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- Bangla PM Tarique Rahman's cabinet holds first meeting
- Takaichi reelected as Japan's prime minister with goal of pushing to right
- Modi invites Bangladesh PM to visit India, says looking forward to working closely
- Gujarat govt presents ₹4.08 lakh crore Budget; big push to tourism, sports infra

## Fencing of Indo-Bangla border nearing completion: Atul

Over 1.70 lakh illegal foreigners detected under Assam Accord in 40 years, House told



**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Over 1.70 lakh illegal foreigners have been detected in the state so far under provisions of the Assam Accord, while about 31,000 have been pushed back in the last 40 years, the assembly was informed on Wednesday.

Assam Accord Implementation Minister Atul Bora also said that fencing of the India-Bangladesh border in Assam has been nearly completed, barring a 4.35

km stretch objected to by the border guarding force of the adjoining country.

Bora was replying to a question by Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) legislator Ramendra Narayan Kalita on the Assam Accord, signed on August 15, 1985, at the end of a violent six-year-long movement against illegal Bangladeshis.

The pact stated, among other clauses, that the names of all foreigners coming to Assam on or after March 25, 1971, would be detected and deleted from the electoral rolls, with steps taken to deport them. The immigrants who came to the state between 1966 and 1971 will get Indian citizenship.

The minister said that as per provision of Accord, 1,37,152 illegal immigrants who entered the state post-1971 till December 31, 2025, and another 33,485 who came between 1966 and 1971 have been identified and declared as foreigners.

From 1985 to March 12, 2013, 29,663 illegal foreigners were sent back to their country through 'Push Back' process. Between March (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Border talks with neighbouring states on track: Minister

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** The Assam government is in the process of resolving its border disputes with adjoining states, with consensus already reached for some points of difference, the assembly was informed on Wednesday.

Border Protection and Development Minister Atul Bora said that talks are on at the highest level with Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, while the matter was before the Supreme Court in the case of Nagaland.

Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland were carved out of Assam over the decades post-Independence, leading to inter-state border disputes.

Replying to a question by Independent MLA Akhil Gogoi, Bora said, "In order to resolve long-standing border disputes and clear encroached land, the Assam government has made much progress in talks with the neighbouring states."

He said 12 points of differences were identified with Meghalaya, and regional committees were formed on both sides to resolve these. An agreement was signed between the two states on March 29, 2022, for resolving the disputes in six of these areas.

"In Hahim, among the six areas covered by the agreement, boundary pillars have been erected after the demarcation of the border. In the remaining five areas, details will be shared once the border survey is completed," the minister said.

Three regional committees are taking forward the dialogue for resolving the disputes in the remaining six areas with Meghalaya, he added.

Bora said that both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have agreed for joint survey of 243.85 km of the inter-state boundary.

"Survey of India (SOI) has started the survey in the 38.93 km portion falling under Pakke-Kessang district of Arunachal Pradesh and Biswanath of Assam from (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Gaurav dares Himanta for debate on Hinduism

Those who joined BJP became insignificant: Assam Cong chief on Bhupen's plan to switch sides

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi on Wednesday said those who joined the ruling BJP have become "insignificant" in their political journey.

Addressing a press conference here, Gogoi said former state Congress chief Bhupen Kumar Borah, who is likely to switch over to the BJP on February 22, will also meet the same fate.

The deputy leader of the Congress in Lok Sabha also challenged Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to a "face-to-face" debate on Hinduism to find out who is well-versed with the actual ethos of the religion.

"Those who joined the BJP have become insignificant. We can see the example of Sarbananda Sonowal and many others. The

AGP (Sonowal's previous party) is on the verge of extinction. I don't think I need to talk specifically about Bhupen Borah's joining," he said.

Gogoi said that everyone knows what Borah is going to get in the BJP as he is not a bigger leader than Union minister Sonowal.

"Once Borah had sworn in the name of Kamakhya Temple and Bardowa Than that he would never join BJP in his lifetime. Now, he could not even wait a single day and decided to join BJP immediately after resigning from the Congress. What is the trustworthiness of Borah's words?" he asked.

"The main reason Sarma is doing this (wooing Borah into BJP) is to overshadow our campaign on 12,000 bighas of land grab. Today, everyone in Assam

## BJP nation chief sets target for Assam party workers

# Secure 50 pc of votes in every booth: Nitin

**DIBRUGARH, Feb 18:** BJP national president Nitin Nabin on Wednesday set a target for party workers in Assam to secure at least 50 per cent of the votes in every booth in the upcoming assembly elections.

Accusing the Congress of using Assam as a land for "vote bank politics", he said the opposition party is "restless" as the BJP government is "throwing Bangladeshi infiltrators out of the country".

Commencing his two-day Assam visit by addressing party workers at a 'Panna Pramukh Samelan' here, Nabin set a target for the cadre to pocket at least 50 per cent of the votes in every booth in the upcoming assembly elections.

"We are here to score a hat-trick victory. But I am not satisfied with just a simple victory. I give you a target -- bring 50 per cent votes



from all booths. This will sink the Congress boat forever," he added.

The Assam Assembly elections for 126 constituencies are likely to take place in March-April this year. Presently, the ruling BJP's strength in the Assam Assembly is

64, while its allies AGP has nine MLAs, UPPL has seven and BPF has three members.

In the opposition camp, the Congress has 26 MLAs, AIUDF has 15 members and CPI(M) has one MLA. There is an Independent leg-

islator as well.

Nabin further charged the Congress with compromising with national security when it was in power.

"It will be a message to all those Congress leaders who joined hands with foreign powers and played with national security.

"The Congress indulged in vote bank politics in Assam. They had no policy, intention and capability to run the state. But the BJP has all three qualities and we are working with the people," he added.

Nabin claimed that some people are asking why Bangladeshi infiltrators are being expelled from Assam.

"I want to ask them that do they have the liberty to snatch the rights of the Assamese people? Why are they supporting the infiltrators? I think (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Only motive of conducting SR in Assam is to include eligible and exclude ineligible voters: CEC

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar on Wednesday said that the Special Revision (SR) was conducted in Assam with the sole motive of including all eligible and excluding ineligible voters from the electoral rolls.

Addressing a press conference at the end of the 3-day visit to review poll preparedness in Assam, Kumar said the SR was conducted in Assam as it is the only state where the NRC is almost complete.

"According to the law, it is mandatory that electoral rolls revisions are held before elections, and as such, SR (special intensive revision) was conducted in 12 states while SR was held in Assam," he said.

He said that the SR exercise was successful in Assam, with only 500



people from across all districts in the state having submitted appeals for inclusion of their names or exclusion of others.

There were 2.52 crore voters on the day the SR exercise began and the final electoral roll has 2.49

crore voters and this shows the hard work done by the voters, particularly the Booth Level Officers (BLOs), he said.

Kumar said that if an eligible voter was left out of the electoral rolls, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Himanta launches PMS portal

Govt initiates steps to streamline provincialisation of venture institutions

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday launched the Provincialization Management System (PMS) portal, a dedicated digital platform aimed at streamlining the provincialisation process of venture educational institutions and their teaching and non-teaching staff.

The portal, launched at a programme at Lok Sewa Bhawan, will serve as a centralised system for processing and monitoring applications related to provincialisation under the Assam Education (Provincialisation of Services of Teachers and Reorganisation of Educational Institutions) Act, 2017, as amended in 2025.

Officials said the PMS portal will create a comprehensive database of venture schools and colleges as well as personnel associated with them.

Eligible institutions, including

venture LP, UP/ME, high and higher secondary schools and venture degree colleges, can apply online through designated education department websites.

Speaking on the occasion, Sarma said the portal has been developed to facilitate applications from non-provincialised institutions across the state and their staff. He noted that the base year for eligibility has been fixed as institutions established before January 1, 2006.

Applicants will be required to submit recognition or affiliation certificates, land documents, pass percentage records of the last four years and detailed information about teaching and non-teaching staff.

The chief minister also recalled earlier phases of provincialisation, stating that thousands of teachers from primary, secondary and college levels had been brought under

(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 'Humiliated' Bhupen says Gaurav just face of Assam Cong

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Former Assam Congress president Bhupen Borah, who is set to join the BJP, on Wednesday claimed that the opposition party's state unit is no longer under the control of Gaurav Gogoi, and Dhubri MP Rakibul Hussain is its "sole base".

In an interview to PTI-Video, Borah claimed Gogoi, the state Congress president, is just "the mere face of the party now".

"Rakibul Hussain, who had won the Dhubri seat by over 10 lakh votes, is the sole base of the party," he claimed.

Borah said that after he sent his resignation letter to the Congress high command on Monday, Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi called him and spoke at length about the "relationship we shared since 2007".

"He mentioned how we helped the party grow, and he helped me over the years, which is true, but he



did not say a word about my resignation letter," he claimed.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced that Borah would be joining the BJP on February 22, after meeting him at his residence on Tuesday evening.

Borah, who was the chairman of 'Assam Sanmilita Mancha' -- a

front of 16 opposition parties, said that before the bypolls to the five assembly constituencies in 2024, it was decided that a CPI(ML) candidate would contest the Behali seat as the outfit had secured 40,000 votes in the previous election. "I agreed to it, but my proposal was (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Cong walks out of Assam assembly

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** The Congress staged a walkout of the Assam assembly on Wednesday, demanding disqualification of its two MLAs who had joined the Rajiv Dal recently.

As soon as the House assembled, Leader of Opposition Debarati Saikia sought the Speaker's ruling on two notices submitted by the Congress against the two legislators.

Abdur Rashid Mandal and Sherman Ali Ahmed, who were suspended by the Congress earlier, had joined the Akhil Gogoi-led Rajiv Dal.

Both are three-time MLAs from Western Assam constituencies.

Speaker Biswajit Daimary maintained that he just received the notices and would need time to go through them.

The Congress did not expel the two MLAs but expected that the Speaker (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 'Sarvajan Hitay, Sarvajan Sukhay' PM to inaugurate India AI Impact Summit 2026 today

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on Thursday inaugurate the India AI Impact Summit 2026, which aims to position the country as a leader in the field of artificial intelligence and envisions a future where the technology advances humanity and fosters inclusive growth.

Modi will also welcome the leaders of the various participating countries at the summit venue, Bharat Mandapam, this evening, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said in an official statement on Wednesday.

The PM will visit and inaugurate the India AI Impact Summit 2026 on February 19. On the sidelines, he will also hold bilateral meetings with several world leaders attending the summit, it said.

Along with Modi, the opening ceremony will be addressed by



President of France Emmanuel Macron, Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres and various top industry leaders from across the world, it added.

This will be followed by a visit to the India AI Impact Expo 2026 along with other leaders, where

they will visit various country pavilions.

Modi will then participate in the Leaders' Plenary, which will take place around 12 noon onwards. It will bring together Heads of State, ministers and senior representatives from multilateral institutions

to outline national and global priorities on AI, including governance, infrastructure and international cooperation.

Thereafter, he will participate in the CEO roundtable from 5.30 pm onwards. It will convene senior executives from global technology and industry firms with government leadership to discuss investment, research collaboration, supply chains and deployment of AI systems.

The theme of India AI Impact Summit 2026 is 'Sarvajan Hitay, Sarvajan Sukhay' (Welfare for all, happiness of all).

It aims to position India as a leader in the field of AI and envisions a future where AI advances humanity, fosters inclusive growth, and safeguards the planet, the statement said. Seven working groups (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Priyanka Gandhi to visit Assam today

**STAFF REPORTER**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is scheduled to arrive in Assam on Thursday as part of the party's preparations for the upcoming Assembly elections, a senior Congress leader said on Wednesday.

According to the leader, Priyanka Gandhi will begin her visit by offering prayers at the Kamakhya Temple atop Nilachal Hill soon after her arrival in Guwahati.

Following the temple visit, she will proceed to Rajiv Bhawan, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) headquarters.

The senior leader said that Priyanka Gandhi will hold an extensive series of meetings with APCC office-bearers, frontal organisation leaders, heads of various party departments and senior functionaries.

The meetings are scheduled to begin at 11 a.m. on Thursday and are expected to continue till midnight.

"The focus of the meetings will be on organisational restructuring, strengthening booth-level committees, and reviewing the party's preparedness ahead of the 2026 Assam Assembly elections," the leader said.

Priyanka Gandhi is also expected to take stock of the prevailing political situation in the state, particularly in the wake of recent political developments and internal challenges faced by the Congress.

She is likely to interact with leaders from different districts and seek feedback on grassroots-level issues, the leader added.

The visit assumes significance amid growing political churn in Assam's opposition space and reports of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 'Assam govt spent ₹ 452 cr in media ads, hoardings in 5 years'

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** The Assam government has spent around ₹ 400 crore in advertisements through various print, electronic, social and digital media platforms in the last five years, a minister said in the Assembly on Wednesday.

Another ₹ 52 crore has been spent on banners, hoardings, etc since 2021-22, Information and Public Relations Minister Pijush Hazarika said.

Replying to a question by Congress MLA Pradipt Sarkar, the minister said that from June 1, 2021, to January 31, 2026, around ₹ 330.74 crore has been paid for display and classified advertisements in print media.

Over ₹ 69.39 crore was spent for advertisements in electronic media, ₹ 37.8 crore in social media and ₹ 1.57 crore in digital media during the same (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Galgotias asked to leave AI Summit after showing Chinese robot as its own

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Private university Galgotias has been asked to vacate its stall at the AI Impact Summit after a controversy over display of a made-in-China robotic dog as its own innovation.

Following the controversy, IT Secretary S Krishnan said the government does not want any exhibitor to showcase items that are not their own.

"We do not want such exhibits to continue," he said, after organisers asked Galgotias University to vacate its stall.

Later in the day in a statement, Galgotias University apologised for the confusion created at the AI Impact Summit, stating that the person "manning the pavillion was ill-informed".

"She was not aware of the technical origins of the products and in her enthusiasm of being on camera, gave factually incorrect information even though she was not authorised to speak to the press," the university said.

Stating that there was "no institutional intent to misrepresent this innovation," the university said it remains firmly committed to academic integrity, transparency and responsible representations of its work.

It said it has vacated the premises "understanding the organiser's sentiment".

The controversy erupted after Neha Singh, a professor of communications at the University, on Tuesday showed to DD News a robotic dog Orion, saying it "has been de-



veloped by the Centre of Excellence at Galgotias University."

As the video went viral, social media users highlighted that the robot was actually a Uniree Go2, manufactured by China's Uniree Robotics and commonly used in research and education worldwide.

As the episode snowballed into a controversy, the university was asked to vacate the stall.

Facing backlash, both Galgotias and Singh on Wednesday said the robot was not a university creation and that the institution had never claimed otherwise.

IT Secretary Krishnan, however, emphasised that the government would not tolerate exhibits misrepresented as original creations.

"If you mislead... we do not want a controversy (and) so we do not want a controversial agency... whom people believe are exhibiting something which is not theirs," he

sion is focused on student learning and innovation, and that it provides students access to modern technologies to help them gain practical experience and prepare for the future.

"Spreading negativity can harm the morale of students, who are working hard to innovate, learn and build their skills using global technologies," it said.

The university maintained that the exercise was aimed at imparting hands-on AI programming skills using globally available platforms and tools.

On ground, the university's stall at the expo had no display on Wednesday. Some students of the university continued to occupy the stall.

Responding to the controversy, Singh told PTI that, "The controversy happened because things may not have been expressed clearly and the intent may not have been properly understood."

"Regarding the robot dog, we cannot claim that we manufactured it. I have told everyone that we introduced it to our students to inspire them to create something better on their own. Our university contributes to building future leaders by providing cutting-edge technologies in the field of AI, and it will continue to do so."

On reports that the government had asked the university to vacate the expo area, she said, "I do not have any information about that. What I know is that today we are all present here." (PTI)

## Axis Bank, IndiGo launch co-branded credit cards for travel rewards

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Axis Bank and IndiGo have partnered to introduce co-branded credit cards aimed at offering travel and lifestyle benefits to customers.

The two variants — IndiGo Axis Bank Credit Card and IndiGo Axis Bank Premium Credit Card — are designed to reward spending through IndiGo's loyalty programme, IndiGo BluChip.

The cards allow customers to earn BluChips on eligible transactions, with accelerated rewards on purchases made through IndiGo channels.

Both cards provide welcome and renewal benefits, milestone rewards, lounge access, dining offers, entertainment discounts and reduced forex markup depending on the variant.

The standard IndiGo Axis Bank

Credit Card, priced at ₹799 plus GST, is targeted at retail customers and focuses on everyday spending rewards.

The premium variant, priced at ₹5,000 plus GST, is designed for affluent customers seeking enhanced travel privileges.

The cards will be available on both RuPay and Visa networks.

Arnika Dixit, President and Head — Cards, Payments and Wealth Management at Axis Bank, said the partnership aims to combine banking and travel benefits to deliver greater value for both occasional travellers and frequent flyers.

Neetan Chopra, Chief Digital and Information Officer at IndiGo, said the collaboration is intended to enhance the airline's loyalty ecosystem by enabling customers to convert everyday spending into travel rewards.

said.

Abhishek Singh, Additional Secretary in Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, said the intention is not to stifle innovation but it should not be misleading.

The controversy "should not overshadow the kind of effort that the others have put in," he said.

As Galgotias University drew sharp criticism and accusations of misrepresenting imported technology as its own, the Greater Noida-based institution issued a statement saying, "the robotic programming is part of our endeavour to make students learn AI programming and develop and deploy real world skills using globally available tools and resources, given developing AI talent is the need of the hour."

Stating that its faculty and students were "deeply pained by the propaganda campaign" against the institution, the university said its vi-

## Royal Stag unveils 'RS Code' campaign with Rohit Sharma, Paddy Upton

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Seagram's Royal Stag Packaged Drinking Water has launched a new campaign titled the Royal Stag Code of Large (#RS Code), a data-driven initiative developed in partnership with cricketer Rohit Sharma and mental conditioning coach Paddy Upton to decode the principles behind success.

The campaign is based on an analysis of Rohit Sharma's career using data science combined with the brand's "Live It Large" philosophy.

The study identified four core personality traits — Selfless, Driven, Fearless and Inspiring — which the initiative presents as key elements underlying sustained success. According to the company, the campaign aims to move beyond celebrating achievement to helping audiences understand the mindset and behaviours that contribute to it.

Paddy Upton features as a subject-matter expert in the campaign, translating performance insights into practical lessons.

The initiative is being rolled out through a digital-first format that includes teaser content, a talk show featuring Rohit Sharma and Upton hosted by Vikram Sathe, and storytelling elements highlighting real-life moments from Sharma's career. The campaign also includes a surprise appearance by cricketer Suryakumar Yadav.

A key component of the campaign is an AI-powered "RS Code Finder," which allows users to answer a set of questions to generate a personalised success profile.

Participants receive a customised video message from Rohit Sharma based on their responses.

# Google unveils India-US subsea cable, \$30 mn AI science challenge, new skilling initiatives

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Betting big on India's AI potential, Google CEO Sundar Pichai on Wednesday announced new subsea cable routes to boost AI connectivity between India and the US, alongside major skilling initiatives, including training 20 million public servants and supporting 11 million students.

Pichai, who is here to attend the AI Impact Summit 2026, said the recently announced USD 15 billion AI hub at Vizag in Andhra Pradesh will house a gigawatt-scale compute facility and an international subsea cable gateway.

"I believe India is going to have an extraordinary trajectory with AI, and we want to be a partner," he said at a media event held on the sidelines of the Summit.

Pichai highlighted India's extraordinary potential in AI. "AI is the biggest platform shift of our lifetime... for countries like India, AI presents a chance to leapfrog age-old gaps and create new opportunities."

He emphasised applications spanning healthcare, education, climate resilience, and more, and noted India's high adoption of AI-enabled voice and visual search.

He announced the India-America Connect Initiative - a new series of subsea cable routes to enhance AI connectivity between the US, India, and multiple locations across the Southern Hemisphere.

Google also unveiled major skilling programs in India, including the Google AI Professional Certificate for students and early-career professionals, partnerships with Karma Yogi Bharat to train 20 million public servants, and generative AI support for over 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs reaching 11 million students.

"Google has full-stack connectivity in India, and I have never been more excited about the future we are building together," he said.

Pichai earlier in the day met Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"We discussed how Google is helping with its mission to infuse AI at all levels in India to improve health, expand access to information in all languages, support startups, agriculture and so much more," Pichai said in a post on X.

Modi shared pictures of the meeting, saying, "It was a delight to meet Mr. Sundar Pichai on the sidelines of the AI Impact Summit in Delhi. Talked about the work India is doing in AI and how Google can work with our talented students and professionals in this field."



At the media event, Pichai stressed India's potential as a global AI leader, noting the technology's transformative applications - from improving healthcare and education to supporting resilient communities.

"AI is the biggest platform shift of our lifetime, and one of the most powerful tools to solve problems and improve lives at a planetary scale," he said.

To support adoption, Google announced the Google AI Professional Certificate Program in India, targeting students and early-career professionals.

Skilling initiatives will also include a landmark collaboration with Karma Yogi Bharat to empower 20 million public servants across 800 districts in 18 languages, and support for Atal Tinkering Labs to bring generative AI assistance to over 10,000 schools and 11 million students.

On research and scientific innovation, Google launched a USD 30 million AI for Science Impact Challenge to support global researchers using AI to accelerate breakthroughs in quantum computing, climate modeling, and other scientific fields.

Partnerships with local institutions, including IIT Madras and the Indian government through Google DeepMind, aim to broaden access to frontier AI capabilities nationwide.

"AI is the biggest platform shift of our lifetime, and one of the most thoughtful tools to solve problems and improve lives at planetary scale. Whether it's making diseases more detectable and treatable, communities more resilient, or learning more accessible," he said.

"For countries like India, AI presents a chance to leapfrog age-old gaps and create new opportunities."

India happens to be among the places with the greatest adoption and optimism for AI technologies.

"Google has been investing in AI for more than a decade because we see it as the most important way to advance our mission that starts with reimagining the products people use every day. For example, AI is changing the way people use Google search. Google AI Overviews - AI-generated summaries at the top of search results - is one of the most successful launches in search in the past decade, he said.

"And AI mode is now available across 35 new languages and 200 countries and territories. Indian users are among the highest global adopters of voice and visual search," he said.

"In the coming weeks, you'll see an enhanced model that powers search live in real time, voice and camera too, so more people can search what they see in their own language."

AI is also helping to create net new experiences that are truly helpful.

The Gemini app is growing rapidly across the world, and India is among its largest markets. It's available in 10 languages in India.

"Underlying this progress is our world class infrastructure. Last year, we announced a USD 15 billion AI hub in Vizag. This hub will house gigawatt scale computers and a new international subsea cable gateway. When finished, it will bring jobs and the benefits of cutting edge AI people and businesses across India," he said.

Building on this, Google is announcing the India-America connect initiative, which will deliver new subsea cable routes to increase AI connectivity between the US, India and multiple locations across the southern hemisphere.

To take advantage of the opportunities this infrastructure creates, the firm must also invest in people and skilling.

Pichai cited a 2025 government AI Readiness Index to state that India is in the top tier of nations for public sector adoption, driven by its world-leading digital public infrastructure.

"AI is fundamentally shifting the pace of discovery, and I'm excited to see how we can continue accelerating science for real-world impact. From advancing quantum computing to predicting extreme weather, AI is giving us the tools to understand the universe in deeper ways and solve hard problems in science," he said. "Google has a full-stack commitment to India, and has never been more excited about the future we are building together." (PTI)

# AI leadership linked to semiconductor strength, says IESA president at India AI Impact Summit

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** Ashok Chandak, President of the India Electronics and Semiconductor Association (IESA) and SEMI India, said India's growing focus on artificial intelligence is closely tied to its expanding semiconductor and electronics ecosystem, as he addressed the ongoing India AI Impact Summit.

He described the summit, inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as taking place at a crucial time when technology, trade and geopolitics are increasingly interconnected.

Chandak said AI is no longer just a digital transformation tool for India but has become an industrial and strategic priority.

According to him, the summit reflects India's intention to build a trusted and scalable AI ecosystem supported by strong semiconductor capabilities.

He noted that this direction aligns with ongoing international engagements, including India-EU trade discussions and technology partnerships with the United States.

Chandak emphasised that global AI leadership depends heavily on secure supply chains for semiconductors, electronics systems, computing infrastructure and

advanced manufacturing.

He said India is increasingly being viewed internationally as a reliable partner for chip design, innovation and trusted electronics production.

He also highlighted remarks by Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw drawing parallels between India's Semiconductor Mission and a forthcoming "Create in India" mission for AI, saying the country is now applying a similar strategic framework to AI development.

From an industry perspective, Chandak said participation in the summit has been strong, with more than 50 global and Indian leaders from SEMI and IESA member companies taking part as speakers, panelists and partners.

Many firms are also showcasing technologies and engaging in policy and industry dialogues.

He said the growing AI momentum is inseparable from semiconductor growth, as chips, systems and AI algorithms now form interconnected layers of the same innovation ecosystem.

Chandak added that deeper collaboration with global partners in AI and semiconductor manufacturing will be key to building a trusted, innovation-driven and globally connected digital economy for India.

*Contd. from Page 1...*

## Secure 50 pc

CM Himanta Biswa Sarma for ensuring the Assamese people's rights. That's why the entire Congress is restless," he added. Nabin claimed that the process to expel Bangladeshi infiltrators from Assam is having its impact in West Bengal and Kerala.

"There was a time during the Congress regime when the Pakistani flag used to fly in Kashmir. That scenario has changed after the Narendra Modi government came to power," he asserted.

Continuing his tirade against the Congress, Nabin claimed that while BJP is now working to develop the Northeast and Assam, the region was the "land of clashes" during the Congress's tenure and news used to be only about clashes. "We are working to develop Assam, which is the Northeast's gateway. Today's Assam is known as land of opportunity, not clashes. The credit goes to the BJP leadership," he added. (PTI)

## Fencing of Indo

13, 2013, and January 31, 2026, Bora said, 468 were sent back through the 'Deportation' process, of whom 458 were convicted foreigners and 10 declared foreigners.

Another 1,421 illegal foreigners were 'Sent Back' as per orders from the Ministry of Home Affairs between February 1, 2025, and January 31, 2026. Moreover, from December 20, 2025, to January 31, 2026, 51 declared foreigners and one new illegal immigrant have been expelled from the country under the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950.

Regarding fencing of the border, Bora said Assam shares 267.5 km of boundary with Bangladesh in Dhubri, South Salmara-Mankachar, Cachar and Sribhumi districts.

Barbed wire fencing has been erected along 228.541 km, with a stretch of 4.35 km left out in Sribhumi district due to objections by the Border Guard Bangladesh. The rest is the river border between the two countries, which is guarded through a Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System by the Border Security Force (BSF), the minister added.

On the implementation of recommendations of Justice (ret'd) Biplab Sharma committee on Clause 6 of the Assam Accord, Bora said the report was received by the state government on behalf of the Centre, which had formed the panel. Clause 6 deals with various Constitutional safeguards for the people of the state. (PTI)

## Only motive of

the person can submit an application via Form 6 or directly appeal to the District Commissioners.

Replying to a question on whether names of illegal foreigners have made it into the electoral rolls, the CEC said that the BLOs worked very hard to ensure that a correct list was prepared.

Asked about the possibility of holding polls in the state before the Bihu festival from April 13, Kumar said that it is a very important festival of Assam, and all proposals received during the review meetings from stakeholders will be considered while deciding the poll dates.

He said that decisions will be taken in the interest of the voters and urged them to celebrate the "Festival of Democracy" in the same manner as they celebrate Bihu. He said that the ECI has taken several initiatives to ensure the smooth conduct of the polls, and this includes webcasting in all 31,486 polling stations in the states.

Out of the total polling stations, 27,711 were rural, 3,775 urban, 3,716 will be managed by women, and 23 by people with disabilities, he said. There are almost equal male and female voters in the state, while there are 2586 centenarian voters, 66 lakh youth in the age group of and 5.75 lakh new voters have been added.

Kumar said that some other initiatives include ease of voting for senior citizens, for whom polling stations will be ensured on the ground floor, ramps with proper gradient and also a home voting facility.

He said that transport facilities will be made available for the disabled and there will not be more than 1200 voters per polling booth. (PTI)

## Gaurav dares Himanta

who were the most corrupt during our 15-year rule in the state. The contest will be between the old Congress and the new Congress," he said. Speaking about the chief minister terming Borah as the "last Hindu leader" in the Congress, Gogoi said, "I want to challenge Himanta Biswa Sarma to an open debate on Hinduism. Let us see who knows better and has more details about the Hindu religion. Let's see if he dares to accept my challenge. But I know that he will never accept it," the Congress leader said. (PTI)

## Border talks with

February 9 this year. Once the survey is completed, boundary pillars will be erected," he said. Talks are on at various levels for resolving the boundary dispute with Mizoram, while the case between Assam and Nagaland over the border differences is being heard by the Supreme Court.

Responding to another question by BJP legislator Amiya Kumar Bhuyan on disputes with Arunachal Pradesh, the minister said the two states share an 804.1 km boundary, touching eight districts of Assam and 12 of the adjoining state. Both states have constituted 12 regional committees for resolving the border disputes, and are taking steps to resolve these issues based on recommendations of these committees, which have jointly toured the areas and held consultations with stakeholders. (PTI)

## Himanta launches PMS

system since 2011. He announced that the State government has made budgetary provision for a "Gurudakshina" scheme to provide financial assistance to teachers and staff whose services cannot be provincialised.

He also said a preferential marking system will be introduced to help such personnel in recruitment to other government jobs. Calling for cooperation from all stakeholders, Sarma urged institutions and staff to make use of the portal to resolve long-pending issues related to venture education institutions.

Education Minister Ranaj Pegu, who delivered the welcome address, and senior officials of the education department were present at the launch programme.

## 'Humiliated' Bhupen says

not considered by the AICC, and two or three leaders from the state unit also started discussing other names. Finally, a person was named as the Congress candidate who was, till then, not even a member of the party," he said. "The leaders of the other parties in alliance had then told me that if you cannot leave even one seat out of the five, then what is there left to discuss for the 126 seats in the next elections. I then resigned as the head of the coalition on moral grounds, and the Congress candidate lost badly in the election," he added. Borah said he had raised the matter at the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting, but did not get any reply. (PTI)

## Cong walks out

would disqualify them from the assembly, he said. As the Speaker refused to give any ruling on the notices, the Congress staged a walkout for the duration of the Question Hour. (PTI)

## 'Assam govt spent

period. Further, the state government has incurred expenditure of more than ₹ 24.69 crore in banners, hoardings, etc in 2025-26 for publishing various activities.

An amount of more than ₹ 12.82 crore was spent for the same purpose in 2021-22, ₹ 6.68 crore in 2022-23, ₹ 7.86 crore in 2023-24 and ₹ 3.99 crore in 2024-25. (PTI)

## Priyanka Gandhi to

senior leaders leaving the Congress. Party insiders said Priyanka Gandhi's engagement with state leaders is aimed at boosting morale and sending out a message of unity within the organisation.

Sources indicated that discussions may also focus on countering the ruling BJP's political narrative, outreach programmes among youth and minorities, and strengthening coordination between the state unit and the party's central leadership. This will be Priyanka Gandhi's first visit to Assam in recent months. Congress leaders believe her presence will help energise the cadre and provide strategic direction at a crucial juncture.

The Congress leader said further details of the visit, including possible public interactions, would be shared later.

## PM to inaugurate

anchor the summit, aligned to three pillars: People, Planet, and Progress. These groups will work on delivering concrete outcomes demonstrating AI's impact across sectors, it said.

The seven themes are AI for Economic Growth and Social Good; Democratising AI Resources; Inclusion for Social Empowerment; Safe and Trusted AI; Human Capital; Science; Resilience, Innovation and Efficiency.

The summit will bring together more than 500 global AI leaders, including CEOs/CXOs, around 100 CEOs and founders, 150 academicians and researchers, and 400 CTOs, VPs, and philanthropists.

It will also engage over 100 government representatives, including more than 20 heads of state and government, and around 60 ministers and vice ministers. (PTI)

## Dr Devajit Mahanta targets Gaurav Gogoi over leadership, candidate selection BJP alleges lack of internal democracy in Assam Congress

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 18:** No indigenous, self-respecting Assamese or Hindu is in Congress or can remain in Congress. If Gaurav Gogoi, who made a "parachute landing" into politics, were not the son of Tarun Gogoi, would he have become the president of the Pradesh Congress? BJP spokesperson Dr Devajit Mahanta made this remark at a press conference in connection with the resignation of former Assam Pradesh Congress president Bhupen Bora from the Congress.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, which believes in internal democracy, has implemented a voting system through opinion polls, i.e., ballots on 17 and 18 February to prepare a list of probable candidates in every constituency. Based on the votes of concerned voters, a panel of three candidates for each constituency will be finalised through this process. In contrast, Dr Mahanta alleged at the press conference that there is no internal democracy in the Congress party. Due to the resignation of Bhupen Bora, the proposed Assam visit of Priyanka Gandhi, Chairperson of the Congress Screening Committee formed for the Assam Vidhan Sabha elections has already been postponed. Two members of the Congress Screening Committee, Imran Masood and Chotguri Ulaka, toured Upper Assam dis-



tricts including Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, Biswanath and Lakhimpur to prepare the list of probable candidates. During this visit, Gaurav Gogoi also sent Dhubri MP Rakibul Hussain, Barpeta MLA Abdul Rahim and Laharighat MLA Asif Nazir along with them. Dr Mahanta questioned why Gaurav Gogoi, who entered politics through a "parachute landing," appointed Muslim MLAs instead of Hindu MLAs in Upper Assam, which is predominantly inhabited

by indigenous sons of the soil. He further stated that, to display appeasement politics, Gaurav Gogoi had earlier taken Rakibul Hussain along with him during his visit to Majuli.

Replying to a journalist's question regarding Bhupen Bora's possible joining of the BJP, Dr Mahanta said that if Bora had wished, after resigning he could have withdrawn his resignation letter by seeking a "safe seat" such as Dhubri, Dalgou, Baghbar, Mankachar, Dhing or Rupohihat in

front of Gaurav Gogoi, Jitendra Singh and Debabrata Saikia, who had visited his residence. However, based on his 32 years of experience in Congress, Bhupen Bora realised that today's Congress is no longer the APCC he had joined but has transformed into "APCC-R." Bora himself reportedly admitted that to prevent him from contesting in the future from the Bihpuria constituency or the newly formed Ranganadi constituency, certain influential individuals within Congress pressured him to contest the by-election from Samaguri while he was serving as the Pradesh Congress president. Referring to Bora's own statements, Dr Mahanta further said that Bora helplessly mentioned that while he himself was the president of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, he was unaware of which high-ranking leader's blessings led to the granting of a Congress ticket in the Bihali by-election to a person who had not even formally joined the party.

Dr Mahanta also stated at the press conference that after his visit to Pakistan, Gaurav Gogoi, as the president of Assam Congress, has recently been engaging in what he termed "Muslim appeasement" in Assam, thereby insulting indigenous sons of the soil despite being an Ahom himself. Time, he said, will never forgive Gaurav Gogoi.

## Karbi totem pole postal cover released at 52<sup>nd</sup> Karbi Youth Festival

*Post Offices honour tribal heritage through commemorative philatelic release*

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, Feb 18:** To promote and popularise the rich cultural identity of the indigenous Karbi tribe, the major scheduled tribe of Karbi Anglong and in support of the Karbi Riso Nimso Rong Aje - Karbi Youth Festival (KYF), the Post Offices of Nagaon Division, supported by Karbi Cultural Society (KCS), have brought out a postal cover depicting the Karbi totem pole, which symbolises the five major clans of the Karbi tribe.

The postal cover was released during a function held on the inaugural day of the 52nd Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) on February 16 at Taralango, approximately 5 km from Diphu. The chief guest for the inaugural ceremony of the KYF, Chief Executive Member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang, released the Karbi totem pole postal cover in the presence of MP Amarsing Tisso; Superintendent of Post Offices, Nagaon Division, Dilip Kumar Mandal; Karbi Cultural Society president, Humsing Bey and general secretary, Sunil Tokbi and officials of the Nagaon Divisional Office, Jayshree Devi, Manashi Saikia, Kokil Sarma, Amalendu Baruah, Postmaster, Diphu HQ



and Chenimail Loyang from Diphu Head Post Office.

Post Office officials informed that the Karbi totem postal cover will be made available at the ePost Office of the Head Post Office, Sansad Marg, New Delhi and in all Philatelic Bureaus. For wider publicity, the Karbi totem postal cover will be exhibited in philatelic exhibitions.

As it was the inaugural ceremony of the 52nd KYF, more than 5,000 people, including cultural troupes from various regions of the district participating in the festival, witnessed the release of the Karbi

totem pole postal cover. The officials of the Post Office also facilitated the CEM, KAAC, Tuliram Ronghang; MP Amarsing Tisso; KCS president, Humsing Bey and general secretary, Sunil Tokbi; Reception Committee for the 52nd KYF, president Ritesh Enghi and general secretary Richard Tokbi; Karbi traditional king Longsing Ronghang and Dumra Karbi king Holi Sing Ronghang; District Commissioner, Karbi Anglong, Aranyak Saikia and Superintendent of Police, Karbi Anglong, Pushpraj Singh.

## Serdihun Girls High School in West KA struggles amid infrastructure neglect

**HT Correspondent**

**KHERONI, Feb 18:** While the government continues to boast about transforming the education sector, a starkly different and disheartening reality has emerged from the heart of West Karbi Anglong. Reports indicate that Serdihun Girls High School (PVN) in Hawaitpur is currently functioning in conditions that can only be described as deplorable. Established in 1990 originally as a girls' school, it later transitioned into a co-educational institution to serve the local youth. However, decades later, the school has become a symbol of systemic neglect rather than a temple of learning.

The "Mission Schools" and "Shiksha" slogans seem to have missed their mark at Serdihun Girls High School. The institution, which should be a hub for shaping the future of West Karbi Anglong is currently struggling to survive amidst a total collapse of basic infrastructure.

The visual evidence from the campus is staggering. Students are forced to attend classes in dilapidated classrooms where the structures appear on the verge of collapse. The "educational environment" is practically non-existent, replaced by a sense of despair for both the faculty and the pupils.

The list of deficiencies is long and alarming. Broken walls and

leaking roofs make learning impossible, especially during inclement weather. There is a severe shortage of teaching staff, leaving the existing teachers overburdened and the students underserved. The school lacks an adequate number of desks and benches, forcing many to sit in discomfort. Even fundamental tools like functional blackboards are missing or in unusable condition. Perhaps most distressingly, there is no provision for clean drinking water on the premises, posing a direct threat to the health of the children.

The teachers and students have expressed deep frustration, noting that the lack of a proper academic atmosphere is severely hindering the learning process. Despite the school's long history since its founding in 1990, the transition to a co-ed facility has not been met with the necessary provincialisation or departmental support required to sustain it.

Local residents and the school authorities are now questioning whether the authorities are intentionally turning a blind eye to the plight of these rural students. They have urgently called upon the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the State Education Department to intervene before the building and the future of its students crumbles entirely.

## Mira Bhattacharya's two Assamese books released

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 18:** Two Assamese books compiled by veteran writer Mira Bhattacharya, her biography 'Mur Jibon Parikrama' and travelogue 'Khei Manoram Thaubur' were released on Wednesday at Dhalailbil under Sonitpur district.

The programme, organised by the North Jamuguri chapter of Lekhika Samaroh at Durga Mandir was chaired by Rupali Bora, president of Sonitpur Zila Lekhika Samaroh. Child literature expert Dilip Kumar Baruah and emerging writer Minku Kalita unveiled the books. The event also celebrated Bhattacharya's 77th birthday with felicitations by organisers including North Jamuguri Mahila Samabai Samiti, North Jamuguri Mahila Sanskritik Mancha and Durga Mandir authorities.

The programme featured a song by Munni Borthakur, a welcome address by Dilip Bhattacharya and speeches by Dilip Kumar Baruah, Minku Kalita, Kamini Baruah, Narayan Saikia and Jit Bora. Lahari Bora, secretary of the North Jamuguri chapter, conducted the proceedings.

## Dima Hasao CEM holds interactive session



**HT Correspondent**

**HAFLONG, Feb 18:** In a significant outreach initiative aimed at strengthening ties between the administration and the media, Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council, Debolal Gorlosa, held an interactive meeting with accredited journalists of the district at his residence on Wednesday.

The programme was organised on the occasion of handing over goodwill gift packs from the Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma to local journalists. The event was coordinated by the District Information & Public Relations Office (DI&PRO), Haflong.

The meeting commenced with a welcome address by DI&PRO Officer Purabi Phonglo, followed by the felicitation of the CEM and Executive Members of the Council. The gathering provided a platform for open dialogue and constructive engagement between the district administration and members of the press.

During the interaction, CEM Gorlosa highlighted the vital role played by journalists in shaping public opinion and strengthening democracy at the grassroots level. He urged media professionals to uphold responsible journalism and promote constructive narratives reflecting the district's development journey. While reiterating his respect for press freedom, he advised against sensational or misleading re-

porting that could create unnecessary misunderstandings or hinder progress.

The CEM revealed that initiatives for the welfare of local journalists and media houses would be taken up in a phased manner. He further assured that structured support mechanisms would be explored through a dedicated roadmap, with a separate consultative meeting to be convened shortly in coordination with media representatives.

Reaffirming his administration's priorities, Gorlosa reiterated his ambitious vision to transform Dima Hasao into the cleanest hill district in Assam and beyond. Stressing the importance of community participation, he called upon the media fraternity to actively spread awareness about cleanliness, environmental protection and civic responsibility.

He also elaborated on the ongoing multi-sectoral development initiatives in the district. Several key road connectivity projects under the Assam Mala scheme are progressing steadily, aiming to link remote villages with National Highways within the next three years. These projects are expected to significantly enhance transportation, trade and economic opportunities across the hill district.

On the education front, the CEM informed that four Ekalavya Model Residential Schools are currently under construction and are likely to become operational soon. These institutions

are expected to provide quality residential education to students from tribal and rural backgrounds, strengthening human resource development in the region.

Tourism development also featured prominently in the discussion. Gorlosa underscored the immense tourism potential of Dima Hasao and urged journalists to highlight the natural beauty of Laisong and Hangrum, two of the district's most picturesque destinations. Referring to the recently organised Mithun Festival, he described it as a distinctive cultural celebration that has further elevated the district's profile as an emerging tourist hotspot.

Among those present were Addl. I&PR Officer DN Loyang, SDI&PRO Riji Nunisa and journalists Surjo Thaisen, Biplob Deb, LK Hengna, Pankaj Kr Deb, Nirmal Singh, Prasanta Bhattacharjee and Swadeep Hasamsa.

The journalists expressed their gratitude to Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for the goodwill gesture and to CEM Debolal Gorlosa for organising the interactive session and addressing concerns related to the media fraternity.

The meeting concluded on a positive and forward-looking note, reflecting strengthened coordination between the district administration and the press in promoting responsible journalism and sustainable development in Dima Hasao.

## NTPC Bongaigaon launches Disha classes 2026 for youth empowerment

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 18:** NTPC Bongaigaon, Salakati has reinforced its commitment to community development and youth empowerment through the launch of the 2026 batch of Disha Classes, an educational initiative under the employee-led voluntary platform e-VOICE and the CSR wing of the station.

The programme, which has been guiding local youth since 2019, focuses on preparing students from neighbouring communities for competitive examinations at both state and central levels, particularly for recruitment in police and armed forces. The new academic batch was formally commenced on 17 February

2026, with the enthusiastic participation of nearly 45 students from nearby areas. The initiative is being conducted by NTPC employees in association with the CISF Unit and supported by the CSR wing of the power station.

The inaugural session was graced by Anurag Gupta, General Manager (O&M), NTPC Bongaigaon, who highlighted the importance of discipline, punctuality and regularity in shaping the future of aspiring youth.

Amit Kumar Asthana, Head of HR, NTPC Bongaigaon, shared insights on the broader vision of NTPC as a responsible corporate citizen committed to nurturing the potential of local youth.

## Ali Aye Ligang celebrated with great fervour

*Missing community observes ancestral agriculture-based festival with traditional rituals and festivities*

**HT Correspondent**

**MARGHERITA, Feb 18:** The sky and air of Jagun resonate with the beats of gumrah and the sweet melodies of oinitam, Ali Aye Ligang is celebrated with great joy and enthusiasm on the first Wednesday in phagun month.

Across the state, the Missing community's ancestral agriculture-based festival 'Ali Aye Ligang' is being observed with fervour.

In the entire state, as well as in several villages including Jagun 2 No Kangkan, Lakla, Lisang and others under the 83rd Margherita Assembly Constituency in Tinsukia district, this sacred festival is being celebrated on Wednesday in an atmosphere of great excitement and bustle.

Wearing traditional Ribi-Gacheng and Mishing Galug attire, young boys and girls, along with people of all ages from children to the elderly come out to the festival grounds.

The local people offer prayers and service to Mother Earth while reverently remembering their ancestors with devotion.

The resounding beats of the drum and the melodious tunes of Oinitam are now filling the 2 No Kangkan area of Jagun

with vibrant energy.

By preserving tradition and binding together with the thread of unity, this sacred festival of the Missing community is bringing a message of harmony to the region.

The fragrance of Mishing culture has permeated the entire region, while tribal dances and songs are reviving a rare tradition in lively spirit.

"Gumrah" likely refers to a traditional Mising community dance or drum rhythm, "Oinitam" to folk songs, "Ribi-gacheng" and "Galug" to traditional attire and "Ali Aye Ligang" also spelled Ali-Ai-Ligang or Ali Aye Ligang is the Mising community agricultural festival marking the ceremonial start of sowing seeds, especially paddy, observed on the first Wednesday of Phagun.

**Our Tezpur Correspondent adds:** Along with the rest of the state, people of the Missing community in Tezpur celebrated Ali Aye Ligang, the traditional agricultural festival of the community, with great enthusiasm and cultural pride on Wednesday at the Murong Ghar in Dolabari here under the initiative of the Tezpur Mising Kebang.

Observed on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month of Phagun, the day-



long programme began with a community cleanliness drive, followed by Pura:ra: Naam, traditional games and Smriti Tarpan. Floral tributes were paid to pioneering Mising leader Taburam Taid, cultural icon Bhupen Hazarika and Zubeen Garg by chief advisers Dinan Pegu and Dr Rajiv Doley of Tezpur University along with office-bearers of the Kebang.

The central religious ritual of the festival, Ligang Lrigad, was formally inaugurated by the vice-president of the Tezpur Mising Kebang, Migang Dipen Kaman. The Murong Ghar courtyard resonated with Oinitom performances, traditional songs and dances, as members of the community participated enthusiastically in the age-old agricultural rites marking the sowing season. A Gumrag Ch-man (dance sequence) was later presented under the leadership of

Chandrakanta Doley, Rajkumar Pegu, Rabin Doley, Ranju Kutum, Rekha Kumbang, Puspapala Doley and Jamuna Pegu. This was followed by a cultural evening featuring a chorus of Mising songs and a felicitation programme for students.

The event was attended by invited guests including Dr Palashmani Saikia, Principal of Darrang College and Bharat Mili, vice-president of the Mising Cultural Society. Bharat Mili elaborated on the mythology and significance of Ali-Aye-Ligang. Addressing the gathering, Dr Saikia also felicitated noted nature-lover and academic Haren Morang of Darrang College for bringing laurels to Tezpur by securing a top position at the National Masters Badminton Championship.

The celebrations concluded with vibrant performances of Gumrag, Oinitom and other traditional dances by youths and elders alike, followed by the serving of customary Mising cuisine to all guests, reflecting the community's rich cultural heritage and spirit of hospitality.

**Our Demow Correspondent adds:** Along with the rest of the State, Ali-Aye-Ligang was celebrated in Borguri

Mising Gaon near Demow on Wednesday. Ali-Aye-Ligang, the agriculture-based festival of the Missing Community is celebrated on the first Wednesday of the Fagun month. On the occasion, the women wore traditional dresses and performed the Mising dance. Traditional food items of the Missing Community were made on the occasion of Ali-Aye-Ligang.

**Our Sivasagar Correspondent adds:** On the occasion of the beginning of the Ahu cultivation, the Missing Community in Majorbari, Ligoribari and Aphala observed the Ali aye ligang festival with traditional gaiety.

In Majorbari, Mising Development Council member Mutkush Mili, Celebration Committee president Sanjay Mili, religious head Rocky Pangang and social worker Santiram Pangang spoke on the importance of the traditional folk culture of Ali aye ligang. Mising youths performed Mising soman and gumrag.

In Aphala village, the agricultural festival drew a large crowd. After the traditional dance, feast with po:ro a:pong and religious performance of seed sowing, the celebration committee erected the lie-khuta for the Po:rag festival in the same place.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*I didn't think; I experimented -Anthony Burgess*

## Acquisition of 114 Rafale fighter jets

There is little to be excited about the defence ministry's latest clearance for the acquisition of 114 Rafale fighter jets from France at a huge cost of ₹ 3.25 lakh crore (nearly \$40 billion), branded as 'mother of all defence deals'. It is a matter of major concern that even 78 years after the country's independence, India, like Ukraine, has to rely on imported arms to defend its sovereignty — Rafale from France, Poseidon jets from the US, and S-400 Triumf from Russia among several others. Even in areas where India is manufacturing defence equipment with foreign collaborations, the country remains highly dependent on overseas subsystems. While the platform such as aircraft and ships might be assembled in India, critical high-end components are still imported making the supply chain vulnerable. Over the years, India has made multiple Rafale deals. They include 36 jets worth around ₹ 7.87 billion (₹ 58,891 Crore) and a more recent one for 26 naval variants for the Indian Navy costing ₹ 64,000 crore. India cancelled a deal to buy 126 Rafale fighters from France in 2015 after years of negotiations over quality assurance issues with Indian-manufactured jets.

In 1950, neighbouring China's economy and defence were much weaker than India's. Today, China boasts itself as one of the world's most self-propelled lethal military powers, after the US and Russia. Thanks to India's import happy political rulers, the country continues to face major gaps in developing advanced military technology, specifically jet engines, active electronically scanned array (AESA) radars, missile seekers, and stealth technology. India's defence R&D spending is abysmally low compared to peers, with the DRDO receiving only 3.94 percent of the total defence budget in 2025-26.

Lengthy procurement cycles and inordinate delays in R&D projects have been hampering modernization. The LCA Tejas program took over two decades from approval to prototype. The programme was initiated as early as in 1984 to develop indigenous, lightweight, multirole fighter jets to replace MiG-21 fleet. India also lacks sufficient, world-class testing infrastructure for advanced technology like UAVs, electronic warfare, and electro-optics slowing down the development and certification of indigenous products. With about 80 percent of India's defence equipment being of Russian origin, Russia remains a cornerstone of the country's defence capabilities. Russia came into the picture when western military powers practically refused to supply high-end arms to India.

The Indo-Russian defence partnership spans, evolving from a pure buyer-seller relationship to joint development and production. Major lethal Russian platforms in India include Sukhoi Su-30MKI (made in India with Russian help), T-90S "Bhishma" and T-22 main battle tanks, BrahMos cruise missile, Russian origin submarines, including leased nuclear-powered vessels (Akula-II), and aircraft carriers like INS Vikramaditya and widely used Mi-17 transport helicopters.

# Technical education and self-reliant Assam

A close look at the depth of Assam's current unemployment problem reveals a massive gap between the prevailing education system in our society and productivity. In the present time, merely acquiring a graduate or postgraduate degree and then waiting year after year for a government job is pushing the state's economic future into greater darkness. A mindset has taken root in Assam where only bookish knowledge is considered everything, while practical, hands-on technical skills essential for real life are sidelined. When we observe our market, we see that for every small or large technical task required in daily life, we have to depend on workers coming from outside the state. From constructing a house to repairing water pipes, fixing electrical appliances, or servicing a vehicle — in every field, the absence of local skilled people is evident. The sole reason for this is our indifference towards technical education and the narrow mindset that regards this field as meant only for a particular class.

A highly educated young person considers sitting idle at home while unemployed a matter of pride, yet feels hesitant to build a career as a mechanic or electrician. This kind of mentality has crippled Assam economically. If the concept of a self-reliant Assam is not to remain confined to speeches alone but to be implemented in reality, then first of all, our education system must be made technical and vocation-oriented. Technical education not only teaches a person to perform work but also shapes him into a productive citizen who can earn his livelihood independently without depending on others.

In Assam's current economic context, one major reason behind the lack of expansion of technical education is the strange disdain or reluctance in society towards "manual labour." From childhood, we educate our boys and girls in such a way that they must somehow secure a job. This notion has so captivated the rising generation that they cannot even think of becoming self-reliant by learning hands-on work. Yet the real picture is exactly the opposite. The struggle a simple graduate undergoes to obtain a private-sector job paying ten to fifteen thousand rupees is far greater than the monthly earnings of a skilled carpenter or a modern mobile technician. But in the name of social prestige, we are pushing our youth towards an uncertain direction where they possess degrees but lack the ability to work with their hands.

It is a harsh truth that one of the main reasons thousands of factories or industries have not been established in Assam is the shortage of skilled local human resources. If an entrepreneur wishes to start

a small enterprise, he has to struggle to find the required technicians and ultimately ends up hiring people from other states at higher costs. As a result, the state's money flows outward and the local economy weakens. To achieve self-reliance, we need an environment where a mechanic or artisan receives the same social respect as a teacher or officer. Until we learn to honour work as work, our boys and girls will not develop interest in technical education, and Assam will never become self-reliant.

Assam's rural economy is based on agriculture, but even this agricultural sector has become stagnant today due to the lack of modern technical knowledge. Our farmers still follow old methods of cultivation, resulting in very low profits compared to production costs. If technical skills were integrated with agricultural education, every village would have produced young people capable of operating and repairing modern agricultural machinery. If an educated youth were to engage in fish farming or animal husbandry using modern methods, he would not remain merely a labourer but could emerge as an agricultural entrepreneur. However, our educational institutions often project agriculture as a low-status occupation, with the result that an educated farmer's son prefers to leave his fields and take up a peon's job in the city.

Assam possesses immense potential in the food processing sector, which remains completely utilised solely due to the absence of technical knowledge. To produce high-quality products from our locally

## DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

grown fruits, vegetables, and other items and sell them in the global market, we need specialised technical training. Rather than merely waiting for government assistance, if our youth could value the resources available in their villages through technical skills, a radical transformation in Assam's rural economy would be possible. The first step towards self-reliance is the optimum utilisation of local resources, and that is achievable only through technical knowledge. We now need a revolution where, alongside the plough and hoe, a strong skilled workforce capable of operating modern machines emerges. A deep and impartial review of the current infrastructure and curriculum of the state's ITIs (Industrial Training Institutes) and polytechnic institutions is urgently required. It is observed that most government technical institutions still use outdated machinery that no longer aligns with the needs of today's industry. The methods the student learns in the institution become obsolete in the modern market. As

a result, even after obtaining a degree or diploma, a youth is often considered "unskilled" when seeking employment in a company. The primary objective of technical education should be practical, hands-on training. One cannot become a skilled technician merely by reading books or memorising theory. These institutions must be directly linked with industry so that students gain real-world work experience while studying.

Assam has large sectors such as tea, oil, and gas industries, yet a significant portion of the skilled technicians required for these sectors comes from outside. The main reason our local students cannot occupy those positions is that the quality of our technical education falls short of current market demands. Rather than merely constructing new buildings and opening institutions, the government must monitor what kind of training is being provided and how effectively it makes students self-reliant. The day our technical education students complete their studies and gain the courage to start their own workshop or enterprise without expecting a job, only then can we say our education system has succeeded.

In the current digital age, the concept of technical education is no longer limited to hardware or mechanical work; it has expanded to include software and digital skills. In a state like Assam, where geographical location poses some difficulties for establishing large industries, digital technical education can open a new path to self-reliance. Skills such as coding, graphic designing, data entry, e-commerce management, and others require no large office — only a computer and internet connection enable one to work for clients anywhere in the world from home. Unfortunately, for the youth in our rural areas, the internet has come to mean only entertainment through social media. There is a lack of structured training to teach them how to use these digital tools as earning instruments.

At a time when southern Indian states have brought about a revolution in the IT sector, we are still searching newspaper advertisements for government job notifications. Digital technical education can connect our youth with the global market. To build a self-reliant Assam, we need a skilled workforce that not only uses mobile phones but can also troubleshoot problems within them or develop new applications to solve local issues. For this, a strong "digital skilling" campaign is required at the government level — one that emphasises genuine skill enhancement rather than merely distributing certificates. Fostering an entrepreneurial mindset

among Assam's educated unemployed is the most effective way to reach the goal of a self-reliant Assam. We must remember that no government can provide government jobs to every educated unemployed person. Therefore, our education system should shape students not merely as job seekers but as job creators. If a youth with technical education starts a small enterprise, he can provide employment to ten others. But for this, a conducive environment is needed in the state. When a technically skilled youth wishes to start his own venture, he often faces problems of capital. Complexities in obtaining bank loans and administrative red tape cause many creative ideas to end before they begin. To build a self-reliant Assam, the government must create a system where technically knowledgeable youth can access loans easily and at low interest rates.

Merely organising fairs or events and talking about self-reliance will not suffice; real support must be provided to a small artisan to advance his business. Assam has vast resources of bamboo and cane; if combined with modern technical design, they could become a major exportable product. If our weavers receive training in modern textile technology alongside their traditional knowledge, Assamese fabrics could dominate the world market. In this entire process, technical education serves as the connecting bridge.

In conclusion, technical education and self-reliance are two sides of the same coin. The all-round development of a state can never be achieved through bookish knowledge alone; it requires a strong technical backbone. The day Assam's younger generation abandons the obsession with government jobs and leaps into the workforce with confidence in their own skills, that day Assam will truly advance on the path of progress. Technical education instills self-respect and self-reliance in people. Ending the class division of work in our society and learning to respect every profession will be our greatest achievement. To build a self-reliant Assam, we need a practical education revolution that prepares students for the battle of life. Being a skilled artisan living with dignity is far more logical than carrying the burden of poverty with only a degree. Only through proper implementation of government schemes and a change in social mindset can technical education give Assam a new dimension. If we are to face future challenges and move forward, there is no alternative to technical education. This is the true key to self-reliance, and through it alone can we turn the dream of a prosperous Assam into reality. (The author is the recipient of the 'Yuba Lekhak Sanman - 2025' from the Government of Assam)

## Shivaji Maharaj

# The eternal flame of Swarajya and the blueprint for a resurgent India

By: Lalit Garg

February 19 is a day of profound pride in Indian history, as we commemorate the birth anniversary of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. This is not merely the remembrance of a birth date; it is the celebration of Indian identity, self-respect, and a remarkable chapter of cultural resurgence that lit the lamp of Swarajya amid the darkness of subjugation. In the seventeenth century, when a large part of India lay under Mughal rule — particularly the rigid authority of Aurangzeb — a young warrior arose from the Sahyadri ranges and declared that "Hindavi Swarajya" was not just a dream, but a solemn resolve — and he transformed that resolve into reality.

Shivaji Maharaj was born in 1630 at the fort of Shivneri. Contrary to popular belief, his name was derived not from Lord Shiva but from the goddess Shivai — an indication that the spirit of strength and courage was embedded in his life from the very beginning. His mother, Rajmata Jijabai, nurtured him with the ideals of dharma, righteousness, and nationhood through the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Puranas. Under the guidance of Dadoji Konddev, he received balanced training in both scripture and warfare. This equilibrium later became the hallmark of his personality — he was not only a master of the sword but also an exemplar of strategy and statesmanship.

Shivaji Maharaj's greatest contribution was the establishment of a sovereign Hindu polity, which he termed "Hindavi Swarajya." This was not a state for any single sect, but a symbol of freedom and dignity for the people of India. Beginning with small forts, he gradually built an organized Maratha power. Forts such as Torna, Raigad, and Pratapgad were not mere stone structures; they were sentinels of Swarajya. His mastery of guerrilla warfare was extraordinary. Mughal commanders mockingly referred to him as a "mountain rat," yet that very strategy became their greatest weakness. He possessed the rare ability to convert geography into strength — swift attacks, surprise offensives, and secure retreats formed the core of his military doctrine.

His valor reached its pinnacle when he openly challenged the vast imperial might of Aurangzeb. His daring escape from captivity in Agra was not just a personal triumph but a decisive blow to Mughal arrogance. Thereafter, in 1674, he was formally crowned at Raigad and assumed the title of "Chhatrapati." This was not merely a political event; it marked a cultural

renaissance, as for the first time in centuries, a Hindu king was consecrated according to Vedic rites. Equally remarkable was his system of governance. He established the Ashtapradhan Council, appointing ministers for various departments. Transparency, justice, and public welfare formed the foundation of his administration. The land revenue system was reformed to prevent exploitation of farmers. Protection of women's dignity was a cardinal principle — women captured in war were sent home with honor. Religious tolerance was central to his rule; Muslim officers held significant positions in his army and administration. He strictly prohibited damage to mosques or places of worship. Thus, his Hindu Swarajya was not narrow or exclusionary, but liberal and inclusive.



Shivaji Maharaj was among the earliest Indian rulers to recognize the importance of maritime power. He built a formidable navy and secured the Konkan coast against foreign aggressors, particularly the Portuguese and the Siddis. This foresight demonstrated that he was not confined to immediate conflicts but possessed the vision to anticipate future challenges. His sacrifice for Indian culture and identity was unparalleled. Renouncing a life of comfort, he chose the path of relentless struggle. Amid continuous wars, conspiracies, and trials, he upheld the primacy of national duty. His life affirms that Swarajya is not merely political independence, but also cultural self-respect. He instilled in the people the belief that foreign domination was not invincible and that organized effort could secure freedom.

In the contemporary context, it is natural to ask how relevant Shivaji's ideals remain in modern India. As India strengthens its global position, issues of national security, cultural resurgence, and good governance have returned to the forefront. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, emphasis has been placed on self-reliance, a robust defense policy, and preservation of cultural heritage. While historical contexts

differ, certain parallels may be observed. Shivaji relied on indigenous military strength and built his state through local resources. Modern India's push for self-reliance in defense production and economic empowerment reflects a similar spirit in contemporary form. Shivaji secured his frontiers through forts and naval power; today, India safeguards its borders through advanced technology and strategic partnerships. His governance prioritized public welfare and accountability; similarly, initiatives such as digital transparency, direct benefit transfers, and anti-corruption measures echo that ideal.

From the standpoint of cultural renaissance, parallels can also be drawn. Shivaji revitalized Hindu traditions and symbols, instilling self-confidence in the masses. Today, renewed attention to the preservation of heritage sites, pilgrimage centers, and historical legacy seeks to foster a similar sense of pride. The difference lies in the nature of the struggle — Shivaji's was a direct military confrontation, whereas modern India navigates global competition and diplomatic complexities. Yet, while making such comparisons, it must be remembered that Shivaji's era was shaped by entirely different political and social realities. He was the founder of an emerging

Swarajya; contemporary India is an established democratic republic. Therefore, these similarities should be viewed as sources of inspiration rather than exact equivalence. Shivaji's greatest lessons — courage, organization, foresight, and the primacy of national interest — remain timeless.

The birth anniversary of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj reminds us that nation-building is achieved not only through the sword but also through policy, morality, and public trust. He demonstrated that even with limited resources, resolute leadership can make the impossible possible. Today, the need is not merely to celebrate his legacy, but to embody his ideals in our conduct and national life. Indian identity does not signify hostility toward others; it signifies respect for one's own civilizational self. That is the enduring message of Shivaji Maharaj's life. On his 394th birth anniversary, we bow in reverence and resolve to transform the spirit of Swarajya — once ignited in the valleys of the Sahyadris — into the driving force of modern India's progress and global leadership. That alone would be a true tribute to his immortal legacy. (The author is a journalist, writer and columnist)

# The spearheads of Hindu revival

By: Er.Rajesh

First foreign invasion to affect country's geographical unit was mounted by Mir Qasim in 638 A.D. on Sindh, when King Dahir Sen ruled it. Taking sea-rout his military landed on the desert adjoining the sea. The ministers of Dahir advised him to cut the supply of food and water to enemy, leaving them dead due to hunger and thirst before engaging into war. But this was the time when deceptive tactics in the Indian art of warfare was held in contempt. To Dahir this advice seemed to be in contravention of 'Kshatriya-dharma' [ethics of warfare] and therefore he declined. With his military Qasim consequently got to reach as close as to the fort of Deval near Karachi. And, contrary to Dahir, Kshatriya-dharma being alien to him and his lot, first thing Qasim did was to mastermind the kidnapping of three children of the Principal guard of the gate of the fort. Without wait Qasim got the head of one of the children chopped off, sending the message what could be done with two other children if his order was not followed. Helpless, guard yielded to open the secret gate of the fort. Subsequently, in fierce battle Dahir got defeated, and thus Sindh went in the hand of foreigners.

Later, the next invasion that country witnessed was in 980 AD. This time the rout the foreigners chose passed through Uppanistan [today's Afghanistan], and their commander was Subuktgin, the sultan of Gazni. Getting hint from the spies that in Indian tradition the war was not fought in the night, he sent an emissary and first got it settled with Indian king, Jaipal Shaiya, that war would be initiated next morning. However, in sheer violation of agreement he unleashed the attack upon the Indian soldiers in the dead of the night, when in deep slumber and unarmed they were! Defeated in this one-sided battle, Jaipal had to shift his capital from Kuba [Kabul] to first at Udabandpur, and then finally at Lavkushpur [Lahore]. Fury of invasions did not come to close even though. Where Subuktgin

ended the battle, his more barbaric and cunning son, Mehmood Gazni, took it forward from there. Using his ancestor's most reliable weapon of 'deception' he dealt defeat on Jaipal Shaiya's descendant Anandpal and then Trilochanpal Shaiya, breaking Afghanistan and Punjab away from India and, subsequently, merging them into his empire.

Making no attack on the enemy fleeing the battle from his back; granting pardon to the enemy fallen in the hand; raising not the arms on an unarmed adversary; backtracking not from the promise once given, come what may; unconcerned to victory or defeat in the battlefield, sacrificing the life in the battlefield being held as a matter of valour and glory — such was the exclusivist outlook to the human virtues which Indian kings could not part with, failing to discern the new kind of barbaric and cunning enemies of jihadist mindset beyond the border, leaving the country succumbed to have suffered the ignominy of slavery and of secession of its territories one by one in their hands. But during this period for the first time one that in true sense discerned the deceptive tactics of invaders and left them behind in their own game and successfully founded the downfall of Mughals, he was the great Maratha Hindu king Chhatrapati Shivaji. It was the time when Hindu kings and vassals had the lone priority of somehow saving their respective territories by appeasing the foreign invaders. Initiating the attack on them was such a thing they couldn't even think of. But as Shivaji laid the foundation of Maratha power he opened the war-front against Mughals by launching fierce attacks, tearing into their military capabilities and empire as a whole. Utterly inferior since he had been before Muslim rulers in strength and resources both, the strategy he adopted earned the glory in the anal of history as 'Gorilla-warfare'. Using dexterously the mazes of terrains of Sahyadri mountain, forming a force of its tribal inhabitants-Mavlays, he dealt one after other setback to the enemies. Gradually he gained upper hand; and as his strength increased he began

to attack openly on Mughals. And with the shattering defeats dealt upon Mughals led by Aurangzeb in the open battle of Salher in 1727, Maratha warriors even forced the opponents to adopt defensive stance! Away from the capital for 1 1/2 years, Shivaji then successfully fulfilled the famous 'Karnataka-mission'. With his able administration and planned strategy he won one after other battles, and founded a separate sovereign Maratha state extending more than 700 miles down to southern part of the country, famous Jinji fort near Chennai being the tip of it.

Emulating the ways shown by Shivaji, later Maratha grew so formidable a force that Aurangzeb, frustrated, even had to propose a truce with them. But as of now it was too late; his proposal met with outright rejection by Maratha power. And from this shock of contempt, which he could never have expected, he could gain redemption only when death embraced him. And, particularly after 1740, when Mughals got weakened during the reign of Mohammad Shah the real power of the country had shrunk into the hands of Maratha. During 1755-1756 under Raghunath Rao and Malhar Rao Holkar they dealt decisive defeat to Rohillas and Afghans and succeeded in liberating Punjab after 800 years from foreigners. And, replacing Muslim rulers, at one point of time the Hindu Maratha dynasts had rooted their rules firmly extending from Attock (Peshawar) of north down to south to Tanjavur (Tamilnadu); and from entire Gujarat in the west to Hugli River (Bengal) in the east. Rising above the caste-creed-regional pride, the Hindu community should keep in mind that their existence today is the result of complete decimation of Mughals under Aurangzeb by their brave ancestors in the past.

In this great war Aurangzeb had put in all the resources of his vast empire from Bharuch to Bengal and from Kabul to the threshold of south India. This was a fight between a small 'lamp' and 'storm'. But by the dint of their courage and prowess in battlefield Hindu Marathas successfully turned the result in their favour.

# No option to opt out: The environmental impact of mandatory AI integration

By: Krishna Vohra

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (Gen-AI) has cascaded into the integration of large language models (LLMs) and AI chatbots onto most digital platforms. Variations of Gen-AI models began to appear on every app, website, and device. LLMs, such as the now ubiquitous Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) models, are trained meticulously on real human data and powered by data centres that are proven to be increasingly damaging to the environment. This advancement has largely occurred without the consent of those most adversely impacted, raising serious ethical questions and concerns about climate-related impacts.

The most pressing data privacy concerns have already been infringed upon. Tech giants trained their AI models by 'scraping' user data without their knowledge. Reversing this and ethically retraining AI models is highly unlikely; it would be an expensive, energy-intensive process that tech companies are unlikely to undertake. Moreover, the environmental cost of AI remains a growing concern. Data centres not only require massive amounts of energy but also use water—often directly from local drinking water sources—to cool their Graphics Processing Unit (GPU) clusters. Recently released research by Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, found that the AI boom used as much water as all bottled water consumed globally in 2025.

A substantial share of energy and water usage occurs during the intensive training process of Gen-AI models such as GPT-5. The billions of queries processed daily by Gen-AI models have their own ecological costs, particularly in relation to energy, water consumption, and the generation of e-waste. The ecological toll of each query is difficult to quantify; shorter, text-based queries consume substantially fewer resources than image or video generation, both of which are becoming increasingly common. New

video generation models, such as NanoBanana 3, are further expected to expand these resource-intensive tasks. Cumulatively, the ecological costs are massive. The International Energy Agency (IEA) highlighted this in a 2025 report on the energy demands of the AI boom. Assessing the impacts of using drinkable water to cool large-scale GPU clusters is even more challenging. That said, the early-stage impact on local communities hosting data centres is deeply concerning, in light of the planned expansion of data centres on a massive scale.

## Understanding the Backlash Against Forced AI Integration

Data and privacy concerns aside, the ecological costs of the data centre boom, exacerbated by the widespread use of chatbots and AI-generated media, have led to an increasing backlash against their creeping, unquestioned integration. Protests against thirsty data centres for AI expansion have taken place across the world, from Chile, India, and Uruguay to Spain and parts of the US. Today, nearly every widely used application, website, and modern electronic device likely features some variation of an AI chatbot or assistant. Social media is flooded with fake images and videos, as AI-generated content proliferates through every medium, making it nearly impossible to distinguish between fiction and reality. At the root of the backlash is the forced and abrupt nature of this integration, which leaves users with little to no choice to disable or opt out of AI usage.

Every Google search, by default, automatically generates an AI overview, even when the more intensive 'AI mode' is disabled. These overviews are generated by Google's Gemini AI and exponentially increase processing requirements. While users can include "ai" in their search query to skip the generation of this overview, little effort has been made to directly inform users of this option. Many have questioned why this feature is active when the process to generate an AI overview relies on energy-intensive data centres



that often consume clean drinking water for cooling. Regulators should perhaps ask why users are not required to include "+ai" in their query instead, if they truly believe an AI-generated overview is necessary.

The transformation of digital norms in something as straightforward as an internet search has irrevocably altered the online information economy. The aim is explicitly to "let Google do the searching for you." When users leave Google to manually check sources and verify information, advertisers lose out on viewership and attention, which is an undesirable outcome for a for-profit company. However, people have expressed their disenchantment with these features and have found their own creative ways to bypass the AI intrusion. 'Meta AI' abruptly began to ap-

pear on the most widely used apps on every smartphone. Facebook and Instagram were the first to integrate it, with Meta AI finding its way directly into personal chats and direct messages, like a silent third party that responds on command whenever called upon. The AI chatbot even appeared on the top search bar of WhatsApp, whether users of the personal messaging app were made aware of this or not. There is no option to opt out or turn this feature off; users were given no opportunity to consent to this update. A similar integration process occurred on Instagram and Facebook. Users can sometimes partially opt out by choosing not to share their data with the integrated AI models on the platform. However, the opt-out process is often obscured and requires a tutorial to even locate the

setting where consent can be revoked.

Microsoft also faced criticism for mandating an upgrade to an AI-driven version of Windows 11 by ending support for all personal computers that could only run Windows 10. Many valid concerns about forcing AI integration in this manner were raised, as Microsoft even faced legal action due to the multifold ramifications of this decision, particularly concerning the embedded energy and water demands. Furthermore, the mandatory migration to the AI Copilot-driven Windows 11 resulted in a massive generation of e-waste, as hundreds of millions of devices that didn't match the technical requirements had to be disposed of entirely.

## Centring Innovation, Not Intrusion

These pressing environmental concerns, among many other factors, have led many people to become increasingly disillusioned with the current state of technology, dominated by a few large corporations. There have been renewed calls for users to migrate from mainstream platforms to other alternatives. Social media giants like X, Facebook, and WhatsApp face some competition from platforms such as Bluesky, Signal, and Telegram in this regard. Should the AI push continue, this could lead to reduced demand, which may cause AI's biggest funders to become wary of supporting further investments.

Regulators have struggled to keep pace with tech developers; however, many now recognise that an intrusive AI rollout has, so far, failed to deliver both on the profit and social benefit fronts that were earlier envisioned. Going forward, developers should seriously consider whether automatic opt-in models lead to a greater backlash and increase the possibility of innovation-stifling regulatory intervention. Tech players should ensure that users can opt out of AI features by default and elect to use these features only when they deem it necessary. This could substantially reduce AI's ecological footprint in the everyday operations of these platforms. Clear and specific permissions should be provided on all platforms that unambiguously define what processes are enabled when turned on.

While many claim that AI could help 'solve' climate change and optimise energy usage, recent research has shown that these claims are likely overstated. In any event, these applications should be undertaken with utmost care to reduce the environmental harm caused in the process. Energy-intensive processes such as training new LLMs should only be undertaken when these industries have transitioned to clean and renewable energy and sustainable water and waste management. Technologies of the future should not use the fuels of the past. (Courtesy: ORF)

## From apple orchards to Khejri trees: The same battle between development and the environment

By: Amarpal Singh Verma

The central government's recent decision to halt three proposed railway projects in Kashmir sends an important message. The decision was taken to protect apple orchards that were under direct threat from the planned railway lines. This step is commendable not only from an environmental perspective but also as a major relief for thousands of farmers whose livelihoods depend entirely on apple cultivation.

The proposed railway routes were likely to lead to the cutting of thousands of apple trees in areas such as Pulwama, Shopian, and Anantnag. These regions form the heart of Kashmir's apple economy and are considered the backbone of its rural livelihood. For nearly a year, farmers lived with the fear that development would cost them their land and their only source of income. This anxiety pushed them to protest and demand the withdrawal of the projects. Eventually, the railway minister clarified that the projects were stopped following recommendations from the Jammu and Kashmir government and local Members of Parliament, in order to prevent damage to the orchards. This decision shows that when the government chooses to, it can strike a balance between development and environmental protection. The larger question, however, is whether the same sensitivity is being shown in other parts of the country.

This is where the ongoing "Save Khejri, Save Nature" movement in Bikaner, Rajasthan, becomes impossible to ignore. The movement has emerged in protest against environmental damage caused by large-scale solar power projects. Under the banner of the Environmental Struggle Committee, a three-day sit-in was organised in Bikaner. Initially, 363 environmental activists began a hunger strike, a number that later rose to 450. Among them were 29 saints, one nun, and 68 women. Protesters ranged in age from 18-year-old youth to 80-year-old elders.

On the third day, the health of 17 hunger strikers deteriorated,

and three of them had to be admitted to PBM Hospital in critical condition. Two temporary hospitals with 75 beds each have now been set up at the protest site. These developments underline the seriousness of the movement and the depth of concern among the people who are fighting to save the Khejri tree in Rajasthan.

It is widely known that Rajasthan is rapidly emerging as a major hub for solar energy in India. Large solar power plants are being established in districts such as Jaisalmer, Barmer, Bikaner, and Jodhpur. Governments and corporations claim that these projects will meet future energy demands and transform India's energy landscape. But the real question remains—what is the cost of this development?

Environmental activists argue that over the past decade, millions of trees have been cut down in Rajasthan to make way for solar projects. Among them are Khejri trees—traditional, life-sustaining trees that are deeply rooted in the desert ecosystem. The Khejri is often called the "Kalpavriksha" of Rajasthan. It stabilises the fragile desert environment and provides sangri (a traditional vegetable), fodder for animals, and livelihood support for rural communities. From birth rituals to marriage ceremonies and even death rites, the Khejri tree is woven into the social and cultural fabric of Rajasthan.

A study by Professor Anil Chhangani of the Environmental Studies Department at Maharaja Ganga Singh University reveals that nearly five million trees have been cut in the last ten years for solar installations. These include Khejri, ber, ker, rohida, and babool. Research also indicates that temperatures around solar plants rise by an average of 4–5 degrees Celsius. Tree loss has destroyed habitats of insects, bees, butterflies, birds, and other wildlife. Gum collection has declined, fodder scarcity has increased, and rural livelihoods are under pressure. Moreover, solar plants require large amounts of water for cleaning and cooling—at a time when Rajasthan is already

facing severe water stress.

There is no denying that solar energy is a necessity of our times. Coal, nuclear, and gas-based power generation causes pollution, and coal reserves are rapidly depleting. Moving towards alternative energy sources is unavoidable. But does that mean we must ignore environmental balance and traditional life systems?

This is where the comparison between Kashmir and Bikaner becomes essential. In Kashmir, development projects were halted to protect apple orchards. The government acknowledged that development has no justification if it destroys livelihoods and the environment. In Rajasthan, however, those demanding protection for Khejri trees and the desert ecosystem are still being forced to struggle.

Apple orchards in Kashmir and Khejri trees in Rajasthan are both pillars of their respective regional economies and cultures. The difference lies only in response—sensitivity was shown in one case, while voices remain unheard in the other. This raises uncomfortable questions. Does the definition of development change from one region to another? Are trees in one state more valuable than those in another?

What is needed is a clear and strict environmental framework for solar energy projects. Companies must be held accountable for tree cutting, water use, and the protection of local biodiversity. Policies must ensure the participation of local communities, so that development does not work against them but grows with their consent and involvement.

The decision taken for Kashmir proves that when there is political will, both environment and livelihoods can be protected. This step deserves appreciation. Now, a similar resolve is required in Rajasthan to protect the Khejri tree. Because while new energy is important, nature is essential—and without it, neither development nor life itself can survive. The Khejri is not just a tree; it is an inseparable part of folk life and folk culture. Ignoring it would mean ignoring the very roots of the desert society. (The author is a senior journalist.)

## Freshwater crisis: Not shortage, but mismanagement

By: Dr Privanka Saurabh

The freshwater crisis is one of the most serious resource crises facing the world today, and it is profound and multifaceted. Approximately 97 percent of the Earth's water is saline, and only about 3 percent is freshwater, of which only a small portion is available for human use. Despite this, 2–3 billion people worldwide face water stress at some point during the year. This crisis is not merely a physical shortage of water, but a combined crisis of declining availability and equitable and secure access to water, simultaneously affecting environmental, social, economic, and political dimensions.

Freshwater availability has steadily declined over the past few decades. A major reason for this is the overexploitation of groundwater. Increasing demands from agriculture, industry, and domestic use have placed unbearable pressure on aquifers. The increasing reliance on tubewells and borewells for irrigation since the Green Revolution has outpaced natural recharge capacity. The rapid decline in groundwater levels in countries like India, China, and the United States poses a serious threat to future water security. In many areas, aquifers have been permanently damaged, making water availability for future generations even more uncertain.

Pollution of water sources is another major cause of the freshwater crisis. Domestic sewage, industrial waste, heavy metals, and agricultural chemicals discharged untreated into rivers, lakes, and groundwater are making water unusable. This problem is even more severe in developing countries, where treatment infrastructure is lacking. As a result, in many places, even when water is available, it is no longer potable, creating health hazards and reducing the effective availability of water.

Climate change has exacerbated this crisis. Rising global temperatures are leading to rapid glacial melt, erratic rainfall patterns, and increased frequency of droughts and floods. Shrinking glaciers in regions such as the Himalayas, Alps, and Andes are destabilizing river flows over the long term. This causes floods in the short term, while in the long term, it leads to chronic water scarcity. Irregular rainfall in monsoon regions has also made water storage and agricultural planning challenging.

Additionally, wetlands and natural recharge areas have been rapidly degraded. Urbanization, unscientific land use, and real estate development have destroyed lakes, ponds, floodplains, and swamps. These ecosystems not only help store water and recharge groundwater, but also moderate the effects of floods and droughts. Their destruction has disrupted the natural balance of the water cycle.

Population growth and changing consumption patterns have also increased pressure on freshwater. Urban lifestyles, water-intensive industries, and changing dietary habits—especially meat-eating—have increased the per capita water footprint. As a result, water de-



mand has far exceeded natural recharge capacity.

While water availability is declining, in many areas, even when water is available, people are still deprived of access. This is primarily due to inadequate infrastructure. In many countries, water collection, treatment, and distribution systems are weak. Due to outdated pipeline networks, high leakage, and inadequate storage, large amounts of water are lost before reaching consumers. According to the World Bank, approximately 40 percent of urban water in developing countries is lost during distribution.

Additionally, water quality issues limit access. Even where water is physically available, it may be undrinkable due to contamination. Waterborne diseases remain a major public health challenge in many countries, with poor and marginalized communities being the most affected.

Political and legal barriers also limit access to water. Water is a shared resource, leading to interstate and international disputes. River sharing, conflicts of rights within federal structures, and the complexities of international river agreements often prevent equitable access even in water-rich areas.

Social inequality is another significant aspect of this crisis. The greatest burden of water scarcity falls on vulnerable sections of society—the rural poor, urban slum dwellers, women and children. In many places, social discrimination, poverty, and lack of affordability prevent equal access to safe water, further exacerbating inequality.

Weak water governance also complicates the problem. Lack of coordination among water management institutions, a lack of re-

liable data, and short-term policies hinder long-term solutions. In many countries, water-related authority and responsibilities are fragmented among multiple ministries and agencies, preventing the development of an integrated and holistic approach.

Seasonal imbalances also exacerbate water access problems. In monsoon regions, rainfall is abundant for a few months, while water is scarce for the rest of the year. Inadequate storage and management prevents this seasonal water availability from being translated into sustainable availability. Cities like Chennai and Cape Town are prime examples of this paradox, experiencing floods and droughts in the same year.

United Nations reports consistently warn that the freshwater crisis is not only an environmental issue but also deeply linked to economic development, social stability, and global peace. Water scarcity is becoming an emerging cause of conflict, migration, and livelihood crises.

Ultimately, the freshwater crisis is one of the greatest shared challenges facing humanity. It is clear that this problem is not solely a result of natural limitations, but also of man-made policy and management failures. If sustainable water management, rainwater harvesting, wetland conservation, inclusive water governance, and international cooperation are prioritized in time, this crisis can be transformed into an opportunity. Ensuring water security is not just a question of environmental protection, but an essential obligation linked to social justice, economic development, and the protection of the rights of future generations. (The author is a PhD (Political Science), is a poet and social thinker)

# Bangla PM Tarique Rahman's cabinet holds first meeting

**DHAKA, Feb 18:** Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman on Wednesday chaired the first meeting of his newly formed cabinet "to set the course for the new administration," media reports said.

Rahman, chief of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), was sworn in as the prime minister on Tuesday.

"The newly formed cabinet led by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has begun its inaugural meeting to set the course for the new administration," BDNews24 news portal said.

Rahman is presiding over the session, which began at 3 pm on Wednesday, his first official day in office, it said.

He is set to hold a separate meeting with secretaries after the cabinet discussion.

Rahman, 60, will deliver his maiden address to the nation at 6:30 pm (local time), the state-run BSS news agency said, quoting a statement by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

The BNP leader, who became the



prime minister for the first time, replaced Interim government chief Muhammad Yunus, who had taken charge in August 2024 after the collapse of the Awami League regime.

Rahman, the son of late President Ziaur Rahman and former premier

Khaleda Zia, returned home in December after living in London in self-exile for 17 years.

Along with Rahman, President Shahabuddin also administered the oath to 25 ministers and 24 state ministers on Tuesday at a ceremony, attended by several leaders from neighbouring countries.

Earlier in the day, Rahman paid rich tributes to his parents, President Ziaur Rahman and Khaleda Zia, by placing wreaths at their graves at Zia Uddin in the city's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area at noon, the BSS said.

Later, flanked by the new cabinet colleagues, he also placed another wreath at the graves and offered prayers.

The BNP bagged 209 out of 297 seats, while right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami secured 68 seats in the 13th Parliamentary elections held on February 12 after a period of tumultuous political vacuum, instability and fragile security situation. The Awami League was barred from contesting polls.

The result was a major turnaround for the BNP, long targeted under the 15-year rule of the Awami League government which collapsed following nationwide student-led protests in August 2024. (PTI)

Her goals include an increase in military power, more government spending and strengthened conservative social policies.

**The power of a supermajority**

Having two-thirds control of the 465-seat lower house allows Takaichi's party to dominate top posts in house committees and push through bills rejected by the upper house, the chamber where the LDP-led ruling coalition lacks a majority.

Takaichi wants to bolster Japan's military capability and arms sales, tighten immigration policies, push male-only imperial succession rules and preserve a criticised tradition that pressures women into abandoning their surnames.

Her ambition to revise the US-drafted postwar pacifist Constitution might have to wait, for now, as she is facing pressure to deal with rising prices, a declining population and worries about military security.

**Addressing rising prices**

Her first urgent task is to address rising prices and sluggish wages and pass a budget bill to fund those measures, delayed by the election.

Takaichi proposes a two-year sales tax cut on food products to ease household living costs.

Experts caution that her liberal fiscal policy could drive up prices and delay progress on trimming Japan's huge national debt.

**Courting Trump**

Takaichi is manoeuvring for a crucial summit next month with US President Donald Trump, who will visit Beijing in April.

The US president endorsed Takaichi ahead of the Japanese election, and hours before Takaichi's reappointment as prime minister, US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick announced Japan will provide capital for three projects under a USD 550 billion investment

package that Japan pledged in October. Japan is committed to the USD 36 billion first batch of projects — a natural gas plant in Ohio, a US Gulf Coast crude oil export facility and a synthetic diamond manufacturing site.

Japan is also under pressure to increase annual defence spending.

"Japan will keep spending more and more for the US ... The question is whether the public wants her to speak out against Trump or be obedient to ensure Japanese security," said Masato Kamikubo, a Ritsumeikan University professor of policy science. "For China, it's simple. Japanese people want her to be tough."

**A hawk on China**

Takaichi in November suggested possible Japanese action if China makes a military move against Taiwan, the self-governing island that Beijing claims as its own. That has led to Beijing's diplomatic and economic reprisals.

Many Japanese, frustrated by China's growing assertiveness, welcomed her comments on Taiwan.

Emboldened by the big election win, Takaichi could take a more hawkish stance with China, experts say.

Takaichi, soon after the election, said she is working to gain support for a visit to Tokyo's controversial Yasukuni Shrine. Visits to the shrine are seen by Japan's neighbours as evidence of a lack of remorse for Japan's wartime past.

A stronger military that spends more and sells more Takaichi has pledged to revise security and defence policies by December to bolster Japan's military capabilities, lifting a ban on lethal weapons exports and moving further away from postwar pacifist principles. Japan is also considering the development of a nuclear-powered submarine to increase offensive capabilities.

Takaichi wants to improve intelligence-gathering and establish a national agency to work more closely with ally Washington and defence partners like Australia and Britain.

She supports a controversial anti-espionage law that largely targets Chinese spies. Some experts say it could undermine Japanese civil rights.

Stricter on immigration and foreigners

Takaichi has proposed tougher policies on immigration and foreigners, something that resonates with a growing frustration in Japan.

Her government in January approved tougher rules on permanent residency and naturalisation as well as measures to prevent unpaid tax and social insurance.

Promoting traditional family values

Takaichi supports the imperial family's male-only succession and opposes same-sex marriage.

She is also against a revision to the 19th-century civil law that would allow separate surnames for married couples so that women don't get pressured into abandoning theirs.

In a step that rights activists call an attempt to block a dual-surname system, Takaichi is calling for a law to allow the greater use of maiden names as aliases instead. (AP)

Overnight, Russia launched one ballistic missile and 126 long-range drones at Ukraine, according to the Ukrainian air force.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that it's "too early" to speak about the outcome. Putin has been receiving reports about the talks' progress, he said.

The head of the Ukrainian delegation in Switzerland, Rustem Umerov, said that officials are trying to bridge their political and military differences.

"Consultations are taking place in working groups by areas within the political and military tracks," the head of the Ukrainian delegation, Rustem Umerov, wrote in English on X. "We are working on clarifying the parameters and mechanisms of the decisions discussed yesterday." (AP)

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# Takaichi reelected as Japan's prime minister with goal of pushing to right



**TOKYO, Feb 18:** Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi was reappointed Wednesday by Parliament to form her second Cabinet, following last week's landslide election win that she hopes will allow a hard-right move to the country's policies.

All previous ministers are expected to be retained. Takaichi will look to use the symbolism of the day, seen as a formality, to further boost her ruling Liberal Democratic Party as it looks to capitalise on a two-thirds supermajority in the lower house, the more powerful of Japan's two parliamentary chambers.

Her goals include an increase in military power, more government spending and strengthened conservative social policies.

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## Russia hosts Cuban foreign minister, urges US not to blockade Cuba

**MOSCOW, Feb 18:** The Cuban foreign minister visited Moscow on Wednesday as the island faces blackouts and severe fuel shortages caused by a US oil embargo.

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez held talks with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov and was set to meet later in the day with President Vladimir Putin.

Lavrov urged the US to refrain from blockading Cuba, which has struggled to import oil for its power plants and refineries after US President Donald Trump threatened any nation that sold oil to Cuba with tariffs.

"Together with most members of the global community, we are calling on the US to show common sense, take a responsible approach and refrain from its plans of sea blockade," Lavrov said during the talks with Rodriguez.

He promised that Moscow will "continue supporting Cuba and its people in protecting the country's sovereignty and security."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov also noted that "Russia, like many other countries, has consistently spoken against the blockade of the island."

"We have our relations with Cuba, and we value these relations very much," Peskov told reporters. "And we intend to further develop them — of course, during difficult times, by providing appropriate assistance to our friends."

Asked whether sending fuel to Cuba could derail a recent warming of ties with Washington, Peskov responded that "we don't think these issues are linked."

Putin has praised Trump's efforts to mediate an end to the conflict in Ukraine, and Moscow and Washington have discussed ways to revive their economic ties.

Venezuela, one of Cuba's main oil suppliers, stopped selling crude to the island in January after the US captured then-President Nicolás Maduro in a pre-dawn raid and flew him to New York to face drug trafficking charges. (AP)

## Envoys signal no breakthrough on bridging Russia and Ukraine's political and military differences

**GENEVA, Feb 18:** The latest US-brokered talks between Russian and Ukrainian envoys over Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine ended Wednesday with no sign of a breakthrough and with both sides saying the talks were "difficult" as the war's fourth anniversary approaches next week.

The negotiations in Switzerland were the third round of direct talks organised by the US, after meetings earlier this year in Abu Dhabi that officials described as constructive but which also yielded no major progress.

The head of the Russian delegation, Russian President Vladimir Putin's adviser Vladimir Medinsky, told reporters that the two days of talks in Geneva "were difficult but businesslike."

He said another round of talks will be held "in the near future." Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also described the discussions as "difficult," and accused Russia of "trying to drag out negotiations that could already have reached the final stage."

US President Donald Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, said on social media that Washington's push for peace in Ukraine over the past year has "brought about meaningful progress," without elaborating.

The two armies remain locked in battle on the roughly 1,250-kilometre front line, while Russia bombards civilian areas of Ukraine daily.

Hours after the first day of talks ended on Tuesday, Russian drones killed a woman and injured a 6-year-old girl and 18-month-old toddler in the southern Ukraine city of Zaporizhzhia, officials said.

## Philippine Vice President Duterte will seek presidency in 2028 but faces impeachment bids

**MANILA, Feb 18:** Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte said Wednesday she would seek the presidency in the 2028 elections — a bid that would have to withstand new impeachment attempts in Congress and criminal complaints that could ban her from public office if convicted.

She made the announcement in a televised speech where she renewed allegations of corruption and misrule against President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. They were running mates in a whirlwind alliance in the 2022 election but have since had a bitter falling out.

She and her family have blamed Marcos for the detention of her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte, who faces a potential trial for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court, which ordered his arrest and detention in the Netherlands last year over his deadly anti-drugs crackdown.

Sara Duterte accused Marcos of renegeing on his campaign promises and of misrule. She repeatedly asked for public forgiveness for problems such as government corruption, law-and-order issues and inflation.

"Politicians often avoid announcing their plans early so they wouldn't be the target of attacks," Duterte said. "But this administration has long destroyed my name."

She then announced her presidential bid and left a news conference without taking any questions.

Marcos, who is limited to a single, six-year term, did not immediately react to the vice president's presidential bid and her allegations. A presidential spokesperson, Claire Castro, said Duterte should apologize to the public for the many irregularities and corruption allegations she's facing along with her frequent personal trips abroad.

"She should ask forgiveness for focusing on destroying reputations of other people instead of doing her work and helping the government," Castro said.

Most of the allegations against Duterte had been included in an impeachment complaint she survived on a technicality last year.

The House of Representatives had voted to impeach her and sent the case to the Senate for trial. The Supreme Court, however, later ruled that the lower chamber violated a constitutional rule that only one impeachment case could be processed by it in a single year against an impeachable official.

The impeachment complaints filed this month centered on her alleged illegal use and mishandling of USD 10.3 million in confidential funds from the vice president's office and from her time as education secretary under Marcos.

Another complaint accused her of having unexplained wealth, including in personal bank accounts. An anti-graft prosecutor has said his agency was trying to gain access to those ac-

counts as part of a separate criminal investigation.

The vice president's threat during an online news conference in 2024 to have the president, his wife and House of Representatives speaker killed if she herself was assassinated was cited in one of the impeachment complaints.

During the House's original investigation into the allegations, Duterte refused to respond in detail to questions and skipped some of the televised hearings.

The vice president's lawyer, Michael Poa, has said Duterte was prepared to confront these allegations and was confident "that a fair and impartial review will demonstrate that the accusations are devoid of both factual and legal basis."

Rodrigo Duterte aligned himself closely with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin during his stormy presidency, which ended in 2022. He was succeeded by Marcos, who has deepened defense and military ties with Washington to confront an increasingly assertive Beijing in the disputed South China Sea.

Sara Duterte has been criticised for failing to publicly call out China for its aggressive actions against the Philippines in the disputed waters.

"Let's be cautious and analytical. Somebody who is seeking your vote maybe a Manchurian candidate," Castro said. (AP)

## Polish army bans Chinese vehicles from military premises

**WARSAW (POLAND), Feb 18:** The Polish army has banned Chinese cars from entering military facilities hoping to prevent the collection of sensitive data by technologically advanced automobiles.

Modern vehicles equipped with cutting edge sensors and communication systems are capable of "uncontrolled acquisition and use of data," the Polish army wrote in a statement justifying the ban.

Vehicles are now able to collect video, sound and location and there is a fear that Chinese producers might share some of this potentially sensitive data with their authorities.

All cars capable of recording location, video and sound will be banned from secure military areas unless those functions are switched off, the Polish army said, meaning that the new restrictions do not apply to Chinese products alone.

It is also prohibited to connect official army phones to infotainment systems in any vehicle produced in China.

The measures introduced are

preventative, the army said, and are consistent with practices used by other NATO countries.

The army also said it was looking into technical solutions to enable producers of cars with such advanced functions to ask for security clearance, which could potentially be used in the future instead of a blanket ban.

The presence of Chinese vehicles on the Polish market has expanded significantly in the last years, with Chinese models representing over 8 per cent of newly registered cars in Poland last year, according to Warsaw-based market research firm IBRM Samar.

At the same time, the US and its European partners have been making efforts to protect sensitive technology and information from foreign snooping, including by China.

Responding to earlier reports that Poland might be preparing such a ban, Guo Jiakun, a spokesman for China's foreign ministry, told reporters in January that China was following the developments and that the abuse of the concept of national security

must be stopped. (AP)

# Not UN's role to regulate AI, says Guterres as world body plans annual global dialogue

**UNITED NATIONS, Feb 18:** It is not the UN's role to regulate AI, Secretary General Antonio Guterres has emphasised as he pointed to an annual global dialogue being planned at the international organisation on AI with participation from all countries, governments, private sector as well as civil society.

Guterres will soon be arriving in New Delhi to attend the India AI Impact Summit, the first-ever summit on Artificial Intelligence hosted in the Global South.

In an exclusive interview to PTI ahead of his visit to India for the Summit, Guterres outlined efforts by the international organisation aimed at global cooperation on Artificial Intelligence (AI), emphasising that these are "perfectly in line" with the strategy demonstrated by India in its leadership of the AI summit.

Guterres highlighted three key areas under the Global Digital Compact initiated at the UN to contribute towards the global AI architecture.

The first is the creation of a new high-level Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence comprising 40 experts from around the world.

The UN General Assembly last week appointed the 40 members recommended by Guterres to the independent panel.

Head of the Department of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence (DSA) at IIT Madras Balaraman Ravindran is among the global group of 40 distinguished experts recommended by Guterres to serve on the panel for a three-year term from date of appointment.



ment where are we in relation to AI? What are the advances that were made? What are the discoveries that were established? What are the risks of (various) mechanisms or instruments, and to do it in a totally independent way."

He described this as a "fantastic source" of information for governments to take the right decisions in policies and measures in relation to AI and "for the people at large to know public opinions, in democratic countries like India that is very important."

Guterres also pointed to an annual global dialogue being planned at the UN on AI with participation from all countries, governments, private sector as well as civil society.

Emphasising that it is not the UN's role to regulate AI, Guterres said the global dialogue will be a "platform where everybody can come and everybody can discuss, and where we can learn with each other and eventually come to some possible consensus on the best way to maximise the opportunities of AI and

minimise its risks."

Lastly, he expressed hope that his proposal of a fund will be approved.

"There was an agreement in the General Assembly in order to support developing countries to build capacity to be able to benefit from AI. So these are three very important contributions of the UN and I believe that these contributions are perfectly in line with the strategy that India has demonstrated in the leadership in the preparation of the present Summit," he said.

The UN chief has proposed a voluntary global fund of up to three billion dollars to support countries in the field of AI capacity building.

The Global Digital Compact, adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future, had set out a shared vision for an open, safe and inclusive digital future.

Among its commitments was the creation of an Independent International Scientific Panel on AI to advance scientific understanding and ensure that international deliberations are informed by the best available evidence, the UN has said.

Stéphane Dujarric, Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, told reporters that Guterres is scheduled to participate in the Summit's opening ceremony, a plenary with heads of state and government, as well as a session on the role of science in international AI governance.

renewable energy and energy transition.

"With India emerging as a global leader in renewable energy expansion, the discussion will bring together senior figures from industry, finance, policy and civil society to identify concrete steps to further accelerate renewable energy deployment, strengthen grids and storage, and mobilise investment at scale.

"This engagement is part of the Secretary-General's continued efforts to advance a faster, fairer and more inclusive global energy transition, aligned with the Paris Agreement," Dujarric said.

United Nations India said in a statement that over 30 events organised by the UN system are scheduled during the five-day summit, and will include sessions on AI for resilient agriculture, health systems innovation, ethical AI governance, women's leadership in technology, digital capacity-building in the Global South and responsible business practices.

The statement by the UN in India said that discussions will focus on "how AI can accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals while safeguarding human rights and addressing emerging risks".

At the Summit, Guterres will be joined by senior UN leaders, including UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk; Under-Secretary-General and UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology Amandeep Singh Gill and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction Kamal Kishore.

Also participating are Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund Kristalina Georgieva; Director-General of the International Labour Organisation Gilbert Houngbo and Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union Doreen Bogdan-Martin. (PTI)

# War of words in Meghalaya Assembly over ILP demand

CM, opposition spar over implementation; House adjourned briefly

**SHILLONG, Feb 18:** Ruling and opposition MLAs engaged in a war of words in the Meghalaya assembly on Wednesday over the demand for the implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in the state.

Raising the issue during the Question Hour, VPP legislator Ardent Basaiawmait alleged that the government was examining alternatives instead of pushing for full implementation of ILP.

"We are yet to see the light of the day. Influx comes from other states and I would like a sincere reply whether the government is serious when it comes to ILP," the VPP legislator said, adding that the continued talk of an ILP-like system had created confusion among the public.

Responding to the charge, Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma said the government has been actively taking measures to curb illegal immigration and had already implemented laws such as the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), besides pursuing the Centre to implement the ILP as per the resolution passed by the assembly.

He maintained that the objective of the proposed mechanism under the new law passed in 2025 remains the same, that is, "to strengthen monitoring and prevent illegal entry".



"The government has been concerned and has implemented different laws to ensure that we curb illegal immigration. Some felt we needed a stronger resolution and hence we are considering holding discussions with the Government of India," Sangma said.

He said the state is also exploring the possibility of bringing certain districts under provisions of a law passed by Parliament in 2025 to create a structured monitoring

framework.

The Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025, provides a consolidated legal framework to regulate the entry, stay and monitoring of foreign nationals in India, he said.

"The purpose is to have a monitoring system for illegal immigration. It is simply a permit before someone enters a restricted area and there is no aspect of intervention," Sangma said, adding that the state has

sought the Centre's consideration for declaring certain areas as protected zones requiring prior permits for foreigners.

The CM also countered the opposition's criticism by stating that Basaiawmait himself had met Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the ILP demand and questioned whether he had followed it up with the Centre.

"Since the passing of the resolution, the VPP leader has not met them even once," he said, sparking loud protests from the opposition benches.

The exchange quickly escalated into a high-decibel confrontation between the treasury and opposition benches, prompting Speaker Thomas A Sangma to adjourn the House for 10 minutes.

When proceedings resumed, the speaker directed members to maintain decorum and disallowed certain allegations raised by VPP MLA Adelbert Nongrum during the debate.

The CM later said technology-based visitor monitoring systems already exist in the state and that the government is examining how enhanced mechanisms could be implemented without adversely affecting other sectors, including tourism. (PTI)

# 658 Bangladeshi nationals detected in Meghalaya since 2021

**SHILLONG, Feb 18:** Prestone Tynsong, Meghalaya Deputy Chief Minister in charge of Home (Police), told the Assembly that 658 Bangladeshi nationals have been detected and prosecuted in the state since 2021, with 194 deported after completing their sentences.

Replying to a call-attention notice moved by a VPP legislator from Mawryngkneng, Heaving Stone Kharpran, Tynsong said the government has established a "comprehensive and multi-layered anti-infiltration mechanism" to tackle illegal migration.

He said 18 anti-infiltration check posts, gates and a land customs station are now operational at strategic points along the inter-state and Indo-Bangladesh border.

"These are supplemented by Anti-Infiltration Special Squads functioning in all districts, which regularly conduct anti-infiltration drives, surprise NAKA checks and patrolling in vulnerable areas in close coordination with the Labour Department, Village Defence Parties and local authorities," Tynsong told the House.

The government has also constituted 11 District Task Forces to detect and deport illegal foreign nationals.

"These sustained measures have resulted in significant detections and enforcement outcomes," he said. "From 2021 till 03.02.2026, a total of 658 Bangladeshi nationals were detected in the state and prosecuted under relevant legal provisions. During the same period, 194 Bangladeshi nationals were deported after completion of their sentences and upon obtaining the requisite Travel Permit from the Bangladesh Embassy."

Tynsong added that a state-level committee has been created to monitor the identification and deportation of overstaying foreigners.

The Meghalaya Resident Safety and Security Act, 2016, has also been operationalised in parts of East Khasi Hills, while provisions of the Immigration and Foreigners Act 2025, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and Ministry of Home Affairs guidelines are being enforced. (NNN)

# Timely investigation thwarted major ginger subsidy scam in Mizoram, says minister

**AIZAWL, Feb 18:** Mizoram Agriculture Minister PC Vanlalruata on Wednesday said a potential multi-core embezzlement bid involving the government's ginger support price has been intercepted following a timely probe.

He said in the assembly that the investigation launched by the Mizoram Agricultural Marketing Board (MAMB), which began after irregularities surfaced in July last year, revealed that several individuals attempted to exploit the state's support price system by passing off outsourced ginger as their own harvest.

He said the MAMB's investigation team conducted four field operations, visiting various Secondary Collection Centres (SCCs), where gingers were collected and their surrounding clusters.

"Their findings exposed a calculated attempt by greedy middlemen to purchase low-cost ginger from outside the state particularly from Myanmar and register it on the official government portal under the guise of local produce," Vanlalruata informed the assembly.

Authorities noted a suspicious and sudden "spike" in the data uploaded to the portal, which would have led to an inflated payout of government funds, he said.

However, the MAMB confirmed that the fraudulent data was identified and rectified prior to the release of any funds.



He said that funds were released from the Aizawl Deputy Commissioner's office and fortunately, they had not yet been distributed to the SCCs or farmers.

"Because the inquiry was launched immediately, we were able to prevent the misappropriation of public money amounting to ₹ 4 to 5 crore. Since no funds were actually embezzled, no legal action has been taken against the suspects at this stage," the minister said.

He identified four SCCs as the primary sites for these attempted fraudulent transactions.

Vanlalruata further informed the Assembly that the state government has also started the process of procuring ginger from local farmers at various SSCs on February 2.

He said that the government fixed the maximum support price for ginger at ₹ 50 per kilogram.

"The government did not register any empanelled buyers and any minded private buyer will purchase ginger at the floor price fixed by the government at ₹ 30-35 per kg. Any amount beyond this will be reimbursed to the local farmers through a support price," he said.

Vanlalruata said that ₹ 141.16 crore was released to ginger growers as support price during the last 2024-25 fiscal.

He added that only ₹ 12.78 crore has been recovered or realised from ginger sales.

Fulfilling its pre-poll promises, the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) government headed by Chief Minister Lalduhoma is purchasing five key crops -- ginger, turmeric, broomsticks, chilli and paddy -- locally grown by farmers through a support price system. (PTI)

# Mizoram govt to handover de-addiction centre in Kolasib to church: Minister

**AIZAWL, Feb 18:** The Mizoram government will hand over the Jordan Centre, a de-addiction facility in Kolasib district, to the Presbyterian Church, Social Welfare Minister Lalrinpuii told the assembly on Wednesday.

She said an agreement has already been signed with the Synod, the highest executive body of the Presbyterian Church, and the formal handover will take place soon.

"The government is now fully prepared to hand over the Jordan Centre and is currently awaiting the Synod's response. Furthermore, the Synod has allocated ₹ 2 crore in its budget for this purpose," Lalrinpuii said, while responding to questions from opposition members.

She noted that while the Law and Judicial Department has completed the vetting process, the file is currently being reviewed by the Finance Department.

Lalrinpuii emphasised that the government is intensifying its efforts in the fight against drug abuse.

Plans are at present underway to establish a large-scale rehabilitation centre in Lunglen near Aizawl, she said.

This facility will be managed by



well-known Mizo preacher Fedrick and his team.

"The proposed Lunglen facility aims for global recognition with a strategic focus on integrating after-care services and professional skill development for its residents," the minister said. At present, Mizoram has over 50 de-addiction and rehabilitation centres, she said.

Lalrinpuii also informed the assembly that the state government has facilitated the transportation of 1,888 bodies from urban hospitals to the native villages of the deceased persons at a total expenditure of ₹ 1.97 crore.

Providing transportation for bodies from hospitals to villages with state funds was the poll plank of the ZPM to alleviate the financial burden, previously borne personally by legislators.

To further streamline this service, the state government launched an online platform last month.

Lalrinpuii said this digital facility is intended to expedite the logistics of the transportation system and ensure the service remains easily accessible to all citizens in their time of need. (PTI)

# Under-construction Dibang hydel project in Arunachal achieves key breakthrough

**ITANAGAR, Feb 18:** The under-construction 2,880-mw Dibang hydel project in Arunachal Pradesh achieved a significant milestone with the successful daylighting of a diversion tunnel, officials said on Wednesday.

The final blast marking the breakthrough of diversion tunnel-3 was initiated by NHPC Director (Projects) Sanjay Kumar Singh on Tuesday, they said.

The achievement is seen as a key step in advancing construction activities and ensuring smooth river diversion works for the project, they added.

The daylighting of DT-3 is considered an important phase in the overall execution plan of the project, officials said.

The project, being developed by NHPC on the Dibang river in the Lower Dibang Valley district, will have an installed capacity of 2,880 mw, through 12 units of 240 MW each. Once completed, it is expected to generate over 11,000 million units of electricity annually, while serving as a major flood moderation and water storage initiative in the region.

The project will help in regulating floods in the Brahmaputra basin, officials said. (PTI)

# Arunachal Police recover 15 stolen vehicles sold fraudulently

**ITANAGAR, Feb 18:** Arunachal Pradesh Police have recovered 15 vehicles that were sold fraudulently in the state after being stolen from neighbouring Assam, police said on Wednesday. The cars recovered from Naharlagun in the Itanagar Capital Region were among 40 vehicles hired from Assam by a 38-year-old man from Guwahati, identified as Rupjyoti Das and then sold to buyers in Arunachal Pradesh, promising them documents later.

Das, who is in the custody of Naharlagun Police, had acquired a total of 71 such vehicles on rent and even paid a few months of rent to the actual owners to build trust, but later duped them, Nagarlagun Superintendent of Police Nyelem Nega said. Das had posed before the buyers as a senior bank official and claimed that the vehicles were from genuine bank e-auctions, he added. The recovered vehicles were handed over to Assam Police for return to the rightful owners after due legal processes, the officer added. (PTI)

# Yumnam Khemchand faces hurdles in expanding Manipur ministry

**IMPHAL, Feb 18:** It has already been two weeks now that Yumnam Khemchand has been sworn-in as the Chief Minister of Manipur but there seems to be lots of difficulties in expanding his ministry to the full form.

On February 4, Khemchand was sworn-in as chief minister along with two deputy chief ministers and two cabinet ministers. Given the 60-member assembly, the full ministry strength should be 12 members including the chief minister. As such, seven ministerial posts are still vacant. Moreover, the portfolios of those ministers sworn-in two weeks ago are also still not assigned. All these are the strong indicators that immense tussles are going on among the MLAs as well as among the coalition partners for the cabinet shares.

Meanwhile, some reports, however, said that chief minister Yumnam Khemchand may go to Delhi in a day or two to meet the central leaders in connection with the ministry expansion. However, sources in the BJP said there is no certainty with regard to the time of the chief minister's visit to the national capital.

Separate sources, though the obvious things, said immense lobbies among the ruling legislators are underway for the cabinet berths and portfolios. (NNN)

# 2 militants arrested in Manipur

**IMPHAL, Feb 18:** Two militants were arrested in Manipur's Imphal East district, police said on Wednesday.

A self-styled Lieutenant of the proscribed Peoples' Liberation Army was apprehended from Yaingangkopi Bazar on Tuesday, they said.

He was identified as Ningthoujam Ibungochia alias Sathouba Meitei (38), they added.

Another member of the outfit, identified as Athokpam Manao-ton Meitei (42), was arrested in Sawombung.

In another operation, security forces recovered arms and ammunition along Ngairangbam Tanoukhul Road in Imphal West district, officials said.

Among them were a double-barrel gun, a country-made pistol along with a magazine, 181 bullets of different calibres, three magazines, two hand-grenades and a detonator, they said. (PTI)

# Meghalaya Speaker bans MLAs from recording selfie videos inside House



**SHILLONG, Feb 18:** Meghalaya Assembly Speaker Thomas A Sangma on Wednesday banned recording of selfie videos inside the House and posting these on social media by MLAs, citing that such activities breach the parliamentary decorum.

The ruling came after opposition Voice of the People's Party chief Ardent Basaiawmait on Tuesday

uploaded a video clip showing him attending the Budget Session. Later, the legislator deleted the post.

"A member has taken a video of himself while participating in the proceedings inside the House. It was circulated on social media. This is a breach of parliamentary practices and decorum," the Speaker said.

He also said it was "not in keeping with the spirit of the rules to be observed by members provided by Rule 275 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business".

"I hereby inform the House that such an activity, a member taking video of himself while speaking inside the House and circulating it on social media, is prohibited. This is my ruling." (PTI)

# Expert panel on reservation policy in Meghalaya for introducing creamy layer principle

Committee calls for strict roster implementation and retention of 1972 policy

**SHILLONG, Feb 18:** An expert committee on reservation policy for tribals in Meghalaya has called for the introduction of the creamy layer principle to ensure that its benefits reach the most disadvantaged sections within the reserved categories of people across the state.

Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma formally tabled the report which also called for strict implementation of the reservation roster system, besides recommending that the state retain the existing 1972 policy.

"The committee has recommended that the state government examine the introduction of the creamy layer principle, where constitutionally applicable to ensure that the benefits of reservation reach the most disadvantaged sections within reserved categories," a gist of the voluminous report stated.

The panel has also "strongly emphasised" the need for strict and transparent implementation of the reservation roster system to ensure fairness, compliance and accountability in recruitment processes.

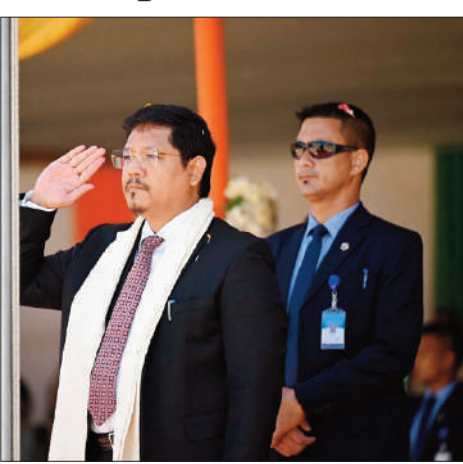
Recognising the 1972 Resolution as "a valid and operative reservation policy", the committee recommended retaining that policy in its present form.

"It has recorded that a majority of stakeholders supported continuation of the existing framework and that no compelling grounds presently exist for fundamental alteration," the report added.

The report of the expert committee on the state reservation policy marks the culmination of a comprehensive review process initiated through a notification issued by the Governor on September 12, 2023.

The committee had been tasked with studying the existing reservation framework, undertaking consultations with stakeholders across the state and recommending modifications, if necessary.

According to the report, extensive interactions were held with representatives of tribes and communities, civil society organisations, employee associations, student bodies and academic experts, besides examining written submissions received from various quarters.



Reaffirming established constitutional principles, the committee observed that reservation should not be determined solely on population proportions of any tribe or caste. Instead, it said, the primary considerations must remain social and

educational backwardness, historical disadvantage and adequacy of representation in public services.

It also clarified that reservations cannot be based on religion, noting that the Constitution provides for affirmative action on the basis of socio-economic backwardness and under-representation rather than religious identity.

While extension of reservation to educational institutions fell outside the committee's formal mandate, the panel said the state government may independently examine the issue in accordance with constitutional provisions if it considers such a move necessary.

Highlighting regional disparities, the committee recommended targeted interventions to improve educational standards, particularly in Garo districts to promote long-term socio-economic development and enhance competitiveness in public employment.

The panel did not recommend extending the Economically Weaker Sections benefits to SC, ST and OBC categories, observing that EWS constitutes a separate constitutional classification dis-

ting from existing reserved groups.

The committee supported continuation of the "carry forward" provision under the 1972 resolution and suggested extending the carry forward period from one year to three years, stating that such an extension has judicial backing and could help address backlog vacancies more effectively.

Referring to recent judicial developments, it said sub-classification within reserved categories, often described as "quota within quota", may be legally permissible subject to the collection of detailed, quantifiable data and advised the government to take a considered decision after undertaking a comprehensive data-driven exercise.

It noted that statutory safeguards already exist for persons with disabilities under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and therefore did not propose additional measures. Similarly, it found that providing preference to residents of local districts in district-level Class C and D posts may not be administratively feasible due to migration patterns and demographic mobility. (PTI)

# Modi invites Bangladesh PM to visit India, says looking forward to working closely

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi has invited Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman to visit India along with his family and said he is looking forward to working closely with the BNP leader to strengthen the multi-faceted bilateral relations.

In a letter to Rahman, Modi said as two close neighbours, India and Bangladesh have a deep-rooted friendship founded on shared history, cultural ties and the aspirations of the peoples for peace and prosperity.

"The strong convergence between our respective developmental priorities shall serve as a guiding principle for our future co-operation," he said in the letter that was handed over by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla when he called on Rahman after the swearing-in ceremony of the new government in Dhaka.

"I extend my warmest congratulations to you on the victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party at the just concluded parliamentary elections in Bangladesh and on your appointment as the next Prime Minister of Bangladesh. I wish you every success as you assume the high responsibilities of this office," Modi said.

The prime minister said Rahman's victory in the election was a testimony to the trust and confi-



dence reposed by the people of Bangladesh in his leadership and their mandate for his vision to take the country forward on the path of peace, stability and prosperity.

"I look forward to working closely with you to strengthen our multifaceted bilateral relations, enhance regional cooperation, and advance our common goals in wide-ranging areas of connectivity, trade, technology, education, skill development, energy, healthcare, as well as cultural and people-to-people

exchanges," he said.

Modi said as two fast-growing economies and aspiring societies, India and Bangladesh can truly become catalysts for each other's sustainable growth, work for each other's security and enable mutual prosperity.

"I take this opportunity to invite you, along with Dr Zubaida Rahman and your daughter Zaima, on a visit to India at a mutually convenient time. A warm welcome awaits you in India.

"Please accept, Excellency, my

best wishes for your good health and success, and for the continued progress and prosperity of the people of Bangladesh," he said.

After attending the swearing-in ceremony in Dhaka, Birla said India is ready to support Bangladesh's endeavours to build a democratic, progressive and inclusive country.

"Glad to attend the swearing-in ceremony of the new government of Bangladesh led by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman in Dhaka today. India stands ready to support Bangladesh's endeavours to build a democratic, progressive and inclusive nation," Birla said in a post on X.

Led by Rahman, the BNP swept to power with a two-thirds majority, bagging 49.97 per cent votes and 209 seats in the polls held on February 12. The results of the election were declared on February 13.

The Jamaat-e-Islami, which was opposed to Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, registered its best-ever performance with 31.76 per cent votes and 68 seats.

Bangladesh had invited Modi to the swearing-in ceremony, but the prime minister could not attend the event as he was scheduled to hold talks with French President Emmanuel Macron in Mumbai on Tuesday. (PTI)

# Gujarat govt presents ₹ 4.08 lakh crore Budget; big push to tourism, sports infra



**GANDHINAGAR, Feb 18:** Gujarat Finance Minister Kanubhai Desai on Wednesday presented a ₹ 4.08 lakh crore Budget for 2026-27 in the Assembly with a focus on tourism promotion and creation of sports infrastructure ahead of the 2030 Commonwealth Games. The Budget, with an estimated surplus of ₹ 974 crore and no new taxes, continued the 5 per cent tax rebate for electric vehicles.

The total outlay increased by ₹ 37,803 crore or 10.2 per cent to ₹ 4,08,053 crore over the previous financial year, Desai said.

A major highlight of the Budget was the state government's roadmap to develop Ahmedabad as an "Olympic Ready City" ahead of the 2030 Commonwealth Games, which Gujarat will host.

The minister proposed an allocation of ₹ 1,278 crore for infrastructure related to the upcoming Games. This includes the development of international-level sports complexes and stadiums, and strengthening urban transport connectivity around key venues.

A total provision of ₹ 1,331 crore has been made for the sports department. Of this, ₹ 500 crore has been earmarked for developing Ahmedabad as an 'Olympic Ready City' and for the SVP Sports Enclave.

Another ₹ 165 crore has been allocated for developing sports complexes in various districts.

An amount of ₹ 100 crore each has been proposed for creating Olympic-level infrastructure at Karai and

setting up a Para High Performance Centre in Gandhinagar. A further ₹ 90 crore has been set aside for constructing a world-class hockey stadium.

Tourism was another key thrust area in the Budget. Announcing 2026 as 'Gujarat Tourism Year', the minister said the state aims to position itself prominently on national and international tourism maps.

To strengthen tourism infrastructure, ₹ 236 crore has been allocated for enhancing facilities in and around the Statue of Unity. The iconic site has emerged as a major global attraction and boosted local employment, particularly among tribal communities, the finance minister said.

The government also proposed ₹ 300 crore for the Ambaji Corridor Masterplan to ensure holistic development of the Ambaji pilgrimage centre. In addition, ₹ 447 crore has been earmarked for building iconic bus stations at Somnath and Ambaji, and for constructing a multi-modal transport hub at Somnath.

Other allocations include ₹ 60 crore for developing Somnath and Shivrajpur Beach as world-class tourist destinations and promoting tourism in the Visavada-Porbandar region. An amount of ₹ 95 crore has been proposed for tourism promotion initiatives, including the training of 1,000 tourist guides and development of facilities at heritage sites.

The minister said Gujarat's rich heritage, from the White Rann of Kutch to Somnath, Gir and the Sun Temple, offers immense potential to attract domestic and international visitors. Special campaigns such as "Wed in Gujarat" will also be launched to promote the state as a wedding destination.

Highlighting urban development in support of tourism and sports infrastructure, the Budget proposed ₹ 16,116 crore under the Swarnim Jayanti Mukhyamantri Shaheri Vikas Yojana, marking a 17 per cent increase over the previous allocation.

The minister said the government remains committed to building world-class infrastructure to support economic growth while promoting Gujarat's cultural and sporting aspirations on the global stage. (PTI)

# MP Budget 2026-27: ₹ 4.38 lakh crore outlay; ₹ 1.27 lakh crore for women's schemes



**BHOPAL, Feb 18:** Madhya Pradesh Finance Minister Jagdish Devda on Wednesday tabled the state's "women-centric" budget for 2026-27 with an outlay of ₹ 4,38,317 crore, and said no new taxes would be imposed.

Devda presented the Mohan Yadav government's third consecutive budget amid interruptions from the Opposition, which raised concerns over the mounting debt burden on the people of the state. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav later described the budget as the fulfilment of his government's commitment to development.

In his nearly 90-minute speech, the finance minister said the budget is framed on the model "GYANII - Garib Kalyan (poor), Yuva Shakti (youth), Annadata (farmers), Nari Shakti (women empowerment), Infrastructure and Industry".

Allocations of about 3 lakh crore have been made for these areas, he said. Ensuring justice for every woman is the government's objective, and providing employment to the youth is its resolve, he asserted.

Devda announced provisions of ₹ 1,27,555 crore for women welfare schemes, including self-help groups and the Ujjwala Yojana. He said 5,700 hostels would be constructed for working women.

The budget has provisioned ₹ 23,883 crore for the

'Ladli Behna Yojana' under which over 1.25 crore women receive monthly assistance of ₹ 1,500 each. The government has so far disbursed ₹ 52,304 crore under the programme launched in 2023.

Referring to the "rolling budget" provision introduced for the first time for carrying forward funds to the next fiscal, Devda said, "Unlike traditional budgets, this approach extends planning beyond a single financial year. It signals a move towards predictable, adaptive, and growth-oriented budgeting, aligned with long-term development priorities."

Explaining the framework, he said the rolling budget is revised periodically to reflect changing economic conditions, policy outcomes, and fiscal realities. "Each year, the budget rolls forward by adding another year to the planning horizon," he said.

Through the budget, the government has made a special provision of ₹ 3,600 crore for the mega religious event Simhastha Kumbh to be held in Ujjain in 2028.

An allocation of ₹ 40,062 crore has been proposed for the Panchayat and Rural Development Department.

Devda announced that 15,000 teachers would be recruited, while milk in tetra packs would be provided for free to children up to Class 8 in government schools.

He said the budget proposes no new taxes in the state. The finance minister announced an allocation of ₹ 10,428 crore for the rural employment guarantee scheme 'G RAM G' and ₹ 900 crore for the PM Janman scheme, which is dedicated to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

He also announced that 1 lakh farmers would be provided with solar pumps.

Besides, a provision of ₹ 1,335 crore has been proposed for the Labour Department, ₹ 12,690 crore for road repairs and ₹ 4,454 crore for the Jal Jeevan Mission. (PTI)

# EC officials flouting SC directives, issuing instructions on WhatsApp, alleges TMC's Abhishek

**KOLKATA, Feb 18:** Hitting out at the Election Commission, senior TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee on Wednesday alleged that poll officials were continuing to flout Supreme Court directives by issuing directions to their subordinates through WhatsApp during the SIR exercise in West Bengal.

Sharing purported screenshots of a WhatsApp group chat on X, Banerjee said SC has repeatedly emphasised transparency, due process, and adherence to official channels of communication. "Yet we are witnessing instructions being circulated over WhatsApp rather than through formal, traceable, and accountable mechanisms," he said.

He also questioned instructions sent by Special Roll Observer (SRO) C Murugan directly to micro observers.

"Even more disturbing are credible reports of Special Roll Observer, C Murugan, issuing instructions regarding the acceptability of birth certificates directly to micro observers in a WhatsApp group, to inflate deletion numbers. Need I remind the ECI of the Supreme Court's categorical directive that the role of micro-observers must remain strictly assistive?" he said.

Banerjee, the TMC national gen-

eral secretary and considered number 2 in the party, questioned why the statutory procedure was being "bypassed" and under whose instructions it was being done.

He also alleged that login credentials of roll observers linked to specific districts were being accessed centrally from Kolkata and "misused".

"Login Data is being misused to generate queries and specifically target a certain community at the direction of ECI's political masters in Delhi. Should this matter be independently examined, it will be established that the tower location and IP address of the login device differ from the actual location of the concerned roll observer," he claimed.

The Diamond Harbour MP said his party would take up the matter before the Supreme Court, which was hearing multiple petitions against the SIR exercise, including one moved by Chief Minister Manu Banerjee.

He said, "The Election Commission derives its legitimacy from PUBLIC TRUST, not POLITICAL PATRONAGE. We shall pursue this matter before the highest court of law. Further, any person aligning themselves with or acting at the behest of Zamindars of Delhi will face stringent and uncompromising legal action. Brace yourselves!"

The allegations were levelled less than 24 hours after the CM tore into the poll body, calling it a "Tughlaqui commission", and accused it of acting at the behest of the BJP to manipulate the voters' lists in the state.

Echoing Banerjee's statements, the TMC took to X and alleged that EC flouted the apex court directions to provide undue advantage to the BJP ahead of the upcoming state polls.

The party maintained that the SRO's instructions on panchayat-issued birth certificates were "patently unlawful".

"Gram Panchayats function as statutory Registrars of Births and Deaths in rural India. Any UNLATERAL instruction to discard such legally valid documents, is ARBITRARY, ILLEGAL, and WITHOUT AUTHORITY," the party stated.

"If @ECISVEEP retains even an iota of credibility, it must answer these serious questions transparently and immediately. A constitutional body cannot afford to function as a POLITICAL BACK OFFICE," it added.

Responding to the allegations, the BJP said it was a "last ditch and hopeless" attempt by the TMC to derail the SIR exercise in the state. (PTI)

# Country's federalism needs 'structural reset,' says Stalin

**CHENNAI, Feb 18:** Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin on Wednesday proposed an amendment to the Constitution to strengthen federalism at the Centre and state autonomy, calling for a "structural reset" of the country's federalism.

Tabling the first part of Justice Kurian Joseph committee report on Centre-state relations in the Tamil Nadu Assembly, he said federalism was about trust and autonomy.

"India's federalism needs a structural reset. If we wish, we can again amend the Constitution. Meaningful federalism is not about control, but about trust, autonomy, and governance that responds to people's realities," Stalin, the ruling DMK president, said.

In 1967, DMK founder and late Chief Minister C N Annadurai observed that the Union must indeed be strong enough to maintain the sovereignty and integrity of India.

His successor, the late M Karunanidhi, advanced this philosophy through the maxim, "Autonomy for States, and Federalism at the Centre" and in 1969 established the first independent committee on Union-State Relations under Justice P V Rajamannar, he recalled. Stalin said the DMK follows the policy of autonomy in the states and federalism at the Centre.

States, he said, still struggled to get rights from the Centre and had to depend on the union government for everything. "How long will we be in a place where the union government gives and we receive," he asked and said the report was like "belling the cat."

"Today is the day we take the initiative to amend the Constitution to ensure that state governments are vested with all necessary powers," Stalin said.

The country would prosper only if the states developed and both were "partners" (in governance) and not "competitors". State autonomy will be the only "remedy against oppression," he contended.

Pointing out that the Indian Constitution has been amended 106 times in the last 76 years, he said, "If we wish, we can amend the Indian Constitution again."

The Justice Kurian Joseph committee on Centre-State relations, constituted on April 15, 2025, submitted its first report to the CM on February 16. (PTI)

# INDIA bloc must address leadership issue: Sena (UBT) targets Congress

**MUMBAI, Feb 18:** The Shiv Sena (UBT) on Wednesday said the question of leadership change in the Opposition INDIA bloc has resurfaced and can't be ignored, asserting that it has to be seen who will helm the alliance, in an apparent dig at the Congress.

The Uddhav Thackeray-led party referred to voices from disgruntled Congress members and those associated with the UPA dispensation, who suggested that the INDIA bloc leadership should be given to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee or Tamil Nadu CM K Stalin.

"The decision has to be taken on Mamata, Stalin or someone else," an editorial in the Sena (UBT) mouthpiece 'Saamana' said.

Instead of waking up when elections are announced and talking about the Opposition alliance, it is necessary to hold discussions among its partners and take decisions consciously, it opined.

The Congress has been helming the INDIA bloc, a coalition of Opposition parties formed before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections to counter the ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

"The issue of change in the leadership of the INDIA bloc has again come to the fore. What happened to the India bloc after the Lok Sabha polls? This question is before many. But has this question come to Congress's mind?" the editorial in 'Saamana' asked.

In West Bengal, the Congress is fighting against the Trinamool Congress (led by Banerjee). In Kerala, the Congress is against the Left. In Maharashtra, the Congress chose to contest independently in the recent civic body polls, which benefited the BJP, it noted. (PTI)

# Mayawati dismisses reports of BSP contesting 2027 polls in alliance as 'fake news'

**LUCKNOW, Feb 18:** BSP president Mayawati on Wednesday trashed as "fake news" reports that her party would contest the 2027 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections in alliance with other parties, asserting that it will fight the polls on its own strength.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister in a press briefing alleged that such reports were being spread with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) to mislead people.

"It is absolutely wrong, false, baseless and fabricated news. These discussions are being deliberately circulated to misguide the public," she said, adding that political leaders as well as sections of the media should avoid indulging in such speculation.

Mayawati also took an indirect swipe at the AI Summit being held in Delhi.

"Instead of awakening the country and the world to the bitter realities concerning larger national and public interest and thereby strengthening democracy and the Constitution, there are self-serving discussions these days projecting artificial intelligence as the key to success.

"Amid such discourse, sections of the media are also, on one pretext or another, spreading talk that the BSP will contest the upcoming Uttar Pradesh Assembly

elections in alliance. This is absolutely false."

Mayawati said she has repeatedly announced that the BSP will contest elections independently and recalled that she had made a public declaration in this regard at a mega rally held in Lucknow on October 9, 2025, on the death anniversary of party founder Kanshi Ram.

"After nationwide discussions on that announcement, there remains no scope for any confusion. Yet some people and certain media sections are engaged in a malicious campaign to spread false news. This is an anti-BSP tactic and people need not pay attention to it," she said. The BSP chief alleged that the Congress, Samajwadi Party and Bharatiya Janata Party have a "narrow mindset" and are opposed to the ideology of BR Ambedkar, and any talk of alliance with the BSP is driven by electoral self-interest.

"Alliance politics has only harmed the BSP in the past. Therefore, party workers are fully committed to contesting the 2027 Assembly elections alone with full dedication," she said.

Urging party workers not to be distracted by what she described as conspiracies by rival parties, Mayawati said the BSP should move ahead confidently and aim to form a full majority government in the state as it did in 2007. (PTI)

# RSS chief Bhagwat interacts with Lucknow University students amid protests by NSUI

**LUCKNOW, Feb 18:** RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on Wednesday interacted with students and research scholars at the University of Lucknow during his two-day visit to the city as demonstrations led by the Congress' student wing were held against his visit.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief met students, research scholars and members of the academic community at the university as part of the organisation's centenary outreach initiative, sources said. The interaction, his first of the day, concluded in the afternoon.

Ahead of the programme, members of the National Students' Union of India (NSUI), the student wing of the Congress, staged a protest against Bhagwat's visit to the campus.

NSUI's Uttar Pradesh vice president Ahmed Raza Khan told PTI the protest was

against the RSS chief's arrival at the university.

He alleged that the RSS has contributed to "polarisation" in society and said that the visit of its chief to a university known for promoting secular values and traditions "was not appropriate".

Khan, who participated in the protest, said that five others who joined him were taken into custody by the police.

A police officer told PTI that the detainees were taken to the local Hasanganj police station where they were detained briefly as a precautionary measure to maintain law and order.

The official said the detainees would be released after the RSS chief's programme concluded. Bhagwat's visit to the university comes amid an ongoing debate over the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s new regulations.



The Supreme Court on January 29 had stayed the recent UGC equity regulations on preventing caste-based discrimination on campuses, saying the framework is "prima facie vague", can have "very sweeping consequences" and may end up dividing society with a "dangerous impact".

Lucknow University had also witnessed massive protests against the proposed regulations in recent weeks, making Bhagwat's

interaction with students particularly noteworthy.

Later in the evening, Bhagwat is scheduled to interact with working professionals and prominent citizens at the Indira Gandhi Pratishthan as part of the second programme of the day, sources added.

Earlier, addressing a 'social harmony' meeting at Saraswati Shishu Mandir in Nirala Nagar on Tuesday, Bhagwat said that "everyone must abide by the law" while responding to a query on the UGC guidelines issue. Referring to the controversy surrounding the recently stayed UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, he said if any law is found to be flawed, there is a constitutional mechanism to amend it.

"Law has to be followed by all. If a law is wrong, there are ways to change it," he said, adding that caste should not become a

cause of conflict in society.

He stressed that a sense of belonging and harmony in society can prevent such disputes. "Those who have been left behind must be helped to rise. All are ours. The world progresses through coordination, not conflict," Bhagwat said.

The RSS chief also called for greater unity and organisation within the Hindu society, expressing concern over declining population growth among Hindus and alleged instances of forced or inducement-based religious conversions.

He said efforts should be made to bring back those who wish to return to the Hindu fold.

Bhagwat further said families should be encouraged to have at least three children, citing studies that suggest societies with fertility rates below replacement levels face long-term decline. (PTI)

# PM meets president of Spain, PM of Finland; says India-EU FTA ushers in golden era

## Newborn's death: Govt doctor suspended, expert team constituted to probe

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday held separate meetings with President of Spain Pedro Sánchez and Prime Minister of Finland Petteri Orpo, and said the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has ushered in a golden era in India-Europe relations.



Prime Minister Modi and President Sánchez held bilateral talks and reviewed the entire gamut of India-Spain relations, including trade and investment, technology, infrastructure, climate and renewable energy, defence and security, space, culture, tourism and people-to-people exchanges, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said in an official statement.

Modi said he had a productive meeting with President Pedro Sánchez and discussed ways to boost the India-Spain friendship, especially in areas such as defence, security and technology.

"Our nations are marking 2026 as the India-Spain Year of Culture, Tourism and AI. This will deepen people-to-people linkages. Glad to see a big delegation of Universities also come to India. This, too, will go a long way in connecting our people."

"The historic FTA with the EU will have a very positive impact on the economic partnership with Spain and provide new opportunities to the people of our nations," Modi said in a post on X.

India and the European Union on January 27 sealed the landmark FTA -- billed as the "mother of all deals" -- to create a market of 2 billion people.

President Sánchez said that alongside Prime Minister Modi, he noted the excellent state of relations between Spain and India, which the two will continue to strengthen.

"I have congratulated him on the organisation of the Summit on the Impact of Artificial Intelligence. We share the need to continue taking steps towards an AI that puts people at the centre," Sánchez said in a post on X in Spanish.

industrial collaboration based on co-development and co-production as the way forward.

The Spanish president is here at the invitation of PM Modi on an official visit from February 18 to 19.

Sánchez highlighted the importance of the summit and expressed confidence that its outcomes would contribute meaningfully to shaping global AI governance.

According to the statement, Modi and Sánchez recognised AI as a transformative force and underlined the need for closer India-Spain cooperation to leverage its potential for inclusive development and societal benefit.

They also discussed the potential of cooperation in the field of education, especially in light of India's New Education Policy. In this context, they welcomed the Conference of Vice-Chancellors of Indian universities and Rectors of Spanish universities, being held in New Delhi on February 19 and 20, the statement said.

Both leaders noted the continued impressive growth in two-way tourism which is contributing to greater economic activities in their respective countries and furthering people-to-people ties.

PM Modi invited leading Spanish universities and institutions, particularly in STEM and technology fields, to open campuses in India under the New Education Policy, the statement said.

Modi and Sánchez exchanged views on regional and global issues of mutual interest, including Spain's decision to join the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative.

They reiterated their strong condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and emphasised the need for strengthened international cooperation to combat terrorism, according to the statement.

This is the second official visit of Sánchez to India after his bilateral visit in October 2024. He is accompanied by Minister for Digital Transformation and Civil Service Oscar López Agueda and Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Luis Planas Puchades.

During his "extensive discussions" with his Finnish counterpart Petteri Orpo, PM Modi thanked him for his personal support to the India-EU FTA, which "ushers in a golden era" in India-Europe relations.

"India and Finland aim to double trade, thus giving a strong boost to economic linkages. We also talked about enhancing cooperation in futuristic technologies like 6G, innovation, clean energy, biofuels, circular economy and more," Modi said in another post on X.

According to another statement issued by the PMO, Modi and Orpo welcomed the recent conclusion of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement during the 16th India-EU Summit, which will serve as a catalyst for shared progress and prosperity. They committed to continuing efforts to further enhance bilateral relations in the spirit of the India-EU Strategic Partnership.

The leaders underscored the pivotal role of digitalisation and sustainability in driving future economic growth and development. (PTI)

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Feb 18:** The Kerala government on Wednesday suspended a consultant doctor at a state-run hospital here following allegations of the death of a newborn after a C-section delivery.

Dr Bindhu Sundar, who had been serving as a consultant at the gynaecology department of the district hospital at nearby Nedumangad, was suspended pending inquiry.

The disciplinary action was taken in view of allegations of medical negligence with regard to the death of a newborn on Tuesday and bribery charges circulated through visual media, according to a government order.

She has been placed under suspension with immediate effect, subject to a detailed inquiry and disciplinary proceedings, it said.

Earlier in the day, state Health Minister Veena George ordered the transfer of Dr Sundar from Nedumangad Hospital pending inquiry and to constitute an expert panel of doctors to carry out a thorough probe into the death of the child.

On the directions of the minister, a team of specialist doctors from the SAT Hospital was constituted to conduct the probe, an official statement said here.

The team comprises experts from the departments of paediatrics, gynaecology and anaesthesiology, it said, adding that they have been instructed to submit an urgent report to the government on Wednesday itself.

The Nedumangad hospital has been witnessing intense protests of various political parties and local people since Tuesday evening following the death of the newborn after the baby was taken out through the C-Section procedure.

The family of the deceased child alleged that negligence on the part of the doctor was the reason for the child's death.

They also alleged that they had given bribes to the doctor ahead of the delivery.

Earlier in the day, the Kerala Government Medical Officers' Association (KGMOA) demanded strict legal action against those who allegedly attacked doctors and created unrest at the Nedumangad district hospital.

In a statement, the district unit of the KGMOA said the death of the newborn was "deeply painful and unfortunate", but condemned what it termed as violence and "mob trial" targeting the hospital superintendent and the District Medical Officer.

Describing the incident as "unacceptable in a democratic society", the association announced that February 18 would be observed as a protest day in the capital district.

The KGMOA said that healthcare workers were striving round the clock to provide quality treatment despite severe manpower shortages and limited infrastructure.

Therefore, portraying doctors as criminals over medical complications that may arise during treatment and publicly humiliating them was condemnable, it said.

It demanded that stringent legal action be taken under the Kerala Healthcare Service Persons and Healthcare Service Institutions (Prevention of Violence and Damage to Property) Act against those who allegedly created a tense atmosphere in the hospital and attacked doctors. (PTI)

Referring to a recent committee report, the government has ordered a probe into the death of a newborn after a C-section delivery at a state-run hospital in Kerala. The report, submitted by a committee of experts, found that the death was due to medical negligence and bribery. The government has suspended the consultant doctor involved and constituted an expert panel to probe the incident. The panel is expected to submit a report soon.

## Global equity: Swiss President Parmelin backs India's push to democratize AI for all nations



**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Switzerland fully supports India's efforts to democratize artificial intelligence and welcomes the AI Impact summit's focus to ensure that the potential of the critical technologies must benefit every nation, Swiss President Guy Parmelin said on Wednesday.

In an interview to PTI, Parmelin backed cross-border flow of data saying it is crucial to exploit the potential benefits from digital technologies like artificial intelligence but at the same time pitched for a set of principles and rules to protect data sovereignty of nations.

Switzerland is likely to host the next edition of the AI summit.

"Switzerland very much welcomes the focus of the AI Impact summit, which is to work towards making sure that everyone in the world can benefit from the potential of AI, and that no one is left behind," Parmelin said.

"The principles established by the summit in India in this regard provide useful guidance, and the structures for voluntary cooperation established in New Delhi provide structure that can help us achieve this goal," he said.

The Swiss president is among around 20 global leaders attending the ongoing AI Impact summit in New Delhi that is largely being seen

as an evolving international goal to strengthen cooperation on the governance, safety, and societal impact of artificial intelligence.

He also addressed concerns over possible impact of AI on developing countries especially on challenges to protect their labour markets from 'AI-driven dumping'.

"When AI significantly reduces production costs in high-wage countries, exports can become so cheap that they put pressure on labour markets in developing countries, even without classic dumping," Parmelin said.

"Such shocks can be mitigated through trade policy. Clear investigation procedures and sunset clauses are important in order to avoid the implementation of harmful, permanent protection measures," he noted.

The Swiss president, delving into the debate on 'data sovereignty' laws versus the concept of 'free flow of data', pitched for rules that can create fair conditions for all stakeholders in the global AI landscape.

"Switzerland is convinced that international cooperation and the cross-border flow of data are crucial for us all if we want to benefit from the potential that digital technologies like AI offer," he said.

"In order for this to work, we need a set of principles and rules that help us to respect each other's sovereignty and that create the necessary trust and fair conditions for all to participate," Parmelin said. Switzerland is willing to work constructively to build a trustworthy framework for AI.

At the same time, he said AI cannot be "regulated" by one single instrument, but there is a need to develop a governance framework consisting of many instruments covering different aspects of the development and use of AI.

"Switzerland is therefore actively

contributing to the development of technical standards for AI, of binding and nonbinding legal instruments, like the recommendations of UNESCO or the Global Partnership on AI (GPAI) and the Council of Europe framework convention on AI, which has been elaborated among 55 countries from all around the world and is the first binding international treaty on AI," he said in the email interview.

"But we also need societal and cultural norms that guide us when using AI in our specific contexts."

The Swiss president said Switzerland "fully share and support India's and other countries' efforts to democratize AI".

"Switzerland has created an initiative to share and pool computing resources across countries and stakeholders that have limited resources in the 'International Computation and AI Network' (ICAIN)."

Just a few months ago, the Swiss AI research community presented the 'apertus' language model which has been trained in over a thousand languages and will help many cultures with fewer resources and data to develop their own language models, appropriate for their own needs, Parmelin said.

On broader India-Switzerland ties, he said relations between the two countries are "excellent".

"There is potential for growth in various areas, and my visit also serves to explore these opportunities. Our economic relations are based on complementary industrial strengths, which allow Switzerland and India to cooperate very effectively," he said.

"Switzerland mainly exports machinery, pharmaceutical and chemical products, precision instruments, medical technology, and watches, while importing chemicals, textiles, electronics, and other industrial goods from India," he added. (PTI)

## Grabbing breasts, pulling pyjama string is 'attempt to rape': SC

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** The Supreme Court has ruled that grabbing of breasts and pulling the pyjama string amount to "attempt to rape", setting aside a controversial Allahabad High Court order which said these were only "preparation to commit rape". A bench of Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and N V Anjaria said the impugned order was liable to be set aside on account of the "patently erroneous application of the settled principles of criminal jurisprudence".

The court passed the order on February 10 on a suo motu plea in which it had taken cognisance of the Allahabad High Court order, which stated that mere grabbing of the breasts and pulling the string of a pyjama did not amount to the offence of rape. While setting aside the HC judgement, the top court restored the original stringent charge of attempt to rape against two accused under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

"The facts alleged being so, we cannot agree with the finding of the High Court that the allegations only amount to preparation, but not an attempt, towards the commission of the offence of rape."

"The attempt made by the accused persons appears clearly and inevitably leads us to conclude that, prima facie, a case for invoking the provisions of attempt to commit rape has been made out by the complainant and the prosecution. The impugned judgement, thus, is liable to be set aside on account of the patently erroneous application of the settled principles of criminal jurisprudence," the bench said.

The apex court said a bare perusal of these allegations leaves no "modicum of doubt" that the case sought to be made out is that the accused persons proceeded with a pre-determined intent to commit an offence under Section 376 (rape) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). (PTI)

## Shankaracharya Temple, Devi museum, heli service among major decisions for Katra: J-K LG Sinha

**JAMMU, Feb 18:** Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Thursday laid the foundation stone of Adi Shankaracharya Temple and announced a series of major initiatives for the development of Katra, including the setting up of an International Museum of Goddess.

The foundation-laying ceremony comes nearly six decades after the Shankaracharya temple project was first conceived in 1967, the officials said.

This state-of-the-art temple is another ambitious project conceived under the leadership of the governor, after a museum of goddesses comprising replicas and representations of major 'devi' pilgrimage sites from across India, which is also proposed to come up at Katra, the base camp of Mata Vaishno Devi in Reasi district.

During the ceremony, Sinha said Adi Shankaracharya undertook a cross-country visit and set up four mathas. "He also visited Jammu and Kashmir. A temple of Shankaracharya situated in Srinagar in Kashmir is being visited by hundreds of pilgrims."

"Now, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board, the district administration and residents have collectively decided to construct a grand temple dedicated to Adi Shankaracharya. A temple for the local deity will also be built," he added.

Sinha said that road infrastructure will be strengthened, and "There is also a proposal to renovate the Bhoomika temple and provide improved facilities for devotees."

The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has proposed the construction of the Shri Shankaracharya Ji temple along with an access road, associated public utilities and 50 commercial shops for the landowners, at an estimated cost of Rs 31.51 crore, the officials said.

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, who revived the project, said that it will give a boost to pilgrim footfall in the region.

"The concept for the construction of the Shri Shankaracharya Ji temple was originally conceived in 1967. During 2025, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB) and the concerned landowners was executed," the officials said.

The temple will come up on 41 kanals of land donated by the landowners for the construction of a motorable access track and creation of essential pilgrim amenities, including toilets and water points, at the proposed site, they added.

Highlighting key decisions taken in a recent board meeting, the governor said an International Museum of Goddess Devi will be established in Katra.

"A light and sound show, on the lines of the shows at Somnath Temple and the Statue of Unity, will also be developed to offer an enhanced spiritual and cultural experience to devotees visiting the town," he said.

The LG said that many pilgrims visiting the shrine face difficulties in travelling to the Shiv Khori shrine for darshan of Lord Bholenath.

"To address this, the Shiv Khori Shrine Board and the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board have jointly decided to operationalise helicopter services between Katra and Shiv Khori," he said.

Sinha said that the helipad at Katra is in the final stage of construction and a similar facility at Shiv Khori is also nearing completion.

Sinha expressed hope that heli services from Katra to Shiv Khori will commence within the next three months, enabling pilgrims to visit both shrines conveniently. (PTI)

## COP30 objectives align with Mumbai Climate Week initiative: UNFCC official

**MUMBAI, Feb 18:** A few objectives from the UN Conference of the Parties (COP) that align with Mumbai Climate Week are the ideas that the climate agenda needs to be connected to people, especially the most vulnerable, and accelerating climate-action agreements through engagement with all stakeholders, a COP30 official said.

In an interview to PTI Videos at the Mumbai Climate Week (MCW), Chief Strategy and Alignment Officer for the COP30 Presidency, Túlio Andrade, stated that the opening plenary session carried a strong message that the climate transition is not only here to stay but is also a defining future trend, something also reflected at COP30.

"There are two objectives from COP30 that we think align with Mumbai Climate Week. First, the idea that the climate agenda needs to be connected to people, especially the most vulnerable, to combat poverty and hunger. Second, accelerating climate-action agreements through engagement with businesses, the private sector, financial centres, and other stakeholders," Andrade told PTI.

MCW, a three-day programme (Feb 17-19), is aimed at finding out

climate solutions centred around the Global South region and its economies.

Speaking about Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's visit to India after the AI summit, he said that announcements around merging the climate and digital transitions into a "single revolution" can be expected.

"Both countries played key roles at COP30. The goal is to accelerate climate action, including digital public infrastructure, and how these systems and AI can speed up climate action while reaching people on the ground. We expect announcements around merging the climate and digital transitions into a single revolution," Andrade, who also served as the head for climate negotiation at Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told PTI.

He further highlighted that the sustainable biofuel agenda is a key connection between India and Brazil, as it is a major driver in transitioning away from fossil fuels.

When asked about the challenges around such joint efforts between the two nations, he mentioned the perceived dilemma between food and energy production, and the misconception that biofuels are not sustainable. (PTI)

## Climate change adversely impacting world's coffee supply, new analysis finds

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Climate change is adversely impacting the world's major coffee-growing regions with high temperatures reducing the harvests and contributing to higher prices of the popular beverage, according to a new report.

Coffee is one of the most sought-after non-alcoholic beverages in the world, with an estimated 2.2 billion cups consumed every day. In the United States alone, at least two-thirds of adults drink coffee daily.

According to an analysis by Climate Central, a not-for-profit group of scientists and communicators who research and report the facts about the changing climate and how it affects people's lives, the world's coffee supply is under growing pressure and climate change is playing a significant role.

Climate Central analysed temperatures from 2021 to 2025 and compared them to a hypothetical world without carbon pollution using the climate shift index. The analysis calculated the additional number of days per year that climate change pushed temperatures above the coffee-harming threshold of 30 degrees Celsius across the major coffee-producing countries.

"When temperatures rise above this threshold, coffee plants experience heat stress that can reduce yield, affect bean quality and increase the vulnerability of plants to disease. Together, these impacts can reduce the supply and quality of coffee and contribute to higher prices globally," the report said.

It noted that smaller harvests and higher



prices hit smallholder farmers the hardest. "Smallholder farmers account for about 80 per cent of global producers and about 60 per cent of global supply but (they) received just 0.36 per cent of the financing needed to adapt to the impacts of climate change in 2021. The average cost of adaptation for a one-hectare farm is USD 2.19 a day -- less than the price of a cup of coffee in many countries," the report further said.

The top five coffee-producing countries -- Brazil, Vietnam, Colombia, Ethiopia, and Indonesia -- are responsible for roughly 75 per cent of the global coffee supply. The report noted that these five countries now experience coffee-harming heat for more than 144 days of the year on average.

"Without the influence of climate change, there would be about 57 fewer days each year with such heat. Changes to rainfall patterns can further stress coffee plants. "Adequate and consistent rain is crucial for their growth. Annual rainfall totals between 59 and 79 inches are optimal and droughts can reduce harvests," the report said.

heat, changes rainfall patterns, and shrinks the land area that can be cultivated, farmers are forced to adapt.

"Most coffee growers are smallholders (farming less than about 12 acres of land) who may rely on this one crop for their livelihoods, making them particularly vulnerable to the agricultural impacts of climate change. Changing conditions threaten the amount of land available for coffee production."

"Land suitable for coffee farming may decrease by 50 pc by 2050 without adequate adaptation. The future range for coffee cultivation may migrate due to climate change. Current coffee-growing regions may become too warm over time, especially for heat-sensitive arabica," the report said.

The analysis pointed out that regions previously unsuitable for coffee farming, because of elevation and temperatures, may become better-suited in a warming world.

"While this could open economic opportunities in new areas, it could also result in deforestation as farmers pursue farmland at higher (cooler) elevations suitable for coffee cultivation. Sustainable agricultural practices can help farmers balance productivity with climate resilience."

"Planting a taller tree canopy that shades coffee plants can protect them from harmful heat. Plants grown in full sun produce higher yields but coffee grown under the shade of native trees has additional ecological benefits of providing wildlife habitat (especially for birds) and enriching soil," it said. (PTI)

# AS A WOMAN IN INDIA, YOU CARRY A SENSE OF THIS TRAUMA

In the upcoming film "Assi", actor Kani Kusru takes on the role of a rape survivor and she believes it is impossible to comprehend the trauma but she has tried to bring authenticity to it based on the collective reality that women face in India.

The Anubhav Sinha-directed movie follows Parima (Kusru), a married woman living in Delhi who is abducted and sexually assaulted by a group of men. The film tracks the traumatic aftermath, focusing on the police investigation and the subsequent legal battle. Actor Taapsee Pannu plays her lawyer.

"I don't think one can tap into the trauma (of a survivor) exactly. As an actor we tried to go closest to it and there can be moments you are probably in it because you are almost believing this has happened to you.

"But I'm not an actor who would fully go in like that, (because) then it will kind of affect you. I don't tend to do that," Kusru, who has garnered acclaim for her work in "All We Imagine as Light", "Biryani", and OTT series, "Maharani", told PTI.

The actor said it is a reality that one often encounters.

"As a woman growing up in this country from childhood to now, do I have a sense of such assaults or traumas? Yes, possibly I do

as my close people have gone through it. So, every now and then, this is one of the things that you are closely associated with even when you don't want it to be that way," she said.

The 40-year-old actor said the film allowed her to understand the nature of the legal system in India in such cases and added that often courtroom proceedings can reignite past pain.

Recalling her conversations with friends who are navigating similar cases and said,

"To get justice, you've to go through it (pain), so there is an absurdity and irony within the system, but that's how you get justice, you cannot forget it. In the film, there's also a line, 'They won't let you forget this'."

As for portraying the resilience of her character, Kusru said she relied on Sinha and writer Gaurav Solanki, who allowed her creative freedom while presenting a nuanced portrayal of a survivor.

"There are all kinds of survivors and everybody responds to it differently. I

watched the film a few days ago for the first time, and I'm contemplating, 'Is this the right way to say it? This interpretation of this particular survivor, is that the right way for this story?' I always think that I would like to watch a survivor who is a little stronger."

Acknowledging the emotional weight of the film, Kusru said her approach was to maintain a boundary from her role.

"I protect myself from the emotional journey of the character. Most of us are very sensitive. As an actor, I like to have this little detachment, unless

sometimes, some scenes are not working and my director is saying, then (I get into the character) to give in that feeling, to get the scene right," she said.

The real understanding of the film, Kusru said, came when she watched the final product recently, and described her reaction as one of surprise and admiration.

"In the script, you don't write descriptively, shot by shot, it's not needed. The ex-



perience is when I watch it. As an actor, I'm very clueless. I was impressed by the director and the editor, I'm like, 'Wow, they put this together, how this happened'. I'm like a child and I looked at it, and thought, 'I didn't think this was the rhythm'. I'm always amazed by cinema, like how it changes from script to this (screen)."

Actors Mohd Zeeshan Ayyub, Manoj Pahwa, Seema Pahwa, Kumud Mishra, and Revathy, round out the cast of "Assi", with special appearances by Naseeruddin Shah, Supriya Pathak, and Seema Pahwa.

The film is produced by T-Series and Sinha's own Benaras Mediaworks. (PTI)

**“ Kani Kusru on playing rape survivor in ‘Assi’ ”**

## ACTOR PRAVINA DESHPANDE DIES



Actor Pravina Deshpande, known for playing supporting characters in films such as "Ready", "Gabbar is Back" and "D Day", has died.

The actor's family shared the news in a post on her Instagram page, saying that Deshpande breathed her last on Tuesday.

"It is with great sadness that we inform you that Mrs Pravina Deshpande has left for her heavenly abode on 17th February 2026," the note read.

According to media reports, Deshpande died after a prolonged battle with blood cancer at the age of 60. She is survived by her husband and two children.

Deshpande worked extensively in Marathi theatre, shows and films. She gained wider recognition for her work in Hindi cinema.

Some of her popular shows and films were "Pariniti", "Avagat", "Ghar Ek Mandir", "Kumkum - Ek Pyara Sa Bandhan", "Ek Vilian", "Parmanu" The story of Pokhran, among others.

She was last seen in the Netflix series, "Taskare: The Smuggler's Web".

The Cine and TV Artists' Association (CINTAA), a trade union body of actors, wrote on X, "CINTAA expresses its condolences on the demise of Pravina Deshpande ji (member since 2008)."

Deshpande's colleagues from the film industry also took to social media to express grief.

"Beautiful person. She'd met me in 2017 to audition for our film. It was a very pleasant experience," filmmaker Aditya Kriplani said on X.

Actor Vaishnavi Dhanraj said, "May her soul rest in peace." (PTI)

## Screenwriter Salim Khan on ventilator support and stable, say doctors

Veteran screenwriter Salim Khan suffered a brain haemorrhage which has been tackled, is on ventilator support as a safeguard and stable, doctors treating him said on Wednesday, a day after he was admitted to the Lilavati Hospital here.

The 90-year-old, one half of the celebrated Salim-Javed duo which scripted films such as "Sholay", "Deewar" and "Don" with Javed Akhtar, is in the ICU and recovery might take some time given his age.

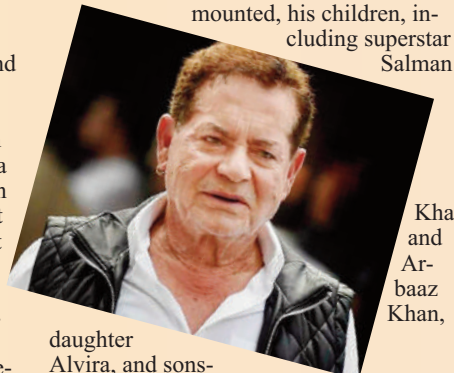
"His blood pressure was high for which we treated him and we had to put him on a ventilator because we wanted to do certain investigations. Now the ventilator was put as a safeguard so that his situation doesn't get worse. So it is not that he is critical," Dr Jalil Parkar told reporters.

"We did the investigations that were required and today we have done a small procedure on him, I will not go into the details. The procedure done is called DSA (digital subtraction angiography). The procedure has been accomplished, he is fine and stable and shifted back to ICU. By to-

morrow, we hope to get him off the ventilator. All in all, he is doing quite well," he added.

Asked whether he suffered a brain haemorrhage, the doctor said, "Unko thoda haemorrhage hua tha, which we've tackled. No surgery is required.

As concern over Khan's health mounted, his children, including superstar Salman



daughter Alvira, and sons-in-law Atul Agnihotri and Aayush Sharma, have been seen outside the hospital along with other well-wishers. His long-time partner Akhtar was also seen

coming out of the hospital.

Khan, a household name in the 70s and 80s, turned 90 on November 24 last year. It was the day Dharmendra, the star of many of his films, including "Sholay", "Seeta aur Geeta" and "Yaadon Ki Baraat", passed away.

Hailing from an affluent family in Indore, Khan arrived in Mumbai in his 20s with dreams of stardom. He was good looking and confident he would make a mark in the industry as an actor. But that did not happen. And then, after struggling for close to a decade and getting confined to small roles in films, he changed lanes.

He worked as an assistant to Abrar Alvi and soon met Akhtar to form one of Hindi cinema's most formidable writing partnerships. They worked together on two dozen movies with most of them achieving blockbuster status.

Other than "Sholay", "Deewar" and "Don", Khan and Akhtar also penned "Trishul", "Zanjeer", "Seeta Aur Geeta", "Haathi Mere Saathi", "Yaadon Ki Baraat" and "Mr India". (PTI)

## 'The Mandalorian and Grogu' to hit Indian theatres on May 22

The Mandalorian and Grogu, the new big-screen adventure from the iconic sci-fi franchise "Star Wars", will release in theatres in India on May 22, Disney-owned studio Lucasfilm has announced.

The movie will bring back two beloved characters from the smash hit series "The Mandalorian" -- Pedro Pascal's bounty hunter Din Djarin aka The Mandalorian and his young companion Grogu.

The studio on Tuesday evening unveiled an action-packed trailer for the film, which will open exclusively in Indian cinemas in English, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, a press release said.

Directed by Jon Favreau, the film stars Pascal in the lead role, alongside Sigourney Weaver and Jeremy Allen White.

Favreau is also producing the project with Kathleen Kennedy, Dave Filoni and Ian Bryce, while the music is composed by Ludwig Goransson.

Set in a galaxy still recovering from the collapse of the Empire, "The Mandalorian

and Grogu" follows a period where Imperial warlords remain scattered across space and the fledgling New Republic is working to protect the peace the Rebellion fought for.

Din Djarin and his apprentice Grogu are enlisted to take on new threats in this next chapter of their journey, according to the official logline.

"The Mandalorian" began as a live-action series for Disney+ in 2019 and quickly emerged as one of Lucasfilm's most successful "Star Wars" spin-offs.

Created by Favreau, the show follows the adventures of lone bounty hunter Din Djarin in the outer reaches of the galaxy after the fall of the Empire and introduced Grogu, the Force-sensitive child who became a global pop culture phenomenon.

"The Mandalorian and Grogu" is positioned as a major theatrical event for the franchise. It will be followed by filmmaker Shawn Levy's "Star Wars: Starfighter", which will feature Hollywood star Ryan Gosling in the lead role. (PTI)

# JAVIER BARDEM, TILDA SWINTON AMONG ARTISTS CRITICISING BERLINALE FOR SILENCE ON GAZA



More than 80 current and former participants of the Berlinale, including Javier Bardem, Tilda Swinton and Adam McKay have signed an open letter condemning the festival's "silence" on Gaza.

It comes after the film festival was swept up in what it called a "media storm" over the alleged sidelining of political discourse at the event.

The row was triggered by a remark from the jury president, Wim Wenders, in the opening press conference that film-makers "should stay out of politics" in response to questions related to the Israel-Gaza conflict and the German government's support for Israel.

A backlash, including the withdrawal of Indian author Arundhati Roy from the event, led to festival director, Tricia Tuttle, issuing a statement defending film-makers and actors who were increasingly being pressed on political and societal is-

ssues during press conferences.

"Artists are free to exercise their right of free speech in whatever way they choose," Tuttle said. "Artists should not be expected to comment on all broader debates about a festival's previous or current practices over which they have no control. Nor should they be expected to speak on every political issue raised to them unless they want to."

But on Tuesday, major figures in the industry accused the Berlinale of "censoring" artists who have spoken out, Variety reported.

The signatories, which also include Angeliki Papoulia, Saleh Bakri, Tatiana Maslany, Peter Mullan and Tobias Menzies, as well as directors Mike Leigh, Lukas Dhont, Nan Goldin, Miguel Gomes and Avi Mograbi, said they "fervently disagree" with Wenders' views on film-making and politics. "You cannot separate one from another," they said, adding that the "tide is chang-

ing across the international film world".

They cited the refusal of more than 5,000 film workers, including several major Hollywood names, to work with "complicit Israeli film companies and institutions". The letter also noted that the Berlinale had made "clear statements" in the past about other "atrocities" including in Ukraine.

"We call on the Berlinale to fulfil its moral duty and clearly state its opposition to Israel's genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes against Palestinians, and completely end its involvement in shielding Israel from criticism and calls for accountability," they said.

Politically oriented questions at the Berlinale have dominated headlines and social media over the past week. High-profile guests questioned on political topics, often with limited connection to the films they were promoting, include US actor Neil

## POLLUTION DIP BRINGS FILM SHOOTS BACK TO DELHI



Film shoots return to the national capital as pollution levels eased with the receding winter. Authorities have received five applications on film shoots in January and February after getting none in December when air quality was "severe".

The applications were received under the Delhi Film Policy by the city's tourism department, with one project already beginning its shoot in the capital, an official told PTI.

Kartik Aaryan and Shreelila starrer Naagzilla received approval to shoot in key locations that include Connaught Place, parts of Delhi Metro Blue Line, Paharganj and stretches near Laxmi Nagar, he said.

Other applications also list similar locations such as Connaught Place, Chandni Chowk, and metro stations, the official added.

He also said Delhi is set to host its own film festival on March 25.

According to official, no applications were received in December, while three proposals came in between October and November. Prior to that, around 15 applications have been filed in total.

To attract more productions and promote the film policy, the Delhi Tourism and Transport Development Corporation has been participating in international and domestic industry events, including the Berlin Film Festival and WAVES, he mentioned.

Launched in 2022, the Delhi Film Policy offers a single-window clearance system that promises approvals for film shoots within 15 days, with DTDC acting as its nodal agency.

The Delhi government had allocated ₹3.01 crore last year for implementing the policy. Official said over 20 applications are expected to be received through the e-film clearance portal this year.

DTTDC also said efforts are underway to develop the animation, visual effects, gaming and comics segment, including plans to collaborate with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to set up a regional centre of the Indian Institute of Creative Technologies in Delhi.

Steps are also being planned to link Delhi's e-film clearance system with the ministry's India Cine Hub, alongside upgrading manpower and maintenance systems. Publicity material will be rolled out to raise awareness about the film policy, he added. (PTI)

Patrick Harris - who was asked whether cinema could fight fascism, UK star Rupert Grint - who was also asked about fascism, and Malaysian actor Michelle Yeoh - who was asked for her thoughts on the current state of the US.

Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello, who co-directed the music documentary The Ballad of Judas Priest, said: "What a time to be alive, where you can both make a documentary about one of your favourite bands and fight fascism at the same time" - to reported applause from the room of journalists.

Tuttle said there were "many different kinds of art, and many different ways of being political". Film-makers, she said, were being criticised "if they can not compress complex thoughts into a brief soundtrack when a microphone is placed in front of them when they thought they were speaking about something else". (AP)

# A cheating claim violated the 'spirit of curling' at the Olympics

**CORTINA D'AMPEZZO (ITALY), Feb 18:** First came the expletives. Then the allegations. Then the media glare and hilarious memes.

Global interest in curling surged over the past week when a cheating controversy erupted at the Winter Olympics, rocking a staid, 500-year-old sport known for its etiquette, manners and friendliness.

After a wild few days for curling featuring plenty of verbal jousting and a brief rule change, things have calmed down and both players and officials appear ready to move on with the medal games approaching.

"It's the Olympics," said Canadian curler Ben Hebert, whose team has been a central character in the controversy. "It'll be over in two weeks and everyone will go back to covering curling in four years."

Yet the headline-grabbing saga has highlighted some issues in a sport eager for exposure — and one slowly becoming more professional — but

maybe isn't ready for all the trappings that come with it.

Sweden crying foul over a rule infringement, an illegal double-touch by Canada's Marc Kennedy in the act of releasing his stone down the ice, called into question whether the so-called "spirit of curling" had been broken.

Curling, after all, has long been a tight-knit sport where players typically call their own fouls, shake hands at the end of a match and share a beer or two afterwards.

The Swedish and Canadian players have been long-time rivals but they're also friendly. Couldn't they just have dealt with this behind closed doors without all the bruising?

"That's where I think the spirit of curling is in a little bit of trouble," Kennedy said, "and honestly that's probably come from the quest for medals. But it's OK. It's all about the evolution of the sport. There's opportunity here as well, right? For the sport to really figure it out as we all go forward."



ward." It seems the top of the sport isn't quite ready for that.

There are no video replays in curling, unlike with sports like soccer, cricket and in the NFL, so officials aren't allowed to re-umpire decisions like the hog line violation apparently committed by Kennedy when he poked one of the granite stones with his outstretched finger after releasing it.

In response, curling's higher-ups first stationed umpires at the hog line to check for future fouls, but then reverted to the traditional practice of players policing themselves.

"We're trying to spread the word about our culture, and our culture is one based on integrity, and honor, and friendship," World Curling President Beau Welling told The Associated Press in a phone interview. "We live by this code — the spirit of curling — where you're expected to have honorable conduct on ice, but also off ice."

"Obviously, this has been tested a little bit this week. But, fundamentally, that's who we are," he said. "And I really don't see that changing."

Some might see this as sweeping the issue under curling's rug.

Yet this is the Olympic Games — it's serious business, being played out in front of curling's biggest audience.

"Curling needs to professionalize a little bit," Canada Curling CEO Nolan Thiessen told the AP

at the Cortina Curling Center. "If we want to be where we want to be as a sport, there's some steps we have to take, and some give and take probably. You know, having officials making subjective calls ... there's a lot of sports that have that. And we probably need to get there as opposed to, I think you did this' and Well, I don't think I did."

"We're trying," he added, "to find the right balance as a sport."

And so, the show goes on. The Olympics soon will be without Sweden's defending champion men's team, which was officially eliminated from semifinal contention on Tuesday after a sixth loss in seven matches in round-robin play.

"We maybe should have done something different and could have dealt with it differently," Sweden skip Niklas Edin said of what he described as a "horrible week."

Plenty of curling traditionalists will no doubt agree with that. (AP)

## Pacers give India Women confidence as they target T20 series triumph over Australia

**CANBERRA, Feb 18:** Aiming to establish an unassailable lead over Australia, Harmanpreet Kaur's India would draw confidence from a strong bowling performance in the rain-hit opening win when the two sides square off in the second and penultimate T20 International here on Thursday.

It was a commanding display from seamer Arundhati Reddy, whose four-wicket haul rattled the hosts and spearheaded a superb bowling effort as Australia were unable to bat out their 20 overs and were bundled out for a below-par 133.

The bowlers enjoyed a solid workout as the long series, also featuring three ODIs and a one off Test, unfolded.

On the batting front, only openers Smriti Mandhana and Shafali Verma managed meaningful time in the middle as rain played spoilsport and the match was decided by the Duckworth-Lewis System, leaving the rest of the batting unit potentially a touch under-prepared.

But given India's formidable batting line-up and the fact that most of the players featured in the recently-concluded Women's Premier League, there is little concern about a failure as they carry ample game time into the contest despite the rain-affected opener in Sydney.

India will once again bank on a



blazing start from Shafali, the standout performer in last year's World Cup final against South Africa, and Mandhana's charismatic batting, followed by Jemimah Rodrigues. Rodrigues singlehandedly knocked Australia out of the World Cup with a match-winning century under testing conditions in the semifinals.

With the Women's T20 World Cup in England later this year, the gruelling series here serves as the gruelling rehearsal for the global tournament, and clinching the three-match T20I rubber will give India

a crucial head-start against the world's most successful team.

The performance of pace-bowling stalwart Renuka Singh, who bowled four miserly overs and claimed two wickets, was encouraging.

Together with Arundhati, the duo accounted for six wickets -- a huge boost for India, which has traditionally relied on the spin duo of Deepti Sharma and Shree Charani for success.

Australia, led by new skipper Sophie Molineux, will be eager for revenge and to level the series. However, there would be immense

pressure on their star-studded top order featuring some of the biggest names in world cricket, including Beth Mooney, Phoebe Litchfield, Ellyse Perry, and Ashleigh Gardner.

The collective collapse of the home side's batting defies logic, with six players managing single-digit scores and Georgia Wareham topping the charts with just 30 runs.

While rain and wet conditions may have played a part in Sydney, Australia, renowned for thriving at home, produced a surprisingly disappointing performance.

Molineux will be eager to assert herself in the leadership role and prove herself as a worthy successor to the legendary Alyssa Healy.

**Teams :**

**Australia:** Sophie Molineux (c), Tahlia McGrath, Darcie Brown, Nicola Carey, Kim Garth, Grace Harris, Phoebe Litchfield, Beth Mooney, Ellyse Perry, Megan Schutt, Annabel Sutherland, Georgia Voll, Georgia Wareham.

**India:** Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smriti Mandhana, Bharti Fulmali, Kranti Gaud, Richa Ghosh (wk), Gunalan Kamalini, Amanjot Kaur, Shreyanka Patil, Sneha Rana, Arundhati Reddy, Renuka Singh, Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Deepti Sharma, Shree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma. Match starts 1:45pm (PTI)

## Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe to battle for group bragging rights



**COLOMBO, Feb 18:** Surprise package Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka will battle for bragging rights when they clash in a compelling T20 World Cup fixture here on Thursday, with both teams having already secured their spots in the Super 8s.

The outcome of this match will determine the group topper.

Sri Lanka have emerged as strong contenders, leveraging their knowledge of local conditions to defeat Oman and Ireland, while crushing Australia by eight wickets to establish themselves as a well-rounded side with the potential to go all the way.

Zimbabwe, on the other hand, claimed their spot in the Super 8s

thanks to their giant-killing win over Australia and the weather, as their match against Ireland was abandoned. By virtue of the shared points, they ended Australia's hopes of advancing, becoming the unlikely qualifiers.

Sri Lanka, led by Dasun Shanaka, are unlikely to relax despite already qualifying for the Super 8s, and will aim to maintain their winning momentum and top the group, which could give them a favourable match-up in the next stage.

The return to form of opener Pathum Nissanka, who struck a timely century to help Sri Lanka chase down a steep target set by Australia in the previous Group B

match, would have thrilled the Islanders, while the half-century of keeper-batter Kusal Mendis, who has been in sublime form with fifties in all three of Sri Lanka's games so far, added momentum to their campaign.

Opener Kusal Perera, however, has emerged as a weak link, scoring just a single in his first match of the tournament, continuing a run of poor form that has persisted since the T20 Tri-series in Pakistan last year.

"We played almost perfect batting innings. Pathum played one of the better T20 knocks that you'll see. And Kusal (Mendis) has been very consistent and he's been doing that for us again and again...we have good players and on a certain day if we play to our potential we can I think get any result that we are looking for," Sri Lanka batting coach Vikram Rathour said.

Sri Lanka will rely on their veteran right-arm pacer Dushmantha Chameera, who has been able to extract pace from the sluggish pitches, while Matheesa Pathirana, though not in the best of wicket-taking form, can still unsettle any batter with his unique bowling action.

Traditionally strong in spin, the Islanders boast a fully fit leg-spinner in Dushan Hemantha, alongside Maheesh Theekshana, who will provide ample support to the pacers. (PTI)

## Canada, Afghanistan face off in dead rubber

**CHENNAI, Feb 18:** Eliminated despite captivating the crowds with their resilience and spirited play, Afghanistan and Canada will square off in their final T20 World Cup fixture here on Thursday, seeking to finish on a high note and leave a lasting impression. Afghanistan wowed fans during the unforgettable double Super Over thriller against South Africa in Ahmedabad where they suffered a heartbreaking loss.

Canada were fuelled by the determination of teenager Yuvraj Samra, who captured the cricketing world's attention with his remarkable feat in Chennai, where he became the youngest ever to score a T20 century. In their bid to bow out on a high, Afghanistan skipper Rashid Khan will rely on his trusted top-order batters -- Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Ibrahim Zadran, and Gulbadin Naib -- who have yet to fire together in the World Cup, with their individual struggles being one of the key reasons for the team's failure to advance.

Gurbaz's explosive 42-ball 84 against South Africa and Naib's 63 against New Zealand were among the few bright sparks from the Afghan batting lineup, and the hope now is that they can click together against a Canadian side that plays on instincts and is powered by the youthful energy of players like Samra. (PTI)

## Norway's curlers wear funky pants at the Winter Olympics in a 'one-time' tribute

**CORTINA D'AMPEZZO (ITALY), Feb 18:** Norway's curlers were back wearing their funky pants at the Winter Olympics on Tuesday — but it might be a one-off.

The men's team's donned bold, diamond-printed trousers for its 7-4 loss to Sweden at Cortina Curling Center as a tribute to former Norway skip Thomas Ulsrud, who was part of the team that famously wore similarly outlandish attire at Winter Games in 2010, 2014 and 2018 in a break with tradition in a typically staid sport.

Ulsrud died of cancer in 2022. "We thought one game honoring the old team and wearing the full Norwegian outfit there on the ice would be just amazing," Norway skip Magnus Ramsfjell said.

"Thomas was an incredible guy, an incredible curler, and just a passion for curling and a passion for just everything I was interested in."

Norway's crazy curling pants first attracted attention at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver and they went viral, with even the Norwegian monarch, King Harald V, receiving a pair. They — the pants, not the curlers — quickly had a Facebook page that attracted nearly 700,000 followers.

Team Ulsrud wore them again for the following two Olympics.

This year's Norwegian team had worn classic curling pants previously in the men's competition, and they'll likely do so again for their remaining matches. Norway is tied for third



place with two round-robin games left in its bid to finish in top four and reach the semifinals.

"We haven't played in these too much, so we aren't super-comfortable in them," Norway curler Martin Sesaker said. "It was always meant to be a tribute, just a one-time thing."

"We have to do a discussion tonight and see if we are going to play the next couple of games with them. But most likely we're going back to the black pants that we're used to."

Ramsfjell said his team has just one set of funky pants, calling them the "originals they played with in Vancouver."

The team has talked about starting its own brand of trousers to get sponsorship and also bring more attention to curling.

"Then again, it was kind of their thing," Ramsfjell said of Ulsrud's team, "and I feel like it would be a bit taking what they earned and then taking it for ourselves. So, me personally, I would prefer not to do it. (AP)

## Madonna sends good luck message to American figure skater Amber Glenn



**MILAN, Feb 18:** It wasn't exactly a prayer that Madonna answered for American figure skater Amber Glenn.

More like a wish and a dream. Just before Glenn performed her short program at the Milan Cortina Olympics on Tuesday night, which is set to Madonna's song "Like a Prayer," she received a video from the "Queen of Pop" wishing her luck in the individual competition at the Winter

Games. Turns out that Madonna had seen a clip of Glenn performing to her song.

"I have to tell you, I was blown away by it," Madonna tells Glenn in the video. "You are an incredible skater. So strong, so beautiful, so brave. I can't imagine that you would not win. So I just want to say good luck. Go get that gold."

Glenn covered up her mouth in surprise while watching. "I'm in shock. I'm in complete shock," she said. "I'm legitimately shaking. Oh my God."

If the call from Madonna was a dream, the program later Tuesday night was a nightmare.

Glenn got off to a great start with a big triple axel and a solid combination pass, but she doubled up a triple loop near the end of the program, and that meant an invalid element and no points. The mistake was so costly that Glenn was left in 13th place going into the free skate on Thursday night, well out of contention for that gold medal.

Madonna wasn't the only big-name celebrity tossing her support behind Glenn and teammates Alysa Liu and Isabeau Levito, who had dubbed themselves the "Blade Angels." Pop superstar Taylor Swift provided the voice-over for an NBC spot highlighting them.

Liu had a much better short program and sat third behind Japan's Ami Nakai and Kaori Sakamoto. Levito was in eighth.

The issue of music rights became a big storyline for figure skaters during the Milan Cortina Games. Several had to frantically try to get approval for their program music at the last minute, and some were even forced to change their programs entirely.

Glenn was among those who had a problem. Her free skate is set to "The Return" by Seb McKinnon, who produces music under the name CLANN. He posted on social media that he was surprised to hear the song during Glenn's performance in the team competition, which helped the U.S. win the gold medal.

McKinnon said that Glenn did not have the proper permission to use the song, even though it has been a part of her program for the last two years. But the two spoke on the phone a couple of days later and managed to smooth everything out.

"I'm very honored that Amber chose my music for her routine, won gold no less!" McKinnon said. "I'm happy things were resolved amicably and that we both stand for the protection of artist rights."

The outspoken Glenn had been asked about music rights on the eve of the Olympics. She said at the time, "If I do get a message from Madonna saying she doesn't want me to skate to her music, I'll just be excited to get a message from Madonna."

Glenn ended up getting the best of both worlds.

"You are an icon and a legend forever," Glenn said in response to Madonna's video, "and thank you for supporting athletes in their artistic ventures, and I hope I can do the song justice. Thank you." (AP)

## Arundhati Reddy's four-wicket haul shows how hard-working she is: Aavishkar Salvi

**CANBERRA, Feb 18:** Pacer Arundhati Reddy's four-wicket haul in India's win in the first women's T20I against Australia was a reflection of her preparedness, said bowling coach Aavishkar Salvi here on Wednesday.

Arundhati claimed 4/22 to help India bowl Australia out for a mere 133 and win the contest by 21 runs via DLS Method in Sydney to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

"Arundhati is a very hard-working girl. She comes prepared for any of the tournaments that she comes into," Salvi told reporters on the eve of the second T20I here.

"To pick up those four wickets in a very important game, it was actually a pleasing thing for all of us because we know how hardworking she is."

"(In) the World Cup, she didn't get a game, (but) she was still preparing herself during the WPL. She got an opportunity and then come to Australia, she started off from where she left in the last Australia series when she got four wickets at Perth," said Salvi, recalling Arundhati's 4/26 at the WACA in third ODI in December 2024.

Australia were placed comfortably at 68/2 when Arundhati was introduced in the eighth over. She accounted for Phoebe Litchfield, Ellyse Perry, Georgia Wareham and Darcie Brown as the hosts were shot out for an under-par total.

"She was spot-on (with) the plans. She was very confident with what she wanted to achieve of that game. When she came into bowl, the run rate was a bit going at a brisk pace."

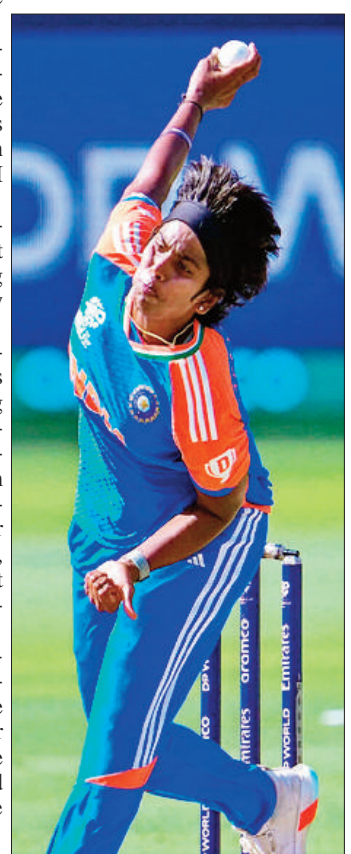
"She executed her plans so well and when she got four for 22, I was so happy for her," Salvi added.

Salvi said preparing well for the tour helped India get off to a winning start.

"That win in Sydney will be a confidence-booster for the entire team because we came early and prepared for the tour. There was prep at North Sydney. We played a game against Governor General and then we got an opportunity to play the 1st T20I," he said.

"... You come to Australia, have your practice sessions under your belt, and then you get an opportunity to play at the centre, (a) game against a proper competitive game against a competitive team."

"That gives us a chance to explore and experience, (and) execute (those) plans we wanted to execute into the main game," Salvi added. (PTI)



## Brevis, bowlers make short work of UAE

# SA finish group stage with all-win record

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Dewald Brevis warmed up nicely with some monstrous sixes as South Africa hardly broke sweat during a walk-in-the-park six-wicket victory over United Arab Emirates in their final group league fixture of the T20 World Cup here on Wednesday.

Chasing a target of 123, the Proteas romped home in 13.1 overs with Aiden Markram smashing 28 off 11 balls to set the stage for young Brevis who also helped himself to a 36 off 25 balls.

Ryan Rickleton hit some lusty sixes to get 30 off 16 balls in an all-round effort.

With the big Super Eights match against India coming up on Sunday, South Africa needed Brevis to fire, and he did have a good session out there in the middle.

The pull off a bouncer sent down by wrong-footed left-arm seamer Muhammad Jawadullah was a treat for the eyes.

Brevis quickly went onto the backfoot and pulled it from above eyeline into the top tier of the square leg stand. When left-arm spinner Haider Ali tossed one outside the off-stump, Brevis thumped it over extra cover into the Hill B of the Feroz Shah Kotla stands.

The two shots were indicators



that Brevis was in prime form. He then picked up a slower one from Mohammed Arfan to dispatch it into the cow corner as South Africa finished proceedings in a jiffy.

Earlier, young Alishan Sharafu led a charmed life with double re-

prieves but Anrich Nortje, playing his first match of the tournament, bowled quick and straight to restrict UAE to 122 for 6 in stipulated 20 overs.

With Lungi Ngidi and Marco Jansen rested before the India game in Ahmedabad on Sunday, Nortje (2/28 in 4 overs) and Corbin Bosch (3/12 in 4 overs) bowled short and

quick consistently as the UAE batting unit never really looked in control of the situation.

While Sharafu managed a 38-ball 45 with five fours and a six, he was lucky due to the 'butter-fingered' Proteas fielders, who dropped two catches.

With conditions overcast and

floodlights being put on, Aiden Markram was spot on in opting to bowl and unleash his pace battery on the minnows by making use of the underlying moisture.

Although skipper Muhammad Waseem (22 off 12 balls) and Aryansh Sharma moved a bit from the line of quick deliveries and got a few boundaries in the process using the pace, it was left-arm spinner George Linde, who got the first breakthrough.

Waseem went to sweep a much fuller delivery and was left plumb in-front.

Once the powerplay got over, UAE batters, save Sharafu's attacking strokes, could never come to terms with the pace and bounce on offer.

Sohaib Khan, who had back-to-back half-centuries against Canada and Afghanistan, had no clue when Bosch let one fly and all he could do was nick it to Quinton de Kock behind the stumps.

How UAE wilted could be gauged from the fact that they hit 10 boundaries in all, in which Sharafu and Waseem hit nine cumulatively.

Just when the UAE innings ended, steady drizzle forced the ground staff to cover the centre square. (PTI)

## Sahibzada ton powers Pakistan to 199/3 against Namibia



**COLOMBO, Feb 18:** Sahibzada Farhan struck a scintillating, maiden hundred to lift Pakistan to a formidable 199 for three against Namibia in their must-win T20 World Cup match here on Wednesday.

Sports Club.

However, skipper Salman Agha broke the shackles at the start of the ninth overs with a six off Willem Myburgh, the batter coming down the track to smack one over long-on.

Taking a cue from his captain, Farhan launched into leg-spinner Myburgh for a big six over deep mid-wicket, and then, sent his tossed up googly soaring over the same region in a similar fashion, using the slog sweep to good effect on both occasions.

The three sixes in one over gave Pakistan's run rate a boost and Salman Agha then lofted Bernard Scholtz straight down the ground for another maximum.

However, Agha was out caught by Gerhard Erasmus off Brassell in the next over.

Picked for this game, Nafay began with a boundary after he rocked back to cut the ball through backward point.

Nafay's brief stay though was cut short when he was caught and bowled by Namibian skipper Erasmus.

Meanwhile, Farhan continued to spearhead Pakistan's batting, cutting, pulling and driving with finesse to dominate Namibian bowlers.

Shadab ended the Pakistan innings with a couple of sixes against Erasmus in the last over. (PTI)

Farhan, who needed just 20 deliveries to move from 50 to 100, ended on 100 not out off 58 balls, becoming only the second player from Pakistan to score a century in the tournament after Ahmed Shehzad's ton against Bangladesh in 2014 at Mirpur.

In all, Farhan hit 11 boundaries and four sixes while adding 67 runs with skipper Salman Agha (38 off 23 balls) and 81 runs with Shadab Khan (36 not out off 22 balls).

Batting first, Pakistan managed 47 runs in the powerplay for the loss of Saim Ayub's (14 off 12 balls) wicket.

Seeking to recover from the heavy defeat to traditional rivals India, Pakistan strengthened their batting with the inclusion of Khawaja Nafay in the middle order while leaving out the woefully out-of-sorts pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi.

While the team did get the occasional boundaries, their approach was far from ideal as they resorted to defensive batting, which pretty much explained why they were 55 for one after overs at the Sinhalese

## Ponting rues lack of aura as Australia crash out of T20 World Cup

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** Former captain Ricky Ponting says the current Australian side lacked the aura that defined its past teams at global events and termed the country's early exit from the men's T20 World Cup as a "really poor campaign".

Speaking on the latest episode of the ICC Review, Ponting said the team on paper did not carry the same presence as previous Australian outfits that dominated ICC tournaments.

"You look at that Australian team on paper, it just doesn't look to have that sort of aura around it that a lot of other Australian teams have going into ICC events and World Cups," Ponting said.

"You need to have your best players and your most experienced players standing up and winning big moments for you in these tournaments if you want to go ahead and win and Australia haven't had



that."

The former skipper pointed to underwhelming returns from the top order, including Cameron Green at No.3 and Tim David at No.4 in the latter matches, as well as a collapse against Sri Lanka where Australia lost six wickets for 20 runs in the closing overs.

Australia failed to qualify for the Super 8s after suffering a shock 23-run defeat to the Zimbabwe, a result Ponting felt effectively ended their campaign.

"It's been a really poor campaign, it has to be said. Just losing to Zimbabwe like they did, that's going to be the game that they're

going to think back and think like that's our World Cup gone, there and then," said Ponting.

Australia began the tournament with injury concerns, with Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins ruled out and Tim David unavailable at the start.

However, Ponting said the loss to Zimbabwe would be the one that lingers.

Ponting admitted he had expected Sri Lanka to be tough to beat at home and credited them for a clinical run chase against Australia.

"I felt Sri Lanka would be difficult to beat at home and that's certainly the way it turned out. They played really well against Australia. That was an amazing run chase when you look at it. That sort of score is never an easy one to chase down.

Ponting said the former players were disappointed but not critical of the current group. (PTI)

## FLORIDA MAN INDICTED FOR SUPPLYING BANNED DRUGS IN CASE INVOLVING US SPRINTER BRACY-WILLIAMS

**NEW YORK, Feb 18:** Federal authorities charged a Florida man Tuesday with providing banned substances to an athlete in a case involving the 45-month doping ban handed to Olympic sprinter Marvin Bracy-Williams last year.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in Orlando announced the indictment of Paul Askew of Jacksonville for violating the Rodchenkov Act, a law enacted in 2020 that allows U.S. authorities to prosecute doping crimes involving international events.

Prosecutors said Askew could face up to 10 years in prison if con-

victed. Askew did not immediately respond to messages left by The Associated Press at an email address and phone number listed in his name. The court records showed he was in the process of being assigned an attorney.

Bracy-Williams ran the 100 meters at the Rio Olympics in 2016 and won a silver medal at the world championships in 2022. But he mysteriously disappeared from sprinting in 2023 before agreeing to his ban last November after a case brought to the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency's attention by a whistleblower. (AP)

## Court orders fresh elections in EFI, directs IOA to form ad-hoc panel

**NEW DELHI, Feb 18:** The Delhi High Court on Wednesday ordered fresh elections in the Equestrian Federation of India (EFI) and also called for the constitution of an independent ad-hoc administrative committee to oversee its functioning.

The matter was listed at Item No. 4 before Court 14 presided over by Justice Kaurav, who was hearing an application filed by the Union of India seeking the appointment of an ad-hoc administrative committee to administer the affairs of the EFI.

The court was informed that the existing Executive Committee had been re-instated in view of the Paris Olympics 2024 and that its tenure had since expired.

The Rajasthan Equestrian Association submitted that elections to the EFI were long overdue.

The court was also apprised through a brief note that the National Sports Governance Act, 2025 has come into force, providing a statutory framework for the governance of National Sports Federations (NSFs) in the country.

It was further informed that the National Sports Governance (National Sports Bodies) Rules, 2026 have also been notified.

Rule 18 of the Rules mandates that all NSFs amend their by-laws in accordance with the provisions of the 2025 Act.

Taking note of the new legal framework, the court observed that elections must be conducted in the EFI. The court directed that as the tenure of the present Executive Committee had expired, it could not continue to function.

It ordered that an independent ad-hoc committee be appointed by the Indian Olympic Association (IOA), and that the existing Executive Committee hand over charge to the ad-hoc panel within seven days. (PTI)

Scotland's Munsey reprimanded for breaching ICC code of conduct

**MUMBAI, Feb 18:** Scotland opener George Munsey has been reprimanded and handed one demerit point for hurling his helmet onto the advertising boards during their Group C T20 World Cup match against Nepal here.

Munsey was found to have breached Article 2.2 of the ICC Code of Conduct for Players and Player Support Personnel, which relates to "abuse of cricket equipment or clothing, ground equipment or fixtures and fittings during an International Match." In addition to this, one demerit point has also been added to Munsey's disciplinary record, and it was the first offence in a 24-month period for him. (PTI)

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## Ryder Cup captaincy also uncertain

# Tiger Woods isn't ruling out a return to the Masters

**LOS ANGELES, Feb 18:** Tiger Woods did not rule out a return to the Masters just under two months away, even as his immediate future appears to include just about everything but golf.

Woods again painted an uncertain future about when or where he plays next because of a seventh back surgery to replace a disk. He said Tuesday at the Genesis Invitational that he remains plenty occupied, mostly with trying to reshape the PGA Tour schedule.

"I thought I spent a lot of hours practicing in my prime," Woods said. "It doesn't compare to what we've done in the boardroom."

Those hours also are an obstacle in his decision whether to be the U.S. captain for the Ryder Cup for the 2027 matches in Ireland. Woods turned down the job two years ago because he didn't think he had the time to do the job justice.

Foremost this time of the year is the Masters, which Woods last played in 2024 when he made the cut for a record 24th time in a row. Woods is a five-time Masters champion.

Asked if playing the Masters, which starts April 9, was off the table, Woods replied without elaboration. "No."

As for his golf anywhere — he turned 50 at the end of last year and is eligible for the PGA Tour Champions — Woods said he is still working his way back from the

disk replacement surgery in October and has no timetable for a return. He has yet to play in the indoor TGL matches, either.

"Well, I'm trying — put it that way," he said, adding that he can hit full shots but not every day "and not very well."

Last year was the first time in his career he did not compete in a single tournament. He had surgery in March 2025 for a ruptured Achilles tendon, which is no longer holding him back. He said his lower back was sore, and at his age, "It's probably going to take me a little bit longer."

"My body has been through a lot," Woods said. "Each and every day, I keep trying, I keep progressing, I keep working on it, trying to get stronger, trying to get more endurance in this body and trying to get it at a level at which I can play at the highest level again."

His chief interest is indoors. He is on the board of the PGA Tour and the commercial PGA Tour Enterprises, heading the "Future Competition Committee" that is trying to create a model to meet CEO Brian Rolapp's goal of fewer tournaments that are more meaningful for the best players.

The only thing clear is that a new model most likely won't be ready by 2027. The committee has reached agreement on a big start to the season — that could be the week after or before the Super Bowl — taking the big events to bigger markets and becoming the most-



see sport of the summer.

Another players-only meeting was scheduled Tuesday at Riviera. Rolapp is expected to pull back the curtain on some aspects at The Players Championship in March, with a little more clarity expected in the summer.

Among items under consideration is moving some prime California stops — Riviera and Torrey Pines get most of the attention — to August as part of the PGA Tour's postseason.

"We're looking at things like that, looking to go to bigger markets later in the year for the playoffs. Just trying to make our

competitive model better, and how do we do that?" Woods said, adding that moving the Genesis Invitational to August "certainly is on the table."

All the while, Woods said it was important to create a path for the next batch of stars.

"We're trying to create opportunities for that turnover... to get more youth out here because eventually they're going to take over the game," Woods said. "So trying to create that opportunity, trying to create the right competitive model and the environment to foster that, that's been the greater challenge of it all."

As for the Ryder Cup, that also is in the wait-and-see mode.

The PGA of America waited longer than it ever has before choosing Keegan Bradley for the '25 matches at Bethpage Black because it was waiting on an answer from Woods.

He doesn't appear to have made much headway.

"They have asked me for my input on it, and I haven't made my decision yet," Woods said. "I'm trying to figure out what we're trying to do with our tour. That's been driving me hours upon hours every day and trying to figure out if I can actually do our team — Team USA and our players and everyone that's going to be involved in the Ryder Cup — if I can do it justice with my time."

Woods became involved at Riviera in 2017 when his TGR Venture began running the event, and now he is the official host in the same capacity of Jack Nicklaus at the Memorial and the late Arnold Palmer at Bay Hill. Those three signature events are the only ones with a 36-hole cut.

Genesis announced it was renewing as title sponsor at Riviera, even amid questions whether it might move to late summer. Genesis also is title sponsor of the Scottish Open in July. There also is a question of how Riviera could be held in August 2028 a month after the Olympics. (AP)