

**6** WORLD

**8** NATION

- Tarique Rahman sworn in as new PM of Bangladesh
- Russian and Ukrainian officials are in Geneva for US-brokered talks
- India has evolved into confident, credible voice of Global South: PM Modi
- Rajasthan Assembly adjourned five times as BJP, Cong spar over cow slaughtering issue

## State Cabinet approves vote-on-account ● Release Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyaan scheme okayed

### Cabinet nod to 3% quota for tea tribes, adivasis in Class I & II govt jobs



**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said the state cabinet has approved the vote-on-account placed in the legislative Assembly for the initial months of the financial year 2026-27. The Cabinet also approved the release of entrepreneurship fund (seed capital) to an additional 1,07,532 eligible beneficiaries (SHG members) under the

Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyaan scheme, implemented by the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission Society, Sarma told reporters after the meeting. The council of ministers also approved the proposal for 3 per cent reservation for the tea tribes and adivasi community of Assam in class I and class II state government jobs in addition to the previous class III and class IV posts, he

said. It also okayed the construction of the second sanik school at Langvoku, Karbi Anglong district, with the ministry of Defence approving the detailed project report (DPR) for its establishment, he said. The Cabinet also approved the settlement of land in favour of Assam Cricket Association (ACA) in Dhemaji District for the development of sports infrastructure, Sarma said. An amount of Rs 20 crore for the project 'Construction of Integrated Development of Borbheti Campus, Jorhat' to promote sustainable, inclusive, and heritage-based tourism has also been approved.

The Cabinet also approved raising the entitlement of earned leave for teachers under the school education department to 15 days and the amendment of the Assam Revised Leave Rules, 1934, accordingly, Sarma said. The council of ministers also gave its nod to the amendment of the Assam Agricultural Service (Amendment) Rules, 2025, to provide relaxation on the requirement of minimum qualifying service period for promotion from one cadre to the next higher cadre, Sarma added. (PTI)

### AIUDF stages walkout from Assam Assembly

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** Legislators of opposition AIUDF on Tuesday staged a walkout from the Assam Assembly after their adjournment motion to discuss Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's alleged provocative statements against the Miya community was rejected.

Raising the motion, AIUDF MLA Aminul Islam alleged that the CM is directly "inciting" people against the Miya community with his "provocative statements".

"Because of his statements, some miscreants have started torturing the Miya people, mostly in Upper Assam. Some have been physically attacked and asked to leave their workplaces," (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### 'Rahul's phone call given me chance to serve Assam and Sanatan dharma'

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday claimed that then Congress president Sonia Gandhi had asked him to decide on the date for his swearing in as CM when 58 party MLAs had supported him in 2014.

The scenario, however, changed after Rahul Gandhi, who was then in the USA, made phone calls to party leaders, Sarma told reporters here after a cabinet meeting at the state legislative assembly.

Assam Congress had witnessed disidence after the 2011 assembly polls, with a section of the MLAs supporting Sarma as the chief minister, replacing the incumbent Tarun

Gogoi. He left the party to join the BJP in 2015 and played a pivotal role in ensuring the saffron party's first victory in the assembly polls. "Madam (Sonia Gandhi), whom I still refer to as such, had asked me to decide on the date and I had told her that I would take oath the day after the Ambubachi Mela at Kamakhya Temple in June (2014)," Sarma said.

The situation changed after Rahul Gandhi made the call, he said.

"I was hurt then, but now I believe that whatever happens in one's life is for the best and God has given me much more than what I would have got, had I remained in the

### Bhupen Borah will join BJP on Feb 22: Himanta

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** Former Assam Congress president Bhupen Borah will join the BJP on February 22, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Tuesday after meeting him.

Sarma visited Borah's residence in the Ghoramara area of Guwahati, a day after the senior leader resigned from the Congress.

The CM was welcomed by Borah's wife and son with 'aarti'. After the meeting, Sarma said state BJP chief Dilip Saikia would hold discussions with Borah to finalise details of his joining the party.

Borah joining the BJP will show that Congress is not a place for Hindus, he claimed.

Sarma claimed Bora has struggled for a long time in the Congress, and he will get a platform in the BJP to do what he wants. The CM claimed (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### Ajanta Neog tables ₹ 62,294.78 cr interim budget for FY'27

### Flagship schemes to continue in poll-bound Assam

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** Presenting a ₹ 62,294.78 crore interim budget for the 2026-27 fiscal ahead of the Assembly elections, Assam Finance Minister Ajanta Neog on Tuesday said major flagship schemes giving direct cash benefits will continue in the years to come.

Tabling her last budget before the state goes to polls, Neog said Assam is currently the fastest-growing state according to RBI data.

"I seek a vote on account on the demands for grants for the initial months of the financial year 2026-27, amounting to ₹ 62,29,478.30 lakh to enable the government to carry on with its normal services pending full budget," she said.

Neog claimed that the flagship 'Nijut Moina' scheme resulted in an 8.2 per cent reduction in dropout among

### CM ON VIRAL VIDEO ROW

### 'My statements are always within constitutional limits, have no fear'

**MIRZAPUR (UP), Feb 17:** Amid the row over a viral video purportedly showing him taking aim and firing with a rifle at members of a particular community, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has claimed that he always makes statements within constitutional limits, and that's why he has nothing to fear.

Asked about the Supreme Court on Monday refusing to entertain petitions seeking action against him over the viral video, Sarma said in Mirzapur on Monday, "Look, whatever statements I make, they are always within constitutional limits. That's why I have no fear."

Sarma also took a jibe at suspended Trinamool Congress MLA Humayun Kabir's announcement to construct a replica of the Babri Masjid in West Bengal's Murshidabad district.

"Whatever I say, I speak for the good of Assam and the Hindu society. And I will continue to do so. I believe that I never cross constitutional limits," Sarma said.

On Monday, a CJ-led Supreme Court bench refused to entertain petitions seeking action against the Assam chief minister over the viral video purportedly

showing him taking aim and firing with a rifle at members of the Muslim community.

The bench asked the petitioners to approach the Gauhati High Court with their grievances and directed the chief justice of the high court to expedite the hearing in the matter.

Asked if it was appropriate for a chief minister to point a gun towards a particular community, Sarma said he only does things that suit him.

"Remember one thing - our (Assamese Hindu population) numbers reduced from 80 per cent to 60 per cent, and the secular people should also understand our concern."

Asked about the proposed mosque in Murshidabad, Sarma told reporters, "It is a 'putlaa' (dummy) of the Babri Masjid, not the original (mosque). When the original is gone, what will the 'putlaa' do?"

Last Wednesday, Humayun Kabir began the construction of the much-hyped mosque modelled on Ayodhya's Babri Masjid at Beladanga in Murshidabad district.

Kabir, who recently floated the Janata Unnayan Party (JUP) after his ouster from the Trinamool Congress, announced that the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### APSC exam result rectified due to quota discrepancy: Minister

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** The Assam government on Tuesday said the results of the state civil services examination declared a day ago had to be cancelled due to a discrepancy in the reservation for a specific community.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary said in the Assembly that the examination was conducted in a transparent manner, though there was an error in reserving positions for the Moran community during declaration of results.

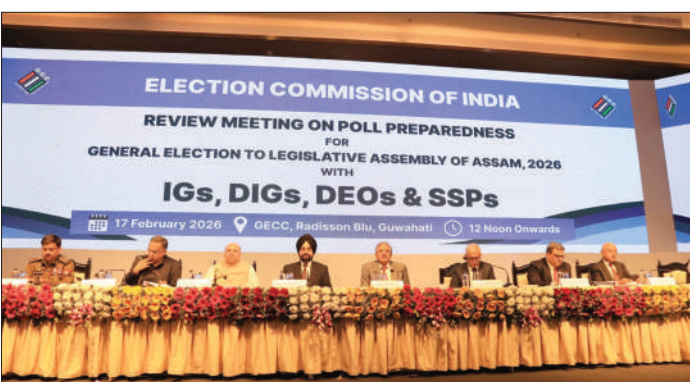
He was responding to the matter raised by AIUDF legislator Ashrafal Hussain, who pointed that the final results of the Combined Competitive Examination (CCE) 2024 were initially declared by the Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) on Monday but cancelled and withdrawn promptly.

The APSC declared the rectified final results for CCE 2024 on Tuesday, which was uploaded on its website.

Patowary said the advertisement published by the APSC for CCE 2024 had (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### Panel urged to conduct single-phase polls

### EC team meets political parties, officials on Assam election preparedness



#### STAFF REPORTER

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** A full bench of the Election Commission of India (ECI), led by Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, on Tuesday held a series of meetings with political parties, election officials and senior police officers in Guwahati to review preparedness for the upcoming Assam Assembly elections.

The EC, accompanied by Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi, along with senior ECI officials, met representatives of recognised national and state political parties at a hotel in the city.

Assam Chief Electoral Officer Anurag Goel was present during the discussions.

Among national parties, the Aam Aadmi Party, Bharatiya Janata Party, CPI(M) and the Congress attended the meetings, while state parties including the AIUDF, Asom Gana Parishad, Bodoland People's Front and United People's

Party Liberal also held separate interactions with the Commission.

During the discussions, most political parties urged the ECI to conduct the Assembly elections in a single phase or at most two phases.

They also requested that poll dates be scheduled keeping in view the Bihu festival.

Officials said political parties generally appreciated the special revision of electoral rolls and offered suggestions to ensure peaceful and smooth conduct of the elections.

Following the party meetings, the Commission held a review session with Inspector General and Deputy Inspector General-level police officers, District Election Officers-cum-District Magistrates and Senior Superintendents of Police to assess law and order preparedness, logistics and coordination.

The ECI delegation, which arrived in Assam on Monday, is on a multi- (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### CM distributes welfare cheques to priests, youth beneficiaries in Diphu

#### HT Correspondent

**KHERONI, Feb 17:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday distributed cheques to beneficiaries under welfare and self-employment schemes at KASA Stadium in Diphu, targeting traditional priests and youth from hill districts.

Under a special initiative to support traditional Karbi priests, Sarma handed over cheques to 7,298 beneficiaries, described as custodians of Karbi Aron Barim religious traditions.

He assured that the remaining eligible beneficiaries would receive assistance before the upcoming Assembly elections and announced that annual support for the priests would be increased to

₹12,000 from next year.

Under the Chief Minister Atmanirbhar Asom Abhijan (CM-AAA) 2.0 scheme, the chief minister also distributed seed capital cheques of ₹75,000 each to selected beneficiaries.

An additional ₹25,000 will be transferred directly to beneficiaries' bank accounts after they complete a mandatory three-day training programme within their respective districts.

Officials said the scheme aims to promote self-employment and entrepreneurship, with plans to extend benefits to around 10 lakh beneficiaries across the state from next year, targeting roughly 8,000 beneficiaries per Assembly constituency.

The distribution programme included 457 beneficiaries from West Karbi Anglong, 1,000 from Karbi Anglong and 487 from Dima Hasao.

The event was attended by Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Chief Executive Member Tuliram Ronghang, MP Amarsing Tisso, Karbi traditional king Longsing Ronghang, Cabinet Minister Nandita Gorlosa, and other council leaders and dignitaries.

Officials said the initiatives reflect the government's efforts to preserve cultural heritage while promoting financial empowerment and self-reliance among youth in Assam's hill districts.

### Shah to attend CRPF anniv parade on Feb 21

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** The CRPF will celebrate its anniversary parade for the first time in the Northeast on February 21, with Union Home Minister Amit Shah set to attend the programme as the chief guest here, top officers said on Tuesday.

Eight contingents involving around 1,400 personnel will showcase equipment and other preparedness of the force during the event, they said.

Addressing a press conference, Special Director General (SDG), North East Zone, Raja Srivastava said, "For the first time, the CRPF is celebrating its anniversary parade in the Northeast, underscoring its deep association with the region and its continued commitment to peace, stability and national security." "The 87th (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### World's first bamboo ethanol plant aims to bring 30,000 farmers in sourcing net Full-scale production to start shortly: ABEPL official

**NUMALIGARH, Feb 17:** The Assam Bio Ethanol Pvt Ltd (ABEPL) is targeting to join hands with more than 30,000 farmers over the next three years to source bamboo for the world's only second-generation bioethanol plant, a senior official said.

The ₹ 4,930-crore plant, with an installed production capacity of 49,000 million tonnes per annum (MTPA), was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September last year, and is presently undergoing stabilisation with limited raw material resources.

"Presently, we are going through the start-up phase. Within around next week, we should be able to stabilise the plant. Thereafter, we will



go for full-scale production," ABEPL Chief Executive Officer Rupjyoti Hazarika told PTI in an interview. Located at Numaligarh in Assam's Golaghat district, the unit

is the only commercial second-generation bioethanol plant in the world using bamboo as the raw material. All other first-generation ethanol plants use food crops such as sugarcane or maize as biomass.

Besides ethanol, the plant will also annually produce 19,000 tonnes of furfural, 11,000 tonnes of acetic acid, 32,000 tonnes of liquid CO2 and 25 MW of green power.

"During the trial run, we produced fuel-grade ethanol with 99.7 per cent purity. The normal range is to have a 99.5 per cent purity level," he said.

To fully achieve the installed ethanol output, the 43-acre plant will require five lakh MTPA of green bamboo as raw material.

The CEO said that to achieve its targeted raw material sourcing, 12,500 hectares of bamboo plantation will be required, using 60 lakh saplings over the next three years.

"We have so far registered over 4,200 farmers for sourcing bamboo. We are targeting more than 30,000 farmers across a 300-km radius sourcing zone over the next three years," he added.

He said that the company has so far transferred ₹ 2.4 crore to farmers' accounts for sourcing bamboo without involving any middleman.

"We have set a target to source bamboo from a 300-km radius of the plant. We will take green bamboo from 16 districts in Assam, four in (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### Sonowal lauds Modi's trade diplomacy

#### HT Correspondent

**DIBRUGARH, Feb 17:** Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal on Tuesday said India's emergence as a major global trade player reflects Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, which he said has expanded international market access while safeguarding the interests of farmers and domestic industries.

Addressing a press conference here, Sonowal said India has moved since 2014 from what he described as a "defensive trade posture" to a more confident and strategically negotiated global engagement.

He said nine major free trade agreements concluded in recent

years have secured preferential access for Indian goods to 38 developed nations across Europe, the Gulf, Oceania and North America, accounting for about 30 per cent of India's export value.

According to him, these agreements have opened nearly 70 per cent of global trade markets to India.

Referring to the India-US interim trade agreement framework, Sonowal said it aims to raise bilateral trade to \$500 billion annually and reduce tariffs on Indian goods while providing zero-duty access for sectors such as pharmaceuticals, gems and jewellery, aircraft parts and selected agricultural products. He added that most sensitive (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Minister apologises for AI summit Day 1 issues

**NEW DELHI, Feb 17:** Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Tuesday apologised for the issues faced by attendees on the opening day of the India AI Impact Summit 2026, calling the turnout "phenomenal" and promising a smoother experience in the coming days.

The world's largest artificial intelligence summit opened to packed halls and long queues on Monday. Huge crowds meant long queues and overcrowding which was compounded by unclear instructions. Mobile data connectivity too was an issue.

Addressing criticism over overcrowding, Vaishnaw said more than 70,000 people attended the summit on Monday, highlighting the high interest in what is billed as one of the world's largest AI gatherings.

"This is the biggest AI summit in the entire world. The response is phenomenal. The energy is palpable. We can see the organisation is very smooth now. If anybody has faced any problems yesterday, we apologise for that," he said at a press conference in the summit venue Bharat Mandapam.

He said a war room is now operating to address any issues being faced.

Any issues can be reported and the organisers will make sure that the summit is more smooth and enjoyable, he said.

"Whatever feedback you have, please share with us. We are open-minded. We will make efforts to make the experience smoother and enjoyable for all of you," he said. "My entire team is working hard day and night for this summit."



The opening day drew thousands of attendees, including startup founders, global tech representatives, and international delegates. However, heavy footfall led to confusion, long queues, overlapping security checks, and temporary evacuation of some exhibitor stalls ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the expo happening alongside.

**STOLEN WEARABLES, CONFUSION**

Amid the confusion, a few reported misplaced or stolen goods.

Dhananjay Yadav, CEO of Neo Sapient, took to X to complain about wearables being stolen.

"At 12 noon, security personnel arrived to sanitise and

cordoned off the area ahead of the visit by PM Modi visit at 2pm," he wrote. "I explained that we're building India's first patented AI wearable at NeoSapient and requested a chance to showcase it."

One officer told others to let him stay but then another group came and ordered him and his team to leave immediately.

"I asked: 'Should we take our wearables?' They said, others are leaving even laptops behind, security will take care. Trusting them, I left. Hoping that the wearables will be safe, and if I am lucky, it might catch the eye of PM Modi," he said adding the gates were closed from 12-6 pm on Monday.

Later, he and his team found that "wearables were stolen."

"Think about this: We paid for flights, accommodation, logistics and even the booth. Only to see our wearables disappear inside a high-security zone. If only security and official entourage had access, how did this happen? This is extremely disappointing," he wrote.

Punit Jain, founder of Reskill, said, "An AI Summit that sidelines its own builders?"

"Exhibitors, delegates, startup founders (were) left outside. No water. No clarity. Media shows celebration. Ground reality was chaos. If access was limited to select high-value guests, just say it upfront. Don't mobilize the ecosystem and then displace them. This is not how we build India's AI future," he wrote on Monday. (PTI)

## NPCI promotes digital payment safety awareness for senior citizens

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) has launched an awareness initiative to educate senior citizens on safe digital payment practices amid rising incidents of online fraud.

NPCI said digital payments have significantly improved daily life for elderly users by offering convenience in routine transactions such as grocery purchases, pharmacy payments and travel bookings.

They also enhance independence by allowing seniors to manage expenses without relying on others, while reducing risks associated with carrying cash.

However, officials noted that increasing adoption of digital platforms has also led to a rise in fraud attempts targeting senior citizens, often through social engineering tactics.

Common frauds highlighted include so-called "digital arrest" scams where fraudsters impersonate law enforcement officials to extort money, fake investment schemes promising unusually high returns, phishing and vishing attempts seeking sensitive information, tech support scams involving remote

access to devices, and fraudulent refund links designed to steal financial data.

NPCI advised senior citizens never to share confidential details such as UPI PINs, OTPs, passwords or bank account information, and to avoid clicking unknown links or installing applications suggested by strangers.

The agency also cautioned users to remain alert when faced with urgent messages about account blocking, KYC expiry or legal threats, noting that genuine institutions provide adequate time for verification and do not demand money over phone or video calls.

In case of suspected fraud, citizens have been urged to immediately contact the national cybercrime helpline at 1930, report the incident to their bank, and file complaints through the Department of Telecommunications portal.

Officials also encouraged seniors to consult family members or trusted individuals before acting on unfamiliar financial instructions.

NPCI emphasised that with awareness and careful verification, digital payments remain a safe and reliable system for everyday use.

## IDBI Bank launches 'Aarogya Fixed Deposit'

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** IDBI Bank on Tuesday announced the launch of its 'Aarogya Fixed Deposit' scheme, a new product that combines fixed deposit returns with health insurance coverage.

Under the scheme, customers can invest ₹7.50 lakh for a tenure of 370 days and receive health insurance cover of up to ₹15 lakh along with regular fixed deposit interest.

The health cover will be pro-

vided through Care Health Insurance, the bank's partner for the product.

The scheme is designed exclusively for resident individual customers aged between 18 years and 58 years and 11 months.

IDBI Bank deputy managing director Sumit Phakka said the product reflects the bank's focus on customer-centric innovation by combining financial returns with health security, offering a holistic solution for customers' financial and healthcare needs.



## AI transforming farming, says Maha official; cites smart cow necklaces, satellite sugar tests

**NEW DELHI, Feb 17:** From smart necklaces for cows in Kashmir detecting infections days before symptoms appear to satellites predicting sugarcane sweetness with 95 per cent accuracy, artificial intelligence is already delivering measurable results for millions of smallholder farmers, Maharashtra Resident Commissioner R Vimala said Tuesday at the launch of a compendium of 26 ground-breaking studies.

"AI is not for the privileged few. It's for every farmer in every corner of the Global South," she said at the AI Impact Summit here.

Maharashtra's Department of Agriculture developed the MahaVISTAAR-AI conversational platform in May 2025, which has since provided personalised crop advisories to 2.2 million farmers.

"That's not disruption, it's transformation at scale," Vimala said at the launch of the AI Casebook on Gender and Agriculture.

On soil testing, she said portable devices under the

Vasudha and Neo Park programmes use hyperspectral imaging to deliver a complete soil chemical profile on the spot with over 90 per cent accuracy, eliminating weeks-long laboratory wait times.

Combined with satellite data, farmers are reporting yield increases of 20-32 per cent.

The compendium also documents Mapmyncrop's use of super-resolution satellite imagery to predict sucrose levels in sugarcane with 95 per cent accuracy, resulting in a 57 per cent improvement in yields. The same satellite infrastructure is being used to generate credit scores for farmers, cutting loan approval times from weeks to days.

Platforms such as RMS for AI and Varaha use MRV (monitoring, reporting and verification) frameworks to validate sustainable farming practices like alternative wetting and drying in paddy cultivation in Punjab in minutes, against months of manual monitoring earlier. (PTI)

### AFFIDAVIT

I, Smt. Swapna Mondal, Wife of Sushil Mondal resident of Gining Mill, Diphu, P.O. & P.S., Diphu, district Karbi Anglong, Assam, do hereby solemnly affirm and declare before the Notary Public, Diphu Court, Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam that my son's actual and correct name is 'Tajas Mondal.'

But in his Aadhaar Card bearing Aadhaar No- 4615 6211 4699 issued by the Government of India, Unique Identification Authority of India, it has been wrongly recorded as 'Tejs Mandal' instead of the correct name 'Tajas Mondal'. Both the names 'Tajas Mondal' and 'Tejs Mandal' are the same and single person but not different individuals i.e. the name of my son.

### AFFIDAVIT

I, Hundi Kharai, DOB-01/06/1980, C/O- Naya FKHARAI, a resident of village Saru Amali, P.O.- Bargaon and P.S.-Baitalhalangso, district West Karbi Anglong (Assam), do hereby solemnly affirm and declare an oath on 30th day of January, 2026 at Morigaon Court premises that my actual name is Hundi Kharai, which is mentioned in my Adhar Card bearing No-5492-7326-3302, Pan Card No-GMXP6567B and Voter Id No-JRF0002301.

Whereas in my Langpi Dehangi Rural Bank Passbook Vide A/C No-7469010094561 under Bargaon Branch, my name has been wrongly recorded as Mondhi Kharai instead of Hundi Kharai. Both Hundi Kharai and Mondhi Kharai are the same and one person is myself.

Contd. from Page 1...

## Bhupen Borah will

that Congress should have addressed issues that forced Borah to leave the party after 32 years and taken corrective measures.

Borah had resigned from the Congress on Monday, but the party's top leadership did not accept his resignation, making attempts to persuade him to take it back. Following this, he sought time to reconsider his decision. (PTI)

## 'My statements are

mosque at Rejinagar in Beldanga would be completed within two years and cost around ₹ 50-55 crore. The mosque is being built on an 11-acre plot and will have the capacity to accommodate about 12,000 people to offer namaz.

Following Kabir's announcement, the Vishva Hindu Raksha Parishad, a right-wing group, had called on the people of Uttar Pradesh to march to Murshidabad.

On driving out Bangladeshi infiltrators from Assam, Sarma said it is a big problem faced by the state.

"I drive away 100-150 of them daily. But the number is big. Right now, we have removed them from 50,000 acres of land in Assam. I have cleared 5,00,000 acres of land in five years. "At a meeting with the prime minister, I said that I will now drive these people away from 1.5 lakh acres of land. The total land under their possession is 10 lakh acres," Sarma claimed.

On Rahul Gandhi criticising the India-US interim trade deal, Sarma wondered if the Congress leader could even read the agreement.

"If there is no one around him (Rahul Gandhi), he will not be able to read the entire document. Rahul Gandhi's mental condition is not good. He needs proper treatment," Sarma said. On the comparison between Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Tipu Sultan, Sarma claimed, "One was a protector of Hindus (Shivaji Maharaj), and the other (Tipu Sultan) was a destroyer of Hindus. How can both be equal?" (PTI)

## Flagship schemes to

47,428 boys from economically weaker families enrolled in the first year of undergraduate and postgraduate courses," she added.

Through the Chief Minister's Jibon Prerana Scheme, the government will cover 48,319 fresh graduates with a monthly financial assistance of ₹ 2,500, Neog said.

"Under Pragyan Bharti, admission fees worth ₹ 780 crore were waived for economically weaker students, benefiting an average of 3.5 lakh UG and PG students each year," she added.

The Assembly elections for 126 constituencies are likely to take place in March-April. On Assam's poverty alleviation scheme 'Orunodoi', Neog said the programme is the BJP government's "promise in action".

"We expanded its coverage from 19 lakh families during the launch in 2021 to nearly 40 lakh today, including Divyangjan, transgender persons, and other vulnerable groups, making it the largest social assistance programme in the history of Assam," she added.

Neog said the government's resolve to empower 'Orunodoi' families will continue with enhanced assistance and convergence with major welfare programmes such as NFSA, PMAY-Gramin, PMAY-Urban and insurance schemes like PM Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY), PM Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PJJBY) and Atal Pension Yojana (APY). "Under the Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyaan, we have empowered over 30.63 lakh eligible women by providing ₹ 10,000 as seed capital per SHG member. Today, I am proud to present that 8.80 lakh Lakshpati Baideo are the engines driving our rural economy," she added.

Neog further said under 'Mission Basundhara', the BJP government distributed land pattas to over three lakh landless beneficiaries, including 24,688 institutions, and settled approximately 4.15 lakh bighas of land, in the last five years.

The BJP leader asserted that the budgets she presented in the last five years were far more than mere financial statements.

"They were a solemn commitment to building a resilient Assam and I can say with humble pride that we have fulfilled our commitments through multiple social sector flagship schemes and assistance, ensuring inclusive growth," she added.

In her 33-page budget speech, Neog said Assam is poised to become a ₹ 10 lakh-crore economy by 2028, ahead of the state's own 2030 target.

"At constant prices, the state's Gross State Domestic Product expanded by 45 per cent between FY 2019-20 and FY 2024-25, significantly outperforming the national growth average of 29 per cent," she added.

Neog pointed out that the Economic Survey of Assam projected a growth rate of 16.93 per cent with the GSDP estimated at ₹ 8,71,451 crore for 2026-27.

"Between FY 2020-21 and FY 2024-25, our 83 per cent growth in per-capita income has made us the fastest-growing state in the country in terms of per-capita income, clearly demonstrating that our growth is reaching people's lives, not just economic reports," she added. The finance minister said Assam's per capita income more than doubled in five years to ₹ 1,85,429 in 2025-26 from ₹ 86,947 in 2020-21, representing a jump of 113 per cent. "While capital spending has expanded, borrowing has been managed prudently. Since FY 2021-22, Assam has undertaken cumulative capital expenditure of ₹ 1,04,896 crore, while the increase in outstanding debt has been ₹ 84,037 crore, indicating that borrowings have been largely channelled towards asset creation," she added.

She said securing the basic right to food, the government has covered 70.71 lakh families and provided free rice to over 2.49 crore citizens under the NFSA and PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.

"Under the ongoing drive for inclusion of 5.04 lakh new beneficiaries, we have already added more than 65 lakh beneficiaries and issued over 14.60 lakh new ration cards in just 5 years," Neog said. She said that Assam has doubled the medical colleges from seven to 14, and is currently investing ₹ 5,500 crore to build 10 more medical colleges,

which will add 4,500 beds to the healthcare system. (PTI)

## APSC exam result

mentioned reservation of one post each for the Moran and Motak communities respectively within OBC/MOBC quota in Assam Civil Service (Junior Grade) and Assam Police Service (Junior Grade). The reservation is for a period of five years according to an official order of October 19, 2023. The minister said though the APSC was aware of the order, the final results of CCE 2024 were initially published on Monday with reservation for only Motak community candidates.

"The APSC was contacted immediately after the declaration of the result. The Commission also received complaints from Moran Students' Union and other Moran community persons, leading to cancellation of the initial declared result," Patowary said.

He maintained that the CCE 2024 was conducted with utmost transparency and said the state government has ensured that it is a fair procedure. (PTI)

## AIUDF stages walkout

he added. Some youths in Upper Assam districts searched houses looking for Miya people and told the owners not to rent out their dwelling units to the Bengali-speaking Muslims, Islam said. "There is no other state in India where one cannot even travel to other districts for work within the state. People are taking the law into their own hands and the police are not doing anything," he added.

The MLA said that the matter is of utmost importance and of recent occurrence, so it can be discussed in an adjournment motion.

Speaker Biswajit Daimary said, "The topic is important, but it can be discussed during Motion of Thanks of the Governor's address. You can raise your points then and the CM can also answer your queries." Besides, as the 'vote on account' will be presented during the day, an adjournment motion cannot be accepted, he added.

"Accordingly, I reject the adjournment motion," Daimary said.

Following this, the opposition members protested by raising slogans against the decision and staged a walkout. 'Miya' is originally a pejorative term used for Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam and the non-Bengali speaking people generally identify them as Bangladeshi immigrants. In recent years, activists from the community have started adopting this term as a gesture of defiance.

Sarma has been making repeated statements in recent days attacking the Miyas, saying that the people from the community will continue to face problems as long as he is in power. (PTI)

## 'Rahul's phone call

Sarma claimed. Justice was not given to "me, but Kharge always told my opponents in the party: you fight with Himanta but he has the MLAs", the CM said.

"These are facts and there are many witnesses to this but I am thankful that it did not happen as I would have become tainted for eternity", he said.

Referring to his allegations against state Congress president Gaurav Gogoi of having Pakistani links, the CM claimed that along with the people of the state, members of that opposition party are also finding it difficult to accept it. As the election approaches, many more leaders will speak out. Sarma claimed that he had said way back in 2012 that he will not bow before leaders who "parachute land" in the state.

"Cabinet ministers in the then state government had been directed to attend Gaurav Gogoi's meetings. I had refused saying that I hold a constitutional post and I will not go but he can attend my public meetings. This antagonised the then leaders of the party," he said. He claimed that people do not know the real reasons why he resigned from the cabinet and then the Congress but "one day they will".

Sarma had resigned from then chief minister Tarun Gogoi's cabinet in 2014 and from the party in 2015. He said that the Congress eco-system is such that it is difficult for people from ordinary families to survive, and former party Chief Bhupen Borah struggled for long but ultimately was forced to tender his resignation on Monday.

The CM said that he will go to Borah's house at around 7 pm on Tuesday after returning from Karbi Anglong.

Regarding Borah joining the BJP, Sarma said that he will first talk to him and then tell the media about his decision. Borah had submitted his resignation from the Congress on Monday with the party high command not accepting it following which he sought time to reconsider his decision. Sarma had told reporters that the doors of the BJP are open for Borah and promised that he would help him win from a safe seat in the assembly elections. (PTI)

## Shah to attend

anniversary parade on Saturday will be graced by Amit Shah ji as the chief guest. The occasion will honour the service and sacrifices of CRPF personnel and their contribution to national security," he said.

Srivastava said the Director General's (DG's) Parade will be held on Thursday with the CRPF director general GP Singh to be present as the chief guest.

Both the programmes will be held at the Sarusajai Stadium here.

The SDG (NE Zone) said the anniversary day parade will feature grand ceremonial marching contingents from various CRPF formations, demonstrations on traditional martial arts of the country and a showcase of modern operational equipment and capabilities, reflecting the force's preparedness to meet emerging security challenges.

Emphasising the CRPF's association with NE region, Srivastava said it has played a pivotal role in countering insurgency and maintaining law and order in the region.

"Out of the 2,270 personnel of the force who have made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty, 79 are from Assam," he added. SDG (Training) Deepak Kumar, who was also present at the press meet, said, "About 1,400 personnel, including contingents, bands

and buglers from eight sectors of CRPF, will participate in the event."

The parade will be commanded by Deepak Daundiyal, a commandant-level officer. The contingent commanders of the sectors will be officers of the rank of assistant commandant, Kumar said. During the CRPF Day Parade, 26 awards, including six Distinguished Service Medals and five trophies, will be presented by the Union Home Minister.

Kumar said, "The CRPF is primarily deployed in three theaters. On this occasion, the Home Minister will honour the best battalions in all three theaters with trophies."

On the day of the DG's parade, a total of 61 medals, eight trophies and one citation will be awarded by the director general, he said.

The best Forward Operating Base among those established in Naxal-affected areas over the past year will also receive a citation from the Director General.

During both these parades, a total of six demonstrations will be showcased in which various types of operations and professional efficiency of the force will be displayed, the SDG (Training) added.

The demonstrations will include band and rifle drill (synchronisation by women personnel of CRPF), Building Intervention Proceedings by Valley QAT, and various crowd control formations by the Rapid Action Force.

Unarmed combat Krav Maga (an Israeli martial art) by the VIP security wing of the force and traditional Indian Martial Arts - Kalarippattu of Kerala, Silambam of Tamil Nadu, Gatka of Punjab and an integrated performance of Chhau Jharkhand/Odisha/Bengal (war dance) - will also be showcased.

COBRA Commandos will demonstrate raid operations and new IED techniques during the parades, Kumar added. (PTI)

## Panel urged to

day visit to review various aspects of election readiness, including security deployment, electoral roll management and administrative arrangements.

On Wednesday, the Commission is scheduled to hold further meetings with enforcement agencies, the Chief Secretary, Director General of Police and other senior state officials before concluding the visit with a press briefing.

Elections to the 126-member Assam Assembly are expected to be held in March-April, with the current Assembly's term ending on May 20.

## Raijor Dal receives

He was also arrested before the suspension over "provocative" remarks he had allegedly made against an eviction drive in Darrang district of the state in September that year. Another three-time MLA of the Congress, Abdur Rashid Mandal, had joined the Raijor Dal on Monday. Mandal switched sides amid former state Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah's resignation from the party. The Congress high command did not accept Borah's resignation, following which he sought time to reconsider his decision. (PTI)

## Sonowal lauds Modi's

farm products remain protected under the arrangement. He also cited the India-EU free trade agreement signed recently, stating it will provide preferential access for the vast majority of India's exports to 27 European countries and benefit labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather and footwear, while also opening multiple services sectors. Similarly, he said the India-UK comprehensive economic agreement ensures duty-free access for nearly all Indian exports and expands opportunities for Indian professionals in services industries.

Agreements with Oman and New Zealand also provide broad duty-free access and investment opportunities. Sonowal said these trade deals represent a structural shift in India's global economic positioning and reflect growing confidence among entrepreneurs, MSMEs and young professionals.

Highlighting Assam's prospects, he said tea exports have regained zero-duty access in the US market, leading to significant growth in shipments.

He added that sectors such as spices, specialty rice, handloom, handicrafts, bamboo products and petrochemicals are also expected to benefit from expanded global access, with the state's exports projected to cross ₹10,000 crore by 2026-27.

## Full-scale production

Arunachal Pradesh, five in Nagaland and one in Meghalaya," Hazarika said. Presently, bamboo cultivation is taking place on 300 hectares of land with the already registered farmers, he added. "We have freely distributed one lakh saplings, the majority of which are for institutional players like tea gardens," Hazarika said.

With the government allowing five per cent of tea garden land for non-tea purposes, many owners have expressed willingness to use their land for bamboo cultivation, he added. "We are identifying non-crop land and not encouraging farmers to convert agricultural land for bamboo cultivation. We are looking for barren and unused land for bamboo cultivation," he said. Hazarika also said that when the company sources bamboo from 12,500 hectares of land, ABEPL will become a carbon neutral entity.

For producing ethanol, bamboo is chopped into small chips of 25 mm each. Although there are many varieties of bamboo available in the Northeast, no specific type is required for the fuel's production. "We have identified 24 chipping units across four districts in the first phase. Of those, we have signed agreements with eight and four have already started supplying bamboo chips," the CEO said.

He said that at the full-scale operation, ABEPL will be the largest consumer of bamboo in the Northeast. The world's first second-generation bio-ethanol plant is a 'zero-waste' facility, which will utilise all parts of the bamboo and is estimated to give a Rs 200-crore boost to the rural economy in the state. The ABEPL is a joint venture company promoted by state-run Numaligarh Refinery Ltd (NRL), and Finland-based Fortum 3 BV and Chempolis Oy. (PTI)

## No casualties reported; security tightened in hill district

# Gunfight in Dima Hasao ahead of Assembly polls



**HT Correspondent**  
**HAFLONG, Feb 17:** Tension gripped the hill district of Dima Hasao following a fresh incident of firing ahead of the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly elections, raising concerns over security in one of the state's most sensitive hill districts during the

pre-election period. According to official sources, the incident took place at around 3:30 PM on Monday in the Dihakho area under the jurisdiction of Langting Police Station in Dima Hasao district. A group of unidentified armed miscreants reportedly opened fire on a police patrolling

team operating in the area. The police personnel immediately retaliated, leading to a brief exchange of gunfire between the two sides. However, taking advantage of the dense terrain and forest cover, the miscreants managed to flee from the spot. Following the incident, security

forces recovered one AK-56 rifle, a magazine, several rounds of live ammunition, clothes, a torchlight and a bag containing other objectionable materials from the site. Authorities believe the recovery indicates the involvement of an organised armed group.

Fortunately, no casualties or injuries were reported from either side in the exchange of fire.

In the aftermath of the incident, police and security forces launched a massive combing and search operation across the region to track down the fleeing suspects. The entire area has been placed under heightened surveillance and additional security measures have been enforced to prevent any further untoward incidents.

The fresh gunfight has once again sparked anxiety among local residents, particularly at a time when the political atmosphere is intensifying ahead of the Assembly elections. Senior district officials have assured that the situation is under control and that all necessary steps are being taken to maintain peace and stability in the district.

## Kaziranga University hosts international conference on science and sustainability

**HT Correspondent**  
**JORHAT, Feb 17:** A two-day international conference titled "International Conference on Bridging Science, Society and Sustainability (ICBSS 2026)" was recently held at The Assam Kaziranga University, Jorhat. The conference was jointly organised by the Department of Biotechnology and the Department of Mathematics in collaboration with the Women Cell and the Institution's Innovation Council (IIC).

The event celebrated the contributions of women and girls in science and brought together academician, researchers and industry experts from India and abroad. Discussions focused on connecting scientific innovation with societal needs and the goals of sustainable development.

A total of 32 women organisers, supporting members and student volunteers actively contributed to the successful conduct of the conference. Notably, all presentations were delivered by women scientists and researchers, offering a global platform, especially for women researchers from Assam and North-east India, to showcase their scientific work.

The accepted research papers were compiled and published in an Abstract Book with an ISBN number, marking a significant academic

milestone for the conference. During the inaugural session, keynote addresses were delivered by Dr Richita Saikia from Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research, Dr Priyadarshini Deka, Founder of Axomia Superfood, Professor Ritu Sahni from Nirma University and Dr Banshree Gogoi from Google XR.

On the second day, following of-line oral presentations, keynote lectures were delivered by Dr Pallabi Saikia of Nanda Nath Saikia College, Dr Liza Handique of Jagannath Barooah University and Dr Ratna Kalita of Assam Agricultural University.

The valedictory session was graced by Vice-Chancellor Professor (Dr) Murari Lal Gaur as the chief guest of honour. The program also featured felicitations of dignitaries, cultural performances and prize distribution. Conference Convener Dr Sumita Sarkar and Coordinators Dr Lipika Khataniar, Dr Gitanjali Baruah, Dr Manasi Kotoki and Bedakshi Baruah stated that the international conference concluded successfully with a strong commitment to promoting inclusive scientific dialogue, strengthening academia-industry collaboration and advancing research-driven sustainable development.

## ATTSA Demow demanding ST status, wage hike

**HT Correspondent**  
**DEMOW, Feb 17:** The Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA), Demow Branch, along with ATTWA and local tea labourers, held a two-hour demonstration in front of the Co-District Commissioner's office on Tuesday. Protesters demanded Scheduled Tribe status for the tea tribes community, an increase in tea labourers' wages and the grant of land pattas, displaying placards and shouting slogans against the BJP and the state government. A memorandum outlining these demands was submitted to the Co-District Commissioner. ATTSA leaders Biswanath Nag (president), Amon Mirधा (secretary), Diganta Tassa, Rajkishore Bhumij and representatives of ATTWA participated in the programme.

## Over 500 join BJP in Kaliabor

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, Feb 17:** Over 500 people joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Kaliabor on Monday.

The joining ceremony was held at the Misa Milan Sangha hall in Kaliabor. The event was addressed by BJP MP from the Kaziranga parliamentary constituency, Kamakhya Prasad Tasa, who spoke about the development initiatives undertaken by the BJP-led government in Assam as well as at the Centre. He expressed confidence that the party would win the upcoming Assembly elections and form the government in the state.

Several leaders from the Congress, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and other parties joined the BJP during the event. Prominent leaders present included BJP leaders Harek Krishna Mahato, Simanchal Digal, Karuna Bhuyan and Bhaskar Saikia.

## Students of Ramanujan Senior Secondary shine in JEE

**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, Feb 17:** Students of Ramanujan Higher Secondary School shine in JEE (Main) Examination. Ramanujan Higher Secondary School, a prominent private institution in Nagaon, has achieved remarkable success in the recently announced JEE (Main) entrance exam results. Pratik Saha, a student of the school, secured a percentile score of 99.77, creating a festive atmosphere in the institution.

A total of 47 students from the school cleared the exam, including notable performers like Kusum Kakati (99.59 percentile), Devashree Kashyap (97.23), Adhik Paul (97.16), Mrinmoy Barman (97.06), Hrishikesh Mohanta (96.89), Nikunja Sut (96.31), Dhritiman Boro (95.9), Mehjabin Siddique (95.9), Muhit Barman (95.82), Sarjah Sahil Ahmed (95.4), Pritamjit Doley (95.39), Baran Bikash Deuri (94.78), Arnab Singha (94.5), Rahul Sarma (94.1), Tanvir Ehsan (94.09), Rahul Kumar Das (90.37) and Naina Kashyap (90.00).

The school has a history of excellence, having created records in the Higher Secondary Examination in Science and Arts streams in the state. The students' outstanding performance in JEE and NEET exams is a testament to the institution's academic prowess.

## Indian Railways adds new train halts

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** Indian Railways has introduced additional train stoppages across Assam, West Bengal and Bihar under the jurisdiction of the Northeast Frontier Railway, effective February 17, 2026. The move has been widely welcomed, sparking appreciation among passengers and local communities. For families, students, traders and patients, these new stoppages represent long-awaited opportunities for smoother, faster and more convenient travel.

Train No 75729/75730 (Guwahati - Silghat Town - Guwahati) DEMU has been provided with a new stoppage at Digaru Railway Station, formally flagged off by Bijuli Kalita Medhi, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Digaru.

Similarly, the Minister of State for Education & Development of the North Eastern Region, Dr Sukanta Majumdar, flagged off new stoppages for Train No 13063/13064 (Howrah - Balurghat - Howrah) Express and Train No 13161/13162 (Kolkata - Balurghat - Kolkata) Express at Daulatpur Hat Railway Station. He also inaugurated the new stoppage for Train No 15464/15463 (Siliguri Jn - Balurghat - Siliguri Jn) Intercity Express at Rampur Bazar Railway Station.

## ASHA workers' convention held in Kokrajhar

Financial aid distributed to retired workers; welfare issues discussed

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 17:** A large convention of ASHA workers was held in Kokrajhar on Monday, bringing together frontline health workers from across the district. The day-long programme took place at the KDSA Indoor Stadium and witnessed the participation of hundreds of ASHA workers, health officials and representatives of the Health Department.

The convention was organised by the office of the Joint Director of Health with the aim of strengthening grassroots healthcare delivery and addressing the concerns of ASHA workers. During the programme, officials highlighted various government schemes and welfare initiatives meant for ASHA workers and discussed ways to improve their implementation at the field level. Several key issues faced by the workers, including service conditions, incentives and work challenges were also raised and deliberated upon.

As part of the event, financial assistance was provided to retired ASHA workers in recognition of their long years of service in the public health sector. Cheques were distributed during the programme



as a gesture of support and appreciation for their contributions.

BTC Health Department Executive Member Derhasad Basumatary attended the convention as the chief guest and handed over the financial assistance cheques. Addressing the gathering, he acknowledged the vital role played by ASHA workers in strengthening rural healthcare and ensuring last-mile delivery of health services.

He assured the workers that the Bodoland Territorial Council gov-

ernment is aware of their concerns and is committed to addressing them. He stated that the issues raised by the ASHA workers would be resolved step by step and reaffirmed the council's commitment to improving the welfare and working conditions of frontline health workers.

The convention concluded with renewed optimism among participants, who expressed hope that their longstanding demands would be addressed in the coming days.

## Poll coordination, SVEEP activities gather pace in Kokrajhar

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 17:** In view of the forthcoming Assembly Elections, 2026, a series of coordination meetings and voter awareness activities are being conducted in Kokrajhar district to ensure the smooth and peaceful conduct of the election process.

On Monday, a coordination meeting of civil and police zonal and sector officers was held at the Science College Auditorium, Kokrajhar. The meeting was conducted in the presence of District Commissioner and District Election Officer, Kokrajhar, Pankaj Chakravarty, along with the SSP and ADC, Kokrajhar. Various aspects related to election preparedness, coordination mechanisms and responsibilities of officers were discussed in detail to ensure efficient and coordinated execution of election duties.

On the same day, an EVM demonstration programme was conducted at the Central Institute of Technology, Kokrajhar, for newly enrolled voters. The programme aimed to familiarise young voters with the functioning of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and VVPAT, while encouraging their active participation in the democratic process. The initiative was organised as part of ongoing SVEEP activities to promote voter awareness and participation among first-time voters.

## Urkhao Gwra Brahma lays foundation for hostel, community centre in Baksa

**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Feb 17:** Assam Cabinet Minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma on Tuesday laid the foundation stones for two key development projects aimed at strengthening education and community infrastructure in Baksa district.

The projects include an ST Boys' Hostel at Mushalpur College with an estimated cost of ₹ 2 crore and a community centre near Jougakhang, Chapaguri, with an investment of ₹ 25 lakh.

The ST Boys' Hostel is being constructed for students from 10 districts of Assam under Article 275(1) of the Constitution of India for the year 2024-25. The facility is expected to provide better residential amenities for Scheduled Tribe students and encourage them to pursue higher education.

Speaking on the occasion, the minister said the hostel will open new opportunities for students by creating a supportive learning environment, while the community centre will strengthen social unity and serve as a common space for public activities and gatherings.

## Oil tanker catches fire on NH-27 near Kachugaon

**HT Correspondent**  
**GOSSAIGAON, Feb 17:** A major fire erupted after an oil tanker caught fire on National Highway 27 near Kachugaon under Gossaigaon subdivision on Tuesday, triggering panic and bringing traffic to a standstill along the busy highway stretch.

According to preliminary information, the tanker reportedly met with an accident before bursting into flames. Within minutes, the blaze intensified, engulfing the entire vehicle and sending thick plumes of black smoke billowing into the sky, visible from several kilometres away.

The driver and his helper are feared to have been trapped inside the burning tanker, though there was no official confirmation regarding casualties at the time of filing this report. Repeated bursting sounds were heard from the vehicle, apparently due to the highly inflammable contents, making it impossible for locals to approach the site.

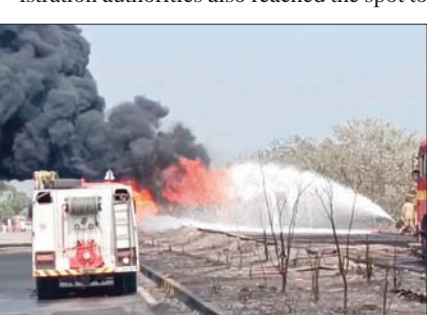
As a precautionary measure, vehicular movement along the highway was immediately suspended. Hundreds of vehicles, including passenger buses and goods carriers were stranded on both sides of the road, resulting in massive traffic congestion and long delays for commuters.

A large number of people gathered at the spot after news of the incident spread. Police personnel deployed at the site repeatedly appealed to onlookers to maintain a safe distance in view of the risk of explosion.

Barricades were erected to cordon off the area.

Fire tenders initially rushed from Gossaigaon to the scene and began efforts to douse the flames. Additional firefighting units from Kokrajhar, Fakiragram and Dotma later joined the operation. Firefighters were seen battling intense heat and dense smoke to bring the situation under control.

Senior police officials and district administration authorities also reached the spot to



supervise the firefighting and rescue operations. Ambulances were kept on standby as a precautionary measure.

The exact cause of the accident is yet to be ascertained. Officials said a detailed inquiry would be initiated after the fire is fully extinguished and the area declared safe. The incident has once again underscored the risks involved in transporting highly flammable materials along busy national highways. Further details are awaited.

## Dimasa language to be taught in schools from 2026-27

Assam govt aims to preserve indigenous languages and cultural heritage

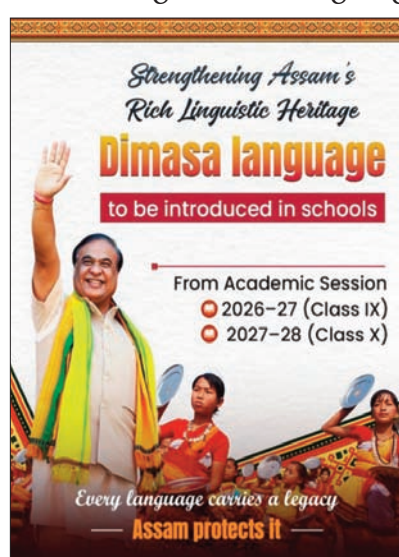
**HT Correspondent**  
**GUWAHATI, Feb 17:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday announced that the Dimasa language will be introduced in schools as part of the state government's continued push to preserve and promote indigenous languages.

Sharing the update on social media platform X, the Chief Minister said that every language carries the soul of its people and reflects their cultural roots, adding that the government has prioritised the promotion and usage of indigenous languages since its first day in office.

"With the introduction of Dimasa in schools, we take another step forward in this direction," Sarma said, underlining the government's commitment to strengthening Assam's rich linguistic heritage.

According to the announcement, the Dimasa language will be introduced in a phased manner in the school curriculum. It will be taught at the secondary level starting from the academic session 2026-27 for Class IX students and extended to Class X from the academic session 2027-28.

Officials said the move aims to provide institutional support to the Dimasa language, spoken predominantly by the Di-



masa community in parts of Assam, particularly in Dima Hasao district and adjoining areas. The decision is expected to help preserve the language, encourage its formal learning and ensure its transmission to younger generations.

The initiative is also aligned with the state government's broader policy of pro-

moting linguistic diversity and cultural inclusion in the education system. Over the past few years, Assam has taken steps to introduce and strengthen several indigenous and tribal languages in schools, recognising their importance in safeguarding cultural identity.

Education department officials said that necessary preparations are underway, including the development of textbooks, curriculum frameworks and teacher training, to ensure smooth implementation of the decision. Experts and community representatives are also expected to be involved in finalising the academic content.

The announcement has been welcomed by members of the Dimasa community and language activists, who have long demanded formal recognition and inclusion of the language in the education system. They see the move as a significant step towards cultural empowerment and preservation.

The Chief Minister reiterated that protecting linguistic heritage remains a key priority for the state government, stating that Assam's diversity is its strength and every language carries a unique legacy that must be safeguarded for future generations.

No.TBDB/6<sup>th</sup> ASFC/90/2024-25/

Dated, the 4<sup>th</sup> Feb/2026

### TENDER

Scaled tender, affixing non-refundable court fee stamp of Rs.8.25 (Rupees Eight & paise Twenty Five Paise) only in prescribed form against the following scheme from the Govt. registered contractors / Firms of appropriate class. Tenders will be received in the office of the undersigned up-to 2.00 PM on 24/02/2026 and will be opened in the same day on 2.30 PM. Details may be seen in the office Notice Board and Tender papers may collect from office on any open day before the Tender.

Sl. No.	Name of Schemes	A.A Value (in Rs.)	Tender Value (in Rs.)	Earnest Money	Tender Cost	Time of Completion
1	*Const. of crematorium at Murmela Borosupa (Under Murmela VCDC)	19,99,998.00	19,99,998.00	2 % for General & 1% for ST/SC/OBC cast to be drawn by D.D in favour of the B.D.O Barama Dev.Block payable at Barama.	0.03% in favour of Principal Secretary, BTC, Kokrajhar payable at S.B.I Korajhar	60days
2	*Const. of crematorium Murmela Borosupa (Under Murmela VCDC,	19,99,998.00	19,99,998.00			
3	*Const. of crematorium Gomma Village (under Koklabari VCDC.) For the year 2021-22 (2 <sup>nd</sup> Inst) during 2025-26	19,99,998.00	19,99,998.00			

Tender not accompanied by the Earnest Money Deposit (EMD) is liable to be rejected.

Sd/-

IPR(BTC)/C/2025-26/4057

Block Dev. Officer Cum Chairman,  
Tender Committee, Tihu-Barama Dev.Block

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

There are many ways of going forward, but only one way of standing still —Franklin D. Roosevelt

## Pak politics and Imran's imprisonment

Things are not going well for Pakistan's former prime minister and front ranking Opposition leader Imran Khan and democratic process of this country. Imprisonment of the former prime minister not dominating the political debate in a country which espouses democracy; this is an aberration. The deeper issue is no longer the fate of the former prime minister. The focus is on the widening machinery which now governs who may speak, what may be said and at what cost. Khan being behind the bars is no doubt a powerful symbol. But it is actually reduced to a tightening of political space. The powers that be in Pakistan are treating dissent not as disagreement but a defiance. Lawyers, journalists, online commentators and human rights activists have found this at their cost. The consequences is a quiet recalibration of public behaviour. It is not shaped by law but fear. Institutional character distinguishes the current phase from previous cycles of repression. Controls embedded within legal frameworks have replaced temporary crackdowns and controls. Time was when informal pressure was exerted on Opposition activists. Now the pressure tactics has been shifted to courts, cyber laws and regulatory authorities. This shift lends permanence to repression. It narrows down democratic life while arming itself with procedural legitimacy.

An illustration is at hand post expanding digital offence. Vaguely defined charges related to national interest or online harm allow wide discretion in enforcement. This ambiguity becomes power in practice. Uncertainty becomes a tool of control. Silence has become the safest choice where boundary of do's and don'ts shift without notice. Journalists are left guessing where the line lies. Financial pressure has emerged as disciplining mechanism in this scenario. Media organisations that resist alignment face sudden revenue disruptions or unexplained regulatory scrutiny. Newsrooms respond not with protest but self censorship. The ongoing regulatory methods avoid spectacle but achieve compliance more efficiently than bans. Military have long been a deciding factor in national politics in Pakistan. But the present moment marks its consolidation rather than intervention.

For India the significance of the Pakistani situation lies in caution. This is no time for complacency on the other side of the border. Pakistan these days is an instance how democracies erode incrementally. It is done by laws framed for protection and fear under the camouflage of normalcy masquerading as governance. The question confronting Pakistan is not whether dissent can be silenced. A political order sustained by fear may appear calm but underneath it lies fragility. The rule of fear accumulates pressure. It eventually surfaces elsewhere, in disengagement, radicalisation or institutional decay.

## The significance of Ali Aye Ligang

Ali Aye Ligang forms an inseparable part of the life, culture, and traditions of the Mising community, one of the indigenous peoples of Assam. It would be no exaggeration to describe it as the very heartbeat or lifeline of Mising society. The definition of culture is extremely broad; it encompasses the collective knowledge, beliefs, customs, practices, and intellectual achievements of a people. A healthy and vibrant culture is what keeps a community alive. In this era of globalization, when the distinct identities of many small ethnic groups are gradually disappearing into the folds of time, the Mising people have succeeded in preserving their unique identity through their language, literature, and festivals such as Ligang, even amid such challenging circumstances.

When the gentle winds of Phagun begin to carry the colourful hues of shimolu and palash trees across the landscape, a fresh vitality and a message of renewed hope enter Mising life—welcomed with open hearts as “Ali Aye Ligang”.

An etymological analysis of the term Ali Aye Ligang reveals its deep connection with agriculture. In the Mising language, “Ali” means seeds or tubers of crops, “Aye” means fruit, and “Ligang” refers to the day when sowing or planting begins. Collectively, it signifies the auspicious first day of sowing seeds or the commencement of planting. This festival is primarily a spring agricultural celebration. As the dryness of winter recedes and new tender leaves adorn Mother Earth in spring, the agrarian Mising community prepares for the forthcoming cultivation season. Thus, it is not merely a festival of joy and merriment; it is also a religious and social acknowledgment of the primordial and sacred bond between humans and the land.

Historically, the specific date for observing this festival has undergone evolution. In earlier times, the Mising people celebrated it on any convenient day during the months of Phagun, Chait, or Bohag, according to their convenience. Later, however, with the aim of fostering unity and solidarity within the community, a significant resolution was adopted in 1956 during the largest socio-economic gathering of the Mising people, known as “Bane Kebang”. According to that resolution, the first Wednesday of the month of Phagun was fixed as the day for observing Ali Aye Ligang. In Mising folk belief, Wednesday is considered an especially auspicious day. Since then, every year, on the first Wednesday of Phagun, this festival has been celebrated with great enthusiasm in various Mising-inhabited regions across the state. It has become not merely the celebration of a single day but a symbol of national

unity. On the morning of the festival day, the elders of each Mising household, together with family members, perform auspicious rites and begin sowing seeds in a selected corner of the homestead garden or a designated plot in the field. In this ritual, as many as nine varieties of crops are planted, including paddy, sweet potato, yam, ginger, turmeric, colocasia, and others. This act carries profound symbolic meaning. Around the prepared plot, four stems of a special plant called “Purtha Megela Bon” are planted to form a boundary. At the base of these Megela plants, “Tachuk”-shaped “Konkuk” structures are made using taro or kou leaves, and offerings of “Por Apong” are made there. Cotton is inserted between the leaves of the Megela plants, symbolizing the purity and abundance of the crops. Even the householder places cotton in his ears, representing the sanctity of nature. During the sowing, auspicious incantations are recited, expressing gratitude and dependence on nature. The sun is addressed as “Ane Doni” (Mother Sun) and the moon as “Abu Pol” (Father Moon), with prayers offered for the protection of crops from pests and for lush growth akin to the Megela plant. This prayer beautifully exemplifies ancient nature worship.

An indispensable part of Ali Aye Ligang is its traditional cuisine. On the festival day, every Mising household prepares “Purang Apin”, or bamboo-tube rice. This special aromatic rice, wrapped in taro leaves and cooked in bamboo tubes, is emblematic of



reflected the profound reverence the Mising community holds for its spiritual beliefs and traditions. Another powerful medium of culture is dance and music. The joy of Ligang is doubled by the “Gumrag” dance, also known as “Pakch Monam”. Accompanied by drums, cymbals, and the “Lenong-Marbang” (a large horn-like instrument), young men and women as well as elders and children participate in this dance. The movements of the dance reflect various agricultural activities such as tilling the soil, harvesting paddy, or sowing seeds. The Mising people believe that pleasing the deities through dance and song ensures good rainfall and increased production. This dance is not merely for entertainment; it is regarded as a tantric or spiritual process to enhance the fertility of the earth. Each beat of the drum seems to infuse new life into the bosom of Mother Earth.

The folk beliefs associated with this festival are particularly fascinating and worthy of research. While going to sow seeds, the farmer carries small stones and pebbles. The belief is that just as these stones and pebbles are solid and heavy, so too will the paddy

grains become plump and substantial. After sowing, the householder consumes a bowl of Apong and Purang, praying that there will be no scarcity of food throughout the year. Equally important is the observance of “Gena” or taboos in the days following the festival. Known in Mising as “Yadla-Dunam”, these prohibitions last for five days from the day of Ligang. During this period, digging the soil, ploughing, roasting or burning anything in fire, or cutting bamboo is strictly forbidden. The belief is that during these days Mother Earth becomes pregnant; therefore, any injury to the soil or the use of fire would harm the crops and cause them to wither. After five days, the taboos are lifted through “Lilenkunam” or the breaking of Gena. This tradition demonstrates the community's innate sensitivity towards nature and an instinctive knowledge of environmental conservation.

Ali Aye Ligang strengthens the thread of unity within Mising society. Through this festival, every individual reconnects with their roots. The vibrant colours of Mising handwoven Eri shawls and garments, prepared by the skilled hands of young women, seem to speak a new language during the Ligang season. The entire village coming together in celebration, sharing a communal feast, and worshipping nature helps dissolve social divisions and build a stable society. Centred on agriculture, this festival teaches the dignity of labour and inspires commitment to nature.

Ali Aye Ligang is no longer confined to the Mising community alone; it has now become an integral part of the broader Assamese culture. It stands as an excellent example of harmony. In an age when mechanized civilization has distanced humanity from nature, festivals like Ligang remind us that our existence depends fundamentally on soil and nature. Therefore, the preservation and promotion of this festival are of utmost importance. Greater research should be conducted into the deep-seated folk beliefs, agricultural traditions, and spiritual philosophies embedded within it, so that future generations may understand their glorious heritage. This sacred festival of the Mising people, illuminated by the colours of palash in the arrival of spring, will continue to shine like a bright star in the cultural sky of Assam for all time.

Ali Aye Ligang sends a special message to the entire human society—that of peace, prosperity, and harmonious coexistence with nature. Treating Mother Earth as a mother and sowing seeds in her bosom in hope of new life, this festival truly represents the lifeline of Mising society. Through it are reflected the dreams, toil, and genuine love for culture of a hardworking people.

## DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

and traditions.

Another powerful medium of culture is dance and music. The joy of Ligang is doubled by the “Gumrag” dance, also known as “Pakch Monam”. Accompanied by drums, cymbals, and the “Lenong-Marbang” (a large horn-like instrument), young men and women as well as elders and children participate in this dance. The movements of the dance reflect various agricultural activities such as tilling the soil, harvesting paddy, or sowing seeds. The Mising people believe that pleasing the deities through dance and song ensures good rainfall and increased production. This dance is not merely for entertainment; it is regarded as a tantric or spiritual process to enhance the fertility of the earth. Each beat of the drum seems to infuse new life into the bosom of Mother Earth.

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## AI's invisible energy burden

By: Dipak Kurmi

Artificial intelligence has slipped so quietly into everyday life that its presence often feels ambient rather than disruptive. We no longer log on to “use” AI in any deliberate sense; instead, we encounter it continuously and almost invisibly. It guides our online searches, curates what we read and watch, suggests products as we shop, predicts traffic before we leave home, and even completes our sentences before we finish typing them. Increasingly, AI systems operate in the background of routine digital interactions, embedded within platforms and services that define modern living. Their ubiquity has normalised a relationship in which computation feels instantaneous and immaterial. Yet behind this seamless interface lies a vast physical infrastructure whose appetite for electricity is growing at a pace few societies have fully reckoned with.

There is no serious dispute that AI holds extraordinary promise. It enhances productivity, accelerates research, assists in medical diagnosis, optimises logistics, strengthens disaster forecasting, and entertains on an unprecedented scale. It can democratise access to knowledge and empower individuals in ways that were once unthinkable. A balanced assessment does not require skepticism about its transformative potential. What demands attention, however, is a near-term consequence of this rapid adoption that receives far less scrutiny than breakthroughs or investment headlines: the surge in electricity demand driven by data centres, the physical backbone of AI systems. As digital intelligence expands, so too does the energy infrastructure required to sustain it.

The magnitude of this demand is already substantial. Research from the Berkeley National Laboratory indicates that data centres in the United States consumed roughly 176 terawatt-hours of electricity in 2023. To contextualise that figure, it approximates the annual electricity consumption of around 16 million average American households, roughly equivalent to the combined usage of major metropolitan areas such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. This level of consumption is not incidental; it reflects the computational intensity required to train large AI models, operate cloud services, and process billions of user interactions daily. The concern lies not merely in the present scale but in the trajectory. Projections suggest that, driven largely by AI workloads, data centre electricity use could triple within just a few years, a rate of expansion unprecedented in modern energy systems.

Power infrastructure, unlike software, cannot scale overnight. Power plants require years to plan and construct. Transmission lines face regulatory hurdles, environmental assessments, and public opposition. Many regions already operate with thin reserve margins during peak demand periods, leaving grids vulnerable to

shortages and price volatility. As electricity prices rise under mounting demand, consumers and industries alike feel the pressure. Where fossil fuels remain embedded in the energy mix, increased generation also translates into higher emissions, complicating climate commitments. This challenge is not confined to the United States; advanced economies across Europe and parts of East Asia confront similar constraints as digital infrastructure expands. The acceleration of AI adoption therefore intersects directly with energy security and environmental sustainability.

India occupies a particularly interesting and often overlooked position within this global conversation. The country operates under technological, demographic, and governance pressures comparable to those faced by advanced economies, yet it approaches digital transformation from a distinct developmental vantage point. India has leapfrogged in digital public infrastructure, creating systems that operate at population scale. Platforms such as Aadhaar and the Unified Payments Interface have generated vast, interoperable datasets and transaction networks that are inherently AI-ready. Large-scale digital service delivery mechanisms further embed data-driven governance into everyday life. At the same time, India's expansive workforce and developmental priorities frame AI not merely as a productivity enhancer, but as a tool for inclusion, administrative efficiency, and social equity.

This dual context tempers AI expansion with practical constraints. Energy availability remains uneven across regions, and grid stability cannot be taken for granted. Yet these constraints also create incentives to integrate efficiency and renewable energy considerations from the outset. In effect, India is being compelled to confront a question that several developed economies postponed during earlier phases of digital expansion: how to align digital ambition with energy discipline rather than excess. If AI-driven growth is inevitable, its infrastructure must be designed with resource prudence embedded at its core. Smarter grid management, distributed renewable integration, and efficiency standards for data centres become strategic priorities rather than peripheral considerations.

At the level of everyday usage, the energy implications of AI are rarely visible. Every interaction with an AI system consumes electricity. Each prompt initiates computation across servers, and each generated response requires processing, cooling, and data transfer. Individually, these actions appear trivial. At scale, multiplied across millions or billions of daily interactions, they accumulate into significant energy demand. Yet both users and platforms often treat AI as effectively costless, encouraging unnecessary back-and-forth exchanges, vague queries that require repeated clarification, and redundant interactions that serve little functional purpose. The absence of visible cost fosters casual

overuse.

This reflects a broader blind spot in digital culture. We seldom perceive the physical infrastructure that supports our digital conveniences. The server farms, cooling systems, and power lines remain geographically and psychologically distant from the user interface. The issue at stake is not etiquette toward machines, nor a rejection of technological advancement, but a question of efficiency. Just as households once learned to switch off unused lights and replace inefficient bulbs, digital societies must cultivate habits that minimise unnecessary computation. The lesson is not absence but intentionality. Clearer and more precise prompts reduce repeated queries and wasted processing cycles. Thoughtful consideration of when AI is genuinely useful prevents mindless overuse driven by novelty rather than necessity.

The technology industry itself bears substantial responsibility. Efficiency should be a core design objective, not an afterthought introduced under regulatory pressure. Advances in model architecture, hardware optimisation, and cooling technologies can reduce the energy intensity of AI systems. Public commitments to improving computational efficiency, coupled with transparent reporting on energy consumption, would help align corporate incentives with societal needs. Integrating renewable energy into data centre operations and improving load management can ease strain on electricity grids. In countries like India, where energy demand is already rising due to urbanisation and industrial growth, embedding such standards early could prevent structural imbalances later.

Ultimately, the expansion of AI forces a broader reflection on how societies balance innovation with sustainability. Digital transformation is not immaterial; it is grounded in physical infrastructure and finite resources. The narrative of limitless virtual growth obscures the reality that every algorithm runs on electricity generated somewhere, often at environmental cost. A modest degree of collective restraint can produce meaningful impact. Turning off a single light may seem inconsequential, yet multiplied across millions of households it reshapes national demand curves. Similarly, small behavioural adjustments in AI usage, practiced widely, can moderate growth in data centre loads.

Artificial intelligence is not a passing trend. It is becoming foundational to economic systems, governance structures, and daily life. The challenge is not whether to adopt AI, but how to integrate it wisely within energy-constrained realities. Politeness and curiosity will continue to define human interaction with machines. Yet in an era where digital expansion strains physical systems, thoughtful efficiency may prove equally virtuous. The true measure of technological maturity lies not only in what we can build, but in how responsibly we choose to use it. (The writer can be reached at dipakurmi@gmail.com)

## Will Bengal choose identity politics or inclusive development?

By: Lalit Garg

Although the formal announcement of the West Bengal Assembly elections is still awaited, the political bugle has already been sounded. The signals this time are clear—the contest may revolve not around development versus claims of development, but around identity, cultural assertion, and the banner of religion. On the occasion of the centenary of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the proposed Hindu conventions across the state appear, for the Bharatiya Janata Party, not merely as ideological celebrations but as strategic electoral opportunities. On the other hand, Mamata Banerjee seems equally aware that if the electoral ground shifts toward religious discourse, it cannot be left uncontested. The foundation-laying of the “Durga Angan” in New Town, Kolkata, and its symbolic linkage with Bengali identity reflect this strategic alertness.

For decades, Bengal's politics revolved around class struggle, Left ideology, and slogans of social justice. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) led the Left Front government for nearly three decades. Before that, the Indian National Congress dominated the political landscape. However, the change of power in 2011 marked the emergence of a new axis—Trinamool versus BJP. Today, the Left and Congress have been pushed to the margins, and the contest has narrowed into a bipolar struggle. This polarization has made the election sharper and increasingly identity-centric.

The BJP's campaign rests on four key planks: the claim that Hindus are under threat in Bengal, illegal Bangladeshi infiltration, women's insecurity, and corruption. By citing examples from border districts, a narrative is being constructed that the demographic balance is shifting. The issue of illegal infiltration is not new, but it is now being infused with renewed political energy. Incidents such as the RG Kar Medical College case, the teacher recruitment scam, allegations of attacks on Hindus, and corruption cases are projected as symbols of governance failure. The BJP's objective is clear—to consolidate nearly 70 percent Hindu voters around a shared sense of insecurity and translate it into electoral behavior. Indeed, unchecked infiltration has become one of the gravest challenges to Bengal's development; it demands firm resolution rather than political exploitation.

Mamata Banerjee's challenge is twofold. On one hand, she must reassure minorities that she remains their protector; on the other, she must convince Hindu voters that their faith and cultural identity are secure. In the 2021 election, when the BJP aggressively amplified the slogan “Jai Shri Ram,” Mamata responded with “Jai Maa Durga” and recitations of the Chandi Path as a cultural counter-narrative. This time, through symbols such as Durga Angan, she signals that Bengali Hindu identity is not the BJP's monopoly. She frames religion not in terms of nationalism but regional identity—“Bengal is culturally Hindu, yet politically pluralistic”—this is her underlying message.

Meanwhile, the reported initiative by former Trinamool leader Humayun Kabir in Murshidabad regarding the symbolic reference to the Babri Masjid has added a new layer of complexity. It may trigger a separate polarization among Muslim voters. If Muslim votes fragment, Trinamool's electoral arithmetic could be affected. In 2021, it secured around 48 percent of the vote and won 223 seats—decisively aided by consolidated Muslim support. The BJP, with 38 percent of the vote and 65 seats, emerged as the principal opposition. If even 5–10 percent of Muslim votes shift, outcomes in several constituencies could change dramatically, potentially enabling the BJP to secure a full majority.

Yet the question is not merely one of numbers but of political character. Will Bengal's election become a laboratory of religious mobilization? Or will it ultimately return to the issues of development, employment, and infrastructure? Ironically, the Bengal once regarded as the country's economic capital—radiating industry, education, and cultural renaissance—now grapples with stalled projects, sluggish industrial growth, and migration for employment. In Kolkata, unfinished metro lines and the silence of shuttered factories narrate a development story drowned out by political rhetoric.

The departure of the Tata Nano project in 2011 marked a symbolic turning point. While the politics of land acquisition gained popular support, it also fostered an atmosphere of suspicion toward industrial investment. Fifteen years later, Bengal still awaits major investments. Youth migrate in search of jobs, and reports of their being labeled “Bangladeshi” in other states strike not only at economic prospects but at dignity itself. Yet this pain often remains peripheral in electoral discourse, eclipsed by religion, identity, and fear.

Mamata Banerjee accuses the central government of fiscal discrimination; the BJP counters with charges of corruption and appeasement. Actions by investigative agencies are described by Mamata as political vendetta, while the BJP frames them as lawful enforcement. This confrontation has transformed administrative dialogue into political conflict, pushing the development agenda into the background.

The central question remains: can religion-based polarization provide sustainable political solutions? History suggests that while religious mobilization may generate short-term energy, long-term governance must grapple with development, education, healthcare, and employment. If the election is confined to “who represents whom,” the critical question of “who will do what” may remain unanswered.

Bengal's soul has long rested in pluralism—from the spiritual legacy of Ramakrishna Paramahansa to the humanist vision of Rabindranath Tagore. This is a land where Durga Puja and Muharram have often been shared social experiences. If politics reduces this delicate social fabric to electoral arithmetic, it risks wounding society's sensitivity. Conversely, if religious symbols are harnessed to inspire cultural pride alongside a commitment to development, they could play a constructive role.

In this election, the BJP's strategy is maximum consolidation of Hindu votes; Mamata's strategy is to integrate Hindu identity with Bengali cultural pride while retaining minority trust. The activism of Muslim political formations poses a challenge to Trinamool but an opportunity to the BJP. This triangular dynamic adds complexity to the contest. Ultimately, however, the maturity of democracy lies with the voter. If Bengal's electorate prioritizes development, employment, and good governance, political parties will be compelled to recalibrate their narratives. If identity politics prevails, that will shape the future trajectory.

The question is not merely who will win, but what agenda will triumph. Can an election fight on religious lines establish enduring values? Or will it deepen ideological fissures within the state? Bengal has repeatedly offered India new intellectual and moral directions. Once again, it stands at a crossroads—whether to entangle itself in religion-versus-religion debates, or to transform faith into a source of ethical inspiration and developmental commitment. Whatever the electoral outcome, the true test will be whether Bengal can reclaim its economic vitality, cultural openness, and social harmony. If not, however high the banner of religion may fly, the void of development will ultimately be visible to all. (The author is a journalist, writer and columnist)

# Skills, safeguards and scale: Making AI work for women in India

By : Kumkum Mohata

As AI becomes increasingly embedded across workplaces and workflows, its implications for equity are only now being fully realised. This shift is unfolding amid a global gender gap in AI adoption, with women adopting AI tools at around 25 percent lower rates than men. In India, it intersects with an already entrenched 24 percent digital gender divide. Ahead of the AI Impact Summit, the policy challenge is not only to enable AI-led productivity gains but also to translate these into women's employability and meaningful economic inclusion.

An inclusive AI agenda for women should therefore be assessed through labour-market outcomes across the employment lifecycle — from hiring and job matching, to working conditions, career progression and access to reskilling. In India, female labour force participation is rising—reaching 41.7 percent in 2023 after falling to 23.3 percent in 2017-18. However, women remain concentrated in informal and unpaid work. In this context, AI integration can represent a distributional shift: It can raise productivity and open pathways to higher-value work; however, it can also deepen constraints if skills, mobility, and job quality do not improve in parallel.

## AI-Linked Productivity and the Uneven Distribution of Skill Gains

The benefits of any technological shift are rarely shared evenly, and the same holds for AI. As AI spreads across workplaces, it can both substitute routine tasks and augment workers in higher-value roles. Productivity gains are therefore expected to be larger in the latter segment. In a labour market already shaped by gender differentials, this transition is further skewed, with male professionals reporting approximately 46 percent higher rates of AI adoption than female professionals.

While the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) does not measure AI exposure directly, it provides a useful baseline to highlight where

wage gradients are steep and where productivity-linked gains may concentrate. These distributional effects can be gauged through two indicators. First, inequality across skill tiers—captured by the skill premium, or the incremental earnings on moving up the skill ladder. Second, the gender wage gap, or the male-to-female earnings ratio, across the same segment. To capture this, skill baskets are constructed using NCO 2015 divisions—high-skill (Divisions 1-2), mid-skill (Divisions 3-4), and low-skill (Divisions 5-9).

Figure 1 highlights a sizeable occupation-based skill premium for both men and women. This suggests that AI-linked productivity gains may accrue disproportionately to workers positioned in higher-skill segments. Notably, the steeper gradient for women indicates a sharper divide between low- and high-skill earnings. Women in lower-skill roles may face a larger penalty, while women who reach high-skill work may see higher returns. In India, this matters because AI adoption is already accelerating in regular salaried service-sector work, including IT-BPM/ITeS and back-office functions (high- and mid-skill sectors) where a sizeable share of women are employed.

Figure 1: Skill premium (occupation-based) by gender

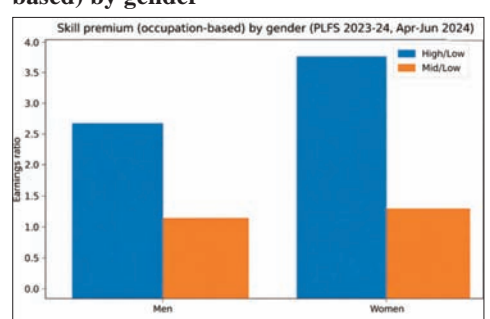


Figure 2 shows the gender wage gaps within skill segments. The gap widens as skill levels decline, reflecting lower earnings for women in low-skill occupations. Figure 3 captures the

same disparity across casual labour and regular salaried employment, with larger gaps accruing to the former. The gig and platform work increasingly overlaps with casual and informal employment, and is also being shaped by algorithmic allocation and digital intermediation.

Beyond labour-market structure, enabling conditions also matter. Women's ability to adapt depends on unpaid care burdens. India's Time Use Survey 2024 highlights large gender differences in time spent on paid and unpaid work, reinforcing that inclusion requires enabling conditions beyond the workplace. In essence, both a steep earnings ladder across skills and persistent gender wage gaps indicate that AI should be treated as a distributional transition.

Figure 2: Gender Earnings gap by occupational skill bucket

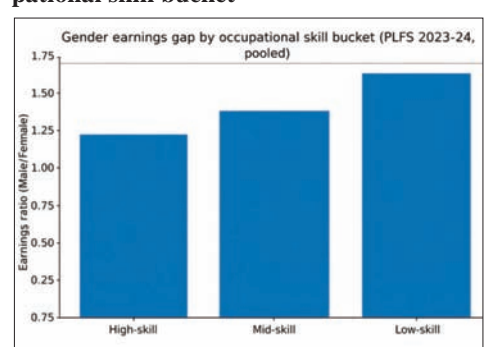
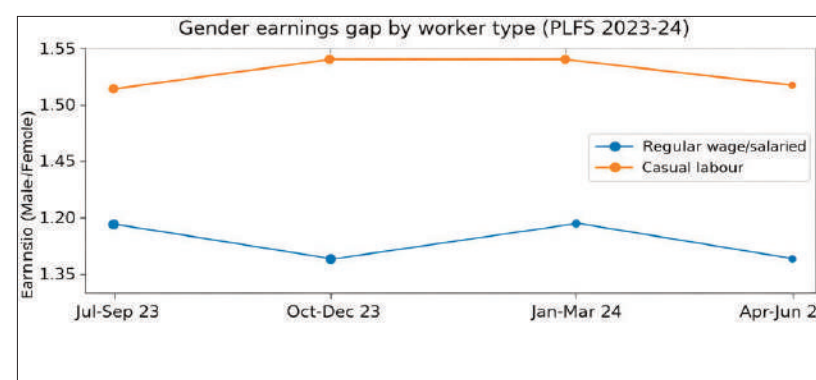


Figure 3: Gender earnings gap by worker type

## Policy Instruments to Align AI Integration with Gender Inclusion

As the India AI Mission prioritises AI democratisation and inclusion, there is a need to move beyond intent to outcome-based measures. Three policy levers are particularly relevant. First, an AI Readiness Index can track women's access to AI, adoption levels and on-the-job use across sectors. Second, inclusion will depend on whether women can effectively



build AI-relevant skills. Since time poverty remains a binding constraint, skilling systems should be designed around women's realities. This includes flexible learning formats, modular credentials, and care-enabling infrastructure, rather than assuming equal capacity to adapt.

State-level interventions show what delivery-grade inclusion can look like. Telangana's WE Hub is building AI-linked capacity for women in technology and business. Partnerships with firms such as Google and Microsoft enable upskilling, training and mentorship. Similarly, the Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP) Kerala and ICT Academy's elevateHER approach to skilling as workforce transition, pairing structured cohorts with employability linkages. National policy can replicate these levers by funding women-first pathways, tying skilling to enterprise outcomes, and embedding mentorship at scale.

Third, alongside skill-based enablers, guardrails are essential to ensure that AI deployment does not deepen the existing gendered barriers to access and rights. The European Union (EU) AI Act adopts a risk-based framework, classifying AI systems used in education and employment as high-risk given their potential to shape opportunities and life outcomes. Embedding a similar risk-tier

logic within the India AI Mission's 'Safe & Trusted AI' pillar can strengthen gender inclusion through enforceable compliance requirements. Similarly, the Digital Personal Data Protection

Act (DPDP) 2023 provides India's baseline framework for personal data governance. It is pertinent to AI-enabled hiring and education systems, which increasingly rely on profiling and automated screening. However, data protection alone does not prevent gendered exclusion in practice, especially when models reproduce historical bias or rely on opaque ranking criteria. The recent Eightfold AI lawsuit underscores these risks. The DPDP safeguards should therefore be complemented with mandatory bias audits, gender-impact assessments, and accessible grievance redressal mechanisms in high-risk contexts such as employment and education.

**Conclusion**  
Historical evidence suggests productivity gains are strongest when technology complements workers rather than simply replacing them. For India, AI can be a similar turning point—harnessing the other half of the demographic dividend, which remains constrained by unpaid care burdens and concentration in mid- to low-skill activities. If designed well, AI can help bridge persistent gaps in job quality, mobility, and wages for women. Leveraging AI for this transition is therefore not only a productivity imperative, but also a strategic pathway towards Viksit Bharat 2047. (Courtesy: ORF)

# The journey of feminism in English literature

By: Satyabrata Borah

The evolution of feminist themes in English literature is a story of change, struggle, and growth. Over time, literature has reflected the changing roles and experiences of women in society. Feminism, at its core, is about equality and giving women a voice in spaces where they were previously unheard. This movement has influenced literature for centuries, shaping the narratives we read and the characters we encounter. Writers have used their

depth. Jane Austen, for example, examined the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society, such as limited opportunities for education and economic independence. Her sharp wit and keen observations of human behavior made her a beloved writer, and her works continue to resonate with readers today.

Mary Shelley, on the other hand, broke new ground with her novel "Frankenstein". Though often regarded as a work of science fiction, it also explores themes of creation, responsibility, and the consequences of

sonal, and she used her writing to express feelings of confinement and frustration. Her honest portrayal of these issues resonated with many readers, particularly women who felt trapped by societal expectations.

The latter half of the 20th century saw the rise of feminist literary criticism, which examined the ways in which literature has been shaped by gender. Writers like Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood challenged traditional narratives and created powerful female characters who refused to conform to societal norms. Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" reimagined fairy tales from a feminist perspective, while Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" offered a chilling vision of a dystopian society where women are oppressed and stripped of their rights.

Feminist themes in literature continued to evolve in the 21st century. Contemporary writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zadie Smith, and Arundhati Roy have brought diverse perspectives to the conversation. These authors explore intersections of gender, race, class, and culture, showing that feminism is not a one-size-fits-all movement. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists" is a powerful manifesto that calls for equality and inclusion, while her novels, such as "Americanah", explore the complexities of identity and relationships.

Zadie Smith's works often feature strong, multifaceted female characters who navigate complex social and cultural landscapes. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" examines the ways in which women's lives are shaped by societal expectations and traditions. These writers demonstrate that feminist literature is not limited to any one style or perspective; it is a rich and diverse field that continues to grow and adapt.

Throughout history, feminist themes in English literature have been shaped by the broader social and political context. As women gained more rights and opportunities, their voices became stronger and more diverse. Literature became a space where women could challenge stereotypes, question norms, and imagine new possibilities. Feminist literature is not just about women's experiences; it is about envisioning a world where everyone can live free from discrimination and inequality.

The journey of feminist themes in literature is far from over. Today, writers continue to push boundaries and explore new ideas. They use their stories to advocate for change, highlight injustices, and celebrate the resilience and strength of women. Feminist literature reminds us that words have the power to transform society and inspire generations. By giving voice to women's experiences, it ensures that their stories will not be forgotten.



works to challenge stereotypes, question societal norms, and imagine a world where women are free to live and express themselves as equals.

In the early days, women were largely absent from the world of literature. Men dominated writing and publishing, and women were often relegated to roles as muses, caretakers, or supporting characters in stories. Their inner lives and experiences were rarely explored. When women appeared in literature, they were often idealized or depicted as symbols of virtue, beauty, or temptation. This lack of representation did not mean that women were silent. It simply meant they were forced to express themselves through other means, often in the privacy of their homes or in diaries and letters.

The situation began to change during the Renaissance period. Women like Mary Sidney and Aphra Behn began writing and publishing their work. Aphra Behn, in particular, was a trailblazer as one of the first English women to earn a living as a writer. Her plays, poems, and novels often explored themes of love, power, and gender. She demonstrated that women could succeed in a field dominated by men, opening the door for others to follow.

The 18th and 19th centuries marked a significant turning point. During this time, the rise of the novel provided a platform for women writers to express themselves more freely. Authors like Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and the Bronte sisters used their novels to explore the lives of women in

exclusion. It was remarkable that a young woman could produce such a profound and thought-provoking work at a time when women were still expected to conform to traditional roles.

The Bronte sisters—Charlotte, Emily, and Anne—also made a significant impact. Their novels, including "Jane Eyre" and "Wuthering Heights", explored complex female characters who defied societal expectations. These women were not passive or submissive; they had strong wills, deep emotions, and a desire for freedom. The Brontes' works challenged traditional notions of femininity and opened up new possibilities for women in literature.

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, feminist themes became even more prominent in English literature. The suffrage movement, which fought for women's right to vote, inspired many writers to address issues of gender inequality. Virginia Woolf emerged as a key figure during this period. In her essay "A Room of One's Own", she argued that women needed financial independence and personal space to create art and express themselves. Her novels, such as "Mrs. Dalloway" and "To the Lighthouse", often focused on the inner lives of women, exploring their thoughts, desires, and struggles.

Another influential writer was Sylvia Plath, whose poetry and novel "The Bell Jar" delved into themes of mental health, identity, and the pressures faced by women in a patriarchal society. Plath's work was deeply per-

# Hepatitis C symptoms in women

By: Rachel Nail

Hepatitis C, often called hep C, may cause different symptoms and complications in females than in males. Fatigue, weakness, and abdominal cramps are common symptoms.

In addition, women can potentially pass the infection to a baby during childbirth. Detection of hepatitis C is particularly important in premenopausal women.

Hepatitis C is a viral illness that, without treatment, can cause long-term damage to the liver. This article will describe some of these key differences, as well as treatment options for women.

## Hepatitis C in women

We explore some of the issues that affect females with hepatitis C.

**Transmission**  
Hepatitis C is a virus that people can acquire through contact with infected blood. A person can get the virus from sharing needles with a person who has hepatitis C.

In some cases, a person can get the virus during condomless sex if they come into contact with blood, including menstrual blood.

However, the incidence of transmission from sexual activity is lower than that of sharing needles, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG).

One of the main differences between transmission in males and females is that females can transmit the hepatitis C virus to a baby during childbirth.

According to ACOG, about 4% of women with hepatitis C pass it on during childbirth. The likelihood of this increases if the woman also has HIV or has high levels of the hepatitis C virus in their blood.

Before 1992, the United States' blood supply was not regulated to detect hepatitis C. This means that women who received blood transfusions during cesarean deliveries before 1992 would have been at risk of contracting the virus.

Anyone who underwent a blood transfusion before 1992 should ask their doctor about hepatitis C testing.

Women cannot spread hepatitis C to a baby through breastfeeding or to another person through contact such as hugging.

**Clearance**  
When a person first gets the hepatitis C virus, they experience an acute infection. The acute infection can last from weeks to months and may cause symptoms that range in severity.

Some people "clear" the virus from their system and do not have further hepatitis C signs. Women are more likely to clear the hepatitis C virus.

Doctors are not sure why this is the case, but it may be due to the higher levels of estrogen in females.

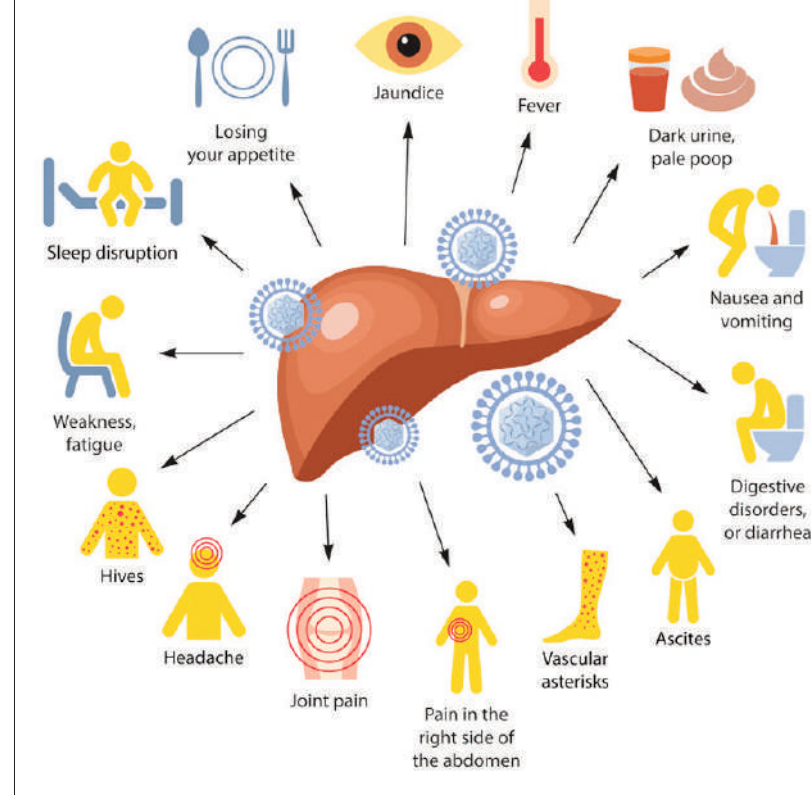
**Progression**  
Disease progression may depend on factors such as when a woman finds out that she has hepatitis C and whether she has co-infections such as HIV.

Hepatitis C symptoms in women  
Hepatitis C rarely causes symptoms until it is more advanced. Often, the person may not know they have hepatitis C until they have a blood test for another condition and discover that their liver enzymes are higher than expected.

However, some symptoms of hepatitis C can include:

- fatigue
- itching
- muscle weakness
- nausea
- stomach pain

## SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS C



• jaundice, or yellowing of the skin or eyes

These symptoms are nonspecific, meaning that many underlying causes may lead to them. This makes hepatitis C more difficult to diagnose.

**Diagnosis**  
Doctors diagnose hepatitis C using blood tests. They may first test for antibody-

**“Hepatitis C is a viral illness that, without treatment, can cause long-term damage to the liver. This article will describe some of these key differences, as well as treatment options for women**

ies to the hepatitis C virus, which can indicate whether a person has ever had the virus, even if they have since cleared it.

A doctor will also test for active signs of the virus. They may measure a person's viral load, or how much of the virus is present in a person's body.

If a woman tests positive for hepatitis C and has a baby, the doctor will usually recommend testing the baby for the virus when they are at least 18 months old. Testing before this age does not always provide accurate results.

**Treatment**  
Treatment for hepatitis C is very reliable. Medications can help many people clear the virus, as long as people do not have structural abnormalities from hepatitis C, such as liver scarring (cirrhosis).

Examples of these medications include sofosbuvir or velpatasvir (Epclusa) and ledipasvir or sofosbuvir (Harvoni).

All genotypes of hepatitis C are fairly susceptible to the newer antivirals, which are curative in nature. Those who

are in the advanced stages of hepatitis C infection and already have cirrhosis may not respond as quickly.

The liver is the body's main organ for clearing substances, such as toxins in alcohol or medications that a person takes. The liver breaks down the substances into smaller parts so that the body can eliminate them.

Doctors will recommend that anyone with liver damage avoid using alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. They also may review a person's medications, including vitamins and supplements.

**Can hepatitis C be prevented?**  
There are vaccines for hepatitis A and hepatitis B, but no vaccine currently exists for hepatitis C.

Because of this, a person should engage in other preventive methods, such as:

- not sharing needles or other drug-related equipment, including glucose monitors, with others
- asking about sterilization techniques and practices when getting a tattoo or body piercing
- following safety precautions such as disposing of all sharp objects correctly, especially in healthcare centers
- using barrier protection to help prevent blood-to-blood transmission during sex

• refraining from sharing personal care items that come into contact with blood, such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, and earrings

• cleaning all blood spills carefully with a mixture of bleach and water, as even dried blood that contains the hepatitis C virus could infect another person

**Summary**  
Women are less likely to experience life-threatening complications of hepatitis C, but they can still develop liver-related complications. They can also pass the virus to a baby during childbirth. Prevention and treatment of hepatitis C are vital. If a woman has risk factors for the virus, she should consider talking with her doctor about testing. (Courtesy: Medical News Today)

*The new cabinet includes two minority community members, BNP Vice President Nitai Roy Chowdhury of the Hindu faith and Dipen Dewan, a Buddhist*

## Tarique Rahman sworn in as new PM of Bangladesh

**DHAKA, Feb 17:** BNP leader Tarique Rahman was on Tuesday sworn in as Bangladesh's new prime minister, marking a new beginning for the country after a nearly 18-month period of political uncertainty and lawlessness under the rule of the interim government led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus.

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, accompanied by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, represented India at the ceremony held at the open space of the South Plaza of the Jatiya Sangsad in presence of Bangladesh's top political and military brass.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin administered the oath of office to 60-year-old Rahman at the South Plaza instead of Bangabhaban, in a departure from a long-standing tradition.

"I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of prime minister of the government in accordance with the law," said Rahman, who led his party to a forceful victory in the crucial general elections.

After the swearing-in, Rahman



signed the oath of office and oath of secrecy. He will serve as the prime minister for the next five years. Rahman, the son of late President Ziaur Rahman and former prime minister Khaleda Zia, returned home in December after living in London in self-exile for 17 years.

Rahman has become the prime minister for the first time. He replaced the interim government chief Yunus, under whose tenure Dhaka's relations with New Delhi

witnessed a significant downturn. Yunus took charge in August 2024 after the collapse of the Awami League regime.

Earlier in the day, Rahman was elected as leader of the parliamentary party by the BNP lawmakers.

President Shahabuddin also administered the oath to 25 ministers and 24 state ministers at the ceremony, attended by several leaders from neighbouring countries, including India and Pakistan. The new cabinet includes two

minority community members, BNP Vice President Nitai Roy Chowdhury of the Hindu faith and Dipen Dewan, a Buddhist.

In a surprise development, the new cabinet also inducted the outgoing interim regime's security adviser, Khalilur Rahman, as a technocrat minister, while several senior BNP leaders were left out of the new cabinet.

Cabinet division officials said the portfolios of the ministers and junior ministers would be announced later, though several mainstream media outlets named the portfolios of several of them, quoting unconfirmed sources.

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.

Earlier in the day, newly elected lawmakers of the 13th Jatiya Sangsad (JS) took oath as members of parliament (MPs).

The Jamaat-e-Islami, which has emerged as the main opposition, boycotted the swearing-in ceremony. Jamaat's electoral ally student-led national Citizen Party (NCP), which was floated last year with Yunus' blessings, followed in its footsteps. In a post-election press conference, Rahman called for "national unity" and "peace" in the national interest, warning that divisiveness would undermine democracy. He said the country faces a fragile economy, weakened institutions, and a deteriorating law and order situation.

"Our paths and opinions may differ, but in the interest of the country, we must remain united. I firmly believe that national unity is our collective strength, while division is our weakness," he said.

He said the new government faces two major challenges - tackling the economy and ensuring good governance. (PTI)

## Russian and Ukrainian officials are in Geneva for US-brokered talks



**GENEVA, Feb 17:** Delegations from Moscow and Kyiv were in Geneva on Tuesday for another round of US-brokered peace talks, a week before the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbour.

However, expectations for any breakthroughs in Geneva were low, with neither side apparently ready to budge from its positions on key territorial issues and future security guarantees, despite the United States setting a June deadline for a settlement. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his government's delegation was in Switzerland and Russian state news agency Tass said the Russian delegation had also arrived. Talks, to be held over two days, were expected to start later in the day.

Discussions on the future of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory are expected to be particularly tough as US President Donald Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, and son-in-law Jared Kushner, sit down with the delegations. That's according to a person familiar with the talks who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the person was not authorised to talk to reporters.

Russia is still insisting that Ukraine cede control of its eastern Donbas region. Also in Geneva will be American, Russian and Ukrainian military chiefs, who will discuss how a ceasefire monitoring might work after any peace deal, and what's needed to implement it, the person said.

During previous talks in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, military leaders looked at how a demilitarized zone could be arranged and how everyone's militaries could talk to one another, the person added.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov cautioned against expecting developments on the first day of talks as they were set to con-

tinue on Wednesday. Moscow has provided few details of previous talks. Ukraine's short-handed army is locked in a war of attrition with Russia's bigger forces along the roughly 1,250-kilometre (750-mile) front line. Ukrainian civilians are enduring Russian aerial barrages that repeatedly knock out power and destroy homes.

The future of the almost 20 per cent of Ukrainian land that Russia occupies or still covets is a central question in the talks, as are Kyiv's demands for postwar security guarantees with a US backdrop to deter Moscow from invading again. Trump described the Geneva meeting as "big talks."

"Ukraine better come to the table fast," he told reporters late Monday as he flew back to Washington from his home in Florida.

It wasn't immediately clear what Trump was referring to in his comment about Ukraine, which has committed to and taken part in negotiations in the hope of ending Russia's devastating onslaught.

**Complex talks as the war presses on**

The Russian delegation is headed by Russian President Vladimir Putin's adviser Vladimir Medinsky, who headed Moscow's team of negotiators in the first direct peace talks with Ukraine in Istanbul in March 2022 and has forcefully pushed Putin's war goals. Medinsky has written several history books that claim to expose Western plots against Russia and berate Ukraine.

The commander of the US military — and NATO forces — in Europe, Gen Alexus Grynkevic, and Secretary of the US Army Dan Driscoll will attend the meeting in Geneva on behalf of the US military and meet with their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, Colonel Martin O'Donnell, a spokesman for the US commander said. (AP)

## B'desh no longer a 'submissive country': Yunus in farewell address

**DHAKA, Feb 17:** Outgoing interim government chief Muhammad Yunus on Monday said his 18-month rule restored three core pillars of Bangladesh's external engagement - "sovereignty, national interests, and dignity", and it is no longer a "submissive" nation.

In his farewell address to the nation, Yunus said that at the end of his regime's rule, "Today's Bangladesh is confident, active, and responsible in protecting its independent interests".

"Bangladesh is no longer a country with a submissive foreign policy or dependent on the instructions and advice of other countries," he said in the televised address a day ahead of quitting power. He emphasised that his 18-month tenure had rebuilt the three "fundamental foundations" of the country's foreign engagement: "sovereignty, national interests, and dignity". Yunus' interim regime began in August 2024 and is set to conclude its unscheduled term with the swearing-in of a new government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on Tuesday, which won a two-thirds majority in general elections four days ago.

BNP, led by its chairman Tarique Rahman, bagged a whopping 209 out of 297 seats in the crucial 13th Parliamentary elections held on February 12.

"I call upon everyone, regardless of party, creed, religion, caste and gender, to continue the struggle to build a just, humane, and democratic Bangladesh. With this appeal, I bid farewell with great optimism," Yunus said. Yunus, who ran the country as the outgoing regime's chief adviser, effectively the prime minister, said Bangladesh's open sea was its great "strategic asset", creating huge economic opportunities in the region for the South Asian nation.

He emphasised the vast growth potential of broader regional cooperation encompassing Nepal, Bhutan, and "northeastern India".

"Our open sea is not merely a geographical boundary; it is a gateway to the global economy," he said, adding that connectivity was central to the country's next phase of development. Yunus said that his administration exhausted its efforts to "ensure democratic rights and values" and formulated some 130 new laws, amended other laws, and issued 600 executive orders, about 84 per cent of which have been implemented.

He said that international port management companies, against which workers waged massive protests, and which critics said were against Bangladeshi interests, would raise the efficiency of the facilities to global standards.

"We have come a long way in signing agreements with leading international port management companies to bring our ports' efficiency up to international standards. If we cannot increase efficiency, we will lag behind in economic achievements," he said.

Earlier in the day, Yunus met with senior bureaucrats and participated in a photo session with all those serving at his office. Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff Gen Waker-Uz-Zaman also paid a farewell visit to him. Yunus thanked the Army chief for the cooperation of the armed forces during the general election. On Sunday, Yunus held the last meeting of his advisory council or cabinet. (PTI)

## Iran temporarily closing Strait of Hormuz for live fire drills as nuclear talks with US begin

**GENEVA, Feb 17:** The US and Iran are holding their second round of talks about Iran's nuclear programme Tuesday in Geneva as Iran said it will close the Strait of Hormuz for several hours as it holds live fire military exercises and the United States ramps up its military forces in the region.

As the talks began, Iranian media announced that Iran had fired live missiles toward the Strait of Hormuz, and said it will close the Strait for several hours for "safety and maritime concerns."

This is the first time that Iran has closed parts of the Strait, an essential international waterway, since the US began threatening Iran with military action. Iran on Monday announced a maritime military exercise in waterways that are crucial international trade routes through which 20 per cent of the world's oil passes. Iran previously held a live fire drill in the Strait of Hormuz several weeks ago but did not announce closures. The semi-official Tasnim news agency, which is close to the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, said missiles launched inside Iran and along its coast had struck their targets in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iranian state TV reported Tuesday that the negotiations with the US will be indirect and will focus only on Iran's nuclear programme, not domestic policies including its bloody crackdown on protesters last month.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to use force to compel Iran to agree to constrain its nuclear programme. Iran has said it would respond with an attack of its own. Trump has also threatened Iran over its deadly crackdown on recent nationwide protests.

The first round of talks February 6 were held in Oman, a sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, and were indirect. Similarly to the last round of talks, the Iranians appeared to be meeting with Omani mediators separately from the Americans on Tuesday.

Trump's envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner were travelling for the new round of talks. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, visiting Budapest, Hungary, said Monday that the US hopes to achieve a deal with Iran, despite the difficulties. "I'm not going to prejudge these talks," Rubio said. "The president always prefers peaceful outcomes and negotiated outcomes to things."

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who is leading the talks for Iran, met with the head of the US nuclear watchdog agency Monday in Geneva. "I am in Geneva with real ideas to achieve a fair and equitable deal," Araghchi wrote on X. "What is not on the table: submission before threats."

Talking to reporters Monday night aboard Air Force One on his way to Washington, US President Donald Trump said he planned to be in-

involved in the talks, at least indirectly. "I think they want to make a deal. I don't think they want the consequences of not making a deal," he said.

The US is also hosting talks between envoys from Russia and Ukraine in Geneva on Tuesday and Wednesday, days ahead of the fourth anniversary of the all-out Russian invasion of its neighbour.

Iran fires missiles into Strait of Hormuz in drill

The semi-official Tasnim news agency, which is close to the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, said missiles launched inside Iran and along its coast had struck their targets in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran had announced that the Revolutionary Guard started a drill early Monday morning in the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, which are crucial international shipping routes.

It is the second time in recent weeks that Iran has held a live fire drill in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stepped up his warnings to the US over its buildup of military forces in the Middle East. "Of course a warship is a dangerous apparatus, but more dangerous than the warship is the weapon that can sink the warship into the depths of the sea," Khamenei said, Iranian state TV reported. (AP)

## Australia won't repatriate 34 women and children linked to IS from Syria

**MELBOURNE, Feb 17:** The Australian government will not repatriate from Syria a group of 34 women and children with alleged ties to the militant Islamic State group, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said Tuesday.

The women and children from 11 families were supposed to fly from Syria to Australia, but Syrian authorities on Monday turned them back to Roj detention camp because of procedural problems, officials said.

Only two groups of Australians have

been repatriated with government help from Syrian camps since the fall of the Islamic State group in 2019. Other Australians have also returned without government assistance.

Albanese would not comment on a report that the latest women and children had Australian passports. "We're providing absolutely no support and we are not repatriating people," Albanese told Australian Broadcasting Corp. in Melbourne.

"We have no sympathy, frankly, for people who travelled overseas in order to par-

ticipate in what was an attempt to establish a caliphate to undermine, destroy, our way of life. And so, as my mother would say, You make your bed, you lie in it," Albanese added.

Joining the caliphate

In his remarks, Albanese was referring to the IS militants' capture of wide swaths of land more than a decade ago that stretched across a third of Syria and Iraq, territory where the extremists established their so-called caliphate.

At the height of its control, IS declared

the city of Raqqa its capital, with jihadists from foreign countries travelling to Syria to join the IS. Over the years, they had families and raised children there.

Opposition leader Angus Taylor demanded Albanese explain whether his government had considered banning the Australians from returning. So-called temporary exclusion orders enable a government minister to prevent high-risk citizens located overseas from returning to Australia for up to two years.

"These are individuals who chose to so-

ciate with a terrorist caliphate. This is not aligned with the values we as Australians believe in — democracy, the rule of law, our basic freedoms including freedom of religion," Taylor told reporters.

"The door must be shut to people who do not believe in those things," Taylor added. Asked about using temporary exclusion orders in this case, Albanese did not directly answer. "What we will do on national security issues is we deal with it appropriately upon advice" of security agencies, Albanese told reporters. (AP)

## Robert Duvall, Oscar-winning actor and 'Godfather' mainstay, dead at 95

**LOS ANGELES, Feb 17:** Robert Duvall, the Oscar-winning actor of matchless versatility and dedication whose classic roles included the intrepid consigliere of the first two "Godfather" movies and the over-the-hill country music singer in "Tender Mercies," has died at age 95.

Duvall died "peacefully" at his home Sunday in Middleburg, Virginia, according to an announcement from his publicist and from a statement posted on his Facebook page by his wife, Luciana Duvall.

"To the world, he was an Academy Award-winning actor, a director, a storyteller. To me, he was simply everything," Luciana Duvall wrote.

"His passion for his craft was matched only by his deep love for characters, a great meal, and holding court. For each of his many roles, Bob gave everything to his characters and to the truth of the human spirit they represented."

The bald, wiry Duvall didn't have leading man looks, but few "character actors" enjoyed such a long, rewarding and unpredictable career, in leading and supporting roles, from an itinerant preacher to Josef Stalin.

Beginning with his 1962 film debut as Boo Radley, the reclusive neighbor in "To Kill a Mockingbird," Duvall created a gallery of unforgettable portrayals.

They earned him seven Academy Award nominations and the best actor prize for "Tender Mercies," which came out in 1983. He

also won four Golden Globes, including one for playing the philosophical cattle-drive boss in the 1989 miniseries "Lonesome Dove," a role he often cited as his favorite.

In 2005, Duvall was awarded a National Medal of Arts.

He had been acting for some 20 years when "The Godfather," released in 1972, established him as one of the most in-demand performers of Hollywood. He had made a previous film, "The Rain People," with Francis Coppola, and the director chose him to play Tom Hagen in the mafia epic that featured Al Pacino and Marlon Brando among others.

Duvall was a master of subtlety as an Irishman among Italians, rarely at the centre of a scene, but often listening and advising in the background, an irreplaceable thread through the saga of the Corleone crime family.

"Stars and Italians alike depend on his efficiency, his tidying up around their grand gestures, his being the perfect shortstop on a team of personality sluggers," wrote the critic David Thomson. "Was there ever a role better designed for its actor than that of Tom Hagen in both parts of 'The Godfather'?"

"The smell, you know that gasoline smell, the whole hill. Smelled like — victory."

Coppola once commented about Duvall: "Actors click into character at different times — the first week, third week. Bobby's hot after one or two takes." (AP)

## India's permanent contribution to agenda of world community is of enormous importance for us: Guterres

**UNITED NATIONS, Feb 17:** India's permanent contribution to the agenda of the international community and that of the UN is of "enormous importance for us", the UN chief has said, as he pointed to a "positive mega trend" of the increasingly enhanced roles of developing economies like India in the world.

These remarks were made by Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who will be heading to New Delhi to attend the India AI Impact Summit, the first-ever summit on Artificial Intelligence hosted in the Global South.

"India became an extremely important leader in the discussions on all aspects of the activities of the UN, in peace and security, sustainable development, where I remember the G20 presided by India, the very important decisions that were taken there," Guterres told PTI in an exclusive interview here.

"And also in human rights as a democratic country in a world where, unfortunately, we see democracy in trouble in so many parts of the world," Guterres said.

To a question on India's role at the UN, Guterres said "first of all, we have a huge debt of gratitude to India" for its presence in UN Peacekeeping, noting that currently about 5000 Indian women and men are deployed in peacekeeping missions across the world.

He also highlighted the "first entirely female police unit in peacekeeping" from India, which he described as "something remarkable", given that gender equality is



a "fundamental objective" for the UN. India, which has traditionally been among the largest troop contributors to UN Peacekeeping, was the first country to deploy the all-women Formed Police Unit to Liberia in 2007, a landmark in the global organisation's history.

"This permanent contribution of India to the agenda of the international community, which is the agenda of the UN, is of enormous importance for us," Guterres said in the interview ahead of his visit to India. Guterres, whose tenure as the UN chief will end this year, highlighted some "positive mega trends" emerging in the world at a time of growing conflicts and increasing inequalities.

"My message is that there are many reasons to be, of course, worried. We have seen conflicts multiplying, injustices, inequalities increasing, poverty and hunger not being solved in the world.

"We have seen terrorism developing and becoming a nightmare in different parts of the world. So there are many reasons to be worried but there are a few positive mega trends," he said.

Guterres stressed that one of the "most important mega trends" has to do with the role of countries and economies like India.

"Every single day, the group of developed countries - G7 and similar countries - they represent a smaller share of the global economy than the day before. And every single day, the emerging economies, in which India is a fundamental pillar, represent a larger share of the world economy than the day before," he said.

"And this happens every single day, which means that this mega trend will, in time, contribute to a world in which justice, equality, and based on justice, equality, peace will have much more con-

ditions to prevail," he said. Guterres has previously emphasised that global structures and institutions must reflect the complexity and opportunity of these "new times and realities".

Against this backdrop, he has called for reform of the UN Security Council but noted that it is important to distinguish the powerful 15-nation organ from the rest of the United Nations.

"The UN is not the Security Council," he said, adding that the UN is fully represented in the 193-member General Assembly, where all states have the same weight.

"Of course, it's the fact that the Security Council has not only been unfair in its composition but ineffective in its action. That facilitates some easy criticism of the United Nations." He voiced full support for the UN, underscoring that he is proud of the work the world organisation does. "I'm extremely proud of the extraordinary work that the United Nations is doing in humanitarian aid around the world, in support of sustainable development around the world, in leading the extremely important campaign for climate action and in developing more and more new areas in relation to what we were doing traditionally," he said. "The United Nations has been a strong ally of developing countries fighting for reform of the international financial architecture to make sure that developing countries have a much stronger participation and voice in the international financial institutions," he said. (PTI)

## Mizoram CM challenges opposition to prove kickback allegations, backs CBI probe Lalduhoma vows to resign if linked to Lengpui land deal

**AIZAWL, Feb 17:** Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma said he would resign if any evidence links him to alleged financial irregularities in the ongoing Lengpui land deal controversy.

Responding to an allegation that he received kickbacks, the chief minister challenged the opposition to prove the claim.

"If my involvement in this matter is verified with evidence, I will no longer consider myself fit to lead this state and will resign immediately," Lalduhoma said.

On February 13, Congress leader and former minister John Rotluangliana accused Lalduhoma of being involved in the alleged scam and claimed that he had received substantial commissions.

"According to information we have gathered, the CM's intended share was ₹ 14 crore, of which he reportedly received ₹ 10 crore," Rotluangliana alleged during a political session at Congress Bhavan here. He further claimed that Lalduhoma specifically requested that the payment be made in gold.

In an interview with a local TV channel on Monday, the CM



strongly dismissed the accusations of accepting "commissions" and said these allegations damaged both his personal reputation and the integrity of the ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM).

Lalduhoma countered by alleging that the previous Mizo National Front (MNF) administration, led by former chief minister Zoramthanga, had attempted to illegally sell land near Lengpui airport to the Indian Air Force (IAF)

through a permanent "direct purchase" agreement. He clarified that his current government is merely acting as a facilitator between the owner and the buyer.

Furthermore, the CM emphasised that his administration is following standard leasing protocols rather than selling the land permanently.

"The matter will be investigated by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)... Everything will be

clear," he said.

The land, located near the state's lone airport in Lengpui and around 32 km from Aizawl, was acquired by the IAF for a base intended to house fighter aircraft and refueling facilities. The acquisition has since sparked a wave of allegations and counter-allegations across political lines. Critics point to "doubtful financial transactions" and an "alleged haste" in the process, which recently came to light following media reports.

Both the opposition MNF and Congress have lodged separate complaints seeking a CBI probe.

A CBI official in Aizawl told PTI that the matter has been referred to the agency's branch office in Manipur's Imphal.

Opposition parties have alleged financial irregularities totalling Rs 187.90 crore, claiming that standard legal procedures were bypassed to fast-track the acquisition.

They alleged that two individuals, who were not the original landowners, received the bulk of the compensation, while the original landowners allegedly received little to nothing. (PTI)

## Meghalaya sets up judicial panel on mine blast, report in 6 months Commission to probe Feb 5 explosion, examine illegal mining root causes

**SHILLONG, Feb 17:** Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma said the Judicial Enquiry Commission has been asked to submit its report within six months on the Mynsngat-Thangsko mine explosion, which killed more than 30 workers on February 5 and on the root causes of illegal coal mining in Meghalaya.

"The judicial commission of inquiry, as per the terms of reference will undertake not only an investigation of the incident that occurred on 5th February, 2026, but will examine the root cause of illegal mining and suggest measures which will as per the Commission of Inquiry Act, 1952, again be placed in this August House," Sangma said in a suo motu statement during the first day of the Assembly's budget session today.

"...the state government is committed to ensuring that illegal coal mining and illegal transportation do not go unchecked," he assured.

The Chief Minister added that his administration has taken steps to ensure that "scientific mining is also taken up, with three approvals already obtained for scientific min-

ing and 20 more being forwarded to the Government of India, which are at an advanced stage of receiving clearances."

The Judicial Inquiry Commission, constituted under the Commission of Inquiry Act, 1952 and notified on February 14, is headed by a former Chief Justice of the Uttarakhand and Telangana High Courts, with two members — retired IPS H Nongpluh and retired IAS Peter Dkhar.

Highlighting the terms of reference of the Commission, Sangma said it will inquire into the circumstances leading to the incident dated 05.02.2026 in the coal mine(s) located at Mynsngat-Thangsko village in East Jaintia Hills. He added that it will submit a comprehensive fact-finding report on the acts and/or omissions of the persons and/or authorities concerned, including any failure to prevent the occurrence of the incident on February 5.

"The Commission will examine the root causes of illegal coal mining in the State of Meghalaya, including but not limited to the working conditions of labourers

and miners whose livelihoods depend on coal mining," he said, adding that the Commission will recommend remedial measures, including administrative and institutional reforms, to be adopted by the Meghalaya government to prevent the recurrence of such incidents in the future.

The Commission has also been asked to suggest appropriate measures, including financial package(s) or rehabilitation scheme(s), for persons whose livelihoods depended on coal mining prior to the NGT ban and to suggest whether the state government ought to approach the President of India for any relaxation, modification or exception in the application of the provisions of the Mines and Mineral Development Act, 1957 or any other applicable law passed by Parliament under Para 12(A)(b) of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in view of the traditional practices of mining prevalent in the State of Meghalaya. "The Commission will submit its report within a period of six months," the Chief Minister said. (NNN)

## Clash with Nagas: Police evacuate 51 Kuki students

**IMPHAL, Feb 17:** The police have evacuated at least 51 Kuki students from a school in Manipur's Naga-majority Ukhrul district as a precautionary measure, following clashes between the two communities, a statement said on Monday.

Tension had been simmering between Tangkhul Naga tribe and the Kukis in Ukhrul for more than a week, as around 30 houses were burnt during clashes at Litan Sareikhong area in Ukhrul district.

"The Ukhrul District Police have evacuated 51 students of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya Ramva School in Ukhrul and handed them over to the Saikul police station team for onward movement to the JNV in Kangpokpi district," the police said in a statement. Thirty-one male and 20 female students were sent to Kangpokpi, a Kuki-majority district. Police said the students were evacuated as a precautionary measure due to the prevailing law and order situation in the district.

During the evacuation process, some members of the public mistook the students for miscreants, the police said, adding that local civil society organisations helped the administration in de-escalating tension.

"Their efforts in persuading villagers across the Shangshak, Ramva, Shokvaio, TM Kasom and S Laho areas ensured the safe evacuation of the students," the statement added. Police also appealed to all communities to maintain restraint and refrain from spreading rumours. The violence between the Kukis and the Nagas began following a drunken brawl between two groups on the evening of February 7 at Litan, a commercial town and home to both communities.

For nearly three years, Manipur has been rocked by ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities. It started in May 2023 after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. At least 260 people lost their lives in the clashes, and thousands were displaced.

Presidents' Rule was imposed in the state on February 13 last year, while the state got a new chief minister in Y Khemchand Singh, who was sworn in earlier this month. (PTI)

## Arunachal guv calls for collective responsibility to keep Itanagar clean



**ITANAGAR, Feb 17:** Arunachal Pradesh Governor Lt Gen KT Parnaik (Retd) on Tuesday emphasised the importance of keeping the state capital clean and called on citizens to actively share responsibility for a tidy and healthy Itanagar.

Chairing a review meeting at the Lok Bhavan here on cleanliness and civic amenities, Parnaik urged residents to respect public spaces, practise hygienic habits and willingly contribute towards the cost of essential services delivered by the Itanagar Municipal Corporation (IMC), an official statement said.

He emphasised the importance of the judicious utilisation of IMC funds and called for the active involvement of corporators in the planning and implementation process. Parnaik underlined that corporators must take the responsibility for mobilising public cooperation to maintain cleanliness and ensure adherence to civic duties. Expressing concern on the upkeep of the cremation ground, the governor noted that it must be maintained with dignity and respect for the sentiments of the people.

He said proper records, regular maintenance and responsible management are essential to ensure the facility remains clean, orderly and accessible to all. Highlighting the city's visual and environmental appeal, he said the road from Donyi Polo Airport to the Capital city should be developed as a green corridor that reflects the rich flora and fauna of Arunachal Pradesh.

He advised the urban development department, Itanagar Capital Region district administration and the IMC to work jointly towards achieving this goal. Chief secretary Manish Kumar Gupta suggested coordinated efforts of all institutions and departments.

Urban Development commissioner Vivek Pandey made a presentation on waste disposal, activities under sanitation and remedial measures for further improvement of civic amenities under IMC.

Mayor Likha Nari Tadar shared her vision of a plastic-free capital city as she called for cooperation from all. (PTI)

## Drugs worth ₹ 1,047 cr seized in a year in Mizoram as border security tightened: Governor



**AIZAWL, Feb 17:** Mizoram Governor Gen Vijay Kumar Singh (retd) on Tuesday said the state has reported a significant crackdown on cross-border smuggling and narcotics trafficking during the 2025-26 fiscal, with law enforcement agencies seizing drugs valued at ₹ 1,047 crore.

Addressing the inaugural sitting of the state assembly's budget session, Singh said the overall law and order situation in Mizoram during the current fiscal remained peaceful due to proactive policing and continuous monitoring by the state police.

He said that coordinated operations between the state police and Central forces like the Assam Rifles and Border Security Force (BSF) to strengthen security along the inter-state and international

boundaries have resulted in the seizure of narcotics valued at a staggering ₹ 1,047 crore.

Huge consignments of other contrabands, including smuggled areca nuts, liquor, arms, explosives and fake currency were also seized during the same period, resulting in numerous arrests, he said.

Mizoram shares 325-km long inter-state boundaries with Assam, Manipur and Tripura and 828-km long international borders with Bangladesh in the west and Myanmar in the east.

Singh stressed that the menace of drug trafficking and substance abuse remained a serious concern for the government.

He said that the state's excise and narcotics department has taken sustained ac-

tion, resulting in the arrest of 652 drug traffickers and the seizure of 487 kg of contraband drugs in the current financial year.

The Mizoram Liquor (Prohibition) Act, 2019, continued to be strictly enforced in the state, he said.

The latest amended prohibition laws and rules notified in October last year allowed partial sale of liquor for foreign and domestic dignitaries and the manufacture, sale and supply of wine and fruit beer made solely from locally produced agricultural and horticultural products.

Since then, 4,532 people have been arrested and 4,915 alcohol-related cases registered in a three-month span till December last year, the governor said.

Singh also said that the state government has been making constant efforts to strengthen institutions in order to enhance law enforcement capacities across the state.

Institutional strengthening measures included the establishments of the directorate of prosecution, extensive biometric authentication of foreigners, collaboration with the National Forensic Sciences University and the introduction of mobile forensic vehicles and district mobile forensic units, which significantly enhanced forensic and law enforcement capabilities across the state, he said.

The four-week-long budget session is scheduled to conclude on March 16.

Chief Minister Lalduhoma, who also holds the finance portfolio will present the state's annual budget for the 2026-27 fiscal and supplementary demands for grants for the 2025-26 period on February 26, according to officials. (PTI)

## 'Manipur govt fully committed to strengthening startup ecosystem'

**IMPHAL, Feb 17:** Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh on Tuesday said his government remains fully committed to strengthening the startup ecosystem in the state. Speaking at the launch of DIGI-SAPNE 2.0, Singh said the programme supports selected startups with mentorship, market access, funding opportunities and financial assistance of up to ₹ 80 lakh.

The programme also aims to help startups scale their ideas, generate employment and compete at national and global levels while contributing to inclusive regional growth, he said. DIGI-SAPNE 2.0 is a startup acceleration programme for the North East under the initiative of Atal Incubation Centre Sikkim Manipal University

Technology Business Incubation Foundation (AIC-SMUTBI) supported by the Ministry of Electronics and IT to promote entrepreneurship and innovation in the region. Singh informed that the country has witnessed a remarkable transformation - from a job-seeking nation to a job-creating one over the past decades and DIGI-SAPNE 2.0 carries this national vision to the grassroots level in Manipur. He said Start-up Manipur has been recognised as a leader in developing a strong startup ecosystem under the 5th edition of the States' Startup Ecosystem Ranking and described the recognition as "a testament to the hard work of officials, institutions, entrepreneurs and policymakers". (PTI)

## Governor says state sees record footfall, major infra push Rail link helping Mizoram emerge as fastest-growing tourist destination in NE: Guv

**AIZAWL, Feb 17:** Mizoram is steadily emerging as the fastest-growing tourist destination in the Northeast, catalysed by the railway connectivity and a surge in high-value infrastructure investments, Governor VK Singh said on Tuesday.

Addressing the assembly on the first day of the Budget session, Singh hailed the new Bairabi-Sairang rail line as a "historic milestone", stating that it has brought a paradigm shift in accessibility and enhancement of new avenues for trade, tourism and employment.

The rail link has not only integrated Aizawl into the national grid but also triggered a sharp increase in tourist arrivals, he said.

He said that a total tourist footfall of over 6.79 lakh, including

9,606 foreign tourists was recorded in the nine months till December 2025.

"This figure has already surpassed the total footfall of the previous year by 29.50 per cent," he said.

"The momentum reached a fever pitch in December, which saw an unprecedented over 1.33 lakh visitors, a staggering 122.11 per cent spike compared to the same month in the previous year," he said.

Singh said that the state government has been making constant efforts for the promotion of eco-tourism and has gained significant central backing.

He said the state government has received ₹ 34.5 crore under the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI)

scheme for the construction of the ropeway at Vantawng falls near Thenzawl in Mamit district.

He said the Union Tourism Ministry sanctioned ₹ 5.47 crore under the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD) scheme for the development of basic amenities at Vangchhia in Champhai district, which is home to about 170 menhirs.

Additionally, the state government also received ₹ 9.97 crore from the Tourism Ministry for the construction of a convention centre at Thinsulthliah in Saitual district, the governor said.

"To ensure sustainable growth, the state Tourism Department signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the state Environment, Forests & Climate



**SHILLONG, Feb 17:** Meghalaya Assembly Speaker Thomas A Sangma on Tuesday refused to allow a discussion in the House on the illegal coal mine blast that claimed 33 lives earlier this month, citing sub justice provisions under assembly rules.

The decision triggered sharp objections from opposition legislators, who accused the executive of using legal technicalities to avoid scrutiny over illegal mining.

"I have received that this matter is sub justice and is pending in the court of law and accordingly, I have taken this decision based on Rule 57, sub-clause 6. I stand by my decision and the Speaker's decision is final," Sangma said in the House. He added that Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma had already made a suo motu statement on the incident on Monday.

The ruling came following a demand from Voice of the People Party (VPP) legislator Ardent Basaiawmtoit, who argued that the repeated invocation of the sub justice rule by the executive was undermining the legislature's freedom to deliberate on matters of public concern.

"As a legislature, we have the freedom of speech to discuss issues affecting the people. Even courts themselves have held that legislative discussion is not barred merely because a matter is pending before them," Basaiawmtoit said.

He clarified that members were not seeking to debate questions of

guilt or innocence or to interfere with judicial findings, but wanted to examine administrative lapses and policy failures surrounding illegal coal mining.

"We know we cannot discuss judicial conclusions, but we can certainly deliberate on administrative failure so that such incidents are prevented in the future. The executive should not hide behind this sub justice provision," he added, urging the Speaker to allow a structured discussion.

Leader of the Opposition in the state assembly, Mukul Sangma, backed the demand, calling Basaiawmtoit's submission "very relevant" and stressed that legislative oversight was necessary in cases involving public safety and governance. He said the government should consider approaching the court to have the specific incident treated separately instead of being clubbed with a broader public interest litigation.

Despite the opposition's appeal, the Speaker declined to reopen the matter for discussion.

"We will not discuss this further, as I have made my decision," he said. The blast in the illegal coal mine in Thangsko area in East Jaintia Hills district on February 5 sparked intense political debate in the state, with opposition parties repeatedly demanding greater accountability and a broader discussion on the persistence of illegal rat-hole mining despite regulatory restrictions. (PTI)



Change department. This partnership, formalised during the first Mizoram Travel Fest in October

2025, aims to strengthen co-operation for the promotion of eco-tourism," he said. (PTI)

**India's growth story is not only rapid, but it is green**

## India has evolved into confident, credible voice of Global South: PM Modi

MUMBAI, Feb 17: India has evolved into a confident and credible voice of the Global South, shaping global conversations and contributing to a more balanced and inclusive world order, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said.

In his written address at the 'Global Economic Cooperation 2026', an event organised by the Future Economic Cooperation Council in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs and the Government of Maharashtra, Modi said as the world looks for steady leadership in uncertain times, India stands out as a beacon of hope.

The country is delivering practical, scalable solutions to shared global challenges, even as it sustains the rare balance of high growth and low inflation, he said.

"India has also evolved into a confident and credible voice of the Global South, shaping global conversations and contributing to a more balanced and inclusive world order," the PM said in the speech, read out by BJP leader Vijay Chau-



thaiwale.

One of the defining challenges of this era is taking welfare to the maximum number of people, leaving none behind and achieving this efficiently. India has transformed this ambition into reality through world-class Digital Public Infrastructure, ensuring that welfare benefits reach citizens with a single click, transparency and ac-

countability, Modi said.

India is the fastest-growing major economy with sustainability embedded at the core of its progress, the prime minister said, noting that non-fossil fuel sources account for over 50 per cent of the installed energy capacity, making India among the first major nations to achieve this feat.

Solar capacity has expanded

over 40-fold since 2014, while wind energy and the EV revolution have gathered remarkable momentum, he said.

India's growth story is not only rapid, but it is green, inclusive and designed for scale. The models emerging in India offer adaptable pathways that are replicable for nations worldwide, the PM said.

The country's rise in manufacturing and sunrise sectors further strengthens its sustainability agenda. India is now the world's second-largest mobile manufacturer and also diversifying into sunrise sectors such as semiconductors and rare earths, signaling a decisive push toward self-reliance, innovation and deeper integration into global value chains, Modi said.

In this context, global collaboration is an imperative, the PM said, adding that as the world rethinks supply chain resilience and reliability, India is uniquely positioned to reinforce trust, stability and shared prosperity across borders. (PTI)

## Rajasthan Assembly adjourned five times as BJP, Cong spar over cow slaughtering issue

JAIPUR, Feb 17: Rajasthan Assembly was adjourned five times on Tuesday following heated exchanges between MLAs of the ruling party and Opposition Congress over cow slaughtering issue.

During the Question Hour, BJP MLA Balmukundacharya raised the issue of illegal transportation and slaughtering of bovines, and asked the government whether it intends to give cow the status of "Gaumata" like some other states.

Replying to the question, Minister for Animal Husbandry and Gopalan, Joraram Kumawat, said the state government will study rules and regulations under which other states have given that status.

"The government is fully dedicated to cow conservation and cow service. His question is whether the government is considering granting the cow the status of Rajya Mata (State Mother). Currently, no such proposal is under consideration of the department," Kumawat said.

He said Rajasthan currently has a strict law under which cases are being registered against those involved in illegal transportation and slaughtering of bovines. To this, Leader of Opposition Tika Ram Jolly replied that it is a serious issue. Stating that a cow was recently slaughtered at Hingonia Gaushala in Jaipur, he said a BJP worker's name was involved in the incident and the BJP MLAs are making effort to save him. "The state government should make clear its stand on the issue and what action will be taken," Jolly said, accusing the government of not clarifying if it will give Gaumata status to cows. This led to a verbal exchange between leaders of both the parties.

As the Congress legislators prepared to raise plac-



ards, Assembly Speaker Vasudev Devnani objected to it. He said it was a well-planned strategy to disrupt House proceedings and that he would not allow it.

Soon, there was an uproar in the House.

BJP MLA Gopal Sharma stood up without permission and began speaking loudly. The Speaker asked him to sit down. When he refused, Devnani asked Chief Whip Jogeshwar Garg to make Sharma sit down. The Speaker objected to the conduct of ruling party MLAs and asked them to sit in their chairs. When the disruption continued, he adjourned the House for 20 minutes.

However, as soon as the Zero Hour began, the Congress MLAs stooped into the Well of the House and shouted slogans, following which chairperson Sandeep Sharma adjourned the Assembly again for 30 minutes. When the House resumed, the din continued and it was adjourned for a third time for 30 minutes.

Even after this, when the House resumed, the uproar over the issue refused to die down, forcing the chairperson to adjourn the House for the fourth time.

The day also saw the Rajasthan Assembly being adjourned for a fifth time, till 5 pm. (PTI)

## Gujarat passes Bill extending work hours

GANDHINAGAR, Feb 17: In a push to create job opportunities and improve work conditions, the Gujarat legislative assembly on Tuesday passed an amendment bill extending daily working hours and allowing women to work on night shifts in shops and commercial establishments.

The Gujarat Shops and Establishments (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) (Amendment) Bill, 2026, replaced an ordinance promulgated last year when the House was not in session.

The Bill, introduced by the BJP government, was passed unanimously after discussion, with the opposition Congress extending its support following assurances from Labour, Skill Development and Employment Minister Kunvarji Bavaliya regarding proper safeguards and implementation.

The legislation amends the Gujarat Shops and Establishments (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 2019.

According to the Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Bill, the 2019 Act was enacted to improve working conditions of employees, create more job opportunities for women and provide a favourable environment for doing business, including freedom to operate establishments 365 days, and permitting women to work on night shifts with adequate safety provisions.

The Bill proposes that any woman, with her consent, can work on the night shift between 9 pm and 6 am at any shop or establishment, provided that the employer ensures adequate protection of dignity and safety, protection from sexual harassment, and provides facilities such as rest rooms, night creches and separate toilets. Minister Bavaliya informed the House that apart from these facilities, transportation from the workplace to residence must also be provided to women working night shifts. (PTI)

## Cash, queues, campaign winds Bengal's Yuva Sathi scheme turns welfare drive into pre-poll theatre

KOLKATA, Feb 17: Even before enrolment camps opened, queues were seen outside school gates and community halls across West Bengal, with men and women clutching certificates and bank details as the state rolled out the Yuva Sathi cash allowance scheme for unemployed youth.

As the government began implementing the scheme, the state has witnessed a striking political image: educated job seekers lining up for Rs 1,500 a month under a welfare programme rapidly emerging as a key plank in the run-up to the 2026 Assembly elections likely to be held in the next two months.

From Master's degree holders in physics and mathematics, engineering graduates and students of computer science and chemistry to class 10 passouts, thousands of unemployed youths queued up across the state this week to register for the scheme.

Announced in the interim Budget earlier this month, the scheme promises Rs 1,500 per month to unemployed youths aged between 21 and 40 for up to five years or until they secure employment.

Though initially slated to begin in August, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee advanced the rollout to April 1, a move widely viewed as politically significant as election season approaches. With camps set up across all 294 Assembly constituencies and online applications now open, the initiative has triggered a statewide rush, turning local community halls and school grounds into centres of both aspiration and debate.

At a camp on the southern fringes of Kolkata, 28-year-old Subir Mitra, a commerce graduate preparing for competitive exams, said the allowance would not transform his life but might ease daily anxieties.

"It won't solve everything, but at least I won't have to depend on my parents for every small expense while preparing for jobs," he said. Nearby stood Ritika Halder, a postgraduate in chemistry who has remained unemployed for nearly three years. She said the monthly assistance could help cover examination fees and travel costs for interviews.

"People assume educated youths won't



stand in line for this amount. But when there's no steady income, every bit counts," she said. At a camp in coastal Kakkdwip, a young mother, Mousumi Jana, waited with her toddler in tow. Married soon after school, Jana said she had resumed studies recently. "This will help me buy books and continue studying without adding pressure on my family," she said.

Officials across districts described the turnout as unprecedented, with lakhs registering within the first days of the drive. For the ruling camp, the lines reflect public trust and outreach. For the opposition, they reveal a deepening employment crisis.

The TMC argues the cash support is a safety net for youths navigating a sluggish job market, while the opposition BJP has labelled it an election-time "dole."

Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari questioned the need for physical camps instead of a fully digital application process, alleging that the "exercise was geared more towards political mobilisation than helping the unemployed youths."

"It also reflects that the TMC government despite being in power for the last 15 years, has failed to generate employment," he said. The state government rejected the charge.

Finance Minister Chandrima Bhatnagar said welfare schemes would continue despite fiscal constraints and accused the Centre of withholding dues.

Political observers noted that the camps have also acted as organisational exercises

for the ruling party's grassroots network.

Local councillors and booth-level workers were visible at several sites assisting applicants, a reminder of how welfare delivery and electoral mobilisation often overlap in Bengal's political culture.

Political analyst Biswanath Chakraborty said the optics were significant. "In Bengal, welfare programmes carry political messaging. The government is signalling empathy with unemployed youth while demonstrating administrative reach ahead of polls," he said. Not everyone standing in line was convinced. At a camp in North 24 Parganas, Sabyasachi Dey, a B.Ed graduate, said he registered reluctantly. "What can Rs 1,500 do today? We want jobs, not token support. But when opportunities are scarce, you take whatever help you can get," he said.

An elderly woman collecting forms for her son, who now works outside the state, echoed a common sentiment. "Any support helps, but every parent still wants their child to come home with a real job," she said, reflecting the deeper social reality of persistent unemployment among educated youths.

The Rs 5,000-crore allocation for Yuva Sathi adds to a portfolio of welfare schemes that has defined the Banerjee government's governance model, from women-focused cash transfers to farmer assistance programmes. The expansion of direct benefit transfers has helped the ruling party build strong voter linkages, particularly among economically vulnerable sections.

Critics, however, argue that recurring cash transfers risk obscuring structural concerns such as industrial stagnation and migration of skilled workers. For many youths themselves, politics feels secondary.

As 24-year-old aspirant Debayan Sarkar said while adjusting his folder of documents, "People can call this politics or welfare. For us, it simply means a little support until work finally comes." With Assembly polls just months away, images of long queues, with young men and women waiting patiently with forms in hand, are already shaping the political narrative. (PTI)

## Farooq Abdullah seeks national unity for peace in Kashmir

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Feb 17: Former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, on Tuesday appealed for the country to stand together to fight for peace and dignity of the people of his state.

Abdullah was speaking at the valedictory function of Vision-2031, an international seminar on development and democracy organised by the Kerala State Planning Commission here.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who listened keenly to the emotionally charged speech of the former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, gave him a warm hug after he returned to his seat following the address. "We look at you and we say to ourselves, Allah, when will you wake up so that we can also walk freely, talk freely, think freely. That's what democracy is—of the people, for the people, by the people... our children and our people who suffered, continue to suffer, even now in the north, yes, calling them Pakistanis."

"Our children, studying in schools and colleges and universities, have to pay a heavy price. When will this end," Abdullah, the National Conference leader said, with tears welling up in his eyes and his voice choking. He said, thanking God, that the South still remains free from communal forces that have been trying to polarise the nation.

"I took this journey at 90 years of age, to tell you, think of us, pray for us so that we can get out of this tragedy that we are facing today in the north. Thank God South is still free, and I hope it remains free and develops and gets stronger. We get strength from you," Abdullah said.

Lamenting what may be in store for Jammu and Kashmir, which predominantly depends on horticulture and tourism for its revenue, in light of India's trade agreement with the US, Abdullah said that the Union Government has not yet provided any clarity on the agreement.

"You see the recent agreement with America, we are frightened. We don't have oil, we don't have gas, we have

the natural beauty that God has given us. Now look at what is happening, if that is correct, because they have not explained to this day what that agreement is. We are horticultural producers. What will happen to our apples, to our walnuts, to our almonds," he asked.

He said that India is being "dictated" to on whether it should buy Russian oil and on what it should buy and sell, and at what price.

Strongly criticising the BJP and the RSS for trying to "communally divide people" purely for electoral victory, Abdullah said that the abrogation of Article 370 and the conversion of Jammu and Kashmir into a Union Territory have not put an end to terrorism.

"But now I ask you, from August 2019 has terrorism disappeared? Has it gone? Have you forgotten Pulwama, where our 40 brave soldiers died. Have you forgotten Pahalgam? Have you forgotten recently? Udhampur," Abdullah asked. He said the BJP always maintained that article 370 was the reason for terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.

"They said the article 370 which had been bestowed on Kashmir created terrorism. That was their main factor. And what happened, they blew (sic) this drum all over the nation, and you bought it," Abdullah said.

He said his state was turned into a Union Territory, and the Assembly is rendered completely powerless.

"You pass bills. They get stuck with the Lieutenant Governor. To this day, business rules have not been completed and given to the state," he said.

Abdullah also came down heavily against the Union Government's alleged attempt to centralise everything and to "unconstitutionally intervene" in the powers of the state governments.

"India is supposed to be a federal country, where states have their power and Centre has its power, and both blend together for a better future. But today, things are not the same. Today, the Centre controls everything. Even jumps into the things that states had and we pay a heavy price," Abdullah al-

## Cong leader Randhawa writes to Centre flagging presence of chief secy, DGP at Punjab govt event

CHANDIGARH, Feb 17: Senior Congress leader Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa on Tuesday objected to the presence of the Punjab chief secretary and the DGP at an anti-drug event organised by the AAP government in Moga, saying it raised "grave legal and constitutional questions".

In a letter to Union minister Jitendra Singh, Randhawa said, "When officers of such senior rank are seen on stage that unmistakably bears the features of a partisan platform, it creates a perception of alignment that is incompatible with the standards expected of the All India Services."

On Monday, the opposition parties in Punjab questioned the presence of the chief secretary (K A P Sinha) and the DGP (Gaurav Yadav) at the AAP government's event in Moga, which rival leaders termed a "rally", accusing the Bhagwant Mann government of politicising the bureaucracy.

"I write to place on record a matter of serious institutional concern relating to an event held at Moga, which was projected as part of the state's campaign against drugs," Randhawa said in the letter dated February 16.

"While the stated theme of the programme pertained to the state's anti-drug efforts, the character of the gathering, by all visible indications, was that of a political rally

organised by the Aam Aadmi Party. "The repeated display of party flags and insignia, partisan sloganeering by the audience, and the presence of AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal as the chief guest lent the function a distinctly political complexion. Senior AAP leaders, including Manish Sisodia, were also present on the dais," the Gurdaspur MP said.

He also claimed that it was widely noted that Kejriwal's concluding remarks expressly cast the event in political terms, ending with an appeal/hope directed towards the party's political objectives. "Quite apart from the content of any individual speech, such framing at the culmination of the programme is a strong indicator that, in protocol and substance, the event functioned as a partisan political platform rather than a neutral governmental programme," Randhawa alleged.

The chief minister of Punjab was also present in what appeared to be a "political capacity", Randhawa claimed. "In this backdrop, the presence and reported participation of the serving chief secretary of Punjab and the DGP on the said platform raises grave legal and constitutional questions," he said. Randhawa also said that members of the All India Services were governed by the All India Services (Conduct) Rules, 1968.

"Rule 5 explicitly prohibits participation in political activities and public association with political parties," he said. "The doctrine of political neutrality of the permanent civil service is foundational to our constitutional architecture and to the credibility of the state's administrative machinery," Randhawa added. When officers of such senior rank are seen on a stage that unmistakably bears the features of a partisan political platform, it creates a perception of alignment that is incompatible with the standards expected of the All India Services, Randhawa claimed.

He added that such developments, if left unexamined, risk eroding public confidence in the impartiality of the civil service and the police, blurring the distinction between the state and the ruling party and undermining the principle of administrative neutrality that safeguards democratic governance. "A factual report should be sought from the Punjab government on the precise nature of the event, and the role played therein by the chief secretary and the DGP," he said.

It should be examined whether their participation was consistent with the All India Services (Conduct) Rules, and if any action is warranted under the applicable disciplinary framework, Randhawa said. (PTI)

## As PM Modi envisions, AI for India is All-inclusive Intelligence: MoS Health at AI Impact Summit

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: When India speaks of AI in healthcare, it is not limited to sophisticated algorithms or the promise of precision alone, but is measured by the extent to which technology touches lives and addresses health inequities across the country, Minister of State for Health, Anupriya Patel, said on Tuesday.

Patel made the remarks while addressing a session on 'Innovation to Impact: AI as a Public Health Game-Changer' at the India AI Impact Summit 2026 at the Bharat Mandapam here.

The session spotlighted the transformative role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in advancing public health outcomes and strengthening India's healthcare delivery systems.

"AI for India, as our Prime Minister Narendra Modi envisions, is not merely Artificial Intelligence but All-Inclusive Intelligence," Patel said.

As India advances towards the vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047, health forms one of the most critical pillars of development, she said. India's vast and diverse population, the rural-urban divide, and the dual burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases present unique challenges, the minister said.

In such a context, she underscored, technology, particularly AI,



becomes an indispensable enabler.

Patel also noted that AI has been integrated across the entire continuum of healthcare – from disease surveillance and prevention to diagnosis and treatment.

She highlighted how the Media Disease Surveillance System, an AI-enabled tool that monitors disease trends in 13 languages, generates real-time alerts, and strengthens outbreak preparedness.

This system, she said, showcases the power of AI in augmenting India's disease control efforts and enhancing its surveillance capacity.

Under the One Health Mission, she said, the Indian Council of Medical Research has launched

AI-based tools for genomic surveillance, capable of predicting potential zoonotic outbreaks even before transmission from animals to humans occurs. Such predictive capabilities, the minister emphasised, represent a paradigm shift in preventive public health.

She also highlighted the deployment of AI-enabled handheld X-ray machines and computer-aided detection tools for tuberculosis (CA-TB), which brought advanced diagnostics closer to communities.

These innovations have contributed to approximately 16 per cent additional TB case detection, she said.

Also, AI-based tools predicting adverse TB treatment outcomes

have helped achieve a 27 per cent decline in negative treatment results, strengthening India's fight against tuberculosis, Patel said.

Emphasising scalability and affordability, Patel said that in a resource-constrained setting like India, which has a large population, solutions must be scalable, frugal and capable of addressing systemic gaps.

She noted that the government has actively worked towards building a strong AI ecosystem in healthcare, including the establishment of three centres of excellence for AI at AIIMS Delhi, PGIMER Chandigarh, and AIIMS Rishikesh to integrate world-class AI expertise into public healthcare delivery.

Clarifying the role of technology, Patel asserted that AI is here to augment and assist, not to replace clinicians.

By reducing the burden of routine and high-intensity tasks, AI enables doctors to devote more time to complex cases and critical clinical decision-making, the minister said.

"Medicine is not only a science; it is also an art," she said.

Healthcare thrives not merely on algorithms but on human touch, empathy, compassion and communication – qualities that cannot be replicated by machines and will always remain the domain of clinicians, the minister said. (PTI)

# Birds, reptiles dominate adoptions at Delhi Zoo, highest proceeds in FY23

**NEW DELHI, Feb 17:** Birds, reptiles and mammals such as blackbuck were the most frequently adopted species in the National Zoological Park in Delhi, with the highest proceeds from the scheme recorded in 2022-23, when 39 individuals contributed ₹ 20.47 lakh, an official said.

Launched during the pandemic years, the Delhi Zoo's Animal Adoption Scheme initially witnessed greater interest in smaller animals. The 39 adoptions completed in the early phase largely in-

volving birds and reptiles, he said. In 2023-24, the number of adoptions fell to six, but these involved larger animals and generated about ₹ 18 lakh, the official said.

In 2024-25, around 15 people adopted animals, contributing ₹ 13.17 lakh. In 2025-26, about 35 animals were adopted by 17 individuals, raising around ₹ 2.3 lakh, with birds accounting for a majority of the adoptions, he said.

The adoption fees vary widely by species.

For instance, smaller birds such

as budgerigars can be adopted for ₹ 700 per year, while a common barn owl is priced at ₹ 9,000.

Among reptiles, an Indian star tortoise carries an annual adoption rate of ₹ 3,500, while a marsh crocodile is priced at ₹ 30,000.

Additionally, blackbuck and Indian hog deer cost ₹ 12,000, whereas the adoption fees for jackal and wolf are ₹ 1,20,000 and ₹ 1,80,000 respectively.

The rates for mammals range higher depending on their size and upkeep. The zoo currently houses



around 1,100 animals across 92 species of birds, reptiles and mammals, maintained in enclosures designed to resemble their natural habitats, the official said.

He added that the scheme aims to increase public engagement and accountability, and is open to individuals, animal lovers, educational institutions, corporates and other organisations.

Contributions under the scheme are used to support animal care, habitat upkeep and conservation awareness.

According to zoo authorities, individuals or institutions can currently adopt an animal for a year, with the option to renew. The adopters get a membership card allowing free entry to the zoo, opportunity to feed their animal in its enclosure and to celebrate occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries there.

The scheme is now being revamped to allow adoptions for shorter durations, including a single day or a month, to widen public participation, the official said. (PTI)

## 'Nations possessing indigenous critical technologies will remain safe, secure'

### India intensifying engagement with global partners from position of strength: Jaishankar

**MUMBAI, Feb 17:** India is engaging with international partners more intensively and from a "position of strength", External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Tuesday, citing a string of recent trade agreements as evidence of the country's growing economic clout.

In an address at the Global Economic Cooperation conference, Jaishankar highlighted the successful negotiation of several high-profile deals, including a significant trade pact with the United States.

The Global Economic Cooperation Council is an event organised by the Future Economic Cooperation Council in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs and the Government of Maharashtra.

Describing the current international landscape as perhaps the most turbulent in living memory, the minister warned that the world is witnessing the "weaponisation" of production and finance, alongside tightening export controls and volatile market shifts.

"The established global order is clearly changing. Replacements are hard to create, and we appear to be headed to a long twilight zone. This will be messy, risky, unpredictable, perhaps even dangerous," he said.

Long-standing assumptions and expectations have now become



questionable, the minister pointed out. Key dimensions are transforming simultaneously, be it strategic, political, economic or technological. Solutions lie in de-risking and diversifying across multiple domains. This approach is increasingly visible in the policy of nations, the EAM said.

Jaishankar stressed that the "reform express" will continue to roll on. "From a position of strength, India is engaging international partners more intensively. This is demonstrated in the recently concluded trade deals," he said.

Economic security is best served through stronger self-reliance and more trusted partners, the minister

added. Following a phone conversation between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump, both sides recently announced a reduction of US tariffs on Indian goods to 18 per cent from 50 per cent.

However, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, has alleged that the government "sold Bharat Mata" through the trade deal with the US, saying it was a "wholesale surrender" with India's energy security handed over to America and farmers' interests compromised.

Last month, India and the European Union (EU) concluded negotiations for the proposed free trade

agreement (FTA), which will help boost two-way commerce and strengthen economic ties between the two sides. Over the last year, India has also finalised trade deals with the UK, New Zealand and Oman.

Jaishankar said that the world has entered a volatile and uncertain era, possibly the most turbulent in living memory.

He emphasised that India will also be more salient in the global calculus of production, on services, technology, skills and knowledge. Economics will give way to politics and security when it comes to making choices and technology in the age of AI (Artificial Intelligence), he noted.

The minister further said that the US is determined to reindustrialise at any cost, and this is central to its tech future.

China's manufacturing and export focus continues unabated and may even expand, he added.

Technology competition is intensifying and polarising. Energy trade flows are being significantly redefined. New mindsets are encouraging greater risk-taking, including through military means. Migration and even mobility are getting contentious, he pointed out.

"Each nation and each society will respond as per their interests and calculations," Jaishankar said. (PTI)

## Political leaders must foster fraternity in country, says SC

**NEW DELHI, Feb 17:** Political leaders must foster fraternity in the country, the Supreme Court observed on Tuesday while asking 12 petitioners, including academician Roop Rekha Verma, to file a fresh plea seeking the guidelines on political speeches.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices B V Nagarathna and Joyalmaya Bagchi, however, declined to entertain a PIL seeking guidelines for politicians and the media when reporting or amplifying speeches by leaders that allegedly affect the fraternity and constitutional values.

The petition, argued by senior advocate Kapil Sibal, was moved in the backdrop of alleged hate speeches by Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

On Monday, a CJ-led bench refused to entertain petitions seeking action against the Assam chief minister over a viral video purportedly showing him taking aim and firing with a rifle at members of the Muslim community.

On Tuesday, at the outset, Sibal said that the atmosphere had become "toxic" and urged the bench to frame guidelines to ensure accountability when political speeches vitiate fraternity.

"It's becoming toxic. I am not on any individual," Sibal said, stressing that the relief sought was not directed against a particular leader.

However, the bench was not in



agreement, with the CJ saying the petition appeared to single out select individuals of a particular political party.

"Of course it is against an individual, especially at this time. Withdraw this. File a simple plea on what conditional guardrails have been laid down and how political parties are violating them," the CJ said.

He added that a petition targeting "selectively chosen few" would not be acceptable and that any such challenge must be objective and even-handed. "We are inclined to entertain such a petition. We are eagerly waiting for someone with objectivity to come and file one," the CJ said. "Political leaders must foster fraternity in the country," Justice Nagarathna observed and underscored the need for restraint on all sides.

"Suppose we lay down guide-

lines... Who will follow them?" she asked, adding, "Origin of speech is thought. How do you control thought? We must raise thoughts in line with constitutional values."

The plea was filed by former Lucknow University professor Roop Rekha Verma and 11 others, including ex-IAS officers and activists. Sibal said while the Election Commission's Model Code of Conduct (MCC) operates during elections, speeches made before the MCC period circulate on social media even after it comes into force. "In the digital world, when the MCC comes into force, these speeches are repeated. What is the responsibility of the media in such cases so that the democratic atmosphere is not vitiated?" he asked, seeking judicially framed guidelines to caution public figures. (PTI)

## HC quashes ₹ 20 cr Nava Kerala programme, flags 'colourable' use of funds ahead of polls

**KOCHI, Feb 17:** In a blow to the ruling CPI(M) in Kerala, the Kerala High Court on Tuesday set aside a government order authorising ₹ 20 crore for the Nava Kerala Citizen Response Programme, terming it a "colourable exercise of executive power" and a violation of the Rules of Business.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Soumen Sen and Justice Syam Kumar V M expressed concern that budgetary allocations to departments were "not being scrupulously adhered to" and that even rules voluntarily framed to enforce fiscal discipline "were being given a go-by with alacrity".

"The facts and circumstances discernible from the documents produced and the stand taken by the state when confronted with the apparent violations of norms in force lead us to conclude that much is left to be desired when it comes to the fiscal discipline expected to be followed by the government while handling public funds," the bench said.

The court also noted that there was no explanation as to how a letter was issued by CPI(M) state secretary M V Govindan, calling upon party affiliates to participate in the programme and register on the so-

cial volunteer force portal, well before the Cabinet decision and government order authorising the initiative.

It said the lack of explanation lent credence to the allegation that there had been a concerted effort to covertly use the programme by enabling party cadres to flood the portal, while not giving adequate publicity that the website would be used for the initiative.

"The counter-affidavit and reply filed by the state do not reveal any steps taken to facilitate wide publicity for the volunteer enrolment process under Exhibit P1 order (launching the programme), whereas the alleged selective leaking of information to party cadres based on Exhibit P2 letter (of Govindan) gives apparent credence to the allegations of oblique motives.

"Read along with the mandatory Rules of Business, the allocation of ₹ 20 crore under the head 'Special PR Campaign' to the Department of Information and Public Relations, for a programme that essentially falls within the domain of the Planning and Economic Affairs Department and the Programme Implementation, Evaluation and Monitoring Department, does in-

deed point to a colourable exercise of executive power, as alleged by the petitioners," the bench said.

The observations came while allowing separate pleas filed by Mubas M H, a Kochi resident, and Kerala Students Union (KSU) state president Alishous Xavier, challenging the programme and the allocation of funds.

The petitioners contended that the government was "misusing public funds for the personal and political gain of the ruling party or front".

Allowing the pleas, the bench noted that the programme had not been undertaken earlier and was launched close to the declaration of Assembly elections.

It held that the order authorising the utilisation of ₹ 20 crore by the Information and Public Relations Department was "inherently flawed and unsustainable due to evident violations of the Rules of Allocation of Business and the concomitant budget allocation".

"Moreover, the portal through which applications were invited for the selection of Karma Sena was not intended for the purpose for which the present exercise is sought to be carried out," the court added. (PTI)

## Rajasthan: Fire at chemical factory kills 7

### CM announces ₹ 3 lakh aid for victims' families

**JAIPUR, Feb 17:** Seven people were burnt alive and two were critically injured in an illegal firecracker-manufacturing factory in the Bhiwadi town of Rajasthan's Khairthal-Tijara district on Monday, officials said. The incident occurred in the Khushkhera-Karoli industrial area in Bhiwadi.

Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma announced ₹ 3 lakh financial aid for each of the family of the seven deceased. In a post on X, he said, "In this hour of grief, the state government stands in complete solidarity with the bereaved families. Instructions have been issued to provide financial assistance of ₹ 3 lakh from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund to the dependents of the deceased." "Seven persons have died in the incident. It was a garment factory but firecrackers were being manufactured inside it illegally," Sumitra Pareek, Additional District Magistrate, said. She said that two people trapped in the factory were rescued. They were admitted to Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital in a critical condition.

Earlier, officials had said that the fire broke out in a chemical factory.

"The premises was leased out in the name of a garment factory but as per the preliminary report, firecrackers were being manufactured illegally," she said.

She said that the police came to know about the incident during a routine patrol, following which a rescue operation was launched immediately.

CM Sharma instructed district administrations to carry out relief and rescue work immediately. He directed Forest Minister Sanjay Sharma to reach Alwar.

Sharma later reached the spot after noon and visited the factory. He directed officials to carry out a detailed investigation and to run a special campaign in Bhiwadi industrial area to conduct checking in all the industrial units.

"All the industrial units will be checked in Bhiwadi industrial area. If any violation of compliances is found, action will be taken," he said.

Earlier, District Collector Artika Shukla and other senior district administration and police officials rushed to the spot. Shukla ordered an inquiry in the matter. As per the preliminary report, there were more than 20 people inside the factory. As soon as the fire broke out, many workers managed to come out, while nine were trapped. Seven of them were burnt alive.

The fire was brought under control after more than one-and-a-half hour. Some skeletons were also recovered. A CCTV footage also surfaced which shows a loud explosion before the fire.

At the factory, gunpowder, firecrackers, and packing boxes were recovered. The bodies were severely burnt and many were reduced to skeletons. Body parts were found scattered and the rescue team collected the body parts in polythene bags. Some of the deceased workers were from Bihar.

A forensic team reached the spot to collect evidence. The team has so far taken samples of bones and burnt firecrackers from the factory.

Vice President C P Radhakrishnan and Prime Minister Narendra Modi condoled the death of factory workers and prayed for the speedy recovery of the injured. In a social media post, the vice president said he was deeply saddened by the tragic fire. "Heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families, and prayers for the speedy recovery of those injured," Radhakrishnan said. The fire accident in Bhiwadi, Rajasthan, is tragic and deeply saddening, the Prime Minister's Office said on X, quoting PM Modi.

Minister of State for Home Jawahar Singh Bedham said in Jaipur that the reasons for the fire were being probed. (PTI)

## Jharkhand: Mentally-challenged man beaten to death

**CHATRA/BOKARO (JHARKHAND), Feb 17:** A mentally-challenged man was beaten to death, while six women from Uttar Pradesh were thrashed by groups of people in two separate incidents in Jharkhand's Chatra and Bokaro districts, police said on Tuesday.

The 45-year-old man, who was allegedly severely beaten up by some people in Chatra district on suspicion of being a child-lifter, succumbed to his injuries at the Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Ranchi on Monday, a police officer said.

The incident took place on Sunday night in Piparwar police station area, where residents of Chiraiyatand and Kichito villages brutally thrashed the victim.

The man has been identified as Rambali Rajwar, a resident of Barwatoli in Ramgarh police station area of Ramgarh district, they said. Piparwar police station officer-in-charge Abhay Kumar said, "The victim died during treatment at RIMS in Ranchi on Monday. It is a clear case of mob lynching and the police have initiated a thorough probe into the matter. Police have intensified efforts to identify those involved in the assault."

An FIR in this regard will be lodged, and the situation will become clearer once the victim's autopsy report is received. So far, no arrest has been made in this case, the officer said.

The victim had gone to the area on Sunday night, after which a group of people thrashed him brutally. As soon as the incident was reported, a team from Piparwar police station rescued him and took him to Bachra Regional Hospital, from where he was shifted to RIMS for better treatment, he added.

Bhuvneshwar Rajwar, the brother of the victim, said his family hails from Barwatoli village in Ramgarh district but currently lives in McCluskieganj in Ranchi district.

He said that his deceased brother was mentally ill, and the family had been keeping him at home.

A day before the incident, he left the house without informing anyone and went to Chiriyatand, where people mistook him for a child-lifter and severely beat him up.

In another incident, six women from Uttar Pradesh were allegedly assaulted by a group of people in Jharkhand's Bokaro district on Monday. (PTI)

## NGT nod to Great Nicobar project unfortunate, disappointing, says Environmentalists

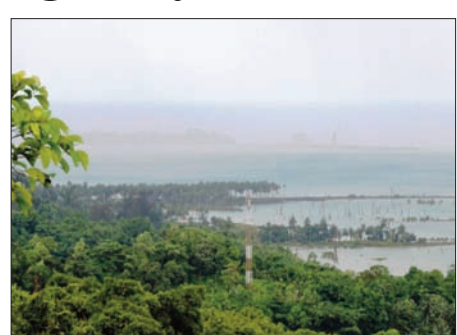
**NEW DELHI, Feb 17:** The National Green Tribunal's nod to the Great Nicobar project is disappointing and unfortunate and may have disastrous ecological impacts, according to environment enthusiasts.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) on Monday cleared the proposed International Container Transhipment Terminal in the Great Nicobar Island, saying adequate safeguards had been provided in the environmental clearance (EC) conditions.

The eastern zonal bench of Kolkata, headed by NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava, passed the order on Monday while rejecting the objections to the proposed terminal, township, area development and a 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant. Congress MP and former environment minister Jairam Ramesh, who has been vocal against the project, termed the decision "disappointing".

"The decision of the National Green Tribunal giving its approval to the Great Nicobar project is deeply disappointing. There is clear evidence that the project will have disastrous ecological impacts," Ramesh said in a post on X.

"The conditions for its clearance, which the NGT draws reference to, will do little to deal



with the long-term consequences. The matter is, however, still under argument in the Calcutta High Court, which is the only beacon of hope now," he added. Debi Goenka, executive trustee at Conservation Action Trust, a Mumbai-based non-profit organisation, termed the NGT nod "unfortunate". Conservation Action Trust is one of the entities to challenge the project in court.

"The decision is unfortunate. Our appeal against an earlier NGT ruling is pending in the Calcutta High Court. We are hopeful that it will be taken up expeditiously," Goenka said.

Former Rajya Sabha MP and bureaucrat Jawahar Sircar said, "This is unbelievable, un-

acceptable!"

"National Green Tribunal clears the massacre of irreplaceable flora and fauna of Great Nicobar for a port (surely to be bagged by a crony to profiteer) and naval outpost! A whole tribe will be wiped out, and the project will endanger a very ecologically fragile zone," he said on X.

Seventy scholars, former bureaucrats, activists, lawyers and environmentalists had previously written an open letter responding to Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav's defence of the proposed ₹92,000 crore Great Nicobar Island mega infrastructure project, urging the minister to "set aside political considerations" and focus on the project's "grave and irreversible negative implications".

The signatories included historian Ramachandra Guha, wildlife conservationist Romulus Whitaker, wildlife biologist Ravi Chellam, nature conservationist Asad Rahmani, scientist Sharachandra Lele, and former Gujarat principal chief conservator of forests Ashok Kumar Sharma, among others.

Earlier, a batch of petitions challenged the clearances granted for the project, claiming violations of the Island Coastal Regulation Zone (ICRZ) notification. (PTI)

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## 'Sangamarmar', backed by Sooraj Barjatya, to release on JioHotstar on Feb 26

with Sooraj Barjatya sir has been a big moment for me. His stories have shaped the way we look at family and relationships, so to be guided by him, especially on a story like this, means a lot. And with Jio Studios and JioHotstar backing the series, it feels reassuring to know that Amrita's story will reach people who might see their own lives reflected in her," Dass added.

Actors Smita Bansal, Khalid Siddiqui, Farooq Saeed, Swati Tarar, Jaya Ojha, and Avinash Wadhvani round off the cast of the series. (PTI)

**“**Sangamarmar”, an upcoming multi-generational family drama series, produced by Sooraj Barjatya and directed by Vikram Ghai, is set to start streaming on JioHotstar on February 26.

The series tells a story of love, family, and the choices that shape lives over time and features Sheen Savita Dass and Sourabh Raaj Jain. The streamer will release a new episode every Thursday, according to a press release.

“Sangamarmar” follows the deeply moving journey of Amrita (Dass), a woman whose life is redefined by a single, pivotal choice.

When faced with a crossroads, Amrita chooses the weight of family responsibility over her personal aspirations and a growing romance with Aditya.

What begins as a tender, youthful love evolves into a soul-stirring saga of sacrifice and silent endurance Barjatya said the “core of the show is patience and how time can both challenge and heal relationships”. “Sangamarmar” is a story that comes from the kind of families we all know. It looks at relationships in their real form; the love, the misunderstandings, the waiting, and the effort it takes to stay together.

Working with Jio Studios and JioHotstar has been a really great experience for me. Together, we are able to bring this narrative to the audiences in a way that feels honest and true to what we set out to say,” he said in a statement.

“Amrita is not just a character in the story, she is the centre of it...Working

Amrita is not just a character in the story, she is the centre of it...Working with Sooraj Barjatya sir has been a big moment for me. His stories have shaped the way we look at family and relationships, so to be guided by him, especially on a story like this, means a lot. And with Jio Studios and JioHotstar backing the series, it feels reassuring to know that Amrita's story will reach people who might see their own lives reflected in her,” Dass added

## SCREENWRITER SALIM KHAN STABLE BUT UNDER CLOSE OBSERVATION: DOCTOR

Veteran screenwriter Salim Khan, credited for writing celebrated Hindi films such as “Sholay”, “Deewar” and “Don” with Javed Akhtar, is stable and under close observation after he was admitted to the ICU of Lilaivati hospital in Bandra on Tuesday.

In a statement shared to PTI, Dr Jalil Parker, who is treating the 90-year-old veteran, said Khan was admitted in the ICU early morning at 8.30 am.

“He is stable but is under close observation in regards to his clinical status,” Parker said in the statement.

“He (Khan) was brought into the emergency by their family doctor Dr Sandeep Chopra. Emergency care was initiated in the emergency and Mr Salim Khan was shifted to the intensive care on the 1st floor. A team of doctors consisting of Dr Vinay Chavan (neurologist), Dr Ajit Menon (cardiologist) & Dr Nitin Dange (neurosurgeon) and Dr Binect Ahluwalia attended on him.”

Parker said the doctors will hold a press bulletin on Wednesday at 11am with “due consent of the relatives & maintaining the confidentiality of the patient to the utmost”.

As concern over Khan's health mounted, his children, including superstar Salman Khan, daughter Alvira, and sons-in-law Atul Agnihotri and Aayush Sharma were seen going into 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 the most Hindi cinema's most formidable writing partnerships. They worked together on two dozen movies with most of them achieving the 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)



## FIR REGISTERED AFTER KANNADA TV ACTRESS ALLEGES SECRET FILMING IN WASHROOM, BLACKMAIL



A case has been registered after a Kannada television actress alleged she was secretly filmed in a stadium washroom during a celebrity event and threatened with online circulation of the video if she failed to pay money, police said on Tuesday.

The incident occurred at the recently held Celebrity Women Cricket Tournament here, they said.

In her complaint, the actress, also a reality show contestant, said that she had

attended a three-day event organised at Koramangala Indoor Stadium.

On February 7, the second day of the event, when she went to use the women's restroom located inside the stadium, without her knowledge, an unknown person secretly recorded an “obscene and indecent video” of her while she was inside the restroom, it stated.

The FIR said the alleged video was sent from an Instagram account to her friend's Instagram account allegedly

under the mistaken belief that the said account belonged to the actress.

“The content of the video is obscene. After uploading the video, the unknown individuals threatened to send more private videos and to engage in video calls. They demanded money and began blackmailing her friend,” the FIR read.

The accused further threatened that if the money was not paid, the video would be circulated on other social media platforms and shared

publicly, the complainant alleged.

The complainant has submitted the photos and videos related to the complaint in a pen drive, the FIR stated.

Based on her complaint, a case under relevant sections of the IT Act and sections 77 (Voyeurism), 351 (criminal intimidation) and 308 (extortion) has been registered at the Cyber Crime police station on February 13 here, police said, adding that further investigation is underway to nab the accused. (PTI)

## Telugu actress death: SC dismisses convict's plea, directs him to surrender

The Supreme Court on Tuesday dismissed the plea of a man challenging his conviction in the death of Telugu actress Pratyusha in 2002, and directed him to surrender within four weeks.

Ruling out that there was strangulation and rape in the case, a bench comprising Justices Rajesh Bindal and Manmohan also dismissed the plea filed by P Sarojini Devi, Pratyusha's mother, who alleged foul play in the death.

“Murder by strangulation is ruled out. Two, overwhelming ocular and medical evidence proves death due to poisoning. Three, the offence of rape against the appellant accused is not made out. At the belated stage, it is difficult to allege that the cause of death was rape and strangulation,” the bench said.

Pratyusha died in Hyderabad on February 24, 2002.

In 2011, the Andhra Pradesh High Court reduced the jail sentence of G Siddhartha Reddy, who was convicted for her death, to two years from the five years earlier awarded.

The trial court had in 2004 sentenced Reddy to five years' imprisonment and slapped a fine of Rs 5,000 on charges of abetment of suicide. It had also awarded him one more year of imprisonment and a fine of Rs 1,000 for attempting suicide.

The gist of the case against Reddy according to the remand report is that he and Pratyusha were in love with each other for six years.

While the relation was acceptable to Pratyusha's mother, Reddy's mother did not agree to the alliance on account of which both of them decided to commit suicide.

On February 23, 2002, both of them went in a car, purchased a pesticide bottle, mixed it in coke and consumed it. However, wisdom prevailed over them and they decided that they should not die.

They drove to Care Hospital in Hyderabad in the car driven by Reddy. In spite of the medical care, Pratyusha died while Reddy survived. (PTI)



## Grateful I get to work freely in expensive language like cinema: 'Sentimental Value' director Joachim Trier

Acclaimed Norwegian director Joachim Trier, whose new movie “Sentimental Value” is nominated in nine categories at Oscars, says his films are personal and often come from a space where he has creative control.

“Sentimental Value”, a closely drawn portrait of a family and revolves around the strained relationship between an aging filmmaker and his two daughters -- a homemaker and an actor, marks Trier and his co-writer Eskil Vogt's return after 2021's “The Worst Person in the World”, the much lauded story of a young woman's search for love and identity.

The director said “Sentimental Value”, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes in May last year, is his sixth film with Vogt and they feel lucky that they get to express freely.

“This is my sixth, written with Eskil Vogt, my co-writer. I come from a place where all my films are developed in a space where we have creative control and we make personal movies. We don't make them to aim for a commercial genre or something like that.

“I grew up with films of Lars von Trier and Pedro Almodovar and people that made personal films from their culture. And I'm very grateful that I'm allowed to work this freely in the language, which is very expensive,” Trier said in response to a question from PTI during an international group interview.

Also known for “Reprise”, “Oslo, August 31st”, “Louder Than Bombs” and “Thelma”, Trier said very few Norwegian films travel outside. He hoped “Sentimental Value” to connect with different audiences, but its international popularity is still surprising for him.

“It moves me that you've seen my film and feel some connection to a simple story about family through the language of cinema because it's kind of



what I dreamt of after the applause in Cannes, which was a wonderful moment for me and my team coming from Norway to Cannes.

“They (at Cannes) gave me a microphone and I quoted Luis Bunuel. He said, ‘I make films for my friends.’ And that's how I think. So, if I can make friends around the world and they feel that I'm communicating something personal, that's my aim. I'm making personal films,” the director added.

Nominated for the best picture, best international feature, best director for Trier, best actress, best supporting actress, best supporting actor, best original screenplay and cinematography, “Sentimental Value” carries a more hopeful note than Trier's other stories.

It comes from being a father, he said. “While writing this film, I listened a lot to the Beatles again. I sing goodnight songs to my kids and want them to feel safe. I think in art, we can try to find a balance between dealing with something difficult and painful. And you've got to have some hope. You've got to think that even in a family

where everything seems lost, it could be a picture of something bigger.

“When John Lennon sings ‘Imagine’, I, as a young punk, used to laugh and say ‘Oh, it's a bit cheesy.’ I don't think it's cheesy anymore. I think it's very moving,” he said about the late singer's 1971 track which encourages listeners to imagine a world of without war and violence where people live in harmony.

Currently streaming on MUBI India, “Sentimental Value” reunites Trier with his “The Worst Person in the World” stars Renate Reinsve and Anders Danielsen Lie. The cast also features Stellan Skarsgard, Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas, Elle Fanning, Jesper Christensen, Lena Endre and Cory Michael Smith.

At the heart of the story is the dysfunctional relationship that the central character Gustav, played by Skarsgard, has with his two daughters -- Nora (Reinsve) and Agnes (Lilleaas). An aging filmmaker, he returns to Norway to make a film on his troubled childhood but in reality, he wants to reconnect with his two daughters after being absent for most of their lives.

Trier said that while a good conversation in real life does not fix everything, he wanted the father-daughter relationship to reach a “good enough” stage in the movie.

“(It's about) how can we maybe make peace with the other in the family? Maybe accept the differences and try to find peace with the grief that's been shared over several years. I'm asking these questions with the film, but I don't have answers.

“When you make a movie, you pretend to have all this control, but you actually don't. You share it with the actors, you share it with the team. And finally you share it with an audience,” he added.

Trier is happy that the film has led to a lot of good conversations with people who have watched it. (PTI)

# Meyers Taylor finally gets gold for US and Eileen Gu wins second silver

MILAN, Feb 17: Small margins decided gold medals at the Milan Cortina Olympics as Eileen Gu had to settle for another silver in defense of her big air ski freestyle title and Elana Meyers Taylor of the U.S. finally won bobsled gold in her fifth Olympics.

Also on Day 10 of the Winter Games, a Norwegian contender's emotional reaction overshadowed the last men's Alpine ski event, and the U.S. and Canada advanced to another gold medal showdown in women's hockey after winning their semifinal games.

## Silver again for Gu in big air

Gu came to Italy to fight for gold medals in three different freestyle ski events. She has two silvers and still has her best event, the halfpipe, to go.

After a long delay because of heavy snow, it was Canada's Megan Oldham who soared to victory with a combined score of 180.75 to Gu's 179.

It was still a remarkable performance from Gu, the San Francisco-born skier for China who hadn't competed in big air in the four years since winning gold at the 2022 Olympics.

The athlete who beat Gu to the gold in slopestyle last week, Switzerland's Mathilde Gremaud, was ruled out of the big air final when she injured her hip in practice hours before.

## The wait is over for Meyers Taylor

Vancouver, Sochi, Pyeongchang, Beijing. Meyers Taylor won at least one medal at each of her first four Olympics, but the gold always eluded her.

## No longer.

The 41-year-old American won that long-awaited medal by just four hundredths of a second in women's monobob when the last competitor, Germany's Laura Nolte, made a small but costly mistake on her final run.

Meyers Taylor's sixth career medal extends her record as the most decorated Black athlete at the Winter Olympics. She's also the oldest American woman to win gold at the Winter Games.

Meyers Taylor's U.S. teammate Kailie Armbruster Humphries was third, 0.08 off Nolte's time.

## McGrath's moment alone in the forest

The men's slalom race had a finish



like no other.

Norway's Atle Lie McGrath was leading the race and skiing last on the second run but straddled a gate and was out. He stopped, threw his ski poles over a fence and then started walking through deep

snow to the forest for some time alone. "I thought that I would get some peace and quiet, which I didn't," said McGrath, who said photographers and police tracked him down.

The dramatic finish overshadowed

Loic Meillard of Switzerland winning gold, and an earlier fall for giant slalom winner and South American history maker Lucas Pinheiro Braathen.

It's been an especially tough Olympics for McGrath, whose grandfather died on the day of the opening ceremony. McGrath was racing with an armband as a tribute.

## US-Canada again for women's hockey gold

The U.S. and Canada will play for the gold medal on Thursday after the U.S. routed Sweden 5-0 and Canada struggled past Switzerland 2-1 in Monday's semifinal games.

U.S. goaltender Aerin Frankel preserved a shutout streak which now stands at 331 minutes. The U.S. team is unbeaten and has allowed just one goal all tournament as it seeks a first gold medal since 2018.

Captain Marie-Philip Poulin broke the all-time Olympic scoring record with two goals in an unusually narrow win for Canada.

## World record gives Japan a figure skating win

Riku Miura and Ryuichi Kihara needed something special after placing fifth in the pairs figure skating short program. They delivered.

Miura and Kihara produced a world record score in the free skate to win Japan's first-ever pairs gold.

Georgia got its first medal in any Winter Olympic sport with Anastasia Metelkina and Luka Berulava in second. Short-program leaders Minerva Fabienne Hase and Nikita Volodin of Germany dropped to the bronze medal position.

Xandra Velzeboer won her second gold medal of the Olympics in the women's 1,000-meter short track speedskating to match her Dutch teammate Jens van 't Wout with two gold medals for the games. Italy's Arianna Fontana was chasing what would have been her 14th career Olympic medal but placed fourth.

Austria won the first-ever Olympic gold in men's super team ski jumping. The Austrians were leading when the competition was cut short due to heavy snow and wind. (AP)

# Pakistan face must-win test against winless Namibia to seal Super 8s berth

COLOMBO, Feb 17: With their backs against the wall, former champions Pakistan will rely on their fragile batting to come good after the jolt against India and seal a Super 8s spot when they face struggling Namibia, in their final league fixture, here on Wednesday.

In Group A, title favourites India have already sealed their Super 8s berth after their handsome 61-run win over Pakistan the other day.

The second spot is now up for grabs, with the United States having their nose ahead of Pakistan.

Both teams have four points each but Pakistan are behind on Net Run Rate -- Pakistan have a negative NRR of -0.403, while the USA are comfortably placed at the 0.788.

Pakistan's equation is simple -- win against the winless Namibia and make the cut as any slip-up could leave them relying on other permutation and combinations.

Led by Salman Ali Agha, Pakistan's campaign has suddenly entered a tense phase after what was meant to be a straightforward progression turned into a battle for survival following the defeat to India.

The spotlight will firmly be on their fragile batting -- including stalwart Babar Azam, openers Sahibzada Farhan and Saim Ayub and their skipper Agha -- which was exposed in their defeat to India in Colombo.

Former Azam has been under pressure, especially after his seven-ball five against India, with calls for his exclusion growing louder.

After being reduced to 13 for 3 by India's pace duo of Jasprit Bumrah and Hardik Pandya, Pakistan's middle order offered no



resistance -- worrying sign even against a side like Namibia.

Openers Sahibzada and Ayub, along with the middle order, will also need to show greater application.

Pace spearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi also struggled, claiming just one wicket while conceding over 31 runs in his two overs.

The only bright spot was Ayub, who had India's top order in a spot of bother with his three-wicket haul.

Pakistan's key worry is Afridi's inconsistency; his struggle with rhythm and control was glaring when he leaked 15 runs in the crucial final over, handing India the late mo-

mentum. Against Namibia, Afridi must strike early as removing key batters in the first six overs will let Pakistan dictate the match.

Pakistan's powerplay frailties also remain a worry -- they managed barely 40 runs while losing four wickets in the last game.

Frequent middle-order shuffles have created a muddle, putting late-order acceleration in doubt.

Namibia, though winless in three matches so far, have shown flashes of discipline and tactical awareness.

The smart tactics of their skipper Gerhard Erasmus paid dividends against India when

the experienced offspinner cleverly released the ball halfway through his run-up and delivered from well behind the stumps to fox Tilak Varma during his splendid 4/20 spell.

He claimed the prized wickets of Tilak Varma, Hardik Pandya and Axar Patel, and his battle against Pakistan's struggling batters could be a key match-up.

Namibia, often thriving in the underdog role, will look to bow out with pride. If they can drag Pakistan into a low-scoring contest, nerves could once again come into play in what has become a crucial fixture for the 2009 champions.

Left-arm pacer JJ Smuts is also a constant thorn for batsmen, Namibia have the firepower to pull off an upset.

Opening batter Louren Steenkamp has delivered two encouraging knocks, including a half-century, in the previous games, while Jan Nicolaas Frylinck and Jan Nicol Loftie-Eaton have added much-needed stability to Namibia's top order.

## Teams :

**Namibia:** Gerhard Erasmus (c), Jan Balt, Jack Brassell, Alexander Busing-Volschenk, Jan Frylinck, Zane Green (wk), Max Heingo, Malan Kruger, Dylan Leicher, Jan Nicol Loftie-Eaton, Willem Myburgh, Bernard Scholtz, JJ Smit, Louren Steenkamp, Ruben Trimpelmann.

**Pakistan:** Salman Agha (c), Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Khawaja Nafay, Mohammad Nawaz, Naseem Shah, Sahibzada Farhan, Saim Ayub, Salman Mirza, Shadab Khan, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Usman Khan, Usman Tariq.

Match starts 3:00 p.m. (PTT)

# People feel there's panic inside Pak team but there's no such pressure: Usman on losing to India



COLOMBO, Feb 17: Pakistani players copped heavy criticism from fans and former players after their humiliating defeat to India in the T20 World Cup but off-spinner Usman Tariq on Tuesday said that the team is not under any pressure after the loss.

The 28-year-old mystery spinner, who has an unusual stop-start bowling action, also defended senior batter Babar Azam and pace spearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi after their below-par show against India, saying they have won many matches for Pakistan earlier.

"To be honest, this pressure is mostly created by spectators and outside opinions. People feel there is panic, but inside the team, I haven't felt any such pressure. Winning and losing are part of the game," Usman said at the pre-match press conference ahead of Pakistan's last group match against Namibia.

"We believe in our strengths, and we'll use them in the upcoming matches. At the moment, there's no clarity about the playing XI. We'll see who plays on the day," he said when asked if there will be changes in the playing XI for the Namibia match.

Pakistan will have to win against Namibia to make it to the Super Eight stage of the tournament.

"After the match (against India), we had a meeting. We discussed where our plans didn't work, about the areas where we had lapses, and how we could revise them to make sure we don't repeat those mistakes.

"We'll work on those mistakes and that will definitely help in getting better results," said Usman who was inspired by iconic former India captain MS Dhoni to take up the game.

Asked if Babar Azam and Shaheen Afridi's confidence took a hit after their poor show against India, Usman said, "There's no doubt that Shaheen and Babar have won many matches for Pakistan. One game doesn't define their capability or calibre.

"If something like this happens, they know how to recover because they are senior players. There's nothing like they are shattered or under extra pressure. It's part of the game. Some days you do well, some days you don't. The main thing is how you come back and perform again."

He said playing against India was always a high-intensity affair but there was no "special pressure".

"Playing against India is always high intensity, so whatever pressure is there is normal -- it's something every human being feels. The important thing is how you overcome it, and we prepared for that.

"So there wasn't any special pressure. We were just trying to execute our plans. Performances depend on the day. If the bowling unit missed their lines, we'll focus on those things and work to improve in the next match."

Usman, who impressed with figures of 1/24 from his quota of four overs against India, admitted that

playing in the marquee clash was a career-defining moment.

"Yes, of course. I think the whole nation watched the Pakistan-India match, and people around the world watch it. Honestly, I saw it as a big opportunity to make a name for myself. I tried my best, but personally, I feel I wasn't up to the mark the way I should have been. Hopefully, if I get another chance, I'll do much better than I did in the last game."

He also said that Indian batters were "very focused" and they had a clear plan not to lose wickets to him.

"They stuck to it (the plan). I was trying to get wickets according to my plans. In the end, I think it was safe from my side. I didn't get wickets, but I also didn't concede too many runs. That helps the team."

"If you bowl in crucial phases and control the scoring, it benefits the team because the other bowler can take wickets from the other end."

Asked who is his role model, Usman said, "As for my inspiration, I came back to cricket after watching M.S. Dhoni. His story felt similar to mine because I was also working a job, and he was too."

"He created history, and I felt that if he could do it, maybe I could as well. But for that, I would have to work very hard. That's what inspired me to return to cricket."

## Namibia looking to end tournament on a high

"Yeah, it's definitely (on our minds to end the tournament on a high). The last three games, each game, we were in position to win. And then we just made small errors which our opposition took advantage of. So we're definitely looking to end the tournament on a high," said Namibia coach Craig Williams.

"When we played India, we actually got ourselves into a position to win the game. I know it was a long shot and all that. We've played some really good cricket. We'll also hopefully be able to put that all together in the last game tomorrow."

He said his bowlers have specific plans for Pakistani batters but the important thing is to execute the plans.

"They (Pakistan) might be out of form, but they're still professional good players. We've done a lot of research into our opposition. Our bowlers have got very specific plans to each one of those players. We will just hopefully try to execute those plans that we put in place."

"I think we just have to play a really good game of cricket for all 240 balls. I think against India, against Holland, against the USA, we were 75% - 80% of the time on top and then that last 20% let us down. So we're just looking for a really good performance tomorrow."

Williams also said that his team has plans to deal with Pakistan's mystery spinner Usman Tariq and has seen a lot of videos of him. (PTT)

# Athletes train their legs and lungs for Gulmarg ahead of Khelo India Winter Games' 2nd leg

GULMARG, Feb 17: The picturesque winter wonderland of Gulmarg will be buzzing with sporting action when the second leg of the Khelo India Winter Games, brings together around 400 athletes from across the country from February 23 to 26.

Four medal events -- ski mountaineering, Alpine skiing, Nordic skiing (cross-country), and snowboarding -- will see competitors from places like Ambala, Hyderabad, Indore, Pune, and Madhya Pradesh testing their skills nearly 8,700 feet above sea level, taking on the challenges of the altitude head-on.

The first leg of the event was held in Leh last month.

Describing the challenges of the upper slopes near Kongdoori, ski exponent from Jammu, Ankush Bazala says competing at such high altitude tests the nerves, patience, and physical endurance of athletes.

"You don't just train your legs here; you train your lungs, your nerves, your patience. Gulmarg pushes you to be better," says Bazala.

Kanika Shan, also from Jammu, says the exposure of athletes to the icy slopes here has transformed the landscape of winter sports in the country.

"This platform (has) changed winter sports (in the country)," she says. (PTT)

# Trying to tame the Olympic controversy, World Curling sent in the umps

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO (ITALY), Feb 17: The curling drama at the Winter Olympics sent the sport's governing body scrambling to address a growing controversy and curb conflicting accounts of rule-breaking. The backpedaling came less than 24 hours later.

A day after World Curling ramped up monitoring of the matches, it pulled the plug, saying umpires would retreat and be available on request but not by default. The move came after a quick meeting between national curling federations and World Curling on Sunday in which curlers expressed dissatisfaction with the increased surveillance. Athletes wanted less monitoring, not more.

Why would Olympic curlers, playing a sport where mere centimeters can make the difference between a winning and losing stone, choose to send the umps away? The answer may have to do with the longstanding spirit of the game, which some athletes are clinging to even as it grows more popular -- and professional.

"I think there's a lot of pride in trying to be a sport that kind of officiates ourselves a little bit, so to speak," said Nolan Thiessen, CEO of Curling Canada, whose teams have been at the heart of the uproar



over the past several days. "I think it was just everybody taking a deep breath and going, OK, let's just finish this Olympics the way we know our sport is to be played."

## World Curling rethinks officiating

The saga began Friday, when Sweden's Oskar Eriksson accused Canadian Marc Kennedy of breaking the rules by touching the rock again after initially releasing it down the sheet of ice. Kennedy's expletive-laden outburst drew widespread attention, as did the sport, which tends to fall off the radar outside the Olympics.

World Curling decided it needed to double down on game surveil-

lance, even though it was already midway through the Olympic men's and women's round-robin competition.

From then on, the federation said, two umpires would step out from behind the court-side table and watch the "hog line" -- the point at which curlers must release the granite stone down the sheet of ice -- from close proximity. That way, they'd be able to more closely check for illegal double-touches.

In just a day, officials called two double-touch infractions, by Rachel Homan of Canada and Bobby Lammie of Britain, removing their stones from play. It is rare for stones to be re-

## FIFA President Infantino celebrates in Beirut after receiving a Lebanese passport



BEIRUT, Feb 17: FIFA President Gianni Infantino received a Lebanese passport at the Interior Ministry in Beirut on Monday, months after he was granted citizenship by the country's president.

Infantino, who is married to Lebanese citizen Lina al-Ashkar, thanked President Joseph Aoun at a meeting at the Interior Ministry where Infantino filed documents and had a photograph and fingerprints taken before being handed his new blue Lebanese passport.

Infantino also has citizenship in Italy and Switzerland.

"I'm very proud and very happy to be here in Beirut at the Ministry of Interior to finally get my Lebanese passport," Infantino said in a video carried by local TV stations. "I love Lebanon."

Lebanese women normally cannot pass their citizenship to their foreign husbands and children under Lebanese law. But Aoun made an exception for Infantino and granted him and his family members citizenship.

Lebanese men married to foreign women automatically pass their nationality to their children, while their wives become eligible for citizenship after being married for a certain period of time.

FIFA is the international soccer governing body. (AP)

## NZ into Super 8s with eight-wicket win over Canada

# Phillips, Rachin blazing fifties

CHENNAI, Feb 17: Glenn Phillips was back at his best blasting the fastest fifty for New Zealand in T20 World Cup history as he and Rachin Ravindra struck fluent half-centuries to power them to an eight-wicket win over Canada and seal their Super 8s berth from Group D, here on Tuesday.

In a must-win contest for both teams, Canada, opting to bat, were powered by Yuvraj Samra's record-breaking 110 -- the youngest century-maker in T20 World Cup history -- but the 146-run unbroken Rachin-Phillips stand and an undisciplined bowling effort ultimately overshadowed the milestone knock.

Chasing 174, New Zealand rode on Rachin and Phillips' stand that came off just 73 balls, overhauling the target in 15.1 overs.

Phillips remained unbeaten on 76 from 36 balls with six sixes and four fours, while Rachin was 59 not out from 39 balls (4x4, 3x6) in their statement win.

The Kiwis finished their league campaign with six points and a net run rate of 1.227.

Having already qualified, South Africa lead the group on net run rate and face UAE in their last league match.

Canada remain winless from three matches and next face Afghanistan in their final league fixture.

Canada struck early after a wayward opening over from Jaskaran Singh cost 14 runs, including a wide and a no-ball.

Finn Allen (21 off 8) counter-attacked before falling to a stunning diving catch by Shivam Sharma, while Tim Seifert departed soon after as New Zealand slipped to 30 for 2 in 3.1 overs.

However, Rachin and Phillips quickly turned the tide as New Zealand raced to 60 for 2 in the



powerplay as Rachin cut and drove with authority, including a six over deep point and two boundaries in a 15-run fifth over. Phillips, who was five off four balls at one stage, shifted gears after the powerplay. He struck Saad Bin Zafar for consecutive boundaries -- a sweep and a back-foot cut -- before launching skipper Dilpreet Bajwa over long-off for six. He then cleared Ansh Patel straight down the ground and followed it up with another maximum to move to 39 off 19 balls.

Jaskaran through midwicket to seal the chase with 29 balls to spare.

Earlier, the left-hander Samra, who is named after India's World Cup-winning hero Yuvraj Singh, scripted his own chapter with a 58-ball hundred, adding to his earlier feat of being the youngest to score a fifty in the tournament at 19 years and 141 days.

He is also the third Canadian to register a half-century in this edition.

Samra smashed six sixes and 11 fours in his 65-ball knock, taking full advantage of a depleted New Zealand attack minus Lockie Ferguson (personal leave) and Mitchell Santner (indisposed).

He set the tone early, taking on pace spearhead Matt Henry in the opening over with back to back fours.

He then shifted gears in the final over of the powerplay, hammering James Neesham for 18 runs.

After two dot balls, he unleashed a sequence of 4, 4, 4, 6 -- pulling behind square, muscling one over mid-wicket, drilling a straight drive and finishing with a stunning upper-cut over point -- to race to 29 off 17 balls.

Samra brought up his fifty off just 36 balls and found solid support from skipper Dilpreet Bajwa as the duo stitched together a 116-run opening stand -- the highest first-wicket partnership by an Associate team against a Full Member in men's T20 World Cups.

Bajwa was clearly overshadowed and got out for 36 off 39 balls.

Samra also had luck on his side, dropped on 91 when Henry failed to hold on at deep extra cover and again on 107 off Neesham.

However, New Zealand found some relief in the final three overs, conceding just 23 runs and picking up two wickets to deny Canada a 180-plus total. (PTI)

## Ahmedabad awaits runs from Abhishek's bat as India look to improve spin play



AHMEDABAD, Feb 17: A peerless India will be hoping that Abhishek Sharma returns to his destructive ways and the other batters up their game against spin when the side takes the field for its final T20 World Cup league fixture against the Netherlands here on Wednesday.

Having established himself as one of the most dangerous batters in the game over the last 18 months, Abhishek is yet to go ballistic in the ICC event at home thus far.

After a nought in the opener, a stomach infection forced him out of the game against Namibia. He returned for the high stakes Pakistan contest but failed to get a run for the second time in as many matches.

But with Ishan Kishan showing imperious form at the other end, the lack of runs from Abhishek's bat have not impacted the team's cause.

To be fair to the 25-year-old, his high-risk play has resulted in multiple wins for India and perhaps it is only a matter of time before he makes the best of bowlers look ordinary again.

However, four ducks in his last six innings do suggest that he may need to review his plans in the powerplay.

Considering his intimidating credentials, it is clear that teams have spent extra time in preparation to tackle the India opener.

By his own admission, Abhishek doesn't have the wide range of shots possessed by others in the line-up and he relies on the use of crease and his free flowing bat swing to scare the daylight out of the opposition.

He likes to target the deep cover boundary in powerplay and starting with the USA game, teams have been smart to deploy a fielder in that region.

Pakistan also had set a similar field for him on Sunday that also included a deep mid-wicket, mindful that

he doesn't attempt shots behind the wicket often.

With India already through to the next stage of the tournament, the Netherlands game presents an ideal opportunity for him to get back among the runs.

India managed to make short work of Pakistan, thanks to a sublime effort from Kishan and the bowlers. However, for the second game in a row, the batters did not show the conviction displayed by Kishan.

After Namibia captain Gerhard Erasmus was able to trouble the Indian batters with his round arm and behind the stumps variations, another unorthodox spinner, Usman Tariq, was able to keep them quiet in the Pakistan clash.

Even Saim Ayub was effective against the Indians.

With due respect to the Netherlands attack, their quality of spinners are not in the same league even though Aryan Dutt and Roelof van der Merwe have been around for a while.

On the bowling front, India have the option to rest a few bowlers before the Super 8s and that includes pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah.

After picking Kuldeep Yadav over Arshdeep Singh as the extra spin option in Colombo, the team management is expected to go back to the two specialist pacers combination.

If Bumrah is rested, Mohammed Siraj and Arshdeep are expected to start.

The two likely spinners will be Varun Chakaravathy and Axar Patel.

The Netherlands would need drastic improvement in their batting and bowling to compete with the defending champions. They lost heavily to USA in their previous game after a convincing win over Namibia.

Ahmedabad has produced the highest total of the games played in India thus far -- 213/4 that South Africa scored in their opener against Canada -- but in the last two games, teams batting first have not managed to cross the 200-run mark.

Even with the Indian involvement, it would be a challenge to pack the world's largest cricket stadium on a pleasant Wednesday evening.

### Teams :

**India:** Suryakumar Yadav (c), Abhishek Sharma, Tilak Varma, Sanju Samson, Shivam Dube, Ishan Kishan, Hardik Pandya, Arshdeep Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Varun Chakaravathy, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Rinku Singh.

**Netherlands:** Scott Edwards (c), Colin Ackermann, Noah Croes, Bas de Leede, Aryan Dutt, Fred Klaassen, Kyle Klein, Michael Levitt, Zach Lion-Cachet, Max O'Dowd, Logan van Beek, Timm van der Gugten, Roelof van der Merwe, Paul van Meekeren, Saqib Zulfiqar. (PTI)

## Fit-again Pratika added to Indian squad for Oz ODI series

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: Having recuperated from an ankle injury, batter Pratika Rawal was on Tuesday added to India's women's cricket squad for a three-match ODI series against Australia beginning February 24 in Brisbane. Rawal picked up the injury during the World Cup last year while fielding during a game against Bangladesh. She was replaced by Shafali Verma in the tournament that India went on to win for the first time.

"The Women's Selection Committee has added Pratika Rawal to India's squad for the three-match ODI series against Australia women, which is part of the ongoing multi-format tour of Australia," read a statement from the BCCI.

"Pratika has completed her rehabilitation at the BCCI Centre of Excellence and has fully recovered from her ankle injury sustained in October during the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup 2025," it added.

After the opening game in Brisbane, the other two ODIs of the series will be held in Hobart on February 27 and March 1. The 25-year-old is already a part of the Test squad for the one-off game from March 6 in Perth.

### India's updated squad:

Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC), Shafali Verma, Renuka Thakur, Sree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma, Kranti Gaud, Sneha Rana, Deepthi Sharma, Richa Ghosh (WK), Uma Chetry (WK), Kashvee Gautam, Amanjot Kaur, Jemimah Rodrigues, Harleen Deol, Pratika Rawal. (PTI)

## Sreejesh re-applies for India junior men's chief coach position

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: Legendary goalkeeper PR Sreejesh, whose contract as India's junior men's hockey team chief coach ended in December last year, has re-applied for the position, which is set to be decided in a fortnight's time.

Sreejesh, a two-time Olympic bronze-medallist, was appointed as the chief coach of the junior men's team in August 2024 and the talismanic custodian guided India to a bronze medal finish at the FIH Men's Hockey Junior World Cup in Chennai last December. That effort ended a nine-year wait for a podium finish at the event, with a dramatic comeback from behind 4-2 victory over Argentina.

But his contract expired on December 21 last year and after that I am in my hometown in Kerala. But I have reapplied when the advertisement came. I knew some six to seven others have also applied. Let's see what happens now,"



Sreejesh told PTI.

Talking about his coaching journey with the junior team, Sreejesh said, "It has been a wonderful learning experience where I gave them insights about what I have tackled in international stage.

"Yes, there were ups and downs, but the bronze medal at the World Cup was a highlight, although we targeted for the gold. After retirement my goal was to give back to the game and what better than passing on my knowledge and experience to the junior players."

"Let's see what happens when

the interview and screening starts but I am hopeful."

Hockey India secretary general Bhola Nath Singh said at least half a dozen more candidates are in fray but did not divulge specific names.

"Yes, as per due procedure an advertisement has been put out for junior men's team coach as Sreejesh's contract expired after the World Cup.

"Six-seven candidates have shown their interest, including Sreejesh. Now a screening and interview would be done and in next 7-14 days, the appointment will be made," Bhola Nath told PTI.

Bhola Nath also talked about the senior Indian men's team's dismal performance in the Rourkela leg of FIH Pro League, where the side suffered four consecutive defeats against Belgium and Argentina, including a 0-8 drubbing against the Los Leones.

But the Hockey India secretary general said there is nothing to be worried about ahead of a busy season, which includes the Asian Games and the World Cup. He said chief coach Craig Fulton is experimenting with the squad to find the best combination. (PTI)

## Hardik to lead India in FIH Pro League's Hobart leg

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: Mid-fielder Hardik Singh was on Tuesday named captain of the embattled Indian men's hockey team for its FIH Pro League matches in Hobart from February 20 to 25 after regular skipper Harmanpreet Singh opted out due to "personal reasons."

The upcoming leg of the tournament will feature India alongside Spain and hosts Australia at the Tasmania Hockey Centre in Hobart.

The side lost all its four matches in the just-concluded Rourkela leg, which included a shocking 0-8 drubbing at the hands of Argentina. "After a disappointing four matches in Rourkela, where the results didn't go our way, we've learned some good lessons and made some notable improvements," India coach Craig Fulton said.

New captain Hardik is a two-time Olympic bronze-medallist. The team will also feature youngsters including Amandeep Lakra and Manmeet Singh, who made their debut appearances for the senior team during the Rourkela leg.

"Harmanpreet Singh will not be part of the squad due to personal reasons," Hockey India said in a statement.

A source close to the player said that the seasoned campaigner

would be missing the games to welcome his second child with wife Amandeep Kaur. Suraj Karkera and Mohith Honnenahalli Shashikumar will share the goalkeeping responsibilities. Pawan, who was there in the Rourkela leg, makes way for Mohith in the squad.

Amit Rohidas, Jarmanpreet Singh, Jugraj Singh, Sanjay, and Sumit add the experience to the defensive unit that also includes exciting youngsters such as Amandeep Lakra, Yashdeep Siwach, and Poovanna Chandura Boby.

Hardik, Sanjay, Vivek Sagar Prasad and Raj Kumar Pal will anchor the mid-field alongside Rajinder Singh, Manmeet Singh, Moirangthem Rabichandra Singh and Vishnu Kant Singh. The forward line will be led by established stars including Mandeep Singh, Abhishek and Shilanand Lakra. Striker Maninder Singh also marks his return to the team. He last played for India in the FIH Hockey Pro League in 2023-24.

Another forward Angad Bir Singh, who made his debut for the senior team last year, also comes back to the team for his first international tour, while young guns Arajjeet Singh Hundal and Aditya Arjun Lalage complete the attacking line. (PTI)

## Asia Cup Rising Stars

## Tanuja, Minnu shine as India A beat Nepal, seal semis berth

BANGKOK, Feb 17: Senior India national team bowlers Tanuja Kanwar and Minnu Mani dished out a dominating display to guide India A to a seven-wicket victory over Nepal and seal their semifinal spot in the Women's Asia Cup Rising Stars, here on Tuesday.

Left-arm spinner Tanuja ran through Nepal with 4/12, while Minnu wreaked havoc with 3/8, as the two spinners bundled Nepal out for just 78 in 18 overs.

India A, powered by an unbeaten 39 off 18 balls from Dinesh Vrinda, chased down the target in just 7.5 overs for the loss of three wickets, securing two points and topping Group A with four points and a strong net run rate of +3.042.

The second semifinal spot from the group will be decided after UAE face Pakistan A later in the day.

UAE sit on four points, but a Pakistan win would tie both teams on four, leaving net run rate to decide who advances.

If UAE win, they'll top the pool with six points, pushing India to second. India dominated in all departments, with their spinners weaving a web around a struggling Nepal batting lineup. (PTI)

## The Namesake: Canada's Yuvraj hopes T20WC ton will help him 'make a living' out of sport

CHENNAI, Feb 17: Till Tuesday morning Yuvraj Samra pursued cricket because of his passion for the sport but after his record 65-ball-110 against New Zealand in a T20 World Cup game here, the 19-year-old from Canada's Brampton is now hopeful of making a "living out of the game."

Named after India's white-ball legend Yuvraj Singh by his cricket-mad father Baljit Samra, the teenager became the youngest to score a ton in a T20 World Cup game and also the first from an Associate nation to achieve the milestone.

"I feel like this inning could change my life. I can actually make a good living out of this sport, especially being from Canada and I feel like it can be a real dream come true," Samra told reporters after his knock went in vain against a marauding New Zealand lineup.

Samra struck 11 fours and half a dozen sixes during his whirlwind effort, which became the foundation of his team's 173-run total against the higher-ranked opponents.

He was dismissed in the final over while attempting another big hit against Jacob Duffy.

Samra believes a lot in manifestation and felt that this moment was his destiny and he



can at least try his luck in T20 leagues across the globe now.

"Yes, I've always been thinking about this moment, day and night, every day. I just

want to make a name in this World Cup and make a living out of this sport, especially being from Canada," he said.

Samra underlined how difficult it is to

fine-tune his skills back home where cricket is a three-month vocation.

"In Canada, it's not that easy because we only get three months to play as there's like minus 25 or minus 30 degree weather, so it's really hard. We try to come out to countries like Sri Lanka which have good weather.

"But I feel like we have a good management, they back us, they take us on pre-tournament tours and we get good preparation there."

His father has been a constant source of encouragement and Samra was sad that he couldn't make it to Chennai to witness the most eventful day in his son's fledgling career.

"I feel like in my cricketing journey, my dad plays the biggest role. I really wish he was here watching this game, but all the credit goes to my dad."

Getting a standing ovation from the Chennai crowd of around 16,000 was also a special feeling.

"The moment I stepped onto this ground, I was just like, wow, playing at this type of venue is amazing, because we never get to play at these type of grounds, especially in Canada, or anywhere in the world. So it's just a great feeling," he concluded. (PTI)