once more to transport the accused to New Delhi, they were stopped again at the Shogi border, approximately 15 km from Shimla. This situation created inconvenience for commuters due to the standoff between the two police teams.

"A case has been registered against 15-20 unknown people in plain clothes for forcibly taking three people staying in a resort in Rohru. They also took the CCTV installed in the resort with them and did not give any receipt," the Shimla police said in a statement.

While the Delhi Police asserted that they had obtained the necessary transit remand, the Himachal

Police claimed that no documentation was presented and deemed the operation illegal, alleging a procedural lapse in not notifying the local police before making an arrest. Both the Shimla and Delhi police accused one another of obstructing the investigation.

In a purported video that appeared from the Shogi border in the suburbs of Shimla city, the Delhi Police officers were heard saying that they had arrested three people in the morning in connection with an FIR registered on February 20. "We have to produce the accused arrested at 5 am today in the court in 24 hours, and you have stopped us after registering an FIR at 8 pm," a Delhi Police officer could be heard saying.

However, Shimla Police maintained that a case of abduction had been filed, alleging that the Delhi Police was hampering their investigation. "I asked you for legal documentation in the morning, but you neither showed any document nor provided the FIR number," a Shimla Police officer could be heard replying. In a statement issued in Shimla, Leader of Opposition in the Himachal Pradesh Assembly Jai Ram Thakur said, "It is shameful to provide protection in Himachal Pradesh to individuals from outside Himachal Pradesh who have attempted to tarnish the country's image internationally."

Thakur accused Chief Minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu of engaging in 'politics of anarchy' to win favour with Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, claiming the Himachal Pradesh Police should have cooperated with the Delhi Police in this interstate operation, but instead attempted to detain them.

The "shirtless protest" at Bharat Mandapam on February 20 prompted a significant security response, with police earlier invoking charges including rioting and promoting enmity under relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). (PTI)

Steady decline in militancy, situation normal in J-K: Western Army Commander

PATHANKOT (PUNJAB), Feb 26: Western Army Commander Lieutenant General Manoj Kumar Katiyar on Thursday said he has noted a sustained decline in militancy indicators in Jammu and Kashmir, and the situation has become very normal.

Maintaining that the Army is keeping a close watch on the terror infrastructure, he said plans are being formulated to deal with it accordingly.

"As you have seen, all militancy parameters in Jammu and Kashmir have consistently declined. The situation in Jammu and Kashmir has become very normal. However, as I said before, this is a well-planned conspiracy by Pakistan to send a few terrorists to disturb the atmosphere. Our Army and all departments of the civil administration are fully prepared (to deal with it)," Lt Gen Katiyar told reporters here.

Responding to a question on terror encounters in the Kathua-Kishtwar belt, the Army commander said, "Wherever we receive information, we take immediate and prompt action. As you have seen this year, in several successful operations, we neutralised terrorists who had come to create disturbances in our country."

Responding to another question about the revival of terror launch pads and terror camps in Pakistan, he said, "We have kept them under watch. We are fully aware of what actions are taking place there. If they are trying to regenerate or reassemble their terrorist bases, we have that information. We will formulate our plans accordingly."

On reports of terrorist infrastructure being rebuilt after Operation Sindoor, Lt Gen Katiyar said Pakistan's military leadership thrives on confrontation. "Pakistan's military leadership wants to remain relevant and does not want politicians to take over power. Their relevance comes through a state of confrontation with India. Despite repeated peace efforts from our side, they keep doing something to keep this confrontation alive," he



said, calling it a matter of concern. He said that India will respond with greater force to any future misadventure by Pakistan and will not be deterred by nuclear threats.

Replying to a volley of questions on the prospect of Operation Sindoor 2, Lt Gen Katiyar said Pakistan has been taught "a very strong lesson" during Operation Sindoor and any renewed provocation would invite a stronger response.

"Our preparations are ongoing, and we must remain prepared. If they do not understand this lesson and create conflict conditions again due to their internal reasons, we will respond in an even better and stronger manner," he said.

On claims that Pakistan sought a ceasefire through other countries and assertions of foreign mediation, the Army commander clarified the sequence of events.

"After the attack on May 7, 2025, our DGMO (Director General of Military Operations) conveyed that we had completed our action and wanted to talk. They refused at that time. Fighting continued for the next 88 hours. After extensive damage to their military bases, their DGMO approached our DGMO, and it was during that conversation that the ceasefire draft was prepared. After deliberations, our government accepted the request," he said.

Rejecting suggestions that India's actions targeted civilians or political leadership, the Army commander said the operation was

precise and objective-driven. "Our response in Operation Sindoor was very clear. We did not target any civilian areas. We initially targeted only terrorist bases. When Pakistan attacked our military stations, we responded by attacking their military stations and air bases," he said, adding that the objective was to destroy terrorist bases swiftly.

On the extent of damage to terror launch pads and camps, Lt Gen Katiyar said the operational details could not be shared. "We have this information, but it is essential for our military planning. What can be said is that we are closely monitoring all actions related to terror infrastructure in Pakistan," he said.

On infiltration and the role of Pakistan's military, Lt Gen Katiyar said, "We believe the Pakistan Army is supporting infiltration. The terrorists are coming after training, and there is a possibility that the Pakistan Army may be helping in their training."

Dismissing nuclear threats, the Army commander termed them a pressure tactic. "We see it as a bogey meant to prevent us from taking strong action. We will not get deterred by nuclear threats," he said. Asked about the scale of a future response in case of any misadventure, he said, "The response will be stronger than what we have done earlier. How far we go and at what level depends on the situation at that particular time, but we are very clear that the response will be harsher than last time." (PTI)

200 judicial officers from J'khand, Odisha will come to Bengal for electoral rolls revision

KOLKATA, Feb 26: Nearly 200 judicial officers from Jharkhand and Odisha are likely to come to West Bengal soon for the ongoing SIR exercise, special rolls observer of the Election Commission, Subrata Gupta, said on Thursday.

Gupta said the poll panel will shortly be informed about the joining of the officers, following the Supreme Court's suggestion to the Calcutta High Court Chief Justice Sujoy Paul.

"We will make all arrangements for the training of the judicial officers for the exercise," Gupta told reporters after attending a stock-taking meeting convened by Chief Justice Paul.

According to the Supreme Court directive, judicial officers from West Bengal's lower courts have been deputed to adjudicate claims and objections of persons listed under logical discrepancies, whose names are at risk of removal from the electoral rolls.

The Supreme Court on February 24 permitted the Calcutta HC chief justice to deploy civil judges and also requisition judicial officers from neighbouring Jharkhand and Odisha to deal with 80 lakh claims and objections in the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal.

The top court took note of a letter from the chief justice stating that 250 district judges currently deployed in the SIR exercise would require around 80 days to complete the work, and allowed deployment of additional officers. (PTI)

CBI files fresh case against Anil Ambani, Reliance Communications over ₹ 2,220 crore bank 'fraud'

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: The CBI has registered a fresh case against industrialist Anil Ambani and Reliance Communications (RCOM) for allegedly cheating the Bank of Baroda during 2013-17 causing a wrongful loss of more than ₹ 2,220 crore to the bank, officials said Thursday.

The case stems from a complaint received from the bank on Tuesday, they said.

"After registration of this case, the CBI has conducted searches at the residence of Anil Ambani and the registered offices of Reliance Communication Ltd. Various documents connected with this loan transactions have been recovered," a CBI spokesperson said in a statement. "The allegations in the FIR are that Bank of Baroda has suffered a loss of more than ₹ 2,220 crore due to the loans availed by Reliance Communications which were allegedly diverted and misutilized by creating fictitious transactions with related parties," the spokesperson said.

According to the officials, the account was declared a non-performing asset in 2017 itself.

"However, based on the petition filed by Anil Ambani before the Hon'ble High Court of Bombay, there was stay on the declaration of the accounts as a fraud by the Hon'ble High Court. The stay was vacated on 23.02.2026 after which the Bank of Baroda lodged this complaint and the CBI has taken up the case immediately," the spokesperson said.

No immediate reaction was available from the company. In its complaint, the Bank of Baroda has accused Ambani and RCOM of systematic misutilisation of borrowed funds contrary to sanctioned purposes.

Ambani and RCOM were also accused of manipulation of books of account to conceal irregularities and misrepresent financial health, diversion of loan proceeds and recycling and layering of funds to camouflage true fund flows, among others.

"RCOM, Reliance Infratel Ltd (RITL), and Reliance Telecom Ltd (RTL), all related parties, cumulatively received ₹ 31,580 crore from banks and financial institutions.

"Of these, ₹ 6,265.85 crore was utilized for repayment of other banks' loans and ₹ 5,501.56 crore for payment to related/connected parties, while ₹ 3,674.85 crore was invested in fixed deposits and mutual funds. These investments were liquidated immediately and utilized for payments to related and non-related parties which indicated that utilization of loan amount was not as per terms of sanction," the complaint alleged.

The bank has alleged loan funds of ₹ 1,783.65 crore raised by RITL was utilized by RCOM through Reliance Communications Infrastructure Ltd (RCIL) to pay its liability or transferred to related parties. "The account was classified as NPA w.e.f. June 5,



2017 due to persistent defaults in repayment obligations and irregularities in fund utilization. Subsequent forensic investigation confirmed diversion and misappropriation of funds, establishing fraudulent intent," it alleged.

The complaint, now part of the FIR, also alleged there were transactions between RCOM, Reliance Infratel and Reliance Telecom which amounts to clear diversion of funds obtained as loan from multiple banks. "There are suspicious transactions to related and non-related parties. There are numerous assignments in the books of Reliance Communications Limited, Reliance Infratel Limited and Reliance Telecom Ltd wherein high-value receivable and payable balances were transferred to corresponding parties to the assignment," it alleged.

"...it is submitted that the borrower company (Reliance Communications) along with its Promoter and Chairman (Anil Ambani) in pursuance of a well knitted criminal conspiracy and with dishonest intention of causing wrongful loss to our bank and wrongful gain to themselves diverted/siphoned off the funds disbursed to them, dishonestly misappropriated the loan amount," it alleged.

The CBI has already registered a case against RCOM based on a complaint lodged by the SBI which is the lead bank of a consortium consisting of 11 banks.

"However, the Bank of Baroda was not part of the said consortium, and this is a different loan availed by the Reliance Communications from Bank of Baroda, the then Vijaya Bank and the then Dena Bank," the spokesperson said.

Earlier in the day, Reliance Group chairman Ambani appeared before the Enforcement Directorate here for a second round of questioning in connection with an alleged bank fraud-linked money laundering case. Officials in the agency said they have recorded his statement under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Ambani was first questioned by the ED in August 2025. (PTI)

Bhagavad Gita's spiritual teachings can give new direction to today's youth: Prez

JAMSHEDPUR, Feb 26: President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday asserted that spiritual teachings in the Bhagavad Gita could give a new direction to today's youth and shape their lives.

Murmu was addressing a gathering in Jharkhand's Jamshepur after laying the foundation stone and performing the ground-breaking ceremony of the Sri Jagannath Spiritual and Cultural Charitable Centre Trust at Kadma.

"It will be a centre for spiritual learning and communal harmony. It will ensure education of poor children, including girls, at its hostel," Murmu said.

Bhagavad Gita's teachings are food for the soul, the President said.

Murmu also praised the organisers of the proposed spiritual centre, saying it will help instil the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita among youth and shape their character.

The President said in his spiritual tra-

dition, the greatest emphasis is placed on the feeling of love and compassion for all living beings and plants.

"Mahaprabhu Jagannath is the Lord of the entire universe. His grace shows equally upon all humanity, without any discrimination", she said, adding there is no caste and creed or untouchability at the doorstep of Lord Jagannath.

This is the reason Lord Jagannath was also known as "Jagat ke Nath" (Lord of the Universe), she said.

Recalling her tenure as Jharkhand governor, Murmu said the state has set a good example of social harmony and preserved tribal traditions.

She also expressed satisfaction over growing faith in Lord Jagannath worldwide.

Speaking on the occasion, Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said over 500 Jagannath temples have been built across the country so far. (PTI)

Bilaspur district admin to develop cybersecurity guidelines for protection of adolescents

BILASPUR (HP), Feb 26: The Bilaspur administration on Thursday said it would soon release guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) to ensure cybersecurity of adolescents in the district. The decision was taken at a meeting of the District-Level Committee on Cybersecurity, held under the chairmanship of Deputy Commissioner Rahul Kumar.

"This initiative will make Bilaspur the first district in the country to develop a structured and institutionalised cybersecurity framework to protect adolescents," Kumar said. Addressing the meeting, the deputy commissioner said, "With the use of digital media increas-

ing rapidly, adolescents are being affected the most. While opportunities have expanded, the digital space also poses serious challenges such as online grooming, cyberbullying, fake profiles, identity theft, gaming addiction and cyber fraud. Consequently, there is a need for a clear, effective and actionable SOP at the district level." He said the draft cybersecurity guidelines and SOP will be released at the state-level Nalwari Fair in March. "This will help in establishing cybersecurity protocols for schools, colleges, industrial training institutes and other educational institutions," the deputy commissioner said. (PTI)

SC bans NCERT Class 8 book over chapter on corruption in judiciary, orders seizure of all copies

NEW DELHI, Feb 26: Observing that there appeared to be a "well orchestrated conspiracy" to defame the judiciary, the Supreme Court on Thursday imposed a "complete blanket ban" on the Class 8 NCERT book with a chapter on corruption in the judiciary and ordered that all copies, physical and digital, be seized.

"They have fired the gunshot. The judiciary is bleeding," a bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant said, a day after the National Council of Educational Research & Training apologised for "inappropriate content" in the social science textbook and said it would be rewritten in consultation with appropriate authorities.

The bench, also comprising Justices Joymalaya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi, issued show cause no-

tices to the NCERT director and the secretary of the department of school education and asked them to explain why contempt proceedings should not be initiated against those responsible. Referring to the NCERT's communication on Wednesday, the CJ said, "That itself shows deep-rooted conspiracy... a well-orchestrated conspiracy".

In its stern comments, the bench added that there seemed to be a "calculated move" to undermine the institution and demean the dignity of judiciary. It warned of serious action if its directions are defied in any manner.

Referring to the contents of the book, the bench observed that such misconduct, having everlasting impact on the judiciary, would fall within the definition of criminal contempt. This would erode peo-



ple's faith in the judiciary if allowed to go unchecked, the apex court said. "It is my duty as the head of the institution to find out who is responsible; heads must roll," the CJ said, adding, "We would like to

have a deeper probe."

The bench then directed that the NCERT, in coordination with the education departments of the Centre and states, ensure that all copies of the book, either hard or soft

copy, are removed from public access. "As an abundant precaution, a complete blanket ban is imposed on any further publication, reprinting or digital dissemination of the book," the bench said.

It said any attempt to distribute the book, either physically or digitally, shall be taken as a willful defiance of the court's order.

A section titled "Corruption in the Judiciary" in the new textbook says corruption, a massive backlog of cases, and the lack of an adequate number of judges are among the challenges faced by the judicial system. It also states that judges are bound by a code of conduct that governs not only their behaviour in court, but also how they conduct themselves outside it.

The Supreme Court had taken suo motu cognisance of the matter

on Wednesday. On Thursday, it made clear that the proceedings were not meant to stifle any legitimate criticism or the exercise of right to scrutinise the judiciary. At the outset, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta tendered an unconditional and unqualified apology on behalf of the Ministry of Education.

The CJ, however, was unconvinced. He said there was not a single word of apology in the NCERT's communication and it instead tried to justify the chapter.

The bench observed it seemed that the choice of words and expressions in the book cannot be said to be an inadvertent or bonafide error. The top court observed it was fundamentally improper to expose students to "biased narrative" at this age which might lead to fundamental

misconceptions. The bench posted the matter for further hearing on March 11. The CJ on Wednesday said nobody on earth would be allowed to defame the judiciary and taint its integrity. "At any cost, I will not permit it. However high it may be, the law will take its course. I know how to deal with it," a visibly irked CJ had said after senior advocates Kapil Sibal and Abhishek Singhvi mentioned the matter.

The council, responsible for school education curriculum, put on hold the circulation of the textbook hours after it took the book off its website on Wednesday. It said it "holds the judiciary in highest esteem and considers it to be the upholder of the Indian Constitution and protector of fundamental rights" and termed the error purely unintentional. (PTI)

Woman, thre

BAFTA win for 'Boong' reinforces faith in cinema's power to bridge divides: Producers



For producers Vikesh Bhutani and Shujaat Saudagar, the BAFTA win for their film "Boong" came as a surprise and reinforced their belief that cinema can serve as a bridge to overcome hatred and foster global unity. The coming-of-age film, directed by Lakshmi Priya Devi, won the award for Best Children's and Family Film at the 2026 BAFTA awards ceremony, held at the Royal Festival Hall in London.

"Winning is something which is the cherry on the cake. I personally was not expecting a win. But once we made the shortlist, there was always hope," Saudagar told PTI in an interview.

"Boong" revolves around a young boy searching for his absent father, whom he wants to bring home to surprise his mother. It was the only Indian film nominated at the awards.

Devi, who wrote and directed the movie, accepted the trophy during the ceremony and was accompanied by Farhan Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani of Excel Entertainment. Bhutani and Saudagar have produced the project through their banner Chalkboard Entertainment.

Bhutani said their decision to back the film was driven purely by its universal storytelling appeal and he was quite hopeful that it would resonate with people globally.

"We did not make this film with any preconceived ideas about the state's politics... We did not think about where it was set," he said, referring to the prevailing situation in Manipur, which has been grappling with ethnic tensions and political unrest over the past year.

Bhutani, who has also backed acclaimed films like "The Mehta Boys" and "Gulmohar", said he liked Devi's vision for the project.

"It was a universal relationship drama. We thought of taking it wherever we can. But whatever has happened becomes, like how we feel there's a hope after every crisis.

"A Manipuri film winning BAFTA is a hope which means cinema can overcome any hatred, it can become a stepping stone towards bringing people together. So, if it can contribute a little bit from that angle, that's something which we've achieved," Bhutani said.

Saudagar, who helmed Akhtar's 2016 movie "Rock On 2", agreed with Bhutani and said the film's "global language and grammar" resonated with international audiences.

"The film spoke universally, whether it's a troubled place in India or anywhere in the world. Also, the journey of this kid and the innocence that children bring in dealing with these kinds of issues was fascinating because

we've never seen it from a child's point of view. We've never seen it from that lens."

Saudagar and Bhutani also revealed that the team of "Boong" didn't face any issues while filming in Manipur.

"Every state has its own set of conflicts. The clashes began the moment we finished filming and came back," Saudagar said.

"Filming was the smoothest part of the whole journey. When we were scouting, when we were there during recce, we had certain obstructions there, but not big enough for us to not do the film. When we were shooting in Moreh, which borders Burma and Manipur, the communities came together and said, 'We support you, do not worry, wherever you want to shoot, it's a border town, we will protect you'," Bhutani added.

Both producers believe that "Boong" adds to the changing trend where indie cinema is gaining international recognition and hopefully things too will change in the home country.

"Five years back, we were not even talking about this. It all began with 'All That Breathes'. The gap is narrowing quickly but we've got miles to go. It is also great to see big production houses like Dharma backing 'Homebound' and Excel backing 'Boong'," Saudagar said.

"As far as these films doing well in India, films like 'Boong' require that kind of distribution network and support to be watched even on a national scale. Awards like this, BAFTA, Oscars, or Cannes or Sundance, they give them impetus," he said.

"Boong" had a limited release in 2025 and the makers are now planning for a theatrical release or a direct-to-OTT move following the BAFTA buzz. (PTI)

VIJAY RASHMIKA - WEDDING

Vijay Deverakonda shares glimpses of Haldi ceremony

Telugu star Vijay Deverakonda on Wednesday shared glimpses of the Haldi ceremony ahead of his wedding with actor Rashmika Mandanna.

The couple will tie the knot on Thursday at a luxury hotel on the outskirts of Udaipur, with pre-wedding festivities spread over the preceding two days.

Vijay offered fans a peek at the elaborate Haldi setup through his Instagram Stories.

The visuals showed circular outdoor space where two small wooden stools were placed at the centre for the bride and groom. Baskets of bright yellow and orange marigold petals surround the area.

In another Story, the actor shared a close-up of personalised flower-shaped name placards — one reading "Rushie", a nickname for Rashmika, and the other "Vijay" — placed among fresh lilies, roses and marigolds.

Family members and close guests have arrived for the wedding festivities of the couple at the hotel. Both the actors had reached Udaipur on Monday.

Elaborate security arrangements have been made at and around the hotel venue. Private bouncers as well as police personnel have been deployed to ensure security during the wedding

festivities. The security arrangement also include restrictions on drones to avoid any leak of photographs and videos from the high profile wedding that has kept fans hooked.

On Tuesday, Vijay and Rashmika shared pictures suggesting they played a friendly cricket match with friends at the hotel premises, which they named the "VIROSH Premier League".

Rashmika also shared an image of the pre-wedding food arrangements with the dinner table decorated with pink tulips and white flowers.

The couple, who worked together on films such as "Geetha Govindam" and "Dear Comrade", have dated for seven years but publicly confirmed the relationship only recently.

They thanked fans and followers for their constant support in a recent post, saying they would

like to name their union "The Wedding of Virosh" to honour the tag given to them by fans.

Deverakonda featured in several successful Telugu films, including "Arjun Reddy" and enjoys a significant fan following across India. Mandanna, a leading actress in Telugu and Kannada cinema, gained widespread recognition with films such as "Geetha Govindam", "Pushpa: The Rise" and "Animal". (PTI)



Korean auteur Park Chan-wook to preside over Cannes main competition jury

Acclaimed South Korean director Park Chan-wook will head the main competition jury at the 79th Cannes Film Festival, marking the first time a Korean filmmaker has been appointed to the role.

Park and his jury will award the 2026 Palme d'Or on May 23 at the Grand Théâtre Lumière, the festival organisers announced in a statement.

Last year's honour was presented by Juliette Binoche to Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi for "It Was Just an Accident".

"Park Chan-wook's inventiveness, visual mastery, and penchant for capturing the multiple impulses of women and men with strange destinies have given contemporary cinema some truly memorable moments," Cannes festival president Iris Knobloch and director Thierry Frémaux said in a statement.

"We are delighted to celebrate his immense talent and, more broadly, the cinema of a country deeply engaged with the questioning of our time."

Park's relationship with Cannes dates back to 2004, when "Old Boy" won the Grand Prix. He has since earned multiple honours at the festival, including the Jury Prize for "Thirst" (2009) and Best Director for "Decision to Leave" (2022).

Known for visceral, subversive storytelling, Park is frequently compared to filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, Brian De Palma and David Fincher. He has cited Alfred Hitchcock, Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman and Luchino Visconti as key influences.

His latest film was 2025's "No Other Choice", a satirical take on the pursuit of success in Korean capitalist society. (PTI)

ROBERT DOWNEY JR HEADS TO SEA AS GODPARENT OF DISNEY ADVENTURE



There's a new leading man at sea. Robert Downey Jr has been named godparent of Disney's newest cruise ship, Disney Adventure, ahead of its maiden voyage from Singapore on March 10.

According to CNA, the Academy Award-winning actor described the role as "an honour, a privilege, a blast, a titillating thrill and ... an adventure" — very on-brand for the man who defined Iron Man for a generation.

Disney Adventure is the largest ship in the Disney Cruise Line fleet and will sail from Marina Bay Cruise Centre Singapore, where it is set to homeport for at least five years. Its launch was initially planned for December 2025 but was pushed back due to what Disney called "unexpected delays". Now, all eyes are on its March debut.

If you're wondering what a ship's godparent actually does, it's a maritime tradition. A public figure officially blesses the vessel before it enters service, symbolising protection and good fortune. Disney has form here: Mariah Carey christened the Disney Fantasy in 2012, while Susan Egan did the honours for the Disney Destiny in Florida last November.

Downey Jr's Disney ties go well beyond a ceremonial title. His run as Tony Stark anchored the Marvel Cinematic Universe, culminating in Avengers: Endgame in 2019.

He was named a Disney Legend the same year and is set to return to the franchise as Doctor Doom in Avengers: Doomsday, set to premiere in cinemas on December 18.

For Disney, the casting feels strategic. Josh D'Amato, chairman of Disney Experiences and incoming CEO of The Walt Disney Company, said the ship continues the brand's tradition of bringing its stories to life at sea — and that Downey Jr is a natural fit to front that.

As for the ship itself, expect scale. Disney Adventure can accommodate 6,700 passengers and 2,500 crew, with seven themed areas inspired by Disney franchises.

Marvel Landing is the headline act, featuring Tony Stark's Ironcycle Test Run — billed as the first roller coaster on a Disney Cruise Line ship and the longest at sea.

There's also the open-air Disney Imagination Garden, where "Avengers Assemble!" will bring stunts and special effects to the stage, and the Marvel WEB Workshop at Disney's Oceaneer Club for hands-on, Avengers-themed activities.

Beyond the superhero universe, guests can explore San Fransokyo Street and Toy Story Place, catch Broadway-style shows and choose from more than 20 dining and lounge venues serving international and Asian-inspired dishes. (PTI)

Luke Thompson Confirms Benedict Bridgerton Will Return in Future Seasons

Luke Thompson isn't saying bye to Benedict Bridgerton. Although his character's love story culminated with an engagement to Sophie Gun, played by Yerin Ha, in Part 2, the Bridgerton star doubts the Season 4 finale will be the last fans see of Benedict.

"I doubt it. I doubt it. He's part of the family, so I'm sure he'll still be around as well as, you know, making way for the new siblings, but, yeah, of course, of course," Thompson told Parade in an exclusive interview. "He's part of the family."

While Phoebe Dynevor (Daphne Bridgerton) left the show after Season 2, Luke Newton (Colin Bridgerton) and Jonathan Bailey (Anthony Bridgerton) have continued to appear as their characters, despite their respective stories having already been told.

"I actually love those scenes with Johnny Bailey in Part 2," Thompson said. "I think they're really interesting

scenes because there's that history. There's that sort of four season history behind it. So it's always very interesting to bring back people and have those relationships, because they've got such depth to them, because we've been doing them for five, six years."

After three seasons of inhabiting Benedict and watching siblings find love, the focus shifted to Thompson's character in Season 4. Now that it's over, the West End actor is a "little bit emotional" to have Benedict's story behind him. "Quite a big chunk" of his professional career, Thompson pointed out, had "sort of like been leading up to in some way this moment."

"It is quite strange being on the other side of it," he confessed.

Rather than feeling relieved to have it all done, the Bridgerton star admitted, "I think I'm, yes, a little bit emotional. A little bit like, 'Oh, that was that. Laughs That's what that was.' It's so difficult to comprehend, maybe be-

cause I've spent so long on the one side of it."

Days after Season 4 premiered, it still hadn't fully sunk in for Thompson that he was already on the other side. "I sort of feel like when you are at the center of something like that, it's a bit of a rollercoaster," he said, also comparing it to going down a slide.

"You sort of like end up at the other end of it and you're like, 'Oh, that was it.' It just goes sort of like in a flash. In a way, when I think back to the nine months filming, like it was both nine months, but it also felt like a few weeks in my head," Thompson shared. "You're so engaged for nine months, time just flies away from me."

As for what lies ahead for his character, that's up to the writers. "We shall see," he said.

But, when it comes to the Netflix series taking creative liberties, like gender-swapping Michael Stirling, Thompson believes the show, inspired

by Julia Quinn's novels, has "done a wonderful job of absolutely meeting the fandom."

"I think authenticity or accuracy in any form, I'm always quite suspicious of. I'm suspicious of it when people, to be honest, whine about the idea that Bridgerton isn't historically accurate because I sort of think that's not the point," Thompson said. "It's never been the point. It's a drama. It's not a history lesson."

And as Thompson noted, "that is nothing new," citing William Shakespeare's play A Midsummer Night's Dream as an example. The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art alum said, "[A] Midsummer Night's Dream is set in ancient Greece, but it's all about Elizabethan England. Shakespeare didn't care about that... It's just a mishmash of all sorts of things. So I just think a lot of art isn't that interested in it being accurate. And I believe kind of the same with the books." (Agencies)



Women's ODI series against Australia

India eye improved batting show to stay afloat

HOBART, Feb 26: Outplayed in the series-opener, reigning world champions India would aim for an improved batting effort in the second women's ODI against Australia to keep the three-match rubber alive here on Friday.

Having won the T20 series 2-1, a below-par India started the ODI contests on a disappointing note, losing by six wickets in Brisbane. The Indian women's team has never won a bilateral ODI series against Australia.

Australia have dominated the rivalry against India in this format, having won all 11 of the bilateral ODI series between the two sides, including a 3-0 win in late 2024 and a 2-1 victory in September 2025.

But India will look to draw inspiration from their five-wicket win over Australia in the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup semifinals.

In the lung-opener here, India were not up to the challenge and were bundled out for a paltry 214.

Barring vice-captain Smriti Mandhana (58), skipper Harmanpreet Kaur (53) and Kshvee Gautam (43), no other Indian batter could produce substantial knocks and struggled against Australia's disciplined bowling.

Opening the batting, Pratika Rawal made a duck, while Shafali Verma, Jemimah Rodrigues and Deepti Sharma also failed to rise to the occasion. India would be bank-



ing on the quartet to come good on Friday.

Big-hitting wicket-keeper Richa Ghosh, who made 23, also struggled and the team would hope that she provides the much-needed impetus towards the end.

On the bowling front, left-arm spinner Shree Charani was the star with figures of 2/41 from her nine overs, but she will look for support from the likes of Deepti Sharma (1/49) and Kshvee in the middle overs.

But the onus would be on right-arm fast medium pacers Renuka Singh and Kranti Gaud to inflict the damage early on, which they failed to do in the series-opener.

Trailing in the series, the Indian team management might also be tempted to bring in all-rounders Amanjot Kaur and Sneha Rana.

Senior India all-rounder Deepti hopes to make a strong comeback in the second ODI to draw parity in the series.

"As a team we played but the re-

sult didn't come our way. We will come back stronger in the next game," she said on the eve of the match.

"We will keep it simple, we are not thinking that much. We are focussing on our strengths."

Australia, on the other hand, will be confident of providing the perfect farewell to their skipper Alyssa Healy, who scored a fine 50 at the top in the last match, by sealing the series on Friday.

Healy and Phoebe Litchfield

have been consistent at the top, stitching a half-century stand and they will like to continue in the same vein.

The chase was a cakewalk for Australia with Beth Mooney (76) and Annabel Sutherland (48 not out) finishing the proceedings with an 85-run stand for the fourth wicket.

Australia's bowling too has been spot on with Megan Schutt, Ashleigh Gardner, Alana King, Tahila McGrath and Sophie Molineux all being economical and among wickets.

The trophy for the multi-format series, which includes a lone pink ball Test in Perth, will be decided on points, with two points for each T20 and 50-over victory and four for a Test triumph.

Teams:

India: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smriti Mandhana (vc), Shafali Verma, Renuka Thakur, Sree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma, Kranti Gaud, Sneha Rana, Deepti Sharma, Richa Ghosh (wk), Uma Chetry (wk), Amanjot Kaur, Jemimah Rodrigues, Kshvee Gautam, Harleen Deol, Pratika Rawal.

Australia: Alyssa Healy (c), Sophie Molineux (vc), Darcie Brown, Nicola Carey, Ashleigh Gardner, Kim Garth, Alana King, Phoebe Litchfield, Beth Mooney, Tahila McGrath, Ellyse Perry, Annabel Sutherland, Georgia Voll, Georgia Wareham.

Match starts at 9.20am. (PTI)

Coulibaly's red card costs Monaco

PSG squeezes through to Champions League last 16



PARIS, Feb 26: Mamadou Coulibaly's red card cost his side dearly as Monaco drew 2-2 at defending champion Paris Saint-Germain in the second leg of their Champions League play-off on Wednesday and went out 5-4 on aggregate.

Monaco was leading 1-0 and the aggregate score was level at 3-3 when the 21-year-old midfielder was shown a second yellow card in the 59th minute following a foul on tricky winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia.

PSG captain Marquinhos equalized from the ensuing free kick and then six minutes later Kvaratskhelia put PSG 2-1 up and in command. Jordan Teze's stoppage-time equalizer came too late for Monaco.

"Yes, I think it was (a turning point) as was the (red) card in the first match," Monaco coach Sebastien Pocognoli said.

"For me the (sending off) was not deserved. The two yellow cards happen quickly within five minutes. The second one was harsh."

PSG won the tournament for the first time last year, but prior to that had been eliminated from the last 16 five times in eight years. Until Coulibaly's sending off, PSG had looked jittery and Monaco was beginning to take control of the game.

"We're staring to know them. We beat them (1-0 in the league) and lost and drew against them with 10 players," he said referring to Monaco's red card early in the second half last Tuesday. "We're searching for their weaknesses amid their immense qualities. I think we did that pretty well, we made the most of what they gave us."

But Coulibaly's late tackle on Kvaratskhelia near the touchline turned the momentum PSG's way. Moments later, PSG were level. A quick free kick was played down the right and Marquinhos poked home Desir Doue's cross from close range.

Kvaratskhelia scored from close range after Philipp Kohn parried a 20-meter shot from right back Achraf Hakimi into his path.

Hakimi was playing a day after being ordered to stand trial in a rape case on Tuesday.

Monaco led 2-0 in the first leg last week before capitulating through poor defending, and took the lead again at Parc des Princes when fleet-footed winger Maghnes Aklouché scored just before half-time.

Monaco switched play from right to left and Brazilian left back Caio Henrique passed inside to Coulibaly, who set Aklouché up for a side-footed finish which went in off the left post.

Coulibaly had missed a great chance early in the game when he side-footed over from close range after Aklouché did brilliantly to break into the penalty area down the left and tee him up near the penalty spot.

"I have two sentiments. First, a sense of pride. I told my players that if we could make PSG doubt that would already be a success," Pocognoli said.

"Secondly, I'm a bit frustrated. If we had finished with 11 players, what would have happened?"

PSG coach Luis Enrique acknowledged that his side struggled at times.

"We're not used to teams coming here and playing like we do. It was very difficult in the first half," he said. "But what we have shown this season is our resilience and ability to come back."

PSG faces either five-time champion Barcelona or two-time winner Chelsea in the last 16.

Aklouché shines for Monaco
Aklouché is playing for a place in France's World Cup squad and his performance may well have boosted his chances of getting in.

The skilful 24-year-old midfielder broke into the France team last September and scored against Azerbaijan two months later.

Last season, he scored a stunning overhead kick for Monaco in a Ligue 1 game, rising to meet Vanderson's cross from the right and twisting in mid-air to volley the ball in with his left foot.

Aklouché also played for France when it reached the final at the 2024 Paris Olympics. (AP)

Pelé's 1966 WC jacket draws new fans



SAO PAULO, Feb 26: A jacket worn by football legend Pelé in the 1966 World Cup has become a hit among fans of pop singer Bad Bunny since he borrowed it from a collector's sports merchandise store and used it in his recent concerts in Sao Paulo, in his first performances on Brazilian soil.

Bad Bunny's tribute to the three-time World Cup winner, who died in 2022 at age 82, also included a change in the lyrics of the song MONACO, sung by the Puerto Rican artist as "scoring a goal after Pelé and Maradona" instead of "Messi and Maradona."

Cássio Brandão, the owner of the Alameda Futebol e Cultura store, seeks historical soccer memorabilia and jerseys and has more than 7,000 of them. He owns 115 items that belonged to Pelé and was involved in Bad Bunny's choice for the jacket.

"He took very good care of the piece. It came back only with sweat, wet with sweat, but it was perfect, in the same condition. They were very careful. It returned in the same suitcase," Brandão said.

Pelé's official Instagram later thanked the singer for the tribute, adding that when someone like Bad Bunny honors "the King on Brazilian soil, it means the crown is still shining."

"I think that today, when I see Bad Bunny doing this, it warms my heart to imagine that many kids across Brazil and around the world are going on YouTube trying to learn more about Pelé, watching his goals and better understanding the magnitude and greatness of this figure, who is the greatest football player in history and, to me, the greatest Brazilian who has ever lived," Brandão said. (AP)

With one foot in semis, New Zealand spinners set to test Brook's England

COLOMBO, Feb 26: New Zealand spinners, led by their mercurial skipper Mitchell Santner, will pose some difficult questions to an English line-up spearheaded by the marauding Harry Brook when the two sides clash in a Super Eight game of the T20 World Cup here on Friday.

The match is of greater significance to the Black Caps as they bid to seal a semi-final spot while England are already through to the last four stage after logging two consecutive wins.

The huge 61-run win over Sri Lanka has elevated New Zealand's net run-rate to +3.050 and to ensure that they progress, the Kiwis have to just avoid a heavy defeat.

Pakistan, after their defeat to England, have a net run-rate of -0.461 and would not only need New Zealand to lose badly but also have to beat Sri Lanka by a heavy margin to eclipse the Black Caps' NRR.

New Zealand have shown that they are comfortable playing against as many six spinners in the match versus Sri Lanka. They actually beat the co-hosts in their own game.

While Brook and Will Jacks have both been comfortable against the likes of Saim Ayub, Mohammed Nawaz and Shadab Khan, New Zealanders Santner, Rachin Ravindra, Glenn Phillips, Cole McConechie could prove to be more handy on a slightly tackier Premadasa track compared to Pallekele. Brook is in good form, as demonstrated by his match-winning hundred against Pakistan, and the team would expect veteran Jos Buttler to up his game after having a quiet tournament so far. A good start by Buttler will put England in a strong position.

At the other end, the off-spin of Jacks and the left-arm spin of Liam Dawson could be equally



challenging for the Kiwis.

At Premadasa, anything in the range of 165 to 175 can be considered a winning score if the spinners are in operation.

"You're always confident going into these fixtures, especially when we know what the surface is going to be like, but I think it'd be silly to underestimate England at any point," Black Caps all-rounder Rachin Ravindra said after his match-winning performance against Sri Lanka on Wednesday.

"They're obviously such a quality unit, and they've shown this in bowling, and how well they've been bowling. I mean, they've got world class batters throughout their order. So it's nothing necessarily like that," he added.

But he was well aware that Friday is a new day and it will be a new challenge for the New

Zealand team.

"Obviously, we'll take confidence from today and move on, but realize in two days' time it's a different challenge and hopefully we can be up for it," Rachin said.

Squads:
England: Harry Brook (captain), Jos Buttler (wk), Tom Banton, Jacob Bethell, Phil Salt (wk), Ben Duckett, Sam Curran, Will Jacks, Jamie Overton, Rehan Ahmed, Liam Dawson, Jofra Archer, Adil Rashid, Josh Tongue, Like Wood

New Zealand: Mitchell Santner (captain), Finn Allen, Tim Seifert, Devon Conway, Mark Chapman, Cole McConechie, Daryl Mitchell, James Neesham, Rachin Ravindra, Jacob Duffy, Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Kyle Jamieson, Ish Sodhi.

Match Starts: 7 pm. (PTI)

Silver Streak: CRPF's Renu Danu Shines at Khelo India Winter Games

GULMARG, Feb 26: Born and brought up in hills but oblivious to what snow felt like for the first 24 years of her existence, it took Renu Danu just two years to not just become a skier but also clinch multiple silver medals at the Khelo India Winter Games that ended here on Thursday.

The 26-year-old constable in the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) grew up in Haldwani, Uttarakhnad, where winters were cold but never white.

Her father drives trucks for a living. One of her brothers serves in the Indian Air Force and the

other runs a business.

"They know cricket, football, volleyball. They don't understand what Nordic skiing is. They don't understand what Ski Mountaineering is. They only see videos of me," Renu said with a smile.

In Haldwani, there were no ski tracks, or winter sport academies. But there were grounds, where she ran races and played Kabaddi, building the endurance that would one day carry her across frozen valleys.

In 2021, Renu joined the CRPF as a Constable General Duty and

in 2024, this job took her to Srinagar and then Gulmarg where she saw snow for the first time.

She trained for just one month before competing at the Khelo India Winter Games in 2024. She did not win anything, did not even come close.

But she finished. For most athletes, finishing is routine. For Renu, finishing was defiance.

"I was new. I didn't know the techniques but I completed the races," she recalled.

In 2025, Renu returned stronger and finished fourth in a Nordic event. (PTI)

Atalanta coach celebrates 'unforgettable night' after late drama seals CL comeback

ATLANTA, Feb 26: Two red cards, a VAR overturn and a decisive converted penalty with the last kick of the game. All of that happened in the final seconds of a Champions League thriller between Atalanta and Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday—and it ultimately ensured there will still be Italian representation in Europe's top club competition.

Atalanta advanced to the round of 16 by capping an unlikely turnaround when Lazar Samardzic curled a penalty into the top corner in the eighth minute of stoppage time to clinch a 4-1 win on the night and a 4-3 victory on aggregate.

Dortmund, the runner-up in 2024, had arrived with a 2-0 lead from the first leg.

"Everyone had written us off," said Davide Zappacosta, one of Atalanta's scorers, "but ... we always believe and we never give up."

Still, Atalanta needed a helping hand.

Extra time was looming when a mistake by Dortmund goalkeeper Gregor Kobel allowed Atalanta to launch one last attack, after the allotted three minutes of stoppage time had been played.

A cross into the area was about to reach Nikola Krstovic for a simple header into an empty net when Dortmund defender Remy Bensedine flicked out his boot and caught the Atalanta substitute on the top of his head, drawing blood.

A corner was initially given but after a VAR check, a penalty was awarded, unused Dortmund substitute Nico Schlotterbeck was shown a red card on the bench for complaining. Bensedine was shown a second yellow card for his foul, and Samardzic dispatched his spot kick, sparking joyous scenes inside the stadium in Bergamo. (AP)

Dortmund takes on Bayern but will der Klassiker live up to its name?



BERLIN, Feb 26: Der Klassiker is in danger of not living up to its name.

The growing gulf between Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund means German soccer's showpiece presents more of an opportunity for Bayern to display its superiority than for Dortmund to mount a genuine challenge to the Bavarian powerhouse.

Dortmund hosts Bayern on Saturday for a meeting of the Bundesliga's top two, but it's unlikely to have any impact on the title race. Bayern is already eight points clear and closing in on yet another championship. Bayern has won 12 of the last 13 since Dortmund won back-to-back titles in 2012. This, despite the fact Dortmund is enjoying its best Bundesliga season since that 2012 title.

Bayern and Dortmund have lost only once in the league. In Dortmund's case it was to Bayern, 2-1 in the reverse fixture in Munich

in October. Bayern was surprised at home by Augsburg last month, when an uncharacteristic wobble (Bayern drew the next game at Hamburger SV) allowed Dortmund to close the gap to six points. Then Dortmund drew at Leipzig 2-2 last weekend to give Bayern its eight-point cushion with 11 rounds to go.

Bayern has dropped points only four times, with 19 wins from 23 games. Since Bayern defeated Dortmund 2-1 in the 2013 Champions League final in London, Bayern has won 24 of the teams' 37 meetings across all competitions. Three of Dortmund's nine wins from those encounters were in the unimportant German Supercup, and there were four draws.

Key matchups Der Klassiker will dominate. While Bayern has had a whole week to prepare, Dortmund was in Bergamo, Italy, on Wednesday for a painful Champions League exit to Atalanta.

At the other end of the table, Werder Bremen hosts Heidenheim for a scrap between the bottom two, also on Saturday. Bremen lost to relegation rival St. Pauli last week for its third consecutive defeat under new coach Daniel Thioune and 13th straight without a win. Heidenheim nearly defeated Stuttgart before settling for 3-3. There are five points between the teams. Eintracht Frankfurt hosts Freiburg on Sunday when the home team will hope to continue its resurgence under new coach Albert Riera.

Players to watch Bayern star Harry Kane recently celebrated 500 goals for club and country. He has 28 in 23 Bundesliga appearances this season and is scoring at such a rate that Robert Lewandowski's season record of 41 from 2020-21 is under threat. Dortmund forward Fabio Silva scored his first league goal for the club in his 17th appearance to rescue

the 2-2 draw at Leipzig last week. Saturday would be a good time to score his second. Who is out? Bayern wing back Alphonso Davies is out of der Klassiker with a hamstring injury from the win over Frankfurt.

Leipzig, which visits Hamburger SV on Sunday, said it was without midfielder Xaver Schlager for "a few weeks" due to an adductor injury. Stuttgart midfielder Angelo Stiller's left knee injury from the draw with Heidenheim last weekend is not as bad as initially feared. It's unclear if he'll be fit in time for Sunday's match against Wolfsburg.

Off the field Dortmund has warned its fans of traffic chaos around Saturday's game because of a local transport strike. It continues Dortmund fans' difficulties getting to a game after police measures forced many to abandon their plans to attend Wednesday's Champions League match in Italy. (AP)



Tinsukia Steps into a New Era of Progress



Inauguration and laying of Foundation Stone of various projects

27 February 2026 3 PM

Ambikapur, Sadiya

Chief Guest
Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister, Assam

Shri Pradan Baruah
MP, Lakhimpur HPC

Shri Bolin Chetia
MLA, Sadiya LAC

August Presence

6th Assam Police Commando Battalion
Ambikapur, Sadiya

Project cost
₹160 crore

Inauguration
RCC Bridge
Hospital Chariali - Tupsinga Ghat

Project cost
₹51 crore

New Building of Sadiya Govt HS School
Chapakhowa

Project cost
₹10 crore

Foundation Stone

New Public Utilities

Multipurpose Indoor Stadium
Kakopathar

Project cost
₹25 crore

Utility Infrastructure at Khiring Khiring
Baitho Mandir, Dangori

Project cost
₹25 crore

Development of Bir Lachit Stadium
Chapakhowa

Project cost
₹11 crore

Dr Bhupen Hazarika Statue-cum-Park
Near Bhupen Hazarika Setu

Project cost
₹8 crore



Fillip to Power Scenario

- ▶ **Electrification at Amarpur** Project cost **₹27 crore**
- ▶ **11 KV Line to Amarpur Char Area** Project cost **₹15 crore**
- ▶ **11 KV Line to Himanto Tengapani area** Project cost **₹2 crore**



Upgraded Roads

- ▶ **Islampur to Assam-Arunachal Pradesh BOP, Shantipur** Project cost **₹50 crore**
- ▶ **Kakopathar-Dangori Road via Borali Gaon** Project cost **₹34 crore**

Total Project Cost: 418 crore+