

6 WORLD

- Mine collapses in eastern Congo, leaving at least 200 dead, rebel authorities say
- 70 terrorists, 10 security personnel killed in different ops across Pak

7 ARUNACHAL

- CM Khandu reviews hydropower projects
- Hollongi Airport wins Best AAI Airport Award

Suffocation kills 4 Assam youths near Bengaluru

Assam govt takes initiative to bring home the bodies
● Himanta to move Karnataka counterpart



BENGALURU/GUWAHATI, Jan 31: Four migrant labourers from Assam were found dead at their rented accommodation on the outskirts of the city in a suspected case of suffocation, police said Saturday.

The deceased have been identified as Jayant Shinde, Nirendranath, Doctor Tide, and Dhananjay Tide, all in their early 20s.

A preliminary investigation revealed that the deaths were allegedly caused by suffocation due to carbon monoxide accumulation while they were cooking rice on a stove, a senior police officer said.

The house reportedly had no ventilation, and the only window was closed.

The incident occurred late Friday night within the jurisdiction of Sulibele police station in Hoskote taluk.

The victims were employed in loading and unloading materials at a nearby warehouse. Due to cold weather, they had tightly shut the doors and windows, making the accommodation airtight.

"Preliminary investigation indicates that the cooking led to the accumulation of carbon monoxide. There was no proper ventilation.

The labourers lost consciousness and died, allegedly due to suffocation," the officer said.

The matter came to light after a friend visited the accommodation. When there was no response at the door, he tried to open the window from outside, police said.

The bodies will be handed over to the families after post-mortem examinations. Authorities are awaiting the autopsy report and forensic analysis to confirm the exact cause of death.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday condoled the death of four migrant workers from the northeastern state near Bengaluru and said he would raise the matter with his Karnataka counterpart.

Sarma said the Assam government will also coordinate with Karnataka for bringing home the bodies of the four youths.

"We received this sad news in the morning... I have asked Assam Police to get in touch with Bengaluru Police and enquire about the investigation. We will also coordinate with them for bringing back the mortal remains," Sarma told reporters on the sidelines of a programme at Naoboicha in Lakhimpur district.

Sarma said that he will speak with his Karnataka counterpart Siddaramaiah later in the day regarding the matter. Three of the deceased hailed from Namoni Borkhamukh village and the other was from Salmora village of Lakhimpur district. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Cong and Gaurav Gogoi have gone mad for Miya votes'

Himanta ridicules Cong's 'Natun Bor Asom' slogan



GUWAHATI/ KHUMTAI, Jan 31: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday criticised the Congress' slogan of 'Natun Bor Asom' (new greater Assam), asking whether it implied an Assamese society that includes illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

He demanded the opposition party to clarify the concept of the slogan, which is being used by state Congress chief Gaurav Gogoi to seek support ahead of the Assembly elections.

Sarma asserted that he will fight the 'Miyas', identifying them as Bangladeshi infiltrators,

with all his might as it is a "matter of life and death for Assamese people".

"What is this 'Natun Bor Asom'? What does it mean?" questioned Sarma while speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a Me-Dam-Me-Phi celebration in Guwahati. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Sunetra Pawar takes oath as Maharashtra's Deputy CM

MUMBAI, Jan 31: Sunetra Pawar on Saturday became the first woman Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra and was allotted excise, sports, minority development and Aukaf departments, but not finance and planning which her late husband Ajit Pawar held.

The brief swearing-in ceremony at the Lok Bhavan here took place three days after Ajit Pawar, NCP president and a deputy chief minister in the BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP 'Mahayuti' government, died in an air crash in Baramati on January 28.

Finance and planning department was not allocated to her, indicating that Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis will hold the charge of the crucial portfolio and



present the Budget next month.

Sunetra Pawar, 62, has resigned her Rajya Sabha membership. She is not a member of either house of the state legisla-

ture at present, and is expected to contest the byelection to the Baramati assembly constituency represented by her late husband. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Himanta holds writer and social activist responsible for 'destroying' NRC in Assam

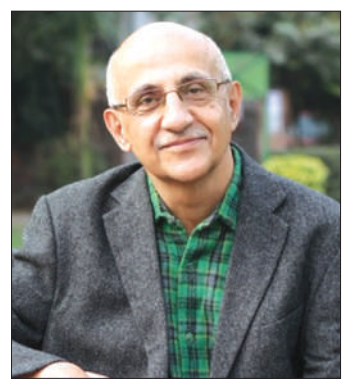
'I will file at least 100 cases against Mander'

KHUMTAI (ASSAM), Jan 31: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said he would file "at least 100 cases" against writer and social activist Harsh Mander after the latter filed a police complaint against him over alleged hate speech targeting Bengali-speaking Muslims.

He accused Mander of "destroying" the National Register of Citizens (NRC) process in the state.

"Who is Harsh Mander? I have seen many like him," Sarma said on sidelines of a programme at Khumtai in Golaghat district.

Mander had reportedly filed a complaint at Hauz Khas police station in Delhi against Sarma



over the latter's public statements that purportedly "promote hatred, harassment and discrimination against Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam".

"He has filed one case against me. Just see, I will file at least 100 cases against him now as I have the necessary materials for it," Sarma said.

Holding Mander responsible for "destroying" the NRC in the state, the chief minister added, "If I was there (in authority) then, I would have taught him a lesson."

Sarma had alleged earlier that Mander and others visited the state when the NRC was being updated and spoiled the entire process. "During the NRC updating process, they created false kin of people to enter names of ineligible applicants and individuals like social activist Mander were the brains (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Seven held for circulating content on child abuse

GUWAHATI, Jan 31: Seven people have been arrested from different parts of Assam for allegedly creating and circulating content related to abuse and sexual exploitation of children, officials said on Saturday.

The arrests were made by the Criminal Investigation Department during a statewide operation in coordination with district police units on Thursday, they said.

The action came based on inputs received by the Cyber Tipline, a centralised reporting system for Child Sexual Exploitative and Abuse Material (CSEAM), an official statement said.

Cyber Tipline also gathers information regarding CSEAM content from various social media platforms and websites, it said.

Among those arrested, three are from Golaghat district, and one each from Kamrup Metropolitan, Kamrup, Barpeta and Bajali districts.

They have been booked under sections of the PCO Act and IT Act, the statement said.

Mobile devices used in committing these offences have been seized, and further investigation is underway to "unearth the nexus involved in creation and circulation of CSEAM and other unlawful content", it added. (PTI)

Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha's statue unveiled in Guwahati

GUWAHATI, Jan 31: Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday paid tributes to Ahom dynasty founder Swargadeo Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha and recalled his contribution in uniting diverse communities.

Sarma also unveiled his statue in Guwahati on 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi', a religious occasion of the Tai-Ahom community during which offerings are made to gods and ancestors.

"Swargadeo Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha established one of the greatest kingdoms of Bharatvarsha, a realm guided by consensus and rooted in the protection of heritage and identity. Today, on the sacred occasion of Me-Dam-Me-Phi, we dedicated his Bhavya Murti in the heart of Guwahati," the CM said in a post on X.

The Chief Minister's Office (CMO), in another post, said: "Recalling the visionary legacy of the founder of the Ahom dynasty, Hon'ble CM remarked that the Swargadeo united diverse communities into a bond of harmony, laying the foundation of a Bor Asom." (PTI)

Bengali social media influencer stirs beef steak row

KOLKATA, Jan 31: Social media influencer and Bengali actor Sayak Chakraborty has stirred a row after posting a video on social media in which he was seen speaking in an agitated manner to a waiter at a popular eatery in the city, alleging he was offered a beef steak despite asking for a mutton steak.

As the waiter hurriedly places a mutton steak before Sayak and his friend on Friday night, the well-known social media influencer is seen demanding an explanation from him why he was earlier served a beef steak and already savoured parts of it "unknowingly presuming it to be mutton".

The waiter and the manager of the eatery at Park Street are seen apologising to Sayak and his female friend in the video, but the unrelenting influencer accused him of hurting his religious senti-

ment, being the son of a Brahmin and threatened legal action. Sayak later filed a complaint with the Park Street police station against the waiter, whose identity was not revealed by the police.

As the video went viral by late Friday night and Saturday morning, and many trolled him, labelling him a BJP agent trying to stoke communal passion, Sayak deleted the initial one and posted another video where he denied allegations of attempting to incite communal tension or acting on behalf of any political party.

"I have no intention of triggering Hindu-Muslim riots. I have Muslim friends, I have celebrated Eid at my friend Riyaz's home, and my content has always promoted communal harmony," he said. "I firmly believe religion should never be a barrier to (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Zero-tolerance for terrorism must be an uncompromising universal norm: India

NEW DELHI, Jan 31: India on Saturday conveyed to Arab League member nations that "zero-tolerance" for terrorism must be an "uncompromising universal norm" as the two sides deliberated on the shared priority of advancing the Gaza peace plan and ways to navigate the current geopolitical environment.

The issues figured at the second India-Arab foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi that saw participation of 19 member nations of the Arab League, considered as an influential grouping.

The participants including several foreign ministers called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi before the start of the meeting.

"The Arab world is a part of India's extended neighbourhood, linked by deep civilisational bonds, vibrant people-to-peo-



ple connections and enduring brotherly ties, as well as a shared commitment to peace, progress and stability," Modi said. "Confident that enhanced cooperation in technology, energy, trade and innovation

will unlock new opportunities and take the partnership to new heights," he said on social media.

In his inaugural address at the foreign ministerial meeting, Jaishankar said that taking forward the comprehensive peace plan to end the Gaza conflict, based on the UN Security Council Resolution 2803, is a widely shared priority.

"Various countries have made policy declarations on the peace plan, individually or collectively. This is the larger context in which we deliberate on the region's challenges and prospects," he said.

The external affairs minister said multiple developments, each of considerable consequence, have taken place in the Middle East over the last few years and many of them have reverberated well beyond the region. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

A first-of-its-kind facility that blends Ayurveda, yoga and modern therapies

PRAYAS bid to improve quality of life of kids with neurological disorders

NEW DELHI/PANAJI (Goa), Jan 31: A first-of-its-kind facility that blends Ayurveda, yoga and modern therapies, the PRAYAS centre at the All India Institute of Ayurveda in Goa is emerging as a ray of hope for children with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders, providing coordinated rehabilitation services to improve their quality of life.

Since its launch in November 2025, the integrated paediatric neuro-rehabilitation centre has benefited 574 patients through the dedicated neuro-muscular and neuro-behavioural OPD, and extended integrated care to 176 children through IPD services.

"PRAYAS is a beacon of hope for children with neurodevelopmental disorders, integrating Ayurveda's holistic principles with multidisciplinary therapies

to foster remarkable improvements in their quality of life. We are committed to expanding this model to reach more families across India, building on our institute's dedication to innovative and compassionate care," Dr Sujata Kadam, Dean (Academic and Administration) at All India Institute of Ayurveda (AIIA) Goa said.

A case in point is a three-year-old boy who was diagnosed with spastic hemiplegic cerebral palsy that rendered him unable to stand or walk independently but could gain mobility without support following integrative care at the centre.

"Earlier, my child was unable to stand or walk on his own. After receiving treatment at PRAYAS, there has been significant improvement, and my child is now able to walk without support," the mother of the child said.



Encouraging clinical outcomes have been observed in this case, Dr Rahul Ghuse, Assistant Professor, Department of Kaurbhritya (Ayurved Pediatrics), AIIA Goa, said.

The institute is now looking to-

wards tying up with special schools in the western coastal state to provide specialised services to children in community settings.

"We are looking forward to establishing memoranda of under-

standing (MoUs) with special schools across Goa. This collaboration will enable us to extend our specialised services directly to needy children, ensuring that integrative neuro-rehabilitation reaches those who need it most in community settings," Dr Ghuse said.

The PRAYAS at AIIA Goa has been operational as a multidisciplinary facility offering integrated, child-centred care for conditions such as cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), global developmental delay and other neuro-muscular and neurobehavioral disorders.

The centre blends Ayurveda-based interventions with physiotherapy, yoga, speech therapy, occupational therapy and modern paediatric care, enabling compre-

hensive assessment, individualised care planning, caregiver counselling and structured follow-up, Dr Ghuse said.

Through a structured, evidence-informed integrative care pathway, PRAYAS is working towards measurable functional gains and improved quality of life for children with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders, supported by standardised documentation and outcome tracking.

Underscoring the next phase of strengthening and scale-up, Dr Sumeet Goel, Associate Professor and Head, Department of Kaurbhritya (Ayurved Pediatrics), AIIA Goa, said, "Our future efforts will focus on developing standardised treatment guidelines and generating evidence to support replication of the PRAYAS model (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Budget FY27: FM may unveil measures to steady growth, boost manufacturing, jobs

NEW DELHI, Jan 31: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will on February 1 present her ninth straight Budget, which is expected to unveil measures to sustain growth momentum, maintain fiscal discipline, and contain reforms that could buffer the economy from global trade frictions, including US tariffs.

The presentation of the Budget for April 2026 to March 2027 fiscal (2026-27) will be on Sunday, a first in independent India's history.

Sitharaman's sweeping income tax and GST cuts, together with spending on infrastructure and the RBI's interest rate reductions, have so far helped the Indian economy withstand the punitive 50 per cent tariff US President Donald Trump has imposed on Indian goods. But now, she has to come up with measures to sustain the momentum.

The FY27 Budget comes against a complex backdrop. While domestic demand has held up and inflation has moderated from recent highs, global uncertainties - including geopolitical tensions, volatile commodity prices and uneven monetary easing by major central banks - continue to cloud the outlook. At home, the government faces pressure to boost consumption, accelerate job creation and step up capital spending, while keeping the fiscal deficit on a downward path.

However, the tax cuts have nibbled into government revenue, limiting her options to support the economy in the new Budget.

Her biggest challenge will be to find a new growth driver, particularly against the backdrop of a global economy ravaged by heightened uncertainty and fragmentation, financial markets on a precipice, and global commodity prices on a continued uptrend.

Sitharaman, economists said, also faces the difficult task of restoring investor confidence in the near term, as uncertainty over India's trade talks with the US has unsettled financial markets, with foreign investors continuing to sell Indian equities and pushing the rupee to a



record low. Some believe she may use the proven cash cow - petrol and diesel - to shore up revenues. Ailing of a limited window available before international oil prices boil, the minister may raise excise duty on the two auto fuels. The duty hike is expected not to be passed on to consumers, but adjusted against the retail price cut that was warranted when global oil prices fell last year.

She may focus on simplifying regulations and pushing structural reforms to attract domestic and foreign investment.

Despite the tight purse strings, she is not expected to cut spending and may include new measures for the poll-bound states -- West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam. Some schemes may be re-packaged.

CAPEX PUSH LIKELY TO CONTINUE

Capital expenditure is expected to remain the central pillar of the budget. Over the past few years, the government has sharply increased spending on roads, railways, defence manufacturing, urban infrastructure and logistics to crowd in private investment.

For FY27, economists expect another meaningful rise in capex, though at a more measured pace compared to the post-pandemic surge. Railways, renewable energy, power transmission, defence and urban transport are seen as priority areas, with continued support for

state-level infrastructure through interest-free loans.

TAX STABILITY OVER BIG GIVEAWAYS

On the tax front, major changes are considered unlikely. The government has repeatedly signalled a preference for stability and predictability, especially in direct taxes. Any tweaks to personal income tax are expected to be incremental, potentially aimed at easing the burden on the middle class to support consumption. Corporate tax rates are also likely to remain unchanged, with the focus instead on improving compliance and widening the tax base through digitisation and data-driven enforcement.

JOBS, MANUFACTURING & MSME

Job creation is expected to feature prominently, with possible incentives linked to labour-intensive manufacturing, skilling and apprenticeships.

Schemes supporting micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which have faced margin pressures from high input costs and tight credit conditions, could see enhanced allocations or credit-guarantee support.

There may also be refinements to production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes as the government assesses their impact on manufacturing capacity, exports and employment.

GREEN TRANSITION & ENERGY SECURITY

With India pushing ahead on its energy-transition goals, the FY27 Budget is expected to strengthen support for renewable energy, green hydrogen, battery storage and electric mobility. Measures to enhance domestic manufacturing of clean-energy equipment and reduce import dependence are also likely.

At the same time, allocations for oil and gas infrastructure and strategic reserves could be maintained to address energy-security concerns amid global volatility.

POLITICAL UNDERTONES

Though not an election year, the Budget FY27 will be closely read for its political signals ahead of key state polls. Balancing welfare spending with fiscal prudence will be a delicate task, especially amid calls for higher rural support and targeted subsidies.

Overall, Sitharaman's FY27 Budget is expected to prioritise continuity over surprise, reinforcing the government's long-term growth strategy while navigating near-term economic risks. Markets will look for reassurance that India can sustain high growth without compromising macroeconomic stability.

According to economists at SBI Research, the Budget comes against the domino effects of a new emerging order of realpolitik, still largely opaque, yet frightening. A bigger concern is if crude oil breaks free from the artificially managed supply glut and joins the bandwagon, even for a short while. "We expect modest growth in tax revenue and flat growth in non-tax revenue," they said. "Government capex may cross ₹ 12 lakh crore in FY27, a YoY growth of around 10 per cent."

Net tax receipts are on course to miss budgeted estimates due to the GST rate rationalisation measures, direct tax relief, and lower tax buoyancy on the back of weaker nominal growth, said Radhik Rao, Senior Economist, DBS Bank.

"We expect Budget measures to align with the economy's strategic ambitions, including on manufacturing and social welfare." (PTI)

With 'mother of all deals' in bag, Goyal says she will be compassionate, fair to all 28 children

NEW DELHI, Jan 31: The trade agreement between India and the EU is likely to double the country's exports to Europe in five years, and this "mother" will be "compassionate and loving", ensuring that all her 28 children gain from the pact, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Saturday.

The two sides announced the conclusion of negotiations for the pact on January 27. It is likely to be implemented this year itself, creating a free market of 2 billion people in India and 27 European Union countries.

The free trade agreement has been widely described at top levels as the "mother of all deals". Asked if the mother will be strict or lenient, Goyal said: "Neither... This mother is going to be compassionate, this mother is going to be loving, and this mother is going to make sure that both her children and, for that matter, the 27 nations of Europe and India, all 28 children will enjoy the fruits of this free trade agreement". India already has a trade surplus in exports of both goods and services to the European Union, he added.

Now, with 99 per cent of India's exports set to get duty-free access from day one of the implementation of the pact, the country's outbound shipments are likely to double in five years, Goyal told PTI Videos in an interview.

The duty-free entry for domestic firms in Europe will give a big fillip to many sectors, such as leather goods,

sportswear, toys, and marine products.

India's bilateral trade in goods with the EU was USD 136.53 billion in 2024-25 (exports worth USD 75.85 billion and imports worth USD 60.68 billion), making the EU India's largest goods trading partner. India's services exports stood at USD 46 billion.

The EU market accounts for about 17 per cent of India's total exports, and the bloc's exports to India constitute 9 per cent of its total overseas shipments. "I could easily see a doubling of exports," Goyal said. He appealed to domestic businesses to "seize" the opportunity, increase investments, expand capacities, and get out of the cosy comfort of the large and huge domestic market.

He was replying to a question about whether the EU's strict safety and quality standards could pose challenges for Indian exporters. Meeting the EU's standards will not be challenging as domestic exporters have the capability, wherewithal, and knowledge.

"All we need to do is expand capacities, we need to get out of the cosy comfort of this large, huge domestic market and look for outward markets, which we are opening up through these various trade deals, particularly in developed nations where you get a good price, where there's no competition, because we are largely exporting labour-oriented goods and services," he said. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Suffocation kills 4 Assam

Villagers gathered at the residences of the youths, who were in their twenties, consoling the family members who were in a state of shock after receiving the news.

"The families received phone calls from another local youth working there around 11 pm yesterday. They were told that the four were together in the room they shared and were found dead inside it," a resident of Namoni Borkhamukh said. The youths were in touch with their families till around 3 pm of Friday and they sounded normal when they spoke over the phone, the villager added.

"We will wait for the findings of the post-mortem examination. Family members of the deceased are in contact with the police here," he added. (PTI)

Himanta ridicules Cong's

a religious occasion of the Tai-Ahom community when offerings are made to the gods and ancestors. "For us, Bor Asom was established 600 years ago by Swargadeo Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha (the founder of the Ahom dynasty)," Sarma added. "Perhaps, their concept of Natun Bor Asom means including illegal Bangladeshis in our Assamese society," the chief minister said. Referring to a graffiti bearing the slogan 'Natun Bor Asom' on the walls of a Congress office that he noticed while travelling to the event, Sarma said, "It is a dangerous slogan and no one seems to have noticed it."

Speaking to reporters again after a programme at Khumtai in Golaghat district, Sarma said, "We understand the 'Bor Asom' of Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha. Sometimes, one may speak of a new, developed Assam. But the Congress is trying to include the 'Miyas' (Bengali-speaking Muslims) in the definition of Assamese people." "If BJP was not here, they would have built their 'Natun Asom' and sold it to the Miyas. They say that I speak against Miyas, but then these people have encroached our 'satras' (Vaishnavite seats of learning), land, done 'love jihad' and 'fertiliser jihad'," the chief minister claimed.

He accused the Congress of forgetting about the Assamese people and going only after the Miyas. "If someone says anything against Asomiyas (Assamese people), they don't have a problem. But if something is said against Miyas, they make a lot of noise. By Miyas I mean Bangladeshi infiltrators," Sarma asserted. "Congress and Gaurav Gogoi have gone mad for Miya votes. But I will do everything possible to chase them as it is the matter of life and death of Assamese people," he claimed.

"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 maintained that the "Assamese people have understood it and have to unite" against it. (PTI)

Sunetra Pawar takes oath as

Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended his best wishes to Sunetra Pawar, expressing confidence that she will work tirelessly for welfare of the people and carry forward her late husband's dream.

After taking the oath of office, Sunetra, a commerce graduate born into a political family who mostly stayed away from politics until 2024 (when she contested the Lok Sabha election from Baramati against her sister-in-law Supriya Sule and lost), vowed to carry forward her husband's people-centric legacy and work with a sense of duty to serve the state. Ajit Pawar's commitment to duty, spirit of struggle and honesty towards the people would remain her guiding strength, she added.

Besides Sunetra Pawar's younger son Jay Pawar and his wife, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, and NCP leaders Praful Patel, Sunil Tatkar and Chhagan Bhuwal were present at the ceremony where she was administered the oath of office and secrecy by Governor Acharya Devvrat. Nobody from party patriarch and NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar's family were present. (PTI)

'I will file at least 100

behind it," he alleged. The final NRC was released on August 31, 2019, with total 3,11,21,004 names included out of 3,30,27,661 applicants, though it is yet to be notified. (PTI)

Bengali social media influencer

friendship," Sayak said. He further stated that he has no political affiliation or ambition and just reacted to the situation at that time. "I have previously been called a 'state government stooge' simply for attending events organised by the chief minister, but I never protested. Today, I am being branded a BJP agent without any basis. Politics has nothing to do with this," Sayak said.

Addressing questions about why the complaint surfaced after the meal, the actor explained that he and his companion had only tasted the food. The issue became clear when the waiter placed another mutton steak on the table, despite only one steak having been ordered. "When we questioned him, he claimed we had ordered two steaks—one mutton and one beef. That is when I protested," Sayak said, adding that he was mentally distraught after realising he had unknowingly consumed beef.

While maintaining his stand, Sayak also expressed empathy for the waiter involved. "Even if the waiter had claimed to be Hindu, I would have asked him the same question—would you eat beef if it were served to you unknowingly? Restaurants at dinner time may witness hectic activities, but if such mistakes go unchallenged, others may face similar situations in the future," he said.

Despite Sayak's clarifications, several social media users continued to question why the complaint was raised only after the food was tasted, while others accused him of communal profiling as he was seen asking about the religious faith of the waiter. A senior police officer said a case has been registered following the complaint, and investigations are underway. (PTI)

Zero-tolerance for terrorism

Contemplating this multitude of challenges, our shared interest warrants strengthening forces of stability, peace and prosperity, he said. In his remarks, Jaishankar flagged serious concerns over the challenges posed by terrorism and called for concerted global efforts to combat it.

"A common threat in both our regions to these objectives is that of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations," he said. "Cross-border terrorism is particularly unacceptable because it violates the basic principles of international relations and diplomacy," he said in remarks seen as an apparent reference to Pakistan. "Societies targeted by terrorism have the right to defend themselves and will understandably exercise it," he said.

Jaishankar said it is essential that we strengthen international cooperation to combat what is a "global scourge". "Zero-tolerance for terrorism must be an uncompromising universal norm," he said. Jaishankar said India has strong partnerships with all Arab League members and the region has some of India's largest expatriate communities, key energy sources, major trade relationships and emerging technology and connectivity initiatives.

"We are crucial to each other when it comes to food security and health security. Today's deliberations, while of a collective nature, will nevertheless give a fillip to many bilateral ties," he said.

Jaishankar said India has developed many more capacities and strengths that are in keeping with the times.

"Many of these are technology related and their application has been people-centric. We believe that sharing experiences and best practices in that regard will be to our mutual benefit," he said. In his address, Jaishankar also made a mention of the current geopolitical environment and that nowhere is this more apparent than in the Middle East. "We meet at an important juncture when the global order is undergoing transformation for a variety of reasons. Politics, economics, technology and demography are all fully into play," he said.

"Nowhere is this more apparent than in West Asia or the Middle East, where the landscape itself has undergone a dramatic change in the last year." "This obviously impacts all of us, and India as a proximate region. To a considerable degree, its implications are relevant for India's relationship with Arab nations as well," he said. (PTI)

PRAYAS bid to improve quality

at larger public health levels, enabling wider access to integrative paediatric neuro-rehabilitation services."

The momentum towards integrative models is also being reinforced at the state level. In a recent engagement with Ayush and wellness stakeholders in Panaji, Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant highlighted the state's growing potential in holistic wellness and called for a framework of guidelines to strengthen integrated wellness, while also reiterating Goa's vision to emerge as a global wellness and medical value travel hub.

This initiative supports the National Health Policy 2017, which promotes integrative, preventive, promotive and rehabilitative healthcare and strengthened service delivery across the continuum of care.

Globally, such service models resonate with international frameworks that emphasise people-centred integration of safe and effective traditional medicine into health systems, including focus on clinical practice guidelines, workforce development and standardised data systems, Dr Ghuse said. (PTI)

Amit Rautela to join Patratu Vidyut Utpadan Nigam as CFO

NEW DELHI, Jan 31: Amit Rautela will join as Chief Financial Officer of Patratu Vidyut Utpadan Nigam, a 74:26 joint venture of power giant NTPC and the Jharkhand government, a statement said on Saturday. Rautela will join Patratu Vidyut Utpadan Nigam from NTPC-UP government joint venture (JV) Meja Urja Nigam Private Limited (MUNPL), where he was serving in a similar position, it added. He joined MUNPL in 2017, and worked on optimising borrowing costs, improving working capital, and enhancing fiscal discipline, the statement said, adding that Rautela will take over as CFO PVUN Ltd next week. "His contribution has been instrumental in driving MUNPL to achieve record-breaking financial performance in FY25, registering the highest-ever total income exceeding ₹ 5,200 crore, EBITDA of over ₹ 2,228 crore, and profit after tax of over ₹ 1,262 crore," it said. Rautela, a fellow member of the Institute of Cost Accountants of India (ICAI), Kolkata, has over 27 years of experience in finance, management, and operations, among others. (PTI)

realme Introduces realme P4 Power 5G with India's First

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Jan 31: realme, India's most recommended youth smartphone brand, today unveils the realme P4 Power 5G, a major technological breakthrough that pushes smartphone battery innovation to a new frontier, leading the industry into the 10,000mAh+ era. Featuring India's first 10,001mAh Titan Battery, the realme P4 Power 5G sets a new benchmark for extreme endurance while combining flagship-level performance and a bold Gen Z-driven design co-created with Pearl Academy. This milestone product marks the most ambitious evolution of the P series, bringing young users unprecedented power longevity, smooth performance and a distinctive visual identity.

Complementing the smartphone launch, the realmeTechLife 45W Cabled Power Bank further reinforces realme's leadership in battery tech-

nology. Featuring a massive 20,000mAh capacity, 45W fast charging, triple output ports and a distinctive 3D transparent design with multi-mode stealth display, it is designed to extend power beyond the smartphone wherever the day takes you. Francis Wong, CMO, realme India said, "With the launch of the realme P4 Power 5G - India's first & biggest 10001 mAh battery smartphone, we aren't just following a trend - we are dictating the new industry standard for endurance. This is a no-compromise device that pairs segment-leading performance with a bold, functional aesthetic. Combined with the realme Buds Clip, realme is empowering the modern user with an intelligent style-driven ecosystem. Through Flipkart's wide customer base, we are scaling this breakthrough across the nation. The realme P4 Power 5G represents true freedom—providing our users with

the uninterrupted power to outpace the ordinary and stay connected entirely on their own terms."

Commenting on the launch, Kanchan Mishra, Vice President, Mobiles, Flipkart said, "Flipkart is excited to partner with realme to launch the P4 Power 5G in India. As one of India's first and biggest 10,001mAh battery smartphones, the device represents a meaningful step forward in addressing consumer demand for long-lasting, dependable power. This partnership brings together realme's innovation-led approach and Flipkart's commitment to delivering differentiated, value-driven smartphones to customers across the country. Through this launch, Flipkart continues to strengthen its smartphone portfolio with products designed for today's always-connected users, while ensuring a seamless and trusted shopping experience nationwide."

Wipro GE Healthcare unveils SIGNA™ Prime Elite

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Jan 31: Wipro GE Healthcare, a leading global medical technology, diagnostics, and digital solutions innovator, today announced the launch of SIGNA™ Prime Elite, its latest MR imaging system, at the Indian Radiological and Imaging Association (IRIA) 2026 Annual Conference in Hyderabad. Manufactured at Wipro GE Healthcare's MDM facility - the company's PLI factory, SIGNA™ Prime Elite is the latest addition to its pioneering 'Made in India' portfolio. The MR system combines advanced imaging intelligence with patient-centric design to deliver faster, more comfortable scans and improved diagnostic confidence.

India is witnessing a sharp rise in noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), which account for over 66% of all deaths, underscoring an urgent need for early detection and advanced diagnostic solutions. SIGNA™ Prime Elite has been engineered for faster scan times, precision-led diagnosis, and enhanced workflow efficiency, empowering clinicians with greater diagnostic confidence to deliver high-quality care. Powered by AIR Recon DL™, a deep-learning image reconstruction technology, the system offers sharper image clarity, reduced noise, and faster scan times. These innovations improve diagnostic confidence while shortening the patient journey.

"As a proud local partner in India's healthcare journey, our purpose goes beyond products. Our focus is long-term and local - to make in India, and lead from India. With SIGNA™ Prime Elite, we are expanding our strong portfolio of Made in India MedTech, designed to expand access, elevate clinical confidence, and deliver reliability at scale. We are investing in localization—not as a project, but as a strategy—to power sustainable growth for India's healthcare system," said Chaitanya Sarawate, Managing Director, Wipro GE Healthcare and President & CEO, GE HealthCare South Asia.

"We are proud to introduce the SIGNA™ Prime Elite—a powerful new addition to Wipro GE Healthcare's pioneering Made-in-India portfolio and a significant milestone in our mission to expand access to world-class diagnostic technology across the country. This breakthrough platform has been engineered to maximize diagnostic potential while delivering clinical excellence at the speed and scale India needs today. With SIGNA™ Prime Elite we are bringing advanced MR innovation and the



power of AI to imaging in a way that truly transforms care," said Raghavendra Rao, Business Head - Imaging, Wipro GE Healthcare South Asia.

Compared to non-deep learning GE HealthCare scanners, SIGNA™ Prime Elite achieves up to 37% reduction in table time*, enabling quicker throughput. AI-enabled workflow solutions further streamline MR exams, with AIR Touch™ automatically selecting optimal coil combinations, while AIR x™ applies 'deep learning' to detect anatomy and prescribe MRI slices—even in complex neurological and knee cases. Together, these tools eliminate sources of variation, improve reproducibility, and allow clinicians to focus on patients. Additionally, the MR system's blanket-like AIR™ Coils allow natural positioning and shorten preparation time, while a flared bore entrance with feet-first scanning adds clearance and headspace, easing exams for claustrophobic patients.

SIGNA™ Prime Elite is green from site to scan. Its compact footprint and lower 60 KVA power consumption make installation easier, enabling hospitals and diagnostic centers beyond major metros to offer advanced MR imaging and expand access to care. Additionally, with Intelligent Magnet Technology reducing helium use by up to 75%*, the solution supports more sustainable operations while redefining the future of MR imaging.

Wipro GE Healthcare is among the first MedTech companies to 'Make in India - for India and the world' over the past three decades. In 2024, Wipro GE Healthcare announced an investment of over INR8000 Crores in manufacturing output & local R&D over next 5 years.

LOST

I lost my Class 10 Admit Card bearing Registration No. 15/RP/0022/307029/22 on January 20, 2026.

Contact No. 97073-67569
Klamong Teron,
S/O- Anjit Teron,
Taralango, Klarjir Restaurant,
PO/PS- Diphu,
Dist.- Karbi Anglong, Assam

AFFIDAVIT

I, Smt Dali Saikia change my name Dolly Saikia have signed an affidavit under Kamrup Notary bearing Certificate No. IN-AS 13824985392401Y, stating that the Name recorded in my birth certificate as "Dali Saikia" is incorrect and Dolly Saikia remains the corrected name.

NAME CORRECTION

My actual and correct name is Samsul Huda, S/O- Mobarak Ali is a resident of Vill-Dakhin Samarali P.O-Choudhury Bazar, P.S.- Murajhar, Dist.- Hojai (Assam). That, Wrongly my name has been written in my son's HSLC Certificate as Samsul Hoda which is not correct. My actual name is Samsul Huda.

Samsul Huda
S/O- Mobarak Ali Vill-Dakhin Samarali
P.O.- Choudhury Bazar,
P.S.- Murajhar, Dist.- Hojai (Assam)
Senarpi.

Tai Ahom commemorates forefathers with traditional rituals and cultural events Me-Dam-Me-Phi Festival celebrations across state

HT Correspondent

MARHERGITA, Jan 31: Me-Dam-Me-Phi, the traditional festival commemorating the forefathers of the Tai Ahom community, was held on Saturday at the Chao Cheng Ren premises in New Colony, Margherita, Tinsukia district.

Organised annually by the Margherita Co-District Me-Dam-Me-Phi Celebration Committee, the two-day programme included traditional puja and worship on the second day, followed by the hoisting of flags. The main flag was hoisted by committee president Mintu Deodhai Phukan, while other flags were raised by office bearers and distinguished guests.

The celebrations also featured the inauguration of a Rangmancha (stage), built at a cost of ₹ 23 lakh from funds allocated by Union Minister Pabitra Margherita and a guest house constructed with ₹ 10 lakh from the MLA's fund, inaugurated by Margherita MLA Bhaskar Sharma along with Shanti Gogoi and Girin Buragohain.

In the afternoon, an open meeting hosted by Rana Jyoti Neog,



chief general secretary of the committee, was attended by several dignitaries. During the event, the "Gyati Mahiyan" award was presented to Girin Buragohain of Jagun Phaneng and ten other distinguished persons were felicitated.

Our Golaghat Correspondent adds: Me-Dum-Me-Phi, a traditionally and spiritually significant festival of the Tai Ahom community of Assam, was observed at Samannay khetra, or-

ganised by the district committee of the Tai Ahom Yuba parishad, Assam and the people of Golaghat, praying for peace and prosperity of the people of Assam and the world at large.

Sanjib Hondique, president of the organising committee, hoisted the flag, followed by the floral tribute to Zubeen Garg. Essay competition among the school students, traditional dress competition was also held on the occasion. Noted writer Dr. Ajit Baruah, Film

Maker Dinesh Gogoi, Social Worker Lachit Phukan were present as distinguished guests.

Our Demow Correspondent adds: The 8th annual Me-Dam-Me-Phi festival was celebrated on Saturday at the Madhupur Ekarani Tai Ahom Culture Preservation and Tai Language Publicity Committee Office premises, under the patronage of the people of Madhupur, Ekarani, Laguabari, Naharabi and in association with the people of Demow. The day-long programme, which began at 11 AM, included traditional rituals, cultural activities and community participation.

Meanwhile, the Demow Ahom Samaj in association with ATASU Demow Regional Committee also celebrated Me-Dam-Me-Phi 2026 at the Demow Public Playground on January 30 and 31. The celebrations began with Furalung Puja on the afternoon of January 30, followed by Damphi Puja on January 31. The festival featured various competitions for students and concluded with a community feast, fostering cultural unity and preserving the traditions of the Tai Ahom community.

Folk musician Mukanda Madhav Bora passes away



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Jan 31: Mukanda Madhav Bora, a renowned folk musician and music scholar from Baligaon, passed away on 30 January at Jorhat Medical College and Hospital following an ailment.

In his early fifties, Bora is survived by his wife, son and a large circle of relatives and well-wishers. He was a versatile musician, skilled in playing and crafting almost all traditional musical instruments and was also an accomplished sculptor.

Bora gained recognition through performances in India and abroad and organised workshops to mentor upcoming folk musicians. He received several awards for his research on folk music instruments. His demise has been widely mourned.

ZP Member, Abdul Jabbar arrested

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Jan 31: Abdul Jabbar, Zila Parishad member of Madhabpara ZP, was arrested by Nagaon police recently, in connection with an alleged cattle smuggling case.

Sources said that Jabbar is being interrogated by police at Nagaon as part of an ongoing investigation. Further details regarding the case and any accomplices are yet to be disclosed.

Dibrugarh University Inter College Youth Festival 2025-26

HT Correspondent

DULIAJAN, Jan 31: The Dibrugarh University Inter-College Youth Festival (DUICYF) 2025-26 continued at Duliajan College with an intellectually charged Debate and Elocution competition under the literary section, reaffirming the festival as a vital platform for democratic expression among youth. The debate, held on the motion "Granting University status to select colleges will significantly improve the quality of higher education in Assam," saw 86 participants—60 debaters and 26 elocutionists—engage in wide-ranging discussions over eight hours, reflecting policy awareness, institutional realities and student aspirations.



The event was adjudged by Dr Mon Prativ Bordoloi (Oil India Limited, Duliajan), Raktim Ranjan Baruah (Academic Director, Vision International School, Jorhat), and Abhishek Kabra (Research Scholar, Tezpur University) with Dr Satyakam Bordoloi (former Dibrugarh University Professor) serving as Speaker of the House.

Addressing the gathering, three-time best debater Abhishek Kabra emphasised the larger democratic importance of debating, especially amid declining press freedom and threats to journalists. He urged students to keep democratic reasoning "alive and awake" and encouraged them to persist irrespective of competition results. Drawing a cricket analogy, he likened debating to Test cricket, where perseverance matters, saying, "If you hang in long enough, someday you become a Pujara."

Raktim Ranjan Baruah highlighted technical rigor and clarity in argumentation, while Dr Mon Prativ Bordoloi encouraged students to develop authentic public speaking styles inspired by speakers worldwide.

Organised by Dibrugarh University at Duliajan College, DUICYF 2025-26 continues to uphold its legacy of fostering cultural and intellectual excellence among college students.

NFR achieves major engineering and safety milestones

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 31: Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has recorded significant achievements in railway infrastructure and safety enhancement during FY 2025-26, reaffirming its focus on safe, reliable and passenger-friendly services.

The Engineering Department completed 9 Road Over Bridges (ROBs) and 8 Road Under Bridges (RUBs), eliminated 21 manned level crossings, rehabilitated 12 bridges and provided pathways on 77 bridges for safer inspections. Rail renewal covered 337.4 km, sleeper renewal spanned 329 km and 7.649 lakh cubic metres of bal-

last were laid, while 16 permanent speed restrictions were removed to improve train mobility and punctuality.

Passenger amenities saw major upgrades with the opening of 13 Foot Over Bridges, 3 high-level platforms, 18 platform sheds and extensions at 10 platforms. Platform raising works were completed at 7 stations, while Haibargaon station works under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme were completed.

Track safety improved with 197 turnout renewals, insertion of 180 thick web switches, 165 weldable CMS crossings, correction of 19 defective layouts and deep screen-

ing at 207 turnouts. Mechanised maintenance achieved a record 48.15 km of CTR/TRS(P) works in December 2025, with a cumulative mechanised progress of 251 km, doubling last year's output.

Revenue from land utilisation and shop/siding licensing reached ₹ 43 crore, while speed enhancements on loop lines at 29 stations raised speeds from 15 kmph to 30 kmph.

These initiatives underscore NFR's commitment to modernisation, infrastructure strengthening and passenger convenience, consolidating its role in regional connectivity and a safer, more efficient railway network.

Legendary singer Dipali Borthakur remembered

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Jan 31: Socio-cultural organisation Agantuk observed the 85th birth anniversary of legendary singer Dipali Borthakur with a function held at Seujia Sangeet Vidyalaya on Saturday.

Delivering the anniversary lecture on Dipali Borthakur's songs and life, noted writer and literary pensioner Dipali Bhattacharyya Baruah said that Dipali Borthakur won the hearts of the Assamese people over several decades through her immortal songs and inimitable voice. "Akashvani, Shillong and Guwahati centres were enriched by the legendary singer's songs. Her songs reflected the heartbeats of Assamese society," she added. Dipali Borthakur carried with her the cultural roots of the Sivasagar Assamese society.

48th session of All Assam Junior Agricultural Officers' Association concludes

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Jan 31: The 48th three-day session of the All Assam Junior Agricultural Officers' Association concluded on Saturday at Nagaon Cultural Complex.

The open session was presided over by association president Dibyajyoti Hazarika. In his welcome address, secretary Gopal Hazarika outlined the session's objectives. The session souvenir was released by Nagaon MLA Rupak Sarma, who emphasised the association's role in promoting literary activities among agricultural officers.

Guest speaker Bhabani Kumar Nath, Joint Director of Agriculture, highlighted government initiatives to boost agricultural production, while senior journalist Kanak Hazarika urged officers to strengthen the agricultural economy and motivate farmers.

Green Leaf Foundation flags irregularities in Kokrajhar electoral rolls

HT Correspondent

GOSSAIGAON, Jan 31: Green Leaf Foundation, a Gossaigaon-based NGO, has submitted a memorandum to the District Commissioner of Kokrajhar through the Sub-Divisional Officer (Civil), alleging serious anomalies and unlawful interference in the ongoing Special Revision (SR) of electoral rolls across Assam.

The organisation claimed that statutory provisions under the Representation of the People Act, 1950, the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, the Manual on Electoral Rolls, 2023 and recent Election Commission guidelines are being widely violated, risking exclusion of genuine voters.

Referring to the draft electoral roll published on December 27, 2025, the NGO noted that

while over 2.51 crore electors were verified, nearly 4.79 lakh deceased voters and over 5.23 lakh shifted voters had been identified by the ECI. Despite this, the Foundation alleged bulk and illegal objections were filed during the claims and objections period, mostly citing death or permanent shifting, leading to notices being sent to genuine voters in violation of rules.

The memorandum further claimed that some objections were filed without the knowledge of listed objectors, misusing their EPIC and mobile numbers. It accused Electoral Registration Officers of issuing notices without stating grounds and allowing insufficient hearing time, contrary to ECI guidelines. Booth Level Officers were allegedly deleting names on ERO in-

structions, while eviction-affected voters were being denied the chance to submit Form 8 for address changes.

Expressing concern that these actions could undermine both the SR process and the NRC exercise, the NGO urged the district administration to reject illegal bulk objections, act against responsible officials, ensure a minimum seven-day notice for hearings, prevent arbitrary deletions and shield the revision process from political interference.

The Foundation also called for strict administrative action against officials acting under extraneous influence and sought protection of voting rights for those who had participated in the NRC until all legal remedies are exhausted.

UPPL's 4th triennial conference concludes at Mushalpur

Party adopts resolutions and prepares for upcoming Assam Assembly elections



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Jan 31: The United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) concluded its 4th triennial conference on Saturday after a two-day event at Durga Mandir Field Complex, Mushalpur, Baksa district. The conference featured a multicultural rally with cultural troupes representing various communities, along with party workers and supporters and was attended by over 5,000 delegates from across the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and beyond.

Several resolutions were adopted, including a six-month extension of the existing Central Committee tenure with minor

reshuffles. A new Youth Cell was formed with Rakesh Brahma as president, Phukan Lahary as general secretary (Administration) and Riman Soren as general secretary (Organisation). Leadership changes were also made in the Women Cell, with Pratibha Brahma re-elected as president, Mursida Begum as general secretary (A) and Marina Lahary Patel as general secretary (O).

Delegates raised concerns over the ongoing Special Revision of Electoral Rolls in Assam, opposing harassment, malpractices and false complaints against genuine voters. They resolved to mobilise UPPL workers to safeguard voters' rights

and appealed to the Election Commission of India for a free and fair process, noting that the NRC is already updated.

The conference also expressed concern over recent Karigaon violence, rising ethnic and communal tensions in BTR, increasing incidents of rape and illegal gambling and deteriorating law-and-order. The house appreciated Pramod Boro's leadership in maintaining peace and stability during UPPL's 2020-2025 government tenure and extended thanks to the Governments of India and Assam.

Regarding the upcoming Assam Assembly elections, the conference resolved to contest all possible seats and formed an Empowered Committee to oversee alliance-related decisions, comprising UG Brahma, Rwigwa Narzary, Khampa Borgoyari, Joyanta Basumatary, Wilson Hasda and Katiram Boro.

UPPL chief and former CEM of BTR, Pramod Boro, expressed confidence in contesting the elections, emphasising the party's commitment to the welfare and development of the people and hope for widespread public support.

Prisoner escapes from Nagaon Central Jail

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Jan 31: A major security breach was reported at Nagaon Central Jail on Thursday after a prisoner, identified as Babul Ali, escaped from custody while being taken for a medical examination.

According to sources, Ali was escorted to Bhogeswari Phukanani Civil Hospital for a routine medical check-up when he managed to flee despite being under police guard. The incident triggered panic in the area and raised serious concerns over security arrangements.

Ali had been arrested by Rupahihat Police under Sections 329(3), 301 and 299 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and was lodged in Nagaon Central Jail. Following the escape, the police launched a massive manhunt to trace the fugitive.

Senior police officials have initiated an investigation to ascertain how the prisoner managed to escape from custody and whether there was any lapse in security at the jail or the hospital. Additional forces have been deployed and checkpoints have been set up at strategic locations across the district.

11th mid-term conference of Assam Senior Citizens' Association concludes



HT Correspondent

HOJAI, Jan 31: The 11th annual mid-term conference of the Assam Senior Citizens' Association, the sole government-recognised body representing citizens aged 60 and above in the state, concluded recently at the Sahityarathi Bezbarua Bhawan in Hojai. Over 700 delegates from across Assam participated, adding grandeur to the event.

The proceedings began with a health consultation and medicine distribution camp for senior citizens, organised under the aegis of the Assam Senior Citizens' Association and the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment at Hojai Girls' College. The camp was inaugurated by Hojai MLA Ramkrishna Ghosh, who encouraged the elderly attendees to embrace a healthy lifestyle through regular yoga practice.

The conference was inaugurated with a ceremonial flag-hoisting. President Baneshwar Khaund unfurled the association's flag, while ten additional flags were hoisted by heads of thematic departments and distinguished committee members. This was followed by a solemn memorial observance, where executive president Prithuram Barua lit sacred lamps and offered floral tributes.

Reverential homage was paid to late Dr Bhupen Hazarika and Zubeen Garg in front of their portraits.

Under the chairmanship of Baneshwar Khaund, the general body ratified the annual activity report, editorial summary and audited accounts of the preceding year. Detailed deliberations took place on the 17-point charter of demands submitted to the state administration, leading to the formulation of future action plans.

The inaugural plenary session was presided over by Lumding MLA Sibum Mishra. Chief Guest Dr Pradip Thakuria highlighted state-sponsored welfare initiatives for senior citizens and urged members to foster greater cohesion and utilize available governmental amenities.

During the event, the souvenir 'Biyoli-Vaibhav' edited by Anima Barua, was unveiled by former president and educationist Suresh Saikia. A poetry volume by veteran litterateur Kalpana Devi Goswami and a novel by Padmavati Bora were released by Dr Sharat Barkatoki, former Principal of Nagaon Mahavidyalaya.

The conference also honoured 12 distinguished Hojai residents for their exemplary contributions to society, education and culture.

Tribute to Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha on 118th birth anniversary

Tezpur celebrates the multifaceted legacy of the cultural icon with music, dance and poetry

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Jan 31: Tezpur's Kalaguru Samadhi Samanway Kshetra came alive with songs, dances and poetry as the 118th birth anniversary of Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha was observed with cultural fervour and reverence.

Organised by the Samadhi Samanway Kshetra Management Committee, the day-long programme began with ceremonial lamp lighting at the mausoleum. Prithiraj Rabha, senior artist, MLA from Tezpur and son of Kalaguru, along with Sonitpur Additional District Commissioner Kamal Barua and educationist Mahendra Nath Keot, formally inaugurated the tribute. Committee president Pankaj Barua presided over the event, which drew eminent personalities including Ritu Baran Sharma (ATDC Vice-Chairman), Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya, Tezpur Municipal Board Chairper-



son Ramen Tamuli and several theatre and cultural activists.

Kamal Barua highlighted Rabha's multifaceted legacy and Tezpur's cultural prominence, while Mahendra Nath Keot stressed the importance of keeping the ideals of Kalaguru relevant for younger generations. Ritu Baran Sharma underscored the responsibility to preserve Assamese lan-

guage, literature and culture, citing icons like Rabha, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Phani Sarma.

Prithiraj Rabha reflected on Kalaguru's national vision and creative depth, sharing insights into Rabha's last composition, 'Ei Mor Xesh Gan' ("This Is My Last Song"), drawing parallels with the Vaishnavite bhaona tradition of Srimanta Sankardeva and per-

formed the song for the audience.

The cultural segment featured dance performances by students of Jyoti Kala Kendra Sangeet Mahavidyalaya and Prahlad Chandra Das Smriti Nrityashala and vocal tributes by Padmaja Kashyap, Pawan Das, Anil Kumar Bhattacharyya, Eva Devi Deka and Prithiraj Rabha. Recitations of Rabha's poetry by Bikash Jyoti Kalita and Prafulla Keot added a literary dimension.

Earlier programmes were held at Tezpur Sahitya Sabha Bhawan, Ban Theatre and Majgaon Senior Citizens' Forum, where senior citizens recalled Rabha's life, philosophy, revolutionary spirit and artistic contributions.

The day concluded with a collective homage, reaffirming Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha's enduring influence on Assamese culture and his timeless relevance in the state's cultural and national life.

South West Regional Sanatan Brahma Dharma Festival begins

HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, Jan 31: The three-day annual programme organised by the South West Regional Sanatan Brahma Dharma Prachar Seva Samiti officially began on Saturday at the Brahma Yajna Mandir premises in Rongkut Ganeshpur, Karbi Anglong. Devotees from across the region attended the opening, which followed a structured religious itinerary.

The afternoon session commenced at 3:00 PM with the formal reception of delegates and devotees. The Main Gate was inaugurated by prominent social worker Jamin Basumatary, while the Delegate Camp was opened by Naren Basumatary. As evening fell, the Mangalik Yajna (holy fire ritual) was performed by Priest Maheshwar Khakhlary, with numerous Brahma Dharma followers participating in sacrificial offerings to seek spiritual blessings. The day concluded with a 'Subject Selection' meeting presided over by Tarun Chandra Brahma, president of the Samiti, to discuss the committee's future roadmap. The atmosphere remained devotional, setting the tone for the extensive spiritual discourses and rituals planned for the remaining two days of the festival.

Editor's Pick

EU-India FTA: Shaping trade, services, and strategic autonomy

By: Shairee Malhotra

On 27 January, the EU and India concluded a historic Free Trade Agreement (FTA), negotiations for which had been underway for nearly two decades. These began in 2007, stalled in 2013 due to a lack of progress, and were reopened in 2022 amid growing imperatives to diversify economic partnerships and reduce dependencies.

The agreement, dubbed "the mother of all deals", combines the EU and India's vast markets — worth a combined US\$25 trillion and encompassing 2 billion people — accounting for 25 percent of global GDP. While India has signed a spate of FTAs in recent years, including with Australia, the UAE, the EFTA bloc of non-EU nations, the UK and Oman, the EU-India FTA is the most significant of these.

The EU is India's top trading partner, while India is the EU's ninth-largest trading partner, with total annual bilateral trade valued at around €180 billion. The EU accounts for 11.5 percent of India's total trade, while India accounts for 2.4 percent of the EU's total trade in goods, underscoring the scope for deepening economic ties. By comparison, China accounts for nearly 15 percent of the EU's total trade in goods.

Under the agreement, India will eliminate or reduce duties on 96.6 percent of EU goods exports, while the EU will liberalise 99.5 percent of its tariff lines on goods imported from India over the next seven years. Indian exports from labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, jewellery and garments — that currently face higher-than-average tariffs in the EU alongside stiff competition from countries such as Vietnam, which already has an FTA with the EU, and Bangladesh, which receives preferential tariff rates due to its Least Developed Country (LDC) status — are set to receive a significant boost. In addition, Indian pharmaceuticals, maritime products, appliances, and electrical machinery will see a reduction in European tariffs.

Meanwhile, European automobiles, alcohol, machinery, chemicals, medical equipment, aircraft, and chocolates will benefit from reductions in Indian tariffs. India currently maintains tariffs of over 100 percent on imported cars and tariffs as high as 150 percent on imported wines. These European exports will receive substantial relief, although tariff reductions will be gradual and subject to quotas in order to limit the impact on India's domestic industry.

In services, India's opening of 102 sub-sectors to the EU — including in the financial, telecommunications and maritime domains — represents a major breakthrough, given India's traditional reluctance to liberalise this sector. The EU, in turn, has granted access to 144 services sub-sectors, opening up opportunities that could help reduce India's dependence on the US market for its services exports. This also links to another key deliverable from the EU-India summit: a mobility framework that allows for easier movement of Indian workers and professionals to Europe.

The agreement also brings EU and Indian intellectual property laws closer, thereby providing a high level of protection for intellectual property rights. Notably, the agreement also includes a dedicated chapter on sustainable development, covering environmental issues and labour rights.

Key Exclusions

Yet, the deal is perhaps as significant for what it excludes as for what it covers. Sensitive sectors such as dairy and agriculture are largely excluded. However, the agreement does reduce prohibitive Indian tariffs on certain EU agri-food exports, such as olive oil, margarine, processed foods, and fruit juices, while leaving out more sensitive products such as sugar and rice.

Despite alleged carve-outs granted to the US in its trade negotiations with the EU, India has not secured an exemption from the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), arguably the most contentious issue in the negotiations. Under the CBAM, the EU intends to levy a carbon tax on imports based on their level of carbon emissions. That said, the two sides have agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) under which the EU will provide €500 million in funding over two years to support sustainable industrial transformation initiatives in India and encourage emissions reductions.

While negotiations have concluded, the text will be finalised and signed at a later stage this year, after which it will need to be ratified by the European Parliament — a process that is by no means assured, if the Mercosur experience is any indication. As a result, it is unlikely that the agreement will enter into force before 2027. Meanwhile, negotiations on an Investment Protection Agreement and Geographical Indications (GIs) will continue separately.

Fragmented Geo-economics

The last few months saw Indian and European negotiators working at breakneck speed to fast-track the deal in time for the EU-India summit, with US President Donald Trump's tariff wars undoubtedly playing a key role. There is a risk that the agreement may have fallen prey to the "deadline effect", whereby the political urgency to conclude negotiations leads to the exclusion of contentious yet critical issues, resulting in a less ambitious and comprehensive blueprint than originally envisioned.

Such caveats aside, the agreement is salient against the backdrop of Trump's tariff wars and China's unfair trading practices, both of which have significantly disrupted the global trading system. In an increasingly fragmented and volatile geo-economic environment, the agreement — while not replacing the criticality of trade with the US and China — will contribute to diversification towards more predictable and reliable partners, and in the long run, to a potential reshaping of supply chains. It is also likely to strengthen the negotiating positions of both India and the EU in their respective trade talks with the US: the EU has suspended its negotiations with Washington over the latter's Greenland threats, while India and the US remain engaged in ongoing talks. The agreement will help reduce vulnerabilities arising from volatile tariff policies and the weaponisation of supply chains, while serving as a tool to preserve strategic autonomy and enhance economic resilience. Crucially for India, it will support greater investment flows from Europe.

Despite some pending business, the significant reduction of tariffs and trade barriers on both sides, alongside provisions in areas such as sustainable development, represents a notable accomplishment. In services and agri-products, India has gone beyond what it has offered in previous free trade agreements and granted greater access to the EU, thereby shifting some of its earlier red lines. At the same time, successfully concluding a deal of this scale while managing to limit access to the most politically contentious agricultural sector constitutes a win for Indian negotiators.

What is clear, however, is that the FTA and the deeper integration of two vast economies will provide a major boost to the broader EU-India partnership, which is deepening across a range of areas — from security and defence to technological cooperation. (Courtesy: ORF)

The dynamic leadership of Assam Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma

By: Diganta Barooah

Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, the current and the 15th Chief Minister of Assam since 2021, is a leader in the true sense of the term. Who can deny his eloquence and dynamism in tackling any kind of adversity thrown before him? His perfect acumen in defeating any kind of adversity is a matter of envy to his detractors. He is the perfect example of a politician that should be. Right from his formative years, he has been acquiring skills and experience in tackling any kind of political challenges vis-a-vis his political detractors. Born on 1st February in the year 1969, he attended his kindergarten at the Balya Bhawan of Jorhat. He did his high schooling at Kamrup Academy, Guwahati and completed his Higher Secondary, Graduation and Master's Degree from the erstwhile Cotton College (Now Cotton University) of Guwahati in Assam. Dr Sarma also completed his LLB from BRM Government Law College of Guwahati and PhD from Gauhati University of Assam. He practised law at the Gauhati High Court for some period. During his days at Cotton College this writer was two years junior to him. Dr Sarma was the General Secretary of the Students Union of Cotton College during those formative years. Dr Sarma was a former member of the Indian National Congress (INC). Sarma joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on 23rd August, 2015. He is a five time Member of the Assam Legislative Assembly from the Jalukbari Constituency. He has been elected from the Jalukbari Constituency continuously since 2001.

Dr Sarma assumed the Office of the Chief Minister of Assam on 10th May, 2021. Himanta Biswa Sarma, stands as one of the most influential political figures in Northeast India today. Known for his strategic foresight, efficient administration, and grassroots connection, Sarma has played a pivotal role in redefining Assam's political and developmental trajectory. His journey from student activism to state leadership is marked by political agility, social reform, and a deep understanding of Assam's challenges and potential. From 2001 to 2015, Sarma held various key ministerial portfolios under the Congress government in Assam: #Minister of Health and Family Welfare #Minister of Education #Minister of Planning & Development #Minister of Finance #Minister of Public Works Department (PWD) During this period, he earned accolades for: #Expanding Assam's healthcare infrastructure, especially in rural areas #Launching the Mriyujoy 108 emergency ambulance service #Introducing reforms in public education and school teacher recruitment #Pushing for higher budget allocations to social welfare sectors In August 2015, Himanta Biswa Sarma made headlines when he resigned from the Congress and joined the BJP, citing lack of recognition and internal mismanagement. This political shift became a watershed moment in Assam's political history. Sarma quickly became one of the most influential leaders in the BJP's Northeastern expansion strategy. Appointed as the Convener of the North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), he was instrumental in building regional alliances and strengthening BJP's presence in:

- o Assam
- o Arunachal Pradesh
- o Manipur
- o Meghalaya
- o Nagaland
- o Tripura

His meticulous planning and electoral strategy led the BJP to a historic victory in the 2016 Assam Assembly elections, ousting the Congress from power for the first time in 15 years.

Himanta Biswa Sarma as Chief Minister of Assam:

Following the BJP's second consecutive victory in the 2021 Assembly Elections, Himanta Biswa Sarma was unanimously chosen by the party as the Chief Minister of Assam, succeeding Sarbananda Sonowal. He took oath on May 10, 2021, ushering in a

By: Dipak Kurmi

As Himanta Biswa Sarma celebrates another year of leadership on his birthday, it is an opportune moment to reflect on his remarkable contributions to Assam and its people. Since he assumed the role of Chief Minister in May 2021, Sarma has become a defining force in the political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental spheres of Assam. His tenure, marked by both monumental achievements and contentious moments, has nonetheless propelled Assam into an era of modernization, growth, and renewed cultural pride.

Born on February 1, 1969, in Jorhat, Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma's journey from a law graduate to a political titan mirrors the very transformation he has sought to instigate within his state. His academic journey—anchored in Cotton College, Guwahati, and furthered with a law degree and Ph.D. in political science—has provided him with the intellectual rigor and strategic acumen to lead with vision and resolve. His early political inclinations were evident during his student years, where he first exhibited leadership potential by being elected General Secretary of the Cotton College Students Union multiple times. Sarma's entry into politics began with the Indian National Congress (INC), where he quickly rose to prominence due to his exceptional administrative abilities. Elected from the Jalukbari constituency in 2001, he served under Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, taking charge of key portfolios such as Health, Education, and Planning. These early years set the stage for Sarma's governance style—pragmatic, people-focused, and reform-oriented. His efforts in transforming healthcare and education laid a solid foundation for his later, more expansive initiatives as a leader.

However, it was his strategic move to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2015 that marked a pivotal turning point in his career and in Assam's political landscape. His shift to the BJP, after growing disillusioned with the Congress leadership, proved to be a masterstroke. Within a short period, Sarma played an instrumental role in the party's sweeping victory in Assam in 2016, elevating BJP as the dominant political force in the region. His influence was integral not only in Assam but also in the BJP's broader ambitions in the Northeast.

As Assam's Chief Minister, Sarma has taken bold strides towards economic transformation, creating an investor-friendly environment that has attracted significant investments to the state. His government's policies, such as the "Advantage Assam" initiative, have led to the establishment of landmark projects like Tata Group's semiconductor plant in Jagiroad. This

new era of assertive and proactive governance. Since assuming office, Sarma has launched a series of impactful reforms and schemes aimed at governance modernization, economic development, and social welfare.

Mission Basundhara:

A landmark initiative aimed at digitizing land records, reducing land-related disputes, and easing the burden of bureaucratic paperwork. Over 8 lakh applications were received in the first phase.

Orunodoi Scheme:

One of the largest direct benefit transfer (DBT) programs in Assam. Under this, economically disadvantaged women receive monthly financial aid to ensure nutritional and financial security for their families.

Healthcare Modernization:

In the healthcare sector, Sarma pushed for: #New medical colleges in Kokrajhar, Tinsukia, and Nalbari #Expansion of ICU beds and oxygen generation units during COVID-19 #Health insurance schemes for frontline workers of Government of Assam

Assam Police Reform:

The Sarma-led government has adopted a tough-on-crime policy. The "encounter culture" has returned, with the police cracking down heavily on drug rackets and organized crime. While this has improved law and order, it has also sparked criticism from civil rights groups.

Educational Transformation:

From merging poorly performing schools to introducing smart classrooms, the government is focused on quality over quantity. Teacher recruitment has become more merit-based, and digital learning initiatives have been expanded.

Employment Generation:

The Assam government announced plans to provide 1 lakh government jobs, and significant steps have been taken from time to time for streamlined recruitment drives.

Flood Management and Infrastructure:

Flooding is a chronic problem in Assam. Sarma's administration has prioritized the construction of embankments, dredging of rivers, and setting up flood response teams.

Advantage Assam 2.0:

Building on its strengths, Assam hosted the "Advantage Assam 2.0: Investment and Infrastructure Summit 2025" to promote economic growth, industrialization, and global collaborations. Its objective was to showcase Assam as a premier investment destination. The Advantage Assam 2.0 Investment and Infrastructure Summit 2025 in Guwahati, was held from 25th to 26th February. It included an inaugural session, seven ministerial sessions and 14 thematic sessions. It is one of the greatest achievement of CMSarma as investors from other parts of the world and from India came to our state and promised large scale investments in our state Assam. The CM has emphasized more on population control, especially in minority-dominated districts. He advocates for educational awareness and voluntary adoption of birth control measures. His stand has received support from some quarters and criticism from others. He also called for ending child marriages in Assam, resulting in mass arrests across the state. This crackdown, though seen as controversial, underscores his commitment to long-term social reform.

Cabinet Decisions:

Since 2021, 112 Cabinet Meetings have resulted in 1,513 decisions, with an impressive 90.5% implementation rate.

Departmental Meetings:

261 meetings since 2021, yielding 3,289 decisions.

District Visits:

The Assam Cabinet undertook a commendable 1,945 district visits, reflecting a hands-on approach to governance. The year 2023 witnessed a series of noteworthy events, including Mega Bihu celebrations that set Guinness World Records. The Amrit Brikshya Andolan marked another significant achievement, establishing 10 Guinness World Records. Other cultural milestones included Khel Maharan and Sanskritik Ma-

hasangram, showcasing the rich cultural tapestry of Assam.

Atmanirbhar Assam Abhijan: A Beacon of Economic Progress:

Under the visionary leadership of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Atmanirbhar Assam Abhijan has made substantial strides, providing more than 1 lakh jobs and fostering economic self-reliance. The Assam BJP has hailed Chief Minister Sarma's leadership as a driving force behind the state's rapid development. In a statement, State BJP of Assam highlighted key achievements, including Assam's ambitious plan to launch its own satellite—an initiative aimed at tackling floods, monitoring agriculture, and addressing border issues. This move positions Assam as the first Indian state to launch its own satellite, marking a milestone in technological advancement. The State BJP of Assam contrasted the current government's performance with the previous Congress-led administration, pointing out that Assam's capital expenditure has grown from ₹3,000 crore in 2015-16 to ₹24,000 crore in 2025-26. He attributed this rise to the BJP government's commitment to infrastructure and economic growth. Emphasizing BJP's focus on empowerment, the State BJP cited initiatives such as Arunodoi, Nijut Moina, the Women's Entrepreneurship Scheme, and the CM's Atmanirbhar Scheme. These programs have supported communities like the Morans, Motoks, Tea Tribes, Bodos, and Koch-Rajbongshis, promoting economic self-reliance. Assam's cultural heritage has also gained global recognition, with traditional performances like Bihu, Jhumur, and Bagruma aiming to set world records. Assam BJP president Dilip Saikia appreciated the 2025-26 budget presented by Finance Minister Ajanta Neog, calling it inclusive and beneficial for all communities. He highlighted provisions for over 25,000 Naamghars (Vaishnavite prayer halls) and religious institutions, reinforcing Assam's spiritual heritage. Saikia reiterated that BJP's welfare schemes, including Orunodoi, PM Awas Yojana, PM Kisan, and Nijut Moina, have been implemented without bias, benefiting people across all religious and linguistic backgrounds. This can only happen with the dynamic leadership of Chief Minister imanta Biswa Sarma. The BJP reaffirmed its commitment to "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas," emphasizing that regions with significant minority populations, such as Barpeta, Dhubri, and Morigaon, have also received the benefits of government schemes. The Chief Minister launched a zero-cost insurance scheme for government employees in collaboration with SBI and UBI. Under this scheme, families of state employees can claim ₹10 lakh for natural deaths and up to ₹1 crore for accidental deaths. "This initiative ensures that our employees and their families feel financially secure, no matter what happens," the CM remarked. He also introduced Swagata Swatirtha, an online portal to streamline transfer processes for third and fourth-grade employees. The portal will allow employees to select up to five district preferences, eliminating the need for manual interventions. "We want to end the days when employees had to knock on doors for transfers," Sarma said, emphasising on transparency of the automated system. Another major highlight was a womenempowerment scheme, aimed at supporting 30 lakh women with tiered financial aid. Women will receive ₹10,000 in the first year, ₹25,000 in the second (half funded by banks), and ₹50,000 in the third. "This initiative will economically empower women and pave the way for self-sufficiency," Sarma said. The Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma stated several key achievements in the year 2024:

Economic Growth:

Assam's GSDP rose to ₹6.43 lakh crore in 2024, with an ambitious target of ₹7.12 lakh crore for 2025. "We are well on track to making Assam a million-dollar economy," he said.

Crime Reduction:

The state reported a 62% reduction in

crime, with only 40,000 cases registered in 2024 compared to 1.3 lakh in 2020.

Tourism Boom:

Assam welcomed over 75 lakh tourists, including 23,000 foreigners. Kaziranga National Park, especially after visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the President Droupadi Murmu, emerged as a key attraction. The Chief Minister also highlighted cultural milestones, including Assamese being granted classical language status, marking the culmination of years of struggle. "This recognition is a proud moment for Assam and our linguistic heritage," he said.

Infrastructure & Industry:

One of the major achievements was the initiation of the Tata Semiconductor Facility, which is expected to create 30,000 direct and indirect jobs. Scheduled for completion by 2025, the project places Assam at the forefront of Industry 4.0. On infrastructure, the state constructed 1,236 bridges from 2021 to 2024. Announcing upcoming projects, the Chief Minister stressed on the ₹12,000 crore tunnel between Numaligarh and Gohpur and a ₹32,000 crore expressway that will cut travel time to Silchar to five hours. Other upcoming projects include a 32-km elevated corridor in Kaziranga and the construction of Swahid Kanaklata University, which will focus on futuristic subjects such as robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and AR.

Governance & Social Welfare:

Despite the Lok Sabha Model Code of Conduct, the state government conducted 33 cabinet meetings in 2024 and implemented numerous welfare schemes. Under Mission Basundhara 1 and 2, the government resolved several land disputes and announced the launch of Mission Basundhara 3. Chief Minister Sarma also praised the success of the Arunodoi Scheme, which, he claimed has evolved into a comprehensive poverty alleviation model and inspired similar initiatives across India "In 2025, we aim to continue this momentum by focusing on inclusive growth and welfare," CM Dr. Sarma said recently. While critics label him as authoritarian, his supporters see him as a doer, not a talker. His ability to connect with the grassroots, along with strategic political maneuvering, has made him the BJP's most valuable asset in Northeast India. Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma's growing influence in national politics cannot be overlooked. Besides being the Convener of NEDA, he is often involved in: #BJP's election strategy in other States of India. #National debates on federal policies affecting the Northeast #Diplomatic meetings involving cross-border issues with Bhutan and Bangladesh Political observers often see him as a potential Union Cabinet Minister or even a Prime Ministerial candidate from the Northeast in the long term. Himanta Biswa Sarma is married to Rinihi Bhuyan Sarma, a prominent entrepreneur and media personality. The couple has two children. Rinihi is the Chairperson of Pride East Entertainment Pvt. Ltd., which runs several regional TV channels. Himanta Biswa Sarma's leadership represents the emergence of a bold, new political narrative in Assam—one rooted in development, identity, and reform. Whether it is cracking down on crime, promoting digital governance, or positioning Assam as a driver of Northeast India's growth, Sarma continues to reshape the state's destiny. As Assam treads into a new decade of transformation, the role of leaders like Himanta Biswa Sarma becomes more crucial than ever. Love him or criticize him, one cannot deny that he is one of the most consequential Chief Ministers Assam has ever seen. As long as Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma is the Chief Minister of our beloved state Assam, we can be optimistic about the growth and development of Assam. His dynamic leadership will definitely and surely soar Assam to greater heights in the years and years to come. (The author is the Assistant Development Officer Transformation and Development Department, Government of Assam. He can be reached at 9678785439 or digantaraju@gmail.com or maiddigantabarooah@yahoo.com)

Himanta Biswa Sarma: Architect of Assam's transformation and progress

Rs 27,000 crore project, the first of its kind in India, has positioned Assam as a key player in the global semiconductor industry, bringing in jobs, boosting the state's GDP, and contributing to India's technological ambitions. Sarma's focus on infrastructure has further bolstered Assam's economy, with the modernization of Guwahati's GopinathBordoloi International Airport, new airports, and improved connectivity through multiple bridges across the Brahmaputra.

Yet, it is not just big-ticket projects that have defined Sarma's leadership. His commitment to inclusive growth has been seen in his initiatives for rural development and empowerment. The expansion of road networks under the PradhanMantri Gram SadakYojana, the improvement of healthcare services with the establishment of medical colleges, and the empowerment of small-scale industries, particularly women entrepreneurs, have transformed the lives of ordinary citizens. The focus on rural Assam has been a hallmark of Sarma's administration, ensuring that the benefits of development reach even the most remote corners of the state. Under his leadership, education in Assam has witnessed a complete overhaul. With a focus on digital learning, teacher training, and school infrastructure, Sarma has expanded access to quality education, particularly in rural areas. His establishment of new universities and technical institutes has ensured that students from across Assam are able to access higher education without having to leave the state. Sarma's push for better healthcare has also been substantial, with the establishment of new medical colleges and a focus on improving public health infrastructure, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sarma's commitment to social justice has been evident in his focus on empowering marginalized communities. Through initiatives that focus on women's economic independence, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and backward communities, Sarma has worked to ensure that social inclusion is at the core of Assam's growth. His support for tea garden workers, providing them with better wages, healthcare, and housing, has uplifted a historically marginalized group, further boosting Assam's tea industry—a sector that remains one of the state's biggest economic drivers.

Cultural preservation and environmental conservation have also been key priorities for Sarma. In a state like Assam, where the confluence of nature and culture forms the foundation of its identity, Sarma's efforts to protect natural resources such as Kaziranga and Manas National Parks have been instrumental in maintaining Assam's biodiversity. Anti-poaching measures, alongside investments in renewable energy, underscore his commitment to

environmental sustainability. Additionally, the promotion of Assamese culture, including language, literature, and traditional arts like Bihu and Jhumur dances, has nurtured a deep sense of pride and belonging among the people of Assam.

One of the most groundbreaking initiatives under Sarma's leadership has been the technological innovations implemented in governance. The launch of AI-powered tools like "Ankita," an AI news presenter, exemplifies Sarma's push towards integrating modern technology with public administration. Such innovations not only improve governance but also make communication with the people more accessible and transparent. Furthermore, his government has implemented blockchain-based tea auctions and educational reforms with AI tools, making Assam a trailblazer in India's digital transformation.

However, Sarma's tenure has not been without its share of controversies. His polarizing statements on various issues, particularly his views on population control and inter-community relations, have sparked debates within the state and beyond. His approach to managing Assam's diversity, coupled with his stance on issues like the Assam-Mizoram border dispute, has often drawn sharp criticism. Despite these challenges, Sarma's ability to navigate complex socio-political landscapes has kept him at the forefront of Assam's political scene. His candid, sometimes confrontational approach, combined with his achievements in governance, has made him a deeply influential figure. Today, as HimantaBiswaSarma celebrates his birthday, Assam stands transformed in many ways—from its improved infrastructure and economic outlook to the empowered youth and revitalized cultural pride. Sarma's leadership has not just shaped the state's present but laid the groundwork for its future, ensuring that Assam emerges as a modern, progressive, and culturally vibrant state. While his approach has sparked controversy at times, his commitment to Assam's growth, inclusivity, and sustainability has been unwavering.

As Assam continues to stride towards progress, the contributions of HimantaBiswaSarma remain invaluable. His blend of vision, strategy, and political astuteness has secured a better future for the people of Assam. On his special day, it is only fitting to acknowledge his relentless dedication and unwavering service to the state, which will undoubtedly leave a lasting legacy for generations to come. Happy Birthday, Chief Minister HimantaBiswaSarma! May your leadership continue to guide Assam towards greater heights of success and prosperity. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

Beyond a Footnote: The Patharughat Uprising in Assam's Anti-Colonial History

By: Prabir Kumar Talukdar

In early January this year, I toured the historic Khatara Sattria in Darrang district, which was established in 1548 by Govinda Atoi. On the way to Dipila, where the Sattria is located, the road is undergoing massive renovation. To make sure the vehicle does not tumble off the dusty road, it is easy to miss a historic place that falls just by the roadside at Patharughat. On 28 January 1894, unarmed peasants who were raising their voices against the exploitative land revenue system of the British Raj were shot on the orders of the then Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, J. D. Anderson. According to official records, 15 people died. Eyewitnesses, however, told a different story, one that revealed how heavily manipulated the official figures were. Over 140 people were slaughtered and as many mutilated by the imperial police's gunfire. The Patharughat Uprising remains an overlooked episode in the annals of India's struggle for freedom. At best, it appears as a footnote, often described as "Assam's Jallianwala Bagh". Any sane mind would question this comparison. Why Jallianwala Bagh? Could there not exist two separate instances of colonial brutality, each with its own history? To read the Patharughat Uprising merely as a revolt against the British Raj would be an injustice to the many souls who lost their lives that day. The peasant uprisings that preceded and followed Patharughat laid the foundation for a long and decisive struggle against colonial power in Assam. From 1816 to 1825, the Burmese invaded Assam three times. The region, then under the Ahoms, was completely ransacked.

Villages, sattras, and institutions were wiped off the landscape. Assam was so severely depopulated that it took years to return to its pre-invasion state. In 1826, the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the British and the Burmese, bringing an end to one of the most devastating periods in Assam's history, known as the "Manor Din" or Burmese period. What initially felt like a breath of fresh air with the arrival of the British, a supposedly modern and civilised authority, soon proved to be far worse. The British were never interested in this part of the country. They detested its inaccessibility, compounded by disease, unfamiliar flora and fauna, and unpredictable weather. Yet, having



arrived, the colonial power felt compelled to assert its presence. Their primary objective was to establish a large tea-producing industry and stabilise a fragile agricultural system. One of their first measures was the introduction of the ryotwari system. This enabled them to procure indentured labourers from across the country, especially from the Chota Nagpur Plateau. To maximise land revenue, the British sought to dismantle the paik system prevalent under Ahom rule. Peasants were expected to move from being paiks to ryots. This shift caused widespread resentment. Under the paik system, peasants could pay their dues in kind or through labour. As ryots, however, they were required to pay in cash alone.

The new tax policies served two purposes: to sharply increase public revenue and to drain peasants of money so that they would be forced

to join plantations as labourers. Under the ryotwari system, individual peasants were personally responsible for their land revenue. Failure to pay resulted in confiscation of land, pushing them into migrant labour and making labour procurement for plantations easier for the British. Another commodity that deeply affected the region was opium. Between 1851 and 1852, the British imposed a blanket ban on poppy cultivation in Assam. For sale and consumption, they introduced an inferior variety of opium from the mainland known as abkari. This was regulated under the Opium Act of 1857 and sold through a government-licensed system, hence the name. The colonial administration now held a monopoly over pricing and distribution, ensuring a steady source of income while simultaneously controlling the peasantry. Consumption of kane, the locally known variety of

processed opium, was widespread in Assam. British authorities believed that controlling its supply would substantially bolster revenue generation. By 1842, the British had already fought Qing China over opium and had mastered the methods needed to expand the trade. All they required was a continuous flow of revenue. By 1856, they were prepared to push further into a weakened China, triggering the second and bloodiest of the two Opium Wars. It is important to note that the opium exported to China was of superior quality, manufactured in Bengal, Patna, and the Malwa region.

The combined pressure of high land revenue and the ban on poppy cultivation led to the first major unrest in Nowgong, present-day Nagaon, on 17 September 1861. Peasants submitted a petition to the magistrate, demanding that no further ban be imposed on betel-nut and betel-leaf.

The district administration ignored their demands and introduced further policies. A rajmel—a large public gathering to discuss pressing issues—was convened at Phulaguri and lasted five days to allow peasants from distant areas to attend. Alarmed by the scale of the gathering, the district administration dispatched an imperial police force under Lieutenant Singer. In the scuffle that followed, Lieutenant Singer was killed by an enraged crowd angered by British repression. Phulaguri thus marked a turning point. By 1892, revenue rates had increased by 70-80 per cent. On 27 January 1894, J. D. Anderson learned that another rajmel was taking place near his campsite. He sent a force to intervene, though no violence occurred that day. The following day, however, unarmed peasants, both Hindus and Muslims, gathered again and raised slogans declaring that they would not pay the revised taxes. Anderson categorically refused to revise the rates. A scuffle broke out. Disoriented and angered, peasants began throwing clods of earth in response to a brutal lathi charge.

The lathi charge was soon followed by gunfire. One by one, peasants who had gathered only to participate in the rajmel fell lifeless to the ground. The Patharughat meeting field was soaked in their blood. There was an eerie silence around the Shaheed Minar when I visited. The obelisk, built on a raised platform, was constructed by the Indian Army with the support of the state government in 2001. Apart from an occasional cowherd, the site was deserted. The front gate was locked, and the elevated approach road made access nearly impossible for a person with limited mobility. The names of those murdered that day are inscribed permanently on black tiles. Some names overwhelmed me deeply. Kinaram and Shambhu Koch were merely passing through Patharughat to buy meat for a wedding. Another victim remains unnamed, identified only as a monk. Narottam Das, an eyewitness to the massacre, composed powerful folk ballads in memory of the martyred peasants.

Ironically, he titled the work Doli Puran, with doli meaning clods of earth. The text was rediscovered in the 1950s and reprinted in the 1980s. The brutality of 1894 has been reverberating across generations. Even today, in Assam, the mere mention of Patharughat sends a shiver down the spine.

Children's World and Fairy Dialogues - A combination of interest, knowledge and morality



By: Dr Satyawan Saurabh

Dr Priyanka Saurabh is a PGT lecturer in Political Science at the Haryana Education Department and holds a PhD in Political Science. Her children's poetry books, "Children's World and Fairy Tales," are highly engaging and informative for children. These poetry collections embellish the innocence of children's minds with magical fairytale dialogues, imparting moral lessons and sparking imagination.

Brief introduction of the author

Dr Priyanka Saurabh teaches political theory, democracy, and governance to students in government schools in Haryana. Her academic background gives her a deep understanding of children's literature. Despite being a political science scholar, she teaches children values like service, social justice, and environmental protection through simple poems. Works like "Dialogue with Fairies" and "Children's World" are a testament to her versatility. The cultural background of Haryana is re-

flected in these poems, such as fairies flying over mustard fields. This confluence of education and literature has earned her recognition as a young writer.

Summary of books

"Fairy Se Samvad" contains 60 children's poems woven into dialogues between fairies. Each poem answers a child's daily life questions—friendship, honesty, love for nature, etc. "Bachchon Ki Duniya" contains 70 short poems, each of 16 lines, focusing on childhood games, festivals, and innocent questions. Both collections are written in simple Hindi. Available on Pothi.com, these books are ideal for children aged 5 to 12. The fairy tales, based on local folklore, connect them with the rural children of Haryana. Overall, these poetry collections are a beautiful bridge between reality and imagination.

Language style and presentation

The language is extremely simple, rhythmic, and musical. Short sentences easily appeal to children. The fairy tales' dialogue is lively, such as "O little child, fairies flee from lies." The use of rhyme and

figures of speech makes the poems lyrical. Political concepts are simplified in fairy tales—democracy is described as "the collective decision of all fairies." The word images are so powerful that the need for illustrations is minimal. Books of 50-60 lines can be read in a single sitting. This style strengthens the excellent tradition of Hindi children's poetry. The grammar is accurate and the pronunciation is easy.

Educational and moral values

As an officer of the Haryana Education Department, Dr. Priyanka has woven curriculum values into these poems. Environmental awareness—"Nature is Mother, Love Her"—gender equality and social harmony are key. Children learn participation and leadership. Useful for moral education or bedtime stories in schools. These poems develop emotional intelligence and spark curiosity. Her expertise in political science is evident in messages like "Politics is service, not self-interest." These books are ideal for Haryana's government school campaigns. They help children become responsible citizens.

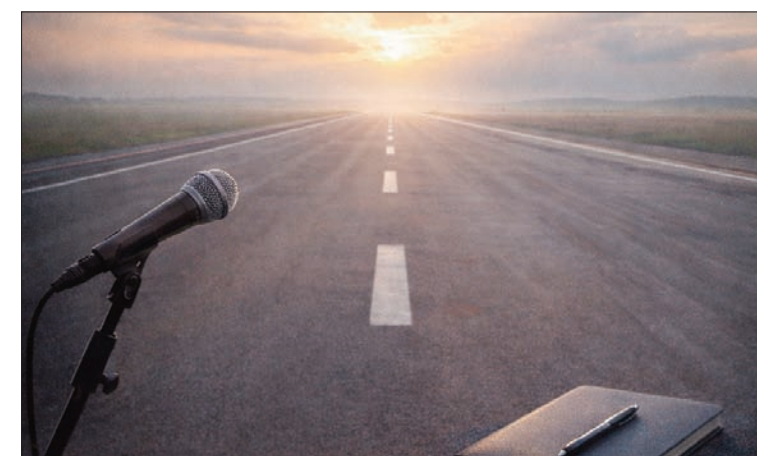
Interest, attraction and impact

These poems score high marks for their engaging nature. Children are captivated by the fairy tale's magic, while adults are influenced by its moral messages. Children ask questions after reading, sparking dialogue. These are rare works that connect readers to books in the digital age. Haryanvi references like "Kites flying in the fields" provide a local touch. The impact is long-lasting—it awakens children's imagination and sense of values. Parents and classroom teachers can use them confidently. The only drawback: the language is a bit formal in some places, but natural in children's literature.

Overall Assessment and Recommendation

These children's poetry books by Dr. Priyanka Saurabh are a treasure trove of Hindi literature. A unique blend of education, politics, science, and literature. 10/10 points. Every parent, teacher, and book lover should buy these. Compulsory reading for children. Hearty congratulations to Priyanka—such works are enriching Hindi children's poetry. She makes Haryana education proud. (The author is a PhD (Political Science) and a poet and social thinker)

Why Slowing Down Matters



By: Narvijay Yadav

Life's uncertainty reminds us that fame, ambition, and routine can change overnight. Recent choices by beloved artists and a sudden, tragic loss make clear the value of balance, pause, and mindful living.

Nothing in life is permanent. Not our routines. Not our roles. Not even our bodies. Events unfold whether we plan for them or not. Some shifts happen slowly. Others arrive without warning. This is the simple truth we often forget until reality reminds us. In the past few days, the world noticed two influential voices choosing a slower pace. Singers and performers, admired for years, announced pauses in their active careers.

Arijit Singh, a voice that shaped modern music, said he won't take on new playback assignments, choosing instead to return to his roots and explore quieter creative paths after years of constant demand. Similarly, comedian Zakir Khan spoke about stepping back from the stand-up circuit, acknowledging the toll his body has taken and the need to recalibrate. These are headlines of conscious choice. They reflect a deeper understanding that life is not only about speed or output. People whose work touched millions are now choosing space, reflection, and connection. At the same time, life's unpredictability struck in a harsher form. In a tragic plane crash near Baramati, a senior Marathi political leader lost his life along with four others in the aircraft. No notice. No rehearsal. A moment that vanished many lives forever, reminding us that no position, title, or plan offers immunity from life's uncertainties.

Moments like these sit uncomfortably alongside each other, one of choice, and one of chance. Both, however, point in the same direction, that control is an illusion. We plan. We prepare. We aim for goals. Yet life has its own rhythm. It unfolds both gently and abruptly. This is not a call to fear. It is a call to awaken.

We live in a culture that applauds ambition, speed, and achievement. We measure success by output, status, and plans executed. But if everything

can change, by choice or by circumstance, then what really matters? Presence. Balance. Awareness. Success without balance becomes stress. Ambition without rest becomes a burden. Work without reflection becomes routine. Life without pause becomes a habit without meaning.

Blissful Living for Stability: Blissful living does not mean detachment from purpose. It means approaching purpose with clarity, not compulsion. It means noticing when the body signals fatigue, and when the mind signals saturation. It means knowing that rest is not a reward; it is a necessity. When a celebrated artist decides to slow down, it tells us something deeper. It says that sustainability matters more than a relentless pace. When another performer accepts the cost of constant touring and laughter, it reminds us that even joy demands energy.

When a leader's life ends suddenly, it forces us to feel how tenuous our own existence can be. None of us is exempt. Fear does not discriminate. Plans do not guarantee continuity. As the Dalai Lama says, "Some things are certainly out of our control." So the question is not how to protect life from uncertainty. The question is how to live with uncertainty.

Awareness becomes the anchor. Acceptance becomes the compass. Awareness of our energy, our health, our relationships, our purpose. Awareness that the body speaks before collapse. Awareness that slow mornings, walks, reflection, and pauses are forms of strength, not weakness. Acceptance that life is unbounded. That unpredictability is part of human life. That every breath, every sunrise, every conversation is ultimately a gift, not an entitlement.

The "Bliss lifestyle" is not about protecting life while pursuing purpose. It asks us to slow down long enough to feel life happening, not just to chase what's next. Because nothing is forever. And that is not sad, it is honest. In that honesty lies freedom. In that freedom lies peace. In that peace lies a life worth living. Bliss On. (The writer is the founder of BlissMedia. Views are personal)

OFT HEART WRENCHING SITUATIONS CREATE CHAOS

By: Bipul Chandra Kalita

Oft heart wrenching situations create chaos, Showering mixture of fire and water, Methodically in innocent minds' simple worlds; Simplicity sacrifices peace of mind many times, Losing its readiness to listen to inner voice.

Architects of chaotic mindsets are hard skinned, Like slippery roads that lead careless travellers to muddy ditches Such hidden dangers leave no stone unturned To try ceaselessly to ruin creative minds' positive vibes.

When Moon, Marsh and even Sun are being almost explored Ugly minds of the globe are killing time in worshipping darkness; Our conscience undergoes repeated acid tests in the garden of tricks Where innocent loses its identity in the whirlpool of fire and water.

Thrown inhumanly upon the thorns of the traitors' ill-thoughts I am bleeding but fighting for rescuing innocence and its identity...

The God's Door

By: Otteri Selva Kumar

Gods door
Open with you
So smile
Don't worry
About of sin...

Sin depend
About death
Death is not sin
Each every sin
Finish
With death!!!

So,
Love to each
Others...
Same with as
Enjoy everyday
Open to you
God's door in
Every where
Every day
Every time
Free...
With love...

Mine collapses in eastern Congo, leaving at least 200 dead, rebel authorities say

GOMA (CONGO), Jan 31: A landslide earlier this week collapsed several mines at a major coltan mining site in eastern Congo, leaving at least 200 people dead, rebel authorities said on Saturday.

The collapse took place on Wednesday at the Rubaya mines, which are controlled by the M23 rebels. Lumumba Kambe Muiyisa, the spokesperson of the rebel-appointed governor of North-Kivu province, told The Associated Press. He said the landslide was caused by heavy rains.

"For now, there are more than 200 dead, some of whom are still in the mud and have not yet been recovered," Muiyisa said. He added that several others were injured and taken to three health facilities in the town of Rubaya, while ambulances were expected to transfer the wounded on Saturday to Goma, the nearest city around 50 kilometres (30 miles) away.

The rebel-appointed governor of North Kivu has temporarily halted artisanal mining on the site and ordered the relocation of residents who had built shelters near the mine, Muiyisa said.

A former miner at the site told The Associated Press there have been repeated landslides because the tunnels are dug by hand, poorly constructed, and left without main-



tenance.

"People dig everywhere, without control or safety measures. In a single pit, there can be as many as 500 miners, and because the tunnels run parallel, one collapse can affect many pits at once," Clovis Mafare said.

Rubaya lies in the heart of eastern Congo, a mineral-rich part of the Central African nation which for decades has been ripped apart by violence from gov-

ernment forces and different armed groups, including the Rwanda-backed M23, whose recent resurgence has escalated the conflict, worsening an already acute humanitarian crisis.

Congo is a major supplier of coltan, a black metallic ore that contains the rare metal tantalum, a key component in the production of smartphones, computers and aircraft engines.

The country produced about 40 per cent of the world's coltan in 2023, according to the US Geological Survey, with Australia, Canada and Brazil being other big suppliers. Over 15 per cent of the world's supply of tantalum comes from Rubaya's mines.

In May 2024, M23 seized the town and took control of its mines. According to a UN report, since seizing Rubaya, the rebels have imposed taxes on the trade and transport of coltan, generating at least USD 800,000 a month.

Eastern Congo has been in and out of crisis for decades. Various conflicts have created one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with more than 7 million people displaced, including 100,000 who fled their homes this year.

Despite the signing of a deal between the Congolese and Rwandan governments brokered by the US and ongoing negotiations between rebels and the Congo, fighting continues on several fronts in eastern Congo, continuing to claim numerous civilian and military casualties.

The deal between Congo and Rwanda also opens up access to critical minerals for the US government and American companies. (AP)

Head bowed, self-respect compromised: Pakistan PM

ISLAMABAD, Jan 31: Seeking foreign loan had forced Pakistan to "bow" its head and make compromises at the "cost of self-respect", Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has said in a candid admission about the humiliation involved in approaching "friendly countries" for financial aid.

Addressing a ceremony held in honour of the country's eminent businessmen and exporters here on Friday, Sharif recalled the difficult period when Pakistan faced fears of bankruptcy and was described by some as being on the verge of technical default.

"When we assumed office, the economic situation was extremely fragile, and the common man faced severe hardships," he said.

The prime minister referred to his meeting with the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Paris in 2023, after which the global lender approved an economic programme that helped stabilise the country's economy.

Sharif said friendly countries had fully supported Pakistan during difficult times and that, together with the Chief of Army Staff and Chief of Defence Forces, Field Marshal Asim Munir, he had met leaders of several countries to seek loans worth billions of dollars.

However, he said, "How should I tell the way we requested friendly countries for loans? The friendly countries didn't disappoint us. But the one who goes to seek a loan, his head is bowed down." The prime minister said loans also create obligations that have to be fulfilled.

"When you go seeking loans, you have to pay the price at the cost of your self-respect. You have to compromise... Sometimes, undue demand may come up, and you have to implement it even when there is no reason to fulfil it," he said.

Pakistan heavily relies on financial aid from several countries, including China, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, to manage its foreign exchange reserves and debt. These nations, along with the IMF, provide regular loans and rollovers to the cash-strapped nation. (PTI)

57 terrorists, 10 security personnel killed in different ops across Pak

KARACHI, Jan 31: A total of 57 terrorists were killed after they carried out attacks on security forces, law enforcement agencies and civilians at 12 different locations in Pakistan's Balochistan province, officials said Saturday.

Ten security personnel were also killed during the operations that were conducted from late Friday night through Saturday afternoon.

These operations come after Pakistani security forces killed 41 terrorists in two different counter-terror measures in Panjgur and Harnai of the province on Thursday and Friday.

Shahid Rind, the spokesperson for the Balochistan government, said that the attacks were carried out at different locations, including at Quetta, Gwadar, Makram, Hub, Chaman, Naseerabad, in the

province.

"The attacks targeted police, frontier corps and civilians at different locations between Friday and Saturday night," Rind said on telephone. The terrorists killed a family of five, including a woman and three children, near Gwadar, Rind said.

He said identification of the dead terrorists is in process and it would be confirmed only later whether they belonged to insurgent groups only or also included the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) outfit.

Security forces are still continuing clean up operations in the affected areas where the militants fled after exchange of heavy gunfire with security forces and law enforcement agencies on Saturday afternoon, he said.

Federal interior minister Mohsin Naqvi said that all the attacks by the terrorists were averted by the forces. He also confirmed that 10 policemen and paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) personnel were killed in these attacks.

He added that terrorists had laid a large number of explosives on a railway track in the Naseerabad district, which were later removed by the bomb disposal squad.

Earlier on Friday, the army and officials said that security forces killed 52 terrorists, mostly belonging to the Taliban, in separate operations across three provinces.

Six terrorists were killed in Punjab province early Friday while on Thursday, 41 were killed in two separate intelligence based operations (IBOs) in Balochistan and

five Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) men, including a commander, were killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

There has been a surge in violence in Balochistan in recent years. Balochistan had an upward trend, with fatalities increasing from 787 to 956; an additional 169 deaths, which are nearly 22 per cent higher than the previous year's figures, data from think tank Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) showed in the January first week.

An Islamabad-based think tank Pak Institute for Peace Studies said there had been an escalation -- by 34 per cent -- in terror attacks and violence in 2025, with as many as 699 terrorist attacks recorded countrywide during the year. (PTI)

Bangladesh set for polls, reform referendum amid uncertain voter mood

DHAKA/NEW DELHI, Jan 31: Bangladesh is going to the polls along with a referendum on reforms in less than two weeks in a dramatically changed political landscape, with the once-dominant Awami League barred from contesting and many voters expressing uncertainty over their choices.

Over 127 million people are eligible to cast their ballots in the February 12 polls, widely regarded as the country's most important election in decades and the first since the mass uprising that ended Sheikh Hasina's rule in August 2024.

Interim government Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus has described the dual exercise as a "grand festival" and said it would be the most free, fair and peaceful vote in the country's history, laying the foundation for what he called a "new Bangladesh".

But observers say the absence of a major political party and rising political tensions have weakened the competitive character of the election and raised concerns about stability and legitimacy.

With the deposed prime minister Hasina-led Awami League out of the race, the contest has narrowed mainly to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), seen as the frontrunner, and the Jamaat-e-Islami and its allies.

Despite the ban, the Awami League, which led Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War against Pakistan, is believed to retain a large base of supporters who now find themselves politically sidelined.

"I feel little enthusiasm. I am not sure if I will vote. I don't know whom I should vote for," said Kader Mia, a Dhaka-based tailor in his mid-40s and a lifelong Awami League supporter.

Another supporter in the southwestern city of Barishal, who runs a small garment shop and did not wish to be named, said staying away from the polls could endanger his family as they might be identified as Hasina's supporters and "radical right-wing elements" can target them. The interim government disbanded the Awami League under the Anti-Terrorism Law months after it was removed from power on August 5, 2024, following violent student-led protests known as the July Uprising that forced Hasina into exile in India.

A special tribunal sentenced Hasina to death in November last year on charges of crimes against humanity linked to her crackdown on protesters, a verdict that many Bangladeshi and foreign analysts have described as "rushed" and "flawed". Yunus has suggested that Awami League voters are "up for

grabs", while Hasina, in interviews with international and Indian media, has said her supporters could boycott the polls.

She warned that a government "born of exclusion" would fail to unite a divided nation and would lead to prolonged instability in Bangladesh. Sensing an opportunity, the BNP has appealed to Awami League supporters by stressing "secular nationalism". The party ended its long-standing alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami in August 2025, a move analysts see as an effort to attract voters who once backed the Hasina-led party.

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman and Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir have increasingly referred to the values of the 1971 Liberation War, the core pillar of Awami League's identity, to signal shared patriotic roots.

In a recent public address, Alamgir said Hasina had fled to India, leaving her supporters "vulnerable" and "in trouble" and claimed the BNP was now "standing by them in a difficult time".

A survey published by leading Bangladeshi newspapers this week showed that a large section of Awami League-leaning voters remained undecided, while a significant number appeared inclined towards the BNP. (PTI)

Israeli strikes kill 23 Palestinians, including children

DEIR AL-BALAH (GAZA STRIP), Jan 31: Hospitals in Gaza said Israeli strikes killed at least 23 Palestinians Saturday, one of the highest tolls since the October ceasefire aimed at stopping the fighting.

A day after Israel accused Hamas of new ceasefire violations, strikes hit locations throughout Gaza, including lethal ones on an apartment building in Gaza City and a tent camp in Khan Younis, officials at hospitals that received the bodies said. The casualties included two women and six children from two different families. An airstrike also hit a police station in Gaza City, killing at least 11 and wounding others, Shifa Hospital director Mohamed Abu Selmia said.

The series of strikes also came a day before the Rafah crossing along the border with Egypt is set to open in Gaza's southernmost city. All of the territory's border crossings have been closed throughout almost the entire war. Palestinians see Rafah as a lifeline for the tens of thousands in need of treatment outside the territory, where the majority of medical infrastructure has been destroyed.

The crossing's opening, limited at first, marks the first major step in the second phase of the US-brokered ceasefire. Reopening borders is among the challenging issues on the agenda for the phase now underway, which also includes demilitarising the strip after nearly two decades of Hamas rule and installing a new



government to oversee reconstruction.

Still, Saturday's strikes are a reminder that the death toll in Gaza is still rising even as the ceasefire agreement inches forward.

Nasser Hospital said the strike on the tent camp caused a fire to break out, killing seven, including a father, his three children and three grandchildren. Meanwhile, Shifa Hospital said the Gaza City apartment building strike killed three children, their aunt and grandmother on Saturday morning, while the strike on the police station killed at least 11 officers, including four policemen, and inmates held at the station. The Hamas-run Interior Ministry said Palestinian civilians were also killed in the strike.

Hamas called Saturday's strikes "a renewed flagrant violation" and urged the United States and other mediating countries to push Israel to stop strikes.

A military official, speaking Saturday on the condition of anonymity in line with protocol, could not comment on the specific targets, but said Israel carried out overnight and Saturday strikes in response to what the army said were ceasefire violations the day before.

Israel's military, which has hit targets on both sides of the ceasefire's yellow line, has said strikes since October have been in response to violations of the agreement. In a statement on Friday, the military said they killed three militants exiting a tunnel in an Israeli-controlled zone in Rafah.

Gaza's Health Ministry has recorded 509 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire since the start of the ceasefire on Oct. 10. The ministry, which is part of the Hamas-led government, maintains detailed casualty records that are seen as generally reliable by UN agencies and independent experts. (AP)

Senate passes Trump-backed government funding deal, sending to House



WASHINGTON, Jan 31: The Senate voted on Friday to fund most of the government through the end of September while carving out a temporary extension for Homeland Security funding, giving Congress two weeks to debate new restrictions on federal immigration raids across the country.

With a weekend shutdown looming, President Donald Trump struck a spending deal with Senate Democrats on Thursday in the wake of the deaths of two protesters at the hands of federal agents in Minneapolis. Democrats said they would not vote for the larger spending bill unless Congress considers legislation to unmask agents, require more warrants and allow local authorities to help investigate any incidents.

"The nation is reaching a breaking point," Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said after the vote. "The American people are demanding that Congress step up and force change."

As lawmakers in both parties called for investigations into the fatal shootings, Trump said he didn't want a shutdown and negotiated the rare deal with Schumer, his frequent adversary. Trump then encouraged members of both parties to cast a "much needed Bipartisan YES" vote.

The bill passed 71-29 and will now head to the House, which is not due back until Monday. That means the government could be in a partial shutdown temporarily over the weekend until they pass it.

Speaker Mike Johnson, who held a conference call Friday with GOP lawmakers, said he expects the House to vote Monday evening. But what is uncertain is how much support there will be for the package.

Johnson's right flank has signalled opposition to limits on Homeland Security funds, leaving him reliant on Democrats who have their own objections to funding U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement without immediate restraints.

Two-week debate over ICE

It was unclear how involved Trump would be in the negotiations over new restrictions on immigration arrests — or if Republicans and Democrats could find any points of compromise.

Senate Democrats will not support an extension of Homeland Security funding in two weeks "unless it reins in ICE and ends violence," Schumer said. "If our colleagues are not willing to enact real change, they should not expect Democratic votes."

Similarly, House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries told reporters that any change in the homeland bill needs to be "meaningful and it needs to be transformative." Absent "dramatic change," Jeffries said, "Republicans will get another shutdown."

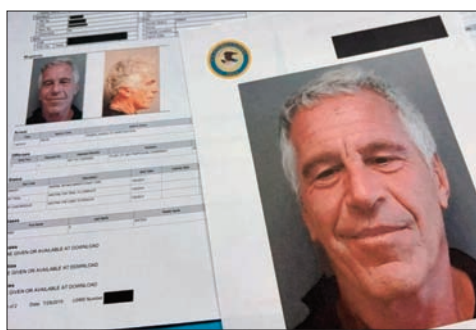
Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said the two sides will "sit down in good faith," but it will be "really, really hard to get anything done," especially in such a short amount of time.

"We'll stay hopeful, but there are some pretty significant differences of opinion," Thune said.

Democrats demand change

Irate Democrats have asked the White House to "end roving patrols" in cities and coordinate with local law enforcement on immigration arrests, including requiring tighter rules for warrants. (AP)

US govt releases largest batch yet of Epstein documents, says it totals 3 mn pages



NEW YORK, Jan 31: The US' Justice Department has released many more records from its investigative files on Jeffrey Epstein, resuming disclosures under a law intended to reveal what the government knew about the millionaire financier's sexual abuse of young girls and his interactions with rich and powerful people such as Donald Trump and Bill Clinton.

Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche said the department would be releasing more than 3 million pages of documents along with more than 2,000 videos and 180,000 images.

The files, posted to the department's website on Friday, include some of the several million pages of records that officials said were withheld from an initial release in December.

Included were documents concerning some of Epstein's famous associates, including Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, formerly known as Britain's Prince Andrew, and email correspondence between Epstein and Elon Musk and other prominent contacts from across the political spectrum. The documents were disclosed under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, the law enacted after months of public and political pressure that requires the government to open its files on the late financier and his confidant and onetime girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell.

Lawmakers complained when the Justice Department made only a limited release last month, but officials said more time was needed to review additional documents that were discovered and to ensure no sensitive information about victims was released. Friday's disclosure represents the largest document dump to date about a saga the Trump administration has struggled to shake because of the president's previous association with Epstein.

Criminal investigations into the financier have long animated online sleuths, conspiracy theorists and others who have suspected government cover-ups and clamoured for a full accounting, demands that Blanche acknowledged might not be satisfied by the latest release.

"There's a hunger, or a thirst, for information that I don't think will be satisfied by the review of these documents," he said.

After missing a Dec 19 deadline set by Congress to release all the files, the Justice Department said it tasked hundreds of lawyers with reviewing the records to determine what needed to be redacted, or blacked out.

It denied any effort to shield Trump, who says he cut ties with Epstein years ago after an earlier friendship, from potential embarrassment.

The latest batch includes correspondence either with or about some of Epstein's friends.

The records have thousands of references to Trump, including emails in which Epstein and others shared news articles about him, commented on his policies or politics, or gossiped about him and his family.

Also included was a spreadsheet created last August summarizing calls to the FBI's National Threat Operation Centre or to a hotline established by prosecutors from people claiming without corroboration to have some knowledge of wrongdoing by Trump.

Mountbatten-Windsor's name appears at least several hundred times in the documents, sometimes in news clippings, sometimes in Epstein's private email correspondence and in guest lists for dinners organised by Epstein. Some records document an attempt by prosecutors in New York to get the former prince to agree to be interviewed as part of their Epstein sex trafficking probe.

The records also show Musk, the billionaire

Tesla founder, reached out to Epstein on at least two occasions to plan visits to the Caribbean island where many of the allegations of sexual abuse purportedly occurred. In a 2012 exchange, Epstein asked how many people Musk would like flown by helicopter to the island he owned.

"Probably just Talulah and me," Musk responded, referencing his then-partner, actress Talulah Riley. "What day/night will be the wildest party on our island?"

Musk messaged Epstein again ahead of a planned Caribbean trip in 2013. "Will be in the BVI/St Bart's area over the holidays," he wrote. "Is there a good time to visit?" Epstein extended an invite for after the New Year holiday.

It's not immediately clear if the island visits took place. Spokespeople for Musk's companies, Tesla and X, didn't respond to emails seeking comment.

Musk has said he repeatedly rebuffed Epstein's overtures. "Epstein tried to get me to go to his island and I REFUSED," he posted on X in 2025 when House Democrats released an Epstein calendar with an entry mentioning a potential Musk visit.

Epstein also appears to have tried to connect New York Giants co-owner Steve Tisch with women, according to emails. In one exchange, Tisch told Epstein he had had lunch with one of Epstein's assistant's friends. He described her as a

"very sweet girl," and asked if Epstein knew anything about her.

"no, but i will ask," said Epstein, before inquiring if Tisch had contacted another woman, crudely describing her physical features. Tisch said in a statement that he had a "brief association" with Epstein where they emailed about adult women and other topics. He said he "never went to his island" and that he "deeply regrets" the association.

The documents show that Steve Bannon, a conservative activist who served as Trump's White House strategist earlier in the president's first term, bantered over politics with the financier, discussed get-togethers with him over breakfast, lunch or dinner and, on March 29, 2019, asked Epstein if he could supply his plane to pick him up in Rome.

Epstein told him his pilot and crew "are doing their best" to arrange that flight but if Bannon could find a charter flight instead, "I'm happy to pay." Apparently in France at the time, Epstein sent a text message saying: "My guys can pick you up. Come for dinner." The exchange did not show how that played out.

In December 2012, Epstein invited Howard Lutnick, now Trump's commerce secretary, to his private island for lunch, the records show. Lutnick's wife accepted the invitation and said they would arrive on a yacht with their children. On another occasion in 2011, the two men had drinks, according to a schedule shared with Epstein. (AP)

CM Khandu reviews hydropower projects

Focus on timelines, local welfare and energy security

ITANAGAR, Jan 31: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu has reviewed the progress of key hydropower projects in Dibang Valley district, underscoring the state's push to balance timely execution with local welfare, infrastructure development and national energy security.

The projects he reviewed included the 3,097 MW Etalin Hydroelectric Project (HEP) and the 680 MW Attunli HEP, which are under implementation, along with those under survey, such as Emni (500 MW), Amulin (420 MW) and Mihumdon (400 MW).

"With a total planned capacity of 5,097 MW, discussions focused on timelines, statutory clearances and ensuring that development supports local communities while strengthening India's energy security," Khandu said in a statement after a meeting with power developers.

Slated to be India's largest hydroelectric project, the Etalin HEP on the Dri River is expected to commence soon.

"Being developed by SJVN Ltd, the project is envisaged as a transformative initiative to accelerate infrastructure growth, generate employment, boost local livelihoods and significantly augment the country's clean en-



ergy capacity," the chief minister said. Khandu also visited the Etalin project site along the Roing-Anini Highway and received a detailed briefing from SJVN officials.

Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein, who also holds the power and hydropower portfolios, on Saturday said the Etalin HEP

features a 101.5-metre-high dam with a top length of 213.7 metres.

He added that the project's Techno-Economic Clearance was revalidated on January 30 last year with an approved cost of ₹ 30,037.36 crore.

According to officials, the project has secured Environmental Clearance and Stage-I Forest Clearance, with over 69 per cent of land compensation already disbursed, reflecting the state government's emphasis on transparency and fairness.

The Attunli HEP, envisaged as a run-of-the-river scheme is expected to further strengthen Arunachal Pradesh's renewable energy capacity.

The project comprises four generating units of 170 MW each with an estimated annual generation of 2,728.50 million units and incorporates an underground powerhouse and advanced tunnel systems to ensure efficiency while maintaining environmental balance, officials added.

"These projects underline our commitment to sustainable development, energy security and inclusive growth, while safeguarding the interests of local communities and the environment," Mein added. (PTI)

Donyi Polo Airport honoured under RCS-UDAN Hollongi Airport wins Best AAI Airport Award



HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, Jan 31: Hollongi (Donyi Polo) Airport, Itanagar, has brought pride to Arunachal Pradesh by being recognised as the "Best Airport of India under RCS-UDAN", marking an important milestone in the state's infrastructure and connectivity journey.

The award was presented on January 29, during the Wings India 2026 event held at Begumpet Airport, Hyderabad. The Ministry of Civil Aviation conferred several awards on the occasion to recognise excellence across the Indian aviation sector. Union Minister of Civil Aviation Ram Mohan Naidu presented the awards, highlighting achievements in airlines, airports, sustainability and state-level policy initiatives.

Chief Minister Pema Khandu congratulated the people of Arunachal Pradesh and termed the recognition a proud moment for the state. He said that Hollongi (Donyi Polo) Airport winning the "Best Airport of AAI under RCS-UDAN" award is a major boost to connectivity, development and opportunities for the people of the state. He also congratulated the Airports Authority of India and the entire team behind the achievement.

Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein also congratulated the state on the achievement, stating that it is a proud moment for Arunachal Pradesh. He said the recognition reflects the collective commitment towards improving regional connectivity, strengthening infrastructure and opening new pathways for growth, tourism and opportunities across the state. He congratulated the Airports Authority of India and all those involved in making the vision a reality.

Home and Border Affairs Minister Mama Natung, among others, also congratulated the achievement and said it would motivate the officers and officials of Donyi Polo Airport, Hollongi, to further improve their services and win the appreciation of lakhs of passengers availing flight services in the coming years.

CRPF Cycle Expedition marks 20th Raising Day



HT Bureau
NAMSAL, Jan 31: On the occasion of the 20th Raising Day of 186 Battalion, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), a Cycle Expedition Programme was organised as part of the commemorative celebrations.

The expedition was conducted across various locations of Arunachal Pradesh with the objective of promoting physical fitness, discipline, esprit de corps, unity and strengthening civil-police relations, particularly in remote and border areas.

The cycle expedition was carried out through six different routes, with cycle contingents starting from multiple locations and covering long and challenging terrain before converging at a common destination. The routes covered during the expedition were Pasighat-Roing-Tezu-Namsai.

Changlang-Kharsang-Mahadevpur-Namsai, Miao-Kharsang-Mahadevpur-Namsai, Bordumsa-Mahadevpur-Namsai, Kharsang-Mahadevpur-Namsai and Pangsung Pass-Kharsang-Mahadevpur-Namsai. The expedition commenced on 27 January from Pasighat in East Siang district. Despite difficult terrain and challenging climatic conditions, all cycle contingents successfully completed their respective routes with high levels of enthusiasm, discipline and commitment, reflecting the operational en-

durance and professionalism of CRPF personnel. On 31 January, all the cycle contingents assembled at APPL Ground, Namsai. On this occasion, C R Khamsa, Deputy Commissioner, Namsai in the august presence of D K Singh, Commandant, 186 Battalion and Ariche Anthony Maheo, Second-in-Command, 186 Battalion, along with other Gazetted Officers of the battalion, formally flagged off the final rally by showing the green flag. Thereafter, all the contingents proceeded towards the Headquarters of 186 Battalion, CRPF, marking the successful culmination of the Cycle Expedition.

Later, the closing ceremony of the expedition was held at the 186 Battalion headquarters. The ceremony was graced by venerable Badanta Aggadhamma (Mahathero) of Namsai along with a Bhante and venerable Sariputra Bhante from the Golden Pagoda along with another Bhante, who blessed the battalion for progress, health and prosperity.

The Cycle Expedition was well received by the local public and civil authorities and played a significant role in strengthening public outreach and goodwill. The successful conduct of the expedition added pride and dignity to the 20th Raising Day celebrations of 186 Battalion, CRPF.

DA initiative to empower recovering youth Project Arohit launched in Pasighat



HT Correspondent
PASIGHAT, Jan 31: In a significant step towards addressing substance abuse through rehabilitation and livelihood support, 38th Pasighat MLA Tapi Darang today launched Project Arohit at the DC's Conference Hall here. Project Arohit is a collaborative initiative of the East Siang District Administration, Department of Skill Development and the Department of Industries, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, conceptualised by Deputy Commissioner Sonalika Jiwani. The initiative focuses on providing industry-linked training, skill enhancement and support for entrepreneurial aspirations of recovering youth.

MLA Tapi Darang hailed the initiative of the East Siang District Administration for fostering self-reliance and the spirit of entrepreneurship. Terming drug abuse as a serious social challenge, he stressed that addressing it requires collective responsibility, beginning from family

and society to all stakeholders. He highlighted the importance of encouraging, guiding and motivating recovered individuals and called for grassroots awareness through Gaon Buras and Panchayat leaders. Referring to Roing village of East Siang district, recognised as a Republic Day "Drug-Free Village" awardee, he urged other villages to take inspiration from its example.

Deputy Commissioner East Siang, Sonalika Jiwani, stated that the objective of Project Arohit is "rebuilding lives with dignity and purpose". She added that AROHIT has been conceived as an end-to-end rehabilitation initiative, linking recovery support with skill training and employment opportunities to ensure sustainable reintegration of recovering youth. The District Administration appealed to departments, institutions and community stakeholders to extend cooperation for the effective implementation of Project AROHIT, supporting youth in their inspiring journey from recovery

to skills, employment and empowerment.

The programme under AROHIT seeks to equip recovering youth with practical skills by converging and tying up with RSETI Pasighat, ITIs, NIELIT Pasighat, Veteran Suvidha Kendra Pasighat, Government Polytechnic College, DTO and Farmers' Training Centres to create employment opportunities and encourage entrepreneurship. The initiative marks a significant step towards social rehabilitation, enabling recovering youth to realise their true potential and showcase their positive and resilient spirit.

Superintendent of Police, East Siang District, Pankaj Lamba, reaffirmed that the police department remains committed to curbing drug-related activities across the district, while also extending full support to rehabilitation-centred initiatives such as Project AROHIT.

A Training Calendar for 2026 has been prepared under the initiative, offering a range of courses through RSETI Pasighat, NIELIT Pasighat Extension, Government Polytechnic College Pasighat, Farmers' Training Centre (FTC), Veterans Suvidha Kendra (VSK), Pasighat and Honda India Foundation under CSR support. The courses cover construction skills, tailoring, agriculture-based practices, computer applications, mobile repair, AI and robotics, cyber security and digital hygiene, among others.

The meeting was attended by ADI Anima Gammeng; Officer-in-Charge, Veteran Suvidha Kendra (Pasighat) Major Fazeel Khan, Dy SP Ayup Boko, I/C SDPO Atan Taki, Director RSETI Pasighat, DMO Dr Yagling Perme, Superintendent T&E Kanggong Dai, DDICDS M T Padung, Nodal Officer, Drug De-addiction and Rehabilitation Centre (DDRC), Pasighat, DRP Education Elizabeth Majumder, representatives of NGOs and in-charges of rehabilitation centres, among others.

Later, a review meeting on the progress of the 16th NCORD meeting was chaired by DC Sonalika Jiwani with departments and stakeholders, during which the DC stressed the need for collaborative efforts to achieve a drug-free East Siang.

'Road Safety Awareness Campaign' held in Capital Complex

HT Correspondent
NAHARLAGUN, Jan 31: As part of the National Road Safety Month 2026, Road Safety Awareness Campaign was conducted on 30 January jointly by the District Road Safety Committee (DRSC), Papum Pare and Itanagar Road Safety Committee (IRSC), Capital, near Dree Ground along NH-415. The programme witnessed a huge turnout of vehicle owners and drivers.

Senior Transport Officer and Capital District Transport Officer (DTO) Techi Tukap informed the media that a host of departments, including DTO Capital, DMO Capital/Yupia, Naharlagun Police, Traffic Capital, DDSE Capital/Yupia and Naharlagun Highway Division, actively participated in spreading road safety awareness among road users. The awareness drive focused on provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 and its

Amendments, 2019, including do's and don'ts, enforcement of traffic laws, road safety pledges in schools, road safety education and health check-ups of commercial vehicle drivers.

During the day-long campaign, the main objective was to create mass awareness among vehicle owners, drivers and road users about their rights, privileges and traffic rules that need to be followed as safety measures

to avoid accidents and penalties. The campaign aimed to ensure that repeated violations and negligence are curtailed through awareness and responsible driving behaviour.

DTO Techi Tukap said that road users were interacted with during the campaign and pamphlets and leaflets were distributed to educate them on traffic rules and road safety measures.

He further informed that traffic violators were booked during the cam-

aign and penalties were collected for various offences, including seat belt violations (3 cases at ₹ 3,000), general offence (1 case at ₹ 500), defective number plates (40 cases), dark film removal (10 vehicles), riding without helmet (50 cases), underage driving (5 cases) and overloading (2 vehicles). In addition, medical health check-ups, including eye screening and blood pressure checks were conducted for 120 drivers.

Decisions aim to boost transparency, growth and ease of doing business

Cabinet okays hydropower incentives, recruitment and governance reforms

ITANAGAR, Jan 31: The Arunachal Pradesh cabinet has approved a series of decisions covering hydropower development, recruitment reforms, ease of doing business, health, education and digital governance, aimed at strengthening institutions, improving transparency and accelerating inclusive growth across the state.

The cabinet meeting, chaired by Chief Minister Pema Khandu, was held at Anini in Dibang Valley district on Friday.

To ensure continuity in recruitment administration, the cabinet approved replacing the Arunachal Pradesh Staff Selection (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 with a Bill, enabling the appointment of a retired officer as chairperson of the Arunachal Pradesh Staff Selection Board (APSSB) along with serving officers.

The move seeks to address disruptions caused by frequent transfers, a statement from the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) said.

To restore public confidence in recruitments, the cabinet cleared remedial measures recommended by the one-man inquiry commission to strengthen and streamline processes of the Arunachal

Pradesh Public Service Commission (APPSC), assuring fair, transparent and efficient selection.

Boosting hydropower viability, the cabinet approved SGST reimbursement concessions for the 1,200 MW Kalai II hydroelectric project in Anjaw district and the 680 MW Attunli project in Dibang Valley.

With a combined investment of about ₹ 21,700 crore, the projects are expected to yield around ₹ 458 crore annually in free power and ₹ 84 crore through the local area development fund, besides generating substantial employment.

The projects will reserve jobs for local tribal communities, including 25 per cent of Group A and B posts, 50 per cent of Group C and D posts and 25 per cent of skilled and unskilled jobs.

The cabinet also approved lifetime annuity payments to project affected families in addition to compensation and relief and rehabilitation packages, positioning affected communities as long-term partners in hydropower projects.

To strengthen technical leadership, a one-time relaxation of superintending engineer (civil) recruitment rules was approved for the Hydro Power Develop-



ment department.

The cabinet further cleared the Renovate-Own-Operate-Transfer (ROOT) policy for small hydro projects, aimed at reviving existing projects through private investment in line with the state's

'Decade of Hydropower' vision (2025-2035).

In education, approval was given for the creation of 150 special education teaching posts, including 75 trained graduate teachers and 75 primary teach-

ers, to expand inclusive education.

Obsolete state rules relating to the State Information Commission were repealed to align with amended national RTI provisions, the statement said.

For improved regulation and convenience, the cabinet approved implementation of the Electronic Inner Line Permit (e-ILP) system. It also cleared renaming of the regional apple nursery at Dirang in West Kameng district as the regional temperate horticulture nursery, reflecting its expanded mandate.

To bolster institutional capacity, recruitment rules were approved or amended for posts in the departments of Indigenous Affairs, Water Resources (Junior Engineers), Agriculture (Statistical Officers) and Disaster Management, aligning pay structures and streamlining promotions.

A major reform for ease of doing business came with approval of the Arunachal Pradesh Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026, decriminalising minor offences under select state laws and replacing imprisonment with rationalised monetary penalties.

Strengthening grassroots governance, the cabinet approved creation of 99 jun-

ior engineer and 99 upper division clerk posts in zilla parishads, along with additional clerical posts at zilla parishad and directorate levels, to enhance planning, execution and monitoring of development works.

In the health sector, one-time relaxation of experience criteria was approved for recruitment of specialist doctors through APPSC, broadening eligibility and improving service delivery. Six new physiotherapist posts were also sanctioned.

To promote academic excellence among youth, flagship talent programmes, Battle of Minds, Spelling Wizard and Maths and Science Olympiads, were institutionalised as annual events under the youth affairs department.

The cabinet reviewed the Chief Minister's Social Security Schemes and directed departments to develop robust mechanisms to maximise benefits for BPL and disadvantaged groups.

Presentations were also made on outcomes of the 5th national conference of chief secretaries, governance reforms at the divisional and district levels, and the Arunachal Vidya Nidhi school asset management system. (PTI)

'Corrupt TMC regime sheltering infiltrators' BJP govt in Bengal vital for national security: Shah

KOLKATA, Jan 31: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday mounted an all-out attack on the TMC government, accusing it of shielding infiltrators, institutionalising corruption and deliberately undermining border security for electoral gains.

Shah said the formation of a BJP government in the state was no longer just a political objective, but a "national security necessity".

Addressing a massive BJP workers' meeting at Barrackpore in North 24 Parganas, the home minister asserted that the 2026 assembly elections would mark the TMC's ouster from power.

"The way infiltration is taking place in West Bengal, it has become a security issue for the entire country. Even after court orders, the TMC government is not giving land to the BSF for border fencing because infiltrators are its vote bank," Shah alleged.

He claimed that the administration and police in the state were not stopping illegal migrants, who were being sent across the country using fake documents.

Shah said the Calcutta High Court had acknowledged that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was not cooperating in providing land required for border fencing.

"But, I want to assure you whether Mamata Banerjee provides land by March 31 as directed by the high court or not, in April, a



BJP chief minister will complete the border fencing work within 45 days," he said, asserting that the party had a record of delivering on its promises.

The Calcutta High Court had recently directed the West Bengal government to hand over already acquired land in nine border districts to the BSF by March 31 for putting up barbed wire fencing along the India-Bangladesh border.

The court had noted that West Bengal accounts for more than half of India's total border with Bangladesh, and despite multiple cabinet decisions since 2016, large stretches of the international boundary remain unfenced.

Drawing a comparison with Assam, he said infiltration had stopped there after the BJP came to power, "unlike during the Congress regime".

On the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, Shah said, "Mamata Banerjee, you can oppose the SIR as much as you want, but it will take place to weed out infiltrators from the voters' list."

He said any illegal names remaining would be removed once a BJP government was formed.

Shah also accused the TMC of intimidating the Matua and Namasudra communities over citizenship. "There is no need to be afraid. Mamata ji cannot touch

your vote," he said, assuring them of protection and dignity under a BJP government.

Referring to the recent fire incident at a momo factory in Anandapur near Kolkata, Shah alleged it was "not an accident but the result of the corruption of the Mamata Banerjee government".

He questioned why the factory owners had not yet been arrested and wondered whether their "proximity" to the ruling party was the reason.

"Has the administration completely ceased to exist in Bengal?" Shah asked, adding that the TMC would have reacted differently had the victims belonged to a "particular community".

Alleging that corruption had been institutionalised in the state, he challenged Banerjee to prove her seriousness about the menace by denying tickets to "tainted ministers" in the assembly polls.

Shah also accused the TMC of opposing a discussion on Vande Mataram in Parliament to appease infiltrators, and called upon voters to "uproot" the Trinamool Congress regime and establish a "government of patriots and nationalists" in Bengal.

Predicting a decisive mandate, Shah said the BJP would cross 50 per cent vote share in 2026, recalling that the party had secured 38 per cent votes and 77 seats in the 2021 assembly elections. (PTI)

Bihar govt recommends CBI probe into death of NEET aspirant in Patna

PATNA, Jan 31: The Bihar government has recommended a CBI probe into the recent death of a female NEET aspirant in Patna, Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary said on Saturday.

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) of Bihar Police is investigating the case.

The NEET aspirant, hailing from Jehanabad, was found unconscious in Shambhu Girls' hostel in Patna's Chitragupt Nagar earlier this month.

She died at a private hospital on January 11 after remaining in a coma for several days.

Her family had alleged that she was sexually assaulted, accusing authorities of attempting a cover-up.

"Chief Minister Nitish Kumar Jee has urged the Government of India to hand over the investigation of the NEET student's murder case in Patna (Case No-14/26) to the CBI. The incident must be thoroughly uncovered in a transparent and just manner," Choudhary said in a post on X.

The deputy CM also holds the home portfolio. The state home department also issued a notification recommending a CBI probe into the case under the provisions of the Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act, which governs the functioning of the country's premier investigation agency.

The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) of the central government will issue a notification, which is a mandatory requirement for initiating a CBI probe in a state-related case, in this regard.

According to rules, prior approval of the state and the DoPT is required to investigate a crime outside the agency's jurisdiction, as law and order is a state subject.

The parents of the NEET aspirant on Saturday alleged that police were trying to hush up the matter by denying any sexual assault of the woman and claiming that it was a case of suicide.

Her post-mortem examination report did not exclude the possibility of sexual violence, and this finding contrasts with police's initial claim that medical



reports and CCTV footage had ruled out sexual assault. One person, an employee of her hostel, was arrested in connection with the case.

"The CBI may now register a separate case on the basis of the FIR registered by Patna Police. The agency sleuths will collect all evidence obtained by police and will also record the statements of suspects, the arrested person, hospital staff, family members and policemen, who had initially investigated the case and concluded it a case of suicide," according to an official.

Meanwhile, Leader of Opposition Tejashwi Yadav alleged that the decision to transfer the case to CBI reflects the failure of the "loud-mouthed NDA government" that "boasts day and night" about catching criminals from the depths of the earth and the skies.

"Instead of exposing the rape and murder of a NEET student, the Bihar government has once again proved that its administrative machinery is corrupt, incompetent, inefficient, and unprofessional, incapable of even solving a case of rape and murder," Yadav posted on X.

He highlighted that in many cases like the Navruna incident, the CBI "closed the investigations" after "failing to apprehend the accused for 12-13 years", adding that "the same is likely to happen in this case as well." (PTI)

Political polarisation hurting transparency; India 'mystery' for world: Abhijit Banerjee

KOLKATA, Jan 31: Nobel laureate economist Abhijit Banerjee has warned that political polarisation in India is eroding transparency and making the country a "mystery" for the world, even as the growth numbers remain robust.

In an interview with PTI, Banerjee said from an economic standpoint, the most critical issues confronting the country today were media freedom and transparency, arguing that investors ultimately cared about data credibility rather than political rhetoric.

"I think India is going through a politically polarised phase in the sense that there are many conflicts that have existed for a long time, and we have to decide, as a nation, to what extent we want to be seen as open and reliable. I think the real issues have to do with media freedom," he said.

"The most important issues are media freedom and transparency. Do we really know what the numbers are? That's what investors care about," Banerjee said.

While India has continued to attract foreign investment, he described the inflows as unstable and highly sensitive to uncertainty.

"We have done reasonably well on foreign investment, but it's



flighty. The rupee is depreciating because money isn't coming in fast enough," he said, linking currency weakness to the absence of sustained capital inflows.

Banerjee cautioned that policy unpredictability, combined with internal polarisation, was undermining the country's credibility as a long-term investment destination.

"People need to know what the policy rules are. Will there be shifts in attitude towards specific companies?" he said.

"Unless we have a very predictable and transparent policy regime and a transparent media, India will remain a mystery to the world," he added.

He said if India wanted to deepen its capital markets and attract long-term global capital,

transparency had to be institutional rather than episodic.

"I think our internal polarisation is undermining our commitment to transparency. And that, I think, is the key point. If we want to be the kind of place where people always want to invest, we need transparency at all levels," the 64-year-old economist said.

"From the world's point of view, India is right now a bit too much of a mystery, and we need to be more transparent," he added.

On whether identity politics had overtaken growth priorities, Banerjee said such politics existed globally, including in the United States, but questioned whether the country's leadership had sufficiently thought through the practical roadmap to development.

"The government is serious about development, but it hasn't thought enough about what it would actually take," he said.

"What is the roadmap, how to get everybody a really high-quality education, how to get out of this trap of very few good jobs, and what happens if AI takes away more of those jobs?" he said.

He warned that headline GDP growth could not indefinitely mask deeper social distress. (PTI)

J-K: Search operation narrowed down following encounter with terrorists in Kishtwar

JAMMU, Jan 31: A search operation, which has been underway to neutralise three holed-up Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir's Kishtwar, has been narrowed down to a specific area following an encounter on Saturday morning, officials said.

The gunfight began when army troops re-established contact with the terrorists in Kishtwar district early Saturday, according to officials.

Kishtwar has seen six encounters in the past seven months as forces continue their crackdown on Pakistan-based terrorists operating in the region, which shares borders with Doda and Udhampur districts.

Northern Army Commander Lt Gen Pratik Sharma visited Kishtwar district to review the counter-terrorism grid and commended the troops for their unwavering resolve in the ongoing efforts.

"During the ongoing joint Operation Trashi-I, contact with terrorists was re-established in the early hours of January 31 in the general area of Dolgam by troops of the White Knight Corps, Jammu and Kashmir Police, and CRPF," the White Knight Corps said on X.

The army noted that intelligence inputs from various sources were coordinated to plan and execute the operation on the ground. "A cordon

has been established, and operations are in progress," it said.

According to reports, the joint operation team sighted three JeM terrorists in the snowbound high-altitude area of Dolgam, resulting in an exchange of fire.

One terrorist is believed to have been injured, the reports indicate, adding that drone surveillance reportedly shows bloodstains from the injured terrorists. This marks the fourth time in the past two weeks that contact has been established with terrorists in the area.

The ongoing anti-terror operation in the snowbound Chatroo-Dolgam-Dichhar belt to track down and neutralise a group of three holed-up Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists has been underway for the past few days.

To prevent misuse by anti-national elements during the operation, mobile internet services have been temporarily suspended since Friday within a six-kilometre radius covering Singhpora, Chingam, and Chatroo.

The operation in the area was launched on January 18, leading to a fierce gunbattle in the Sonnar forest near Mandral-Singhpora, resulting in the killing of a paratrooper and injuries to seven soldiers.

Although the terrorists managed to escape, benefiting from thick

vegetation and challenging terrain, security forces continued their pursuit despite more than two feet of snowfall.

Two more encounters between the army and the terrorists occurred at Mali Dana Top on January 22 and Janseer-Kandiwar on January 25, but the terrorists once again slipped deep into the forested area.

The visit of the army commander to the mountainous district comes after a high-level security review of the evolving security dynamics in the Jammu region, with a focus on strengthening the counter-terrorism grid on Thursday, officials said.

"Lt Gen Pratik Sharma, Army Commander Northern Command, visited Kishtwar today to review the counter-terrorism grid and operational preparedness," Northern Command Headquarters said on X.

The army commander, while interacting with ground commanders and troops, commended them for their unwavering resolve in the ongoing efforts.

On Thursday, the Northern Army commander chaired a high-level security meeting in Jammu and reviewed the evolving security dynamics in the Jammu region, with a focus on strengthening the counter-terrorism grid, officials said. (PTI)

Punjab BJP thanks PM ahead of his visit, attacks govt over bomb threats

CHANDIGARH, Jan 31: A day before the prime minister's visit to Punjab, the state BJP's core committee on Saturday passed a resolution, expressing gratitude to Narendra Modi, saying his visit will further strengthen communal harmony in the state.

Modi will visit Dera Ballan on the occasion of the 649th Guru Ravidas Jayanti on Sunday. He will inaugurate the civil terminal of the Halwara airport in Punjab and visit Adampur airport, where he will unveil its new name -- Sri Guru Ravidas Ji Airport.

A meeting of the BJP's core committee was held here under the leadership of state president Sunil Jakhar. Attendees included national secretary Narinder Singh Raina, working state president Ashwani Sharma, national parliamentary board member Iqbal Singh Lalpura and general secretary (organisation) Manthri Srinivasulu.

During the meeting, the party outlined its strategy for the coming days and passed two major resolutions, a party statement said.

The prime minister understands the sentiments of the people of Punjab and is visiting the state to pay tribute to Guru Ravidas on a day when the Union Budget will also be presented in Parliament, Jakhar said.

He added that the party's core committee passed a resolution expressing gratitude to the prime minister. This visit would further strengthen communal harmony in Punjab, according to Jakhar.

Speaking about the second resolution passed, the party chief in the state noted that just ahead of the prime minister's visit, anti-national elements have been issuing bomb threats in Jalandhar, which expose the "failure" of the Punjab government and the police department.

He said the party has passed a condemnation resolution against the Punjab government for failing to maintain law and order.

He said if the security situation is like this even before Modi's visit, "one can easily imagine the atmosphere of fear in which ordinary people of Punjab are living". (PTI)

Bengal: NIA begins probe into Beldanga violence

KOLKATA, Jan 31: The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Saturday began its probe into the violence that erupted in West Bengal's Beldanga in Murshidabad, following the news of death of a migrant worker in Jharkhand earlier this month, an officer said.

An NIA team reached Beldanga police station in the morning and talked to the officials earlier involved in the probe, and sought documents from them.

Following the directions of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the central agency had registered a fresh case.

The focus of the investigation is to determine whether the violence was the result of any organised conspiracy, the spread of fake or misleading information, or deliberate provocation to stoke communal passion, an NIA official said.

Tension flared up in Beldanga and adjoining areas on January 16 after news spread that a migrant worker from the area had died an unnatural death at his shelter in Jharkhand.

The situation remained volatile for nearly two days as the news of another assault of a migrant worker in Bihar hailing from the region came, with incidents of unrest reported across the area. Protesters blocked National Highway-12 and railway tracks at Beldanga, affecting rail and road traffic.

Against this backdrop, the Centre decided to hand over the investigation to the NIA.

A special NIA court has directed the West Bengal Police to hand over all documents, records and details related to the investigation without delay. (PTI)

K'taka HM directs police to investigate circumstances that led to incident

BENGALURU, Jan 31: Karnataka Home Minister G Parameshwara on Saturday said the police have been directed to conduct an inquiry into the circumstances that led to the "suicide" of Confident Group chairperson C J Roy, who allegedly shot himself dead at his office here when I-T officials were present in connection with earlier searches.

Speaking to reporters, Parameshwara said the Income Tax Department had earlier conducted searches at Roy's company and were in the process of completing statutory procedures.

"There was a raid in his company in December (last). There is a rule that within 60 days a charge sheet has to be filed in the court. They had to finalise before February 4. Hence, he was summoned," he said.

Roy had recently returned from abroad and was cooperating with the authorities, he added.

"Three days ago, he had returned from Dubai. The

I-T officials went to his office to record his statement. He too responded to it," Parameshwara said.

"In the meantime, Roy told the officials that he would be back in five minutes, but he did not return even after 20 minutes. Then his suicide came to the notice." Parameshwara said he has ordered a police inquiry into the incident.

"I have directed police officials to conduct an inquiry into the circumstances that led to the incident.

Things will be clear only after the report comes out," he said.

He added that Roy's family has linked the incident to the I-T action.

"Roy's brother has also given a statement that this incident happened due to I-T raids. Our police officers haven't looked into it from that aspect," he said.

When asked whether there was any political angle to the increasing Income Tax raids, the HM declined to speculate. (PTI)

From low-profile wife of politician to centre stage: Sunetra Pawar's journey to deputy CM's post

MUMBAI, Jan 31: Thrust into the spotlight from the shadows of one of the most powerful political families in Maharashtra, Sunetra Pawar on Saturday became the first woman deputy Chief Minister of the state as she faces the Herculean task of leading the Nationalist Congress Party after the tragic death of her husband Ajit Pawar.

The 62-year-old Rajya Sabha MP's elevation to the number 2 position in the BJP-led state cabinet will also mark the beginning of a new chapter for the NCP.

Following NCP president and deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's death in an air crash in Baramati on January 28, Sunetra Pawar was earlier on Saturday elected as the leader of the NCP Legislature Party. She took oath as deputy CM in the evening.

Hailing from Tera village in Dharashiv (formerly known as Osmanabad) in the Marathwada region, Sunetra Pawar comes

from a political family, but wasn't actively involved in politics herself for much of her life. Padamsinh Patil, her brother, is a senior NCP leader.

Her father Bajirao Patil was involved in the Marathwada liberation struggle which preceded the merger of the Hyderabad state into the Indian union.

A commerce graduate, she is said to have interest in painting, music, photography and agriculture. After her marriage, she actively took up farming at Katewadi village.

The NCP, founded by Sharad Pawar in 1999, split after his nephew Ajit Pawar joined the Mahayuti government of the BJP and Shiv Sena in July 2023. He was appointed as deputy CM, and continued to hold the same post in the subsequent Devendra Fadnis-led government that came to power after the Mahayuti alliance won a landslide victory in the November 2024 assembly polls.



Described on her website as a passionate environmentalist and social entrepreneur, Sunetra Pawar made her electoral debut in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, facing off against her sister-in-law and incumbent NCP (SP) MP Supriya Sule, in Baramati, the home turf of the Pawar family.

After losing to Sule, she was elected to the Rajya Sabha.

Her elder son, Parth Pawar, has remained on the sidelines after unsuccessfully contesting the 2019 Lok Sabha elections from Maval. Jay, the younger

son, is an entrepreneur.

While Ajit Pawar entered politics in the early 1980s, Sunetra Pawar largely stayed away from the political limelight until the 2024 general election.

In 2010, she founded the Environment Forum of India (EFOI), a non-governmental organisation dedicated to raising environmental awareness and fostering eco-conscious communities.

Under her leadership, EFOI pioneered the eco-village model in India, an innovative approach that integrates ecological practices into rural development. She has also led campaigns for biodiversity conservation, protection of endangered species, water resource management and drought mitigation, as per her website.

Sunetra Pawar is also a trustee of the Vidya Pratishthan, an educational institution set up by Sharad Pawar. She has represented India in international discussions on sustainability and social innova-

tion as a member of a think-tank of the World Entrepreneurship Forum based in France.

She has led a self-help group movement in 86 villages of Maharashtra under the Nirmal Gram campaign, transforming Katewadi, a hamlet in Baramati, into an eco-village, promoting sanitation, health, community livestock management and solid waste management.

Sunetra Pawar is also the chairperson of the Baramati hi-tech textile park, a multi-modal garment manufacturing facility that employs over 15,000 rural women.

The hitherto silent member of the Pawar family now faces an uphill task of holding the NCP together and negotiating coalition dynamics while working with the BJP and Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena. But her immediate challenge will be to decide whether to go ahead with the much-anticipated merger of the two NCP factions. (PTI)

Rio launches digitisation of old manual birth and death certificates



HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, Jan 31: Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio officially launched the digitisation of old manual birth and death certificates in his official chamber in Kohima on Saturday.

During the launch, Rio stressed

that the initiative will streamline service delivery, ensure efficient and accurate data, improve citizen access to essential documents, and assist the government in making informed public policy decisions. Commending the efforts of the economics & statistic department

in making the digitization possible, he urged the citizens for timely registration of births and deaths.

Following the directive of the Office of the Registrar General of India (ORGI), the department introduced online registration of births and deaths in the state in

April, 2022. This initiative marks a significant step toward modernising vital records management and ensuring greater efficiency and accessibility for citizens.

The department has announced that the issuance of manual certificates will soon be discontinued, with the system transitioning to 100 percent online registration and digitisation of old manual birth and death certificates.

This move is aimed at streamlining processes, reducing paperwork and providing citizens with faster and more reliable services.

The department said the digitisation of old manual certificates has become essential to ensure that all records are seamlessly integrated into the new online system, thereby safeguarding their authenticity and accessibility for future use. Only genuine certificates issued by the registrar of births and deaths and information available in the record can be digitalised.

The department requested the public to come forward and access the facility provided through the ORGI portal dc.crsorgi.gov.in to help build a comprehensive and secure database of vital records for the state.

Arunachal CM announces major infra, education projects for Dibang Valley



ITANAGAR, Jan 31: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Saturday announced a slew of major development initiatives for Dibang Valley district following the Cabinet Aapke Dwar meeting held at Anini, the district headquarters town.

Addressing the outcomes of the outreach cabinet meeting, the chief minister said the initiatives span infrastructure, road connectivity, education, power supply, research, and livelihood generation, and are aimed at addressing region-specific needs of one of the state's most remote border districts, an official statement said.

Explaining the Cabinet Aapke Dwar initiative, Khandu said it is designed to bring the government to the people's doorstep by holding cabinet meetings outside the state capital, enabling direct engagement with local communities and district administrations, understanding local challenges, and ensuring prompt decision-making and on-the-spot interventions, particularly in remote and border areas.

Among the key announcements made for the border district was the construction of a community hall at Rekho, to serve as a multi-purpose facility for official functions, public meetings, cultural programmes, and social events at the district headquarters.

To strengthen road connectivity, approval was announced for the construction of a 15-kilometre road from NH-313 at Amuli village to the Anini-Dambun BRO road up to Aliney, at an estimated cost of Rs 15 crore.

The project is expected to reduce travel time, improve civilian movement in the Dri Valley, and enhance strategic connectivity up to the last motorable point at Bruni.

For improving all-weather con-

nectivity, resurfacing of the NH-313 to Anelih circle road was announced.

The 15-kilometre stretch, considered the lifeline of Anelih circle, is currently in poor condition. Similar resurfacing work was also approved for the road connecting Gipulin village to Acheso village.

To strengthen technical administration, Khandu announced the construction of an office building-cum-residential accommodation for the PWD executive engineer at Anini, aimed at improving on-ground supervision and expediting execution of developmental works.

In the education sector, Khandu announced the creation of a science stream at the government higher secondary school, Anini, enabling students of Dibang Valley to pursue science education locally.

Construction of additional classrooms at Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya, Anini, was also announced to meet rising demand.

Highlighting livelihood and research opportunities, the chief

minister announced the establishment of a high-altitude medicinal plant research centre in Dibang Valley to promote conservation, scientific research, and sustainable use of medicinal plants endemic to the Mishmi Hills.

A feasibility study will be submitted within three months.

A high altitude trout hatchery at Anini was also announced to support cold-water fisheries and generate high-value livelihood opportunities, with a feasibility study to be completed within the same timeframe.

To address power constraints, installation of solar street lights in Anini township was announced as a sustainable solution amid limited power availability and frequent load shedding.

The chief minister further announced that a detailed feasibility study for the development of an Advanced Landing Ground at Anini will be carried out by an expert team, considering the district's strategic location and connectivity needs, the statement added. (PTI)

Thousands rally to assert stand on territorial, administrative integrity of Manipur



IMPHAL, Jan 31: Thousands of people on Saturday held a rally in the Manipur capital Imphal to assert their stand that the territorial and administrative integrity of the state cannot be divided at any cost.

The "Save Manipur" rally was organised by the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), an umbrella body of several Meitei civil society organisations.

Following the ethnic conflict in the northeastern state, the Kuki community has been demanding a separate administrative mechanism for its members. At least 260 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in the ethnic violence between Imphal Valley-based Meiteis and hills-based Kuki-Zo groups in Manipur since May 2023. The state has been under President's Rule since February last year.

During Saturday's rally, the agitators marched from Tiddim ground to Thau ground, covering a distance of 5 km.

They raised slogans and held placards that read "no compromise to Manipur's territorial and administrative integrity," "no attempts should be made to divide Manipur," and "resettle the IDPs to their home".

Demonstrators also included people from non-Manipuris, Muslims and Naga communities, along with Meiteis.

"We are participating in this rally to reiterate our stand that Manipur's territorial and administrative integrity must not be broken at any cost. We cannot compromise on this," said Bidaluxmi Oinam.

Another demonstrator, Khagembam Surjit, said, "The land of Manipur was built by our forefathers, and not by illegal immigrants from Myanmar."

Kukis share ethnic ties with the Chin community people of Myanmar. Security has been tightened across the capital in view of the rally. (PTI)

Labourer killed in mudslide during road widening work in Gangtok

GANGTOK, Jan 31: A 50-year-old labourer was killed in a mudslide during road widening in Gangtok district on Saturday, police said.

According to police, road widening work was going on near Makha outpost when a sudden mudslide buried the labourer.

Rescue operations were immediately carried out using a JCB machine, but the victim, identified as Harka Bahadur Sanyasi of Sudunglakh, Rhenock area, was found dead under the debris. Police alleged gross negligence by the private company officials for failing to ensure safety measures during the work.

The post-mortem examination was conducted at District Hospital Singtam, and the case is under investigation, police added. (PTI)

NSF cautions against 'unguarded statements' on Naga issue

HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, Jan 31: The Naga Students' Federation (NSF) on Friday cautioned that "unguarded statements, mutual accusations and public finger-pointing" on the Naga political issue can only further complicate and escalate the situation at this critical juncture.

It expressed serious concern over frequent statements and remarks made by various individuals and groups through the media on the issue.

In a statement issued by its media cell, the NSF, however, acknowledged the enthusiasm and genuine concerns of individuals and groups yearning for an early and honourable solution.

On Thursday, some senior leaders of Nagaland at a meeting at former Nagaland chief minister SC Jamir's farm house in Chumoukedima deliberated on the issue and called for its early solution in the wake of the Framework Agreement with NSCN (I-M) on August 3, 2015 and the Agreed Position with the working committee of the Naga National Political Groups on November 17, 2017.

"At this crucial moment in our history, the need of the hour is unity - unity of purpose, unity of vision and unity of the Naga people. If we continue to point fingers at one another in-

stead of standing together, we risk deepening divisions and undermining the collective struggle that generations of the Nagas have carried forward with immense sacrifice," the federation said.

According to the NSF, the Naga political issue is not confined to the Nagaland state alone, but it is a historical and political question that encompasses all the Nagas living beyond the "artificial and imposed territorial boundaries".

Calling for sincerity and political will on the part of the Government of India to resolve the issue, it appealed to all Naga political groups to come together in unity, maturity and mutual respect to hammer out a lasting and honourable settlement.

The federation also reiterated that even if any agreement were to come about with any group(s), without addressing the core issues of territorial integration and the political identity of the Naga homeland, it will continue to carry forth the movement until the collective aspiration of the Nagas to live under one political umbrella is realised.



282 recruits inducted into Assam Rifles



HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, Jan 31: A total of 282 recruits, including 36 female recruits, were formally inducted into the Assam Rifles at an attestation parade at the Assam Rifles Training Centre and School (ARTC&S) at Sukhovi in Chumoukedima district on Saturday.

The recruits marched with impeccable rhythm and synchronisation during the special attestation parade held to mark the successful completion of their 44 weeks of rigorous training. The training encompassed battle craft, weapon handling, jungle lane shooting, and specialisation in counter-insurgency operations. The parade was led by Capt Anjali Kirola.

Addressing the recruits, Maj Gen JS Bainsla, ADG, Assam Rifles, highlighted the rich legacy of Assam Rifles, the country's oldest paramilitary force, and its multifaceted role in safeguarding the nation. He underscored the growing contribution of rifle women, who have been inducted into frontline duties since 2015 and have demonstrated exemplary performance not only in the Northeast but also in Jammu & Kashmir, United Nations missions, and prestigious Republic Day parades in 2019 and 2023. Bainsla noted that the presence of women soldiers in frontline roles strengthens security and furthers the vision of a women-empowered India.

He congratulated the recruits and their proud parents on the successful completion of training and wished them success and happiness in all their future endeavours.

During the ceremony, recruits were also recognised for their outstanding performance. Overall Best Recruit (Best in Physical & Firing) was bagged by GD Appu Chakma, overall Second Best Recruit by GD (Mahila) T Maloti Devi and the Best in Drill by GD Bikash Mandal.

Economic Survey recognises Meghalaya's community-driven water strategy: Conrad

SHILLONG, Jan 31: Amid rising concerns over drying springs and declining water discharge, Meghalaya's community-driven climate adaptation and water security initiatives have found mention in the Economic Survey 2025-26, Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma has said.

The chief minister said the survey, tabled in Parliament by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, highlighted Meghalaya's ecosystem-based and community-centric approach to addressing water security challenges.

"With initiatives like MegARISE, spring mapping, and community-based water harvesting, the state is protecting critical catchments, restoring forests, and empowering local communities to adapt to climate change, strengthening water security for generations to come," Sangma posted on X on Friday.

He added, "When communities lead the way, great things are possible!" Meghalaya is witnessing increasing stress on its water resources, with nearly half of the state's springs either having dried up or showing a significant reduction in water discharge." To address the issue, the state has



adopted a community-centric adaptation strategy that includes initiatives such as the Protection of Vulnerable Catchment Areas in Meghalaya (MegARISE), the Spring Mapping Initiative and the Climate-Adaptive Community-Based Water Harvesting Project.

Under the MegARISE project, critical catchment areas are being protected through sustainable forest management, watershed treatment, forest restoration and participatory community involve-

ment. The project envisages plantation activities over 8,430 hectares and the treatment and protection of two major catchments -- Umiew and Ganol.

The Spring Mapping Initiative has used Geographic Information System technology to map over 55,000 springs across the state to facilitate timely corrective measures for conservation and revival of water sources.

More than 500 community-

based water harvesting projects are also being implemented to adapt effectively to climate change, strengthening water security for future generations," the chief minister said, adding that community participation has been central to the success of these efforts. (PTI)

BJP targets all 28 seats in upcoming district council elections, no decision on alliance: CM

HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, Jan 31: With the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) elections approaching, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has set its sights on securing all 28 seats, emphasizing development as its key agenda for the region.

Tripura Chief Minister Dr Manik Saha highlighted that the party aims to bring large-scale progress to the tribal areas, arguing that only a national party can deliver the infrastructure, welfare programs, and opportunities needed for the Janajati communi-

ties. He said, "The tribal areas have not witnessed significant development in the past. Our focus is to change that and ensure the people experience real growth under a BJP-led council."

Dr Saha clarified that no decisions have been made yet regarding alliances for the TTAADC elections. While the BJP currently collaborates with the Tipra Motha Party in the state Assembly, the situation is different in the tribal council polls. "Our primary objective remains winning all 28 seats. Discussions on alliances are yet to take place," he said.

The Chief Minister also stressed that the party's outreach will focus on grassroots-level engagement, identifying key areas for concentrated effort, and ensuring close monitoring at the booth level. According to him, the BJP's development-focused approach is resonating with the state's 19 recognized tribal groups and other sub-tribes, who see the party as committed to their welfare.

Saha criticized the opposition for allegedly misrepresenting facts, asserting that BJP's transparent development-centric politics will ultimately convince the electorate.

RPP flags sonic boom impact in Nagaland

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Jan 31: The Rising People's Party (RPP) on Friday urged the Army and Air Force authorities to consider the life-threatening impact of sonic boom caused by jet fighters or a possible controlled explosion of bombs and ammunition.

In a statement, the RPP made the appeal after a reported sonic boom ripped through Dimapur town on January 28, rattling in particular a private hospital housing many critical patients and causing one of the patients to undergo a massive cardiac arrest.

The party urged the defence authorities to clarify the January 28 incident and ensure that such incidents are not repeated. The RPP also requested the state government to intervene in the matter.

It said the government may intercede with higher authorities to ensure that low-flying over the Dimapur vicinity is strictly prohibited, or even banned, due to health risks to individuals, especially patients, and concerns about the structural integrity of buildings.

The RPP further urged the Nagaland Pollution Control Board to take cognizance of the matter, saying the maximum permissible noise level in Indian cities, as defined by the Central Pollution Control Board, is 75 decibels (dB) in industrial areas, whereas sonic booms range between 110-120 dB.

According to the party, sonic boom became a regular occurrence in the Dimapur area after the then interlocutor for Naga talks, RN Ravi, declared that the talks had concluded.

Catherine O'Hara, Emmy-winning comedian of 'Schitt's Creek', 'SCTV' fame, dies at 71

Catherine O'Hara, a gifted Canadian-born comic actor and "SCTV" alum who starred as Macaulay Culkin's harried mother in two "Home Alone" movies and won an Emmy as the dramatically ditzy wealthy matriarch Moira Rose in "Schitt's Creek," died Friday. She was 71.

O'Hara died at her home in Los Angeles "following a brief illness," according to a statement from her agency, Creative Artists Agency. Further details were not immediately available.

O'Hara's career was launched at the Second City in Toronto in the 1970s. It was there that she first worked with Eugene Levy, who would become a lifelong collaborator — and her "Schitt's Creek" costar. The two would be among the original cast of the sketch show "SCTV," short for "Second City Television."

The series, which began on Canadian TV in the 1970s and aired on NBC in the US in the early '80s, spawned a legendary group of esoteric comedians including Martin Short, John Candy, Andrea Martin, Rick Moranis and Joe Flaherty.

Hollywood didn't entirely know what to do with O'Hara and her scattershot style. She played oddball supporting characters in Martin Scorsese's 1985 "After Hours" and Tim Burton's 1988 "Beetlejuice" — a role she would reprise in the 2024 sequel.

She played it mostly straight as a horrified mother who accidentally abandoned her child in the two "Home Alone" movies. The films were among the biggest box office earners of the early 1990s and their Christmas setting made them TV perennials. Her co-star Culkin was among those paying her tribute Friday.

"Mama, I thought we had time," Culkin said on Instagram alongside an image from "Home Alone" and a recent recreation of the same pose. "I wanted more. I wanted to sit in a chair next to you. I heard you. But I had so much more to say. I love you."

Meryl Streep, who worked with O'Hara in "Heartburn," said in a statement that she "brought love and light to our world, through whipsmart compassion for the collection of eccentrics she portrayed."

O'Hara would find her groove with the crew of improv pros brought together by Christopher Guest for a series of mockumentaries that began with 1996's "Waiting for Guffman" and continued with 2000's "Best in Show," 2003's "A Mighty Wind" and 2006's "For Your Consideration."

"Best in Show" was the biggest hit and best remembered film of the series. It sees her paired as Levy's wife as the couple, Gerry and Cookie Fleck, takes their Norwich terrier to a dog show, and constantly run into Cookie's former lovers along the way.

"I am devastated," Guest said in a statement to The Associated Press. "We have lost one of the comic giants of our age."

Born and raised in Toronto, O'Hara was the sixth of seven children in a Catholic family of Irish descent. She graduated from Burnhamthorpe Collegiate Institute, an alternative high school. She joined Second City in her early 20s, as an understudy to Gilda Radner before Radner left for "Saturday Night Live."

(O'Hara would briefly be hired for "SNL" but quit before appearing on air.)

Nearly 50 years later, "Schitt's Creek" would be a career-capping triumph and the perfect personification of her comic talents. The small show created by Levy and his son, Dan, about a wealthy family forced to live in a tiny town would dominate the Emmys in its sixth and final season. It brought O'Hara, always a beloved figure, a new generation of fans and put her at the center of cultural attention.

She told The Associated Press that she pictured Moira, a former soap opera star, as someone who had married rich and wanted to "remind everyone that (she was) special, too." With an exaggerated Mid-Atlantic accent and obscure vocabulary, Moira spoke unlike anyone else, using words like "frippet," "pettifogging" and "unasinous," to show her desire to be different, O'Hara said. To perfect Moira's voice, O'Hara would pore through old vocabulary books, "Moira-izing" the dialogue even further than what was already written.

The show also brought a career renaissance that led to a dramatic turn as therapist to Pedro Pascal and other dystopia survivors on HBO's "The Last of Us" and a straitlaced comic role as Seth Rogen's reluctant mentor and freelance fixer on "The Studio," both of which earned her Emmy nominations. "Oh, genius to be near you," Pascal said on Instagram. "Eternally grateful. There is less light in my world."

O'Hara is survived by her husband, Bo Welch, sons Matthew and Luke, and siblings Michael O'Hara, Mary Margaret O'Hara, Maureen Jolley, Marcus O'Hara, Tom O'Hara and Patricia Wallace. (AP)



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"I am devastated," Guest said in a statement to The Associated Press. "We have lost one of the comic giants of our age."

Chhattisgarh: Sirpur Heritage Festival to be held from Feb 1-3 to celebrate Buddhist legacy, culture



The annual Sirpur Heritage Festival will be held in Chhattisgarh from February 1 to 3 to celebrate the region's rich Buddhist legacy, culture and global connections, an official said on Friday.

The event will be organised at Sirpur, one of India's most significant ancient centres of Buddhist learning, in Mahasamund district, said Dhammsil Ganvir, Chief Executive Officer of Sirpur Special Area Development Authority (SADA).

Sirpur, which occupies a distinguished place in Buddhist history, was once a flourishing monastic and intellectual hub, believed to have housed more than 10,000 Buddhist monks at its peak, he said.

The renowned Chinese scholar and pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsuan-Tsang), who visited Sirpur around 630-645 CE, documented its vibrant monasteries, learned scholars and dynamic intellectual life, he said.

With this legacy at its core, the Sirpur Heritage Festival 2026 aims to place Sirpur firmly on the national and international cultural map, strengthen its position in the global Buddhist circuit, and promote awareness of its outstanding universal value, Ganvir said.

The festival is also aligned with ongoing efforts to prepare Sirpur for nomination as a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage Site, highlighting its archaeological importance and living cultural traditions, he said.

The festival will be organised on a grand scale with international participation. Delegates from Bhutan and South Korea, along with representatives from

Japan, are expected to attend, he said.

A high-level panel discussion on "UNESCO Aspirations for Sirpur" will also be held during the festival, focusing on conservation, global recognition and sustainable cultural tourism, he said.

The three-day event will feature a mix of classical, folk, spiritual and contemporary performances, the official said.

The opening evening on February 1 will include Chhattisgarhi folk dances, Kathak, the Thagat drama, Dhruvad recital, performances by students of Indira Kala Sangeet Vishwavidyalaya, Khairagarh, and a special presentation by noted singer Baba Hansraj Raghuvanshi, he said.

On February 2, cultural programmes will include Sufi spiritual music by Ustad Vusaf Iqbal Khan of the Delhi Gharana, a Kabir musical evening, the Therigatha drama highlighting the voices of early Buddhist nuns, and a performance by Indian Idol fame singer Hemant Brijwasi.

The festival will conclude on February 3 with performances by artists from across Chhattisgarh, including Panthi, Danda and Bastariya dances, followed by a grand finale by popular Bollywood music duo Meet Brothers, he said.

Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai has extended his best wishes for the successful organisation of the programme. He said the festival is being organised annually to preserve and promote Chhattisgarh's ancient cultural, historical and archaeological heritage.

Such events not only strengthen the state's cultural identity but also help promote tourism and create new livelihood opportunities for local residents, he added. (PTI)

Prime Video shares character details from 'The Boys' spin-off series 'Gen V'

Streamer Prime Video has offered details of the characters from "Gen V", the upcoming spin-off series to smash hit show "The Boys". The Amazon original series is set to launch on Prime Video on September 29.

"Gen V" follows the training of the first generation of superheroes to know about Compound V, a mysterious substance that accords powers to humans. The new generation will get to know that their powers were injected into them, rather than God-given, as per the official description.

"These young, competitive heroes put their physical and moral boundaries to the test, competing for the school's highly coveted top ranking. They quickly come to learn that ambition comes with sacrifice, and the difference between right and wrong is not as clear as they once believed.

"When the university's dark secrets come to light, the students must come to grips with what type of heroes they are going to become," it added.

Showrun by Michele Fazekas and Tara Butters, "Gen V" features an ensemble cast of Jaz Sin-



clair, Chance Perdomo, Lizzie Broadway, Shelley Conn, Maddie Phillips, London Thor, Derek Luh, Asa Germann, Patrick Schwarzenegger, Sean Patrick Thomas, and Marco Pigossi. Sinclair essays the role of Marie Moreau, an 18-year-old superhero with the ability to control and weaponise her own blood. As an incoming freshman at Vought-run Godolkin University, she is eager to prove she has what it takes to join The Seven, but is sidetracked by a mystery she

begins to unravel at the school.

Perdomo is playing Andre Anderson, a junior at Godolkin University with magnetic powers, whereas Broadway portrays Emma Meyer, who is also known by her superhero name, Little Cricket, for her ability to get super small.

Conn will be seen in the role of Indira Shetty, the dean of Godolkin University. She doesn't have powers, but her background in superhero psychology and her peerless ability to analyze what makes them tick make her indispensable to the school. Phillips plays Cate Dunlap, a junior at Godolkin University who is good friends with Jordan and Andre.

Actors Thor and Luh are portraying Jordan Li, a competitive student who has a unique ability of changing between male and female forms, through which different powers manifest — the man is dense and indestructible, while the woman is agile and can launch energy blasts.

Germann plays Sam, a troubled supe who is desperately trying to escape his unfortunate circumstances. (PTI)

Burnout or well planned: Experts weigh in on Arijit Singh's decision to quit playback singing at his peak

The music fraternity reacted with shock and empathy to the announcement by Arijit Singh that he was retiring from playback singing, a decision that has led to a wider conversation about emotional exhaustion, creative control and the price of staying at the top.

Singh is perhaps one of the biggest names from the world of entertainment to call it quits right at his peak, but he is not the only one. Popular stand up comedian Zakir Khan recently announced a multi-year break to focus on his health and singer Neha Kakkar wrote a cryptic post about stepping away from everything.

For many in the industry, these departures can't just be seen as a loss of ambition but a bid for survival.

Veteran filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt believes the industry fails to prepare artists for the psychological toll of fame.

"Fame trains you to step into the arc lights, but it does not train you to live inside them. At the peak of success, the pressure to remain visible, relevant, and emotionally available becomes relentless.

When applause replaces privacy and identity gets trapped in performance, withdrawal is often an act of survival, not weakness," he told PTI.

Singh made the surprise an-

ouncement on Tuesday on his social media, stating that he was leaving his playback career behind. "Hello. Happy New Year to all. I want to thank you all for giving me so much love all these years as listeners. I'm happy to announce that I am not going to take any new assignments as a playback vocalist from now on. I am calling it quits.

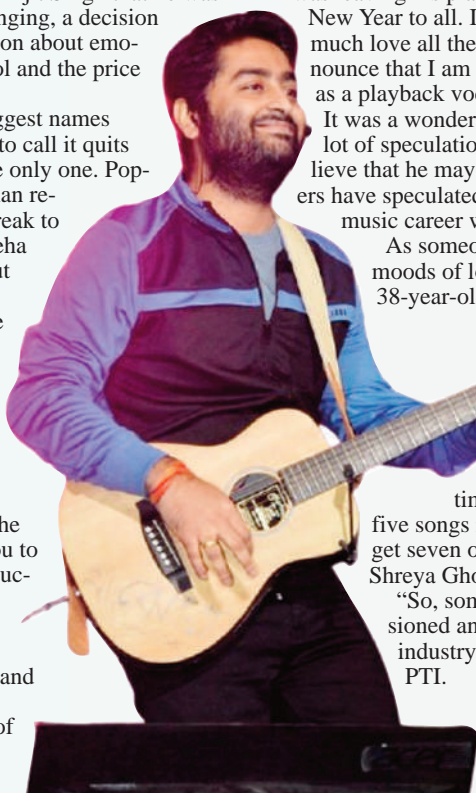
It was a wonderful journey," he wrote. There has been a lot of speculation about his next move. While some believe that he may be gearing up for a stint in politics, others have speculated that he will focus on an independent music career where there is a greater creative control.

As someone whose voice captured the many moods of love and heartbreak in Hindi cinema, the 38-year-old singer's departure is a huge blow to the industry, music critic Rajiv Vijaykar said.

"Arijit delivered some of the best songs. Every other singer, whether it's Amit Mishra or Jubin Nautiyal, either sings like him or are made to sing like him. The time when a top singer can record three-five songs in a day is gone. If you are lucky, you get seven or eight songs in a year, unless you are Shreya Ghoshal or Arijit.

"So, somebody like Arijit is bound to be disillusioned and with him leaving playback, the music industry will definitely suffer," Vijaykar told PTI.

Celebrity psychologist Akshara Damle, who has worked with a wide range of clients in showbiz to sports world, said burnout is quite common in performing artists.



"When work comes, it comes back-to-back; there is no pause between performances. Singers like Arijit or Neha or even performers like Zakir have to be at the top of their game every day. That kind of anxiety can easily lead to a burnout," Damle told PTI.

Vijaykar believes the issue runs deeper than just personal fatigue and added that the industry is increasingly driven by market forces that favour manufactured songs designed for quick consumption over enduring artistry.

"In the 80s, even legends like Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosale had restricted (singing) their songs. Not just because of their age but because they had similar issues. They wanted to reduce or quit but either they were not able to do so or not allowed to do so," he said, adding, the pressure is even more intense today due to social media.

"Likes, views and being on top of music streaming apps and all that indirectly is spoiling things. Passing popularity has become the mantra. Consumers are getting immune to good music. They are happy to listen to a song, which they can at a gym or while driving or dancing. Then after 15 days they listen to another song," Vijaykar said.

Actor-psychologist Aditi Govitrikar said social media has added stress, something the older generations didn't have to deal with at all.

"People from the industry come to me to seek help. The biggest issue is relevance on social media. It's not like earlier times that you're established and it's okay. With social media you've to work at it constantly. You've to be aware of what's happening, what's trending, and all of that has added a lot of pressure," Govitrikar told PTI.

From the brand and market point of view, some see a silver lining for Singh.

Trade analyst Girish Wankhede said artists like Singh have nothing to lose as they've the privilege to redefine

their careers outside the traditional ecosystem.

"Arijit doesn't need playback singing to survive. He'll continue as an independent artist. He's leaving the industry at the peak of his career, but I don't see any impact on his brand. Artists today earn significantly more from live shows and independent projects," Wankhede told PTI.

While completely stepping away from one's career at the peak of popularity is rare, artists have often taken breaks for months and sometimes years to recharge themselves.

After the failure of his last few movies, Shah Rukh Khan took a break from acting for over four years and returned with not just one hit but three in 2023.

Aamir Khan for years now has limited his work assignments to focus on quality and most recently Bhumi Pednekar took a short sabbatical of almost 10 months.

Explaining the reason behind the break, Pednekar said she felt she needed a pause.

"It was ten years of work. I didn't have a pause. I'm an artist, not a factory and I think we forget that. My job is to give my best. I made the best decision of my life. I felt like if I needed longevity for the next two decades, I had to take those months off," the actor, who is back and promoting her new show "Daldal", told PTI. Bhatt is already retired from direction and firmly believes that stepping away from the spotlight can be restorative.

"It's not that when you are away from arch lights, you will perish. I'm not an active filmmaker but I'm connected to the movie business, mentoring people. I remember when I gave up (direction) and getting out of movies, I was not stepping out of life, it's stepping into life," he said.

Singh's decision to step away from playback music underscores a fragile truth — behind every chart-topping song or viral reel lies a person grappling with the weight of expectation. (PTI)

Once Bumrah's U-19 Gujarat teammate, US skipper Monank now lives 'American Dream'

NEW DELHI, Jan 31: When USA skipper Monank Patel stepped onto the hallowed Wankhede Stadium turf a decade and half back as an impressionable U-19 cricketer from Gujarat, he had another gangly pace bowler with an unusual sling action alongside him — Jasprit Bumrah.

Back then, little did Monank know that Bumrah would go on to become India's greatest ever all-format bowler.

Reminiscing the good old junior cricket days, Monank took a trip down the memory lane when he dreamt of wearing the blue jersey albeit for India.

"Yeah, I have had great memories of playing with Axar (Patel) and Jasprit (Bumrah). I played my first year of Gujarat U-19 with Jasprit and before that I played my U-16s with Axar. We (Bumrah and him) were together for a good two years, two seasons, playing a lot of games for the Gujarat team," Monank told PTI as he gears up to play in next month's T20 World Cup in his country of birth.

He remembers that Bumrah was a cut above the rest even then.

"We played both red-ball and white-ball cricket, and those were really special times. It was the early stage of my cricketing journey and even back then, the way we were playing, especially the

way Jasprit was performing, we knew he had that X-factor and that he would definitely go on to do something great," Monank fondly recalls.

But for Monank, the road to international cricket wasn't a bed of roses as he had actually contemplated quitting cricket when he decided to migrate permanently to the US in 2013, having already got his green card in 2010.

"So, I have had a green card since 2010 and I decided after 2013, that I wanted to move to the US. My family was already planning to settle there.

"I tried staying there for a month or so, and then came back to India and after giving myself one last chance to play for Gujarat in the Ranji Trophy. When I didn't get that opportunity, I decided to go back to the USA and settle there for good," he said.

Monank turned to restaurant business, but his favourite delicacy remained cricket.

"When I moved to the US, my vision and goal wasn't like, just play cricket. I wanted to start my own business," he said.

But cricket isn't even among the top-10 sports in the USA. For Monank, the journey from being a semi-amateur to a full-fledged professional was fraught with risks, primarily because of the uncer-



tainty associated with the commercial viability of the sport.

"In 2018, it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy for us to just survive financially by just playing cricket. So, we didn't have a busy schedule

throughout the year when we used to play in 2018 or 2019.

"But later on, as soon as we started doing well and we got ODI status in 2020, everything, financially and also opportunity-wise, it

got better. So, the first two, three years were a bit tough as a player, but we managed it really well," he said.

Monank says all these would not have taken place without the sup-

port of his family, which allowed him to pursue his dreams.

"All credit goes to my family. Without their support, it's very tough to survive in the US. We got the ODI status in 2020, the opportunities which we got helped us as players and also benefited us financially. Everything just got better and better," he added.

In the USA team, Indo-Pak bonhomie still exists.

The players of India and Pakistan might not be shaking hands on the field due to the prevailing hostile relationship between the cross-border neighbours.

But when Monank steps onto the field along with Pakistan-origin Ali Khan and batter Shayan Jahangir, they have only one flag to play for — The Star-Spangled Banner.

"There's, no Indian, no Pakistani when you represent the USA. Everyone is representing the country, and, we have been playing since long and we are very close friends, very close teammates, and our goal is to make sure that we give our best, and

stay committed.

"They (Ali and Jahangir) are our teammates. There's no Indian, no Pakistani when it comes to cricket," he said.

For many US players, Wankhede is familiar turf. For Monank, Wankhede Sta-

dium pitch has a familiar feel to it as a lot of the Indian-origin players in the US team including him and Saurabh Netravalkar have played a number of games at the venue.

"A lot of players have played here before, and I feel like we'll take this as a challenge, and when we are challenged, I think this team always performs well. There's a lot of expectations," said the skipper, who hit a half-century in a winning cause against Pakistan in the last edition.

Cricket can be a career in the US now.

Monank sounded extremely confident when asked if he would like to recommend cricket as a career option to a 15-year-old American citizen.

"More than the kids, their parents know what's going on. If you research, the number of cricket academies have been increasing every year," he said, citing a different scenario than seven to eight years ago.

The money that Major League Cricket is pouring in does make cricket a viable career choice for the members of the diaspora.

"Sharing dressing room with quality international players in the last 3 years in MLC has definitely helped us," concluded Monank, who indeed is living his great American Dream. (PTI)

Delhi Capitals look for win against UP Warriorz to seal Eliminator berth in WPL



VADODARA, Jan 31: Lack of runs for some of their top batters notwithstanding, Delhi Capitals will have their fate in their own hands as they look for a win against UP Warriorz in the final league match of the Women's Premier League match here on Sunday.

A win for DC will straightaway send them to the Eliminator against Gujarat Giants with eight points for a third-place finish in

the league, knocking defending champions Mumbai Indians out of the reckoning.

On the other hand, a victory for bottom-placed UP Warriorz could open the door for Mumbai. In that situation, all the three sides -- Mumbai, DC and Warriorz -- will be on same six points and net run rate (NRR) will decide who will face Gujarat Giants in the Eliminator for a place in the final.

Of the three, Warriorz have the

worst NRR of minus 1.146 while DC have minus 0.164. MI have the best NRR of the three with plus 0.059.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru have already booked a direct place in the final after topping the five-team standings with six wins from eight matches.

DC's top-order batters have not scored too many runs this season, with South African Lizelle Lee being the most prolific for them

with 230 runs from seven matches. South African star Laura Wolvaardt has made 194 from seven games, much below expectations.

Shafali Verma has been inconsistent with 179 runs from seven matches and DC would hope for a big contribution from the Indian opener in the crunch match.

New captain Jemimah Rodrigues has contributed even less with 132 runs from seven matches, and a big knock from her could lift the team. Her highest has been a 51 not out so far.

In the bowling front also, DC's foreign recruits have been below-par with the experienced South African Marizanne Kapp and West Indian Chinelle Henry struggling with just seven and six wickets respectively. It is the same scenario for India bowlers Sneha Rana and Minnu Mani also.

In fact, DC's wicket-taking duties this season have been mainly shouldered by two youngsters -- uncapped pacer Nandani Sharma (14 wickets from 7 matches) and India left-arm spinner Shree Charani (12 wickets from 7 matches).

The Warriorz, on the other hand, are coming in after two consecutive losses, the latest being the 8-wicket thrashing at the hands of RCB on Friday. Scoring a below par 143 for 8 and then losing the match in just 13.1 overs must have dented their confi-

dence, but they will need to quickly regroup themselves.

Except for the Australian duo of captain Meg Lanning (248 from 7 matches) and Phoebe Litchfield (243 from 6 matches), all other batters have failed to perform this season. Litchfield's absence due to injury will also hurt them.

Their bowling department also failed to impress with the likes of England's Sophie Ecclestone (6 wickets from 7 matches) and India's Deepti Sharma (5 from 7 matches) producing below-par performances. The star duo needs to bring out something special on Sunday if the Warriorz want a big win for a chance to sneak into the Eliminator.

Teams:
Delhi Capitals: Jemimah Rodrigues (c), Taniya Bhatia, Chinelle Henry, Lizelle Lee, Niki Prasad, Shafali Verma, Laura Wolvaardt, Lucy Hamilton, Marizanne Kapp, Alana King, Sneha Rana, Pragati Singh, Minnu Mani, Nandani Sharma, Shree Charani, Eddla Srujana.

UP Warriorz: Meg Lanning (c), Harleen Deol, Shipra Giri, Amy Jones, Kiran Navgire, Pratika Rawal, Simran Shaikh, Gongadi Trisha, Deandra Dottin, Charli Knott, Shikha Pandey, Shweta Sehrawat, Deepti Sharma, Asha Sobhana, Chloe Tryon, Sophie Ecclestone, Kranti Gaud, Suman Meena.

Match Starts at 7:30pm. (PTI)

Pat Cummins ruled out of T20 World Cup as Australia pick Ben Dwarshuis in 15-men squad



MELBOURNE, Jan 31: Australia suffered a huge blow on Saturday as premier pacer Pat Cummins was ruled out of the upcoming T20 World Cup due to an injury, forcing the national selectors to pick Ben Dwarshuis in his place in a 15-member squad.

Cummins, 32, has not recovered fully from his lingering back injury and will miss the tournament that begins in India and Sri Lanka on February 7, while top-order batter Matthew Short has also been omitted from the original 15-player squad.

Matthew Renshaw comes in for Short who was listed in the initial provisional squad.

Selector Tony Dodemaide said: "With Pat needing more time to recover from his back injury Ben is a ready replacement who offers a left arm pace option as well as dynamic fielding and late order hitting."

Cummins had initially been named in Australia's provisional squad.

"We believe his ability to swing the ball at good pace along with clever variations will be well suited to the conditions we expect and overall structure of the squad."

"Matt (Renshaw) has impressed in all formats of late, including in multiple roles in white ball formats for Australia, the Queensland Bulls and the Brisbane Heat."

The trio of Josh Hazlewood,

Tim David and Nathan Ellis have cleared the fitness test for the month-long T20 showpiece.

Hazlewood has not played since injuring his hamstring and Achilles prior to the Ashes. David missed most of the BBL and the Pakistan series because of a hamstring injury, while Ellis missed the Big Bash League finals and the Pakistan tour with a hamstring niggle.

"With the top order settled and spin heavy conditions expected in the pool stages in Sri Lanka, we also feel Matt provides extra middle order support, with Tim David completing his return to play program in the early phase of the tournament."

"As a left hander, he (Renshaw) also offers a point of difference to the middle order batting."

Australia is currently playing a three-game T20 Series against Pakistan in Lahore before leaving for Sri Lanka for the pool stages of the World Cup.

The T20 World Cup will be held in venues across India and Sri Lanka from February 7 to March 8.

Australian squad: Australia squad: Mitchell Marsh (c), Xavier Bartlett, Cooper Connolly, Tim David, Ben Dwarshuis, Cameron Green, Nathan Ellis, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Glenn Maxwell, Matthew Renshaw, Marcus Stoinis, Adam Zampa. (PTI)

David Miller receives medical clearance to feature in T20 World Cup

JOHANNESBURG, Jan 31: South Africa's senior batter David Miller on Saturday received medical clearance to join the national squad for the T20 World Cup which begins next week.

Miller, who had suffered a muscle strain during SA20 tournament, will depart with the South African squad here on Sunday for Mumbai, Cricket South Africa said.

"Proteas Men's batter David Miller has been medically cleared for next month's ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 in India and Sri Lanka," CSA said in a social media post.

"Miller successfully underwent a fitness test this week following an adductor muscle strain sustained while playing for Paarl Royals during the SA20."

"He will join the squad on Sunday when they depart for Mumbai from OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg," CSA added.

Last edition's runner-up South Africa are placed in Group D along with New Zealand, Afghanistan, Canada and the United Arab Emirates.

South Africa will take on India in a warm-up match at Navi Mumbai's DY Patil Stadium on February 4 before facing Canada in their tournament opener in Ahmedabad on February 9. (PTI)

Devika Sihag enters maiden Super 300 final at Thailand Masters

BANGKOK, Jan 31: Young Indian shuttler Devika Sihag stormed into her maiden BWF Super 300 final with a straight-game win over world No. 35 Huang Yu-Hsun at the USD 250,000 Thailand Masters here on Saturday.

The 20-year-old unseeded Indian, who claimed her maiden BWF International Challenge title at the Malaysia International last year, registered a 22-20, 21-13 win over the fifth-seeded Huang in the women's singles semifinal.

Seemingly down and out at 15-20 in the opening game, Devika rose like a phoenix, saving five game points to seal the opener and continued the momentum in the second to prevail over Huang, who drowned in a cesspool of unforced errors.

The world No. 63 will face Malaysia's Goh Jin Wei in the summit clash.

The two shuttlers fought early, moving to 7-7 at one stage. Huang then surged ahead, slowly building a substantial lead.

The Indian was guilty of handing her opponent opportunities to quickly finish the points as Huang led 18-14.

Aided by a service error from Devika and a straight smash, Huang grabbed five game points. The Taiwanese then went wide, while Devika prevailed in a net duel. Huang



next found the net as it became 18-20.

An alert Devika then stood near the net to dispatch one more and, when Huang smashed wide, the Indian brought it level at 20-20.

She earned her sixth point on the trot to hold a game point herself and sealed the game after the Taiwanese once again smashed wide.

The second game started on an even note as both committed too many unforced errors, but Devika managed to curb her mistakes to open up an 8-5 lead.

For Huang, nothing seemed to go her way as she drowned in her own

pool of errors, allowing Devika to take an 11-5 lead at the break.

Devika tried to engage her opponent in long rallies, moving to 14-8. She used her overhead drops, forehand flat drives and better net play to trouble her opponent. Soon she was 17-9 up.

Two nervy shots saw her miss the lines on both flanks as it became 17-11. Huang again smashed into the net to see Devika reach 19-12. The Indian then sent one wide.

An on-the-line return on the backline gave seven match points to the Indian and she sealed it with a smash.

Djokovic and Alcaraz have shots at tennis history in the Australian Open final

MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA), Jan 31: In a moment of exhaustion and elation, Novak Djokovic recognized Margaret Court in the crowd and thanked her for staying up so late to watch him get within a single victory of becoming the most decorated tennis player of all time.

The 83-year-old Court was among the VIPs at Rod Laver Arena for Djokovic's epic five-set win over two-time defending Australian Open champion Jannik Sinner in a grueling semifinal that ended after 1:30 a.m. Saturday.

For now, they share the all-time record of 24 Grand Slam singles titles. That could change Sunday.

Djokovic's energy-sapping win over Sinner set up a championship decider against top-ranked Carlos Alcaraz, the 22-year-old Spaniard bidding to become the youngest man ever to complete a career Grand Slam.

Alcaraz and Sinner have combined to block Djokovic's push for a 25th major title, splitting the last eight majors evenly between them.

In his on-court interview to cap Day 13, Djokovic thanked Court for hanging around to witness him end a streak of five losses to Sinner, and also snap a run of four semifinal defeats at the Grand Slam tournaments.

"Some legends stayed up to 2 a.m.!" he said. "Thank-you so much for being here."

Djokovic owns just about every record there is available to him, surpassing the marks set down by Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. He has one more than Serena Williams, who holds the women's Open era record at 23.

He's made no secret of the fact he's only in Australia for the coveted 25th.

Some analysts debate the greatness of Court's career tally because she won 13 of her 24 major singles titles before the profes-



sional Open era began in 1968.

Not Djokovic. For him, the numbers speak volumes.

10/10 After beating one half of the "Sincaraz" rivalry, Djokovic gets a shot at another in the 11th final of his career at Melbourne Park. He has won all 10 previously.

The 38-year-old Djokovic said he was sore and tired and likely wouldn't do much practice Saturday, prioritizing recovery.

Alcaraz also said he'll be focussing on recovery after struggling with cramps and a sore right leg in a five-set, 5-hour and 27-minute win over Alexander Zverev. It was the longest semifinal ever at the Australian Open.

It wasn't the longest match ever at Melbourne Park — not surprisingly, Djokovic holds that record with his 5:53 win over

Rafael Nadal in the 2012 final.

Djokovic crossed paths with Alcaraz between the five-set semifinals and commended him on pushing through. Alcaraz was on an exercise bike warming down and Djokovic was still preparing for his delayed start to the night.

25 the goal for '26

When he was setting goals for this season, Djokovic said he'd asked himself: "Okay, what is it that I'm looking for from myself?"

"I was imagining really playing against Jannik and Carlos at the final stages of Grand Slams and battling it out," he said. "Very fortunate to already get it in the first Slam of the year."

Djokovic conceded he was lucky to reach the semifinals, after getting a walkover in the fourth round before Lorenzo Musetti re-

tired during their quarterfinal after taking the first two sets.

Against Sinner, there were times when Djokovic looked down and almost out of gas, but his resilience was phenomenal. Sinner wasn't able to convert eight breakpoint chances in the fifth set — he was only 2 of 18 in the match — and Djokovic converted the first breakpoint chance he had in the deciding set.

Alcaraz also was wobbly in the third set, taking a medical timeout for what he thought was an injured adductor in his right leg. Turns out, it was more likely cramps. It will be his first final in Australia.

"I just got to do whatever it takes to be as good as I can for the final," Alcaraz said.

Djokovic hasn't won a major since the 2023 U.S. Open but, while others may have written off his chances, he never doubted he could rise to that level.

"There's a lot of people that doubted me ... a lot of experts all of a sudden that wanted to retire me," he said. "I want to thank them all because they gave me strength. They gave me motivation to prove them wrong."

One for the ages Djokovic is aiming to become the oldest man in the Open era to win a major title. Alcaraz is aiming to be the youngest ever to win titles at all four Grand Slams.

"There's always for me, also for Carlos — because of his age and everything he's achieved — history is on the line," Djokovic said.

Tough choice Nadal, who will be at the final, was asked Saturday to pick a preferred champion.

"I feel I have to support Carlos," Nadal said of his fellow Spaniard. But "If Novak wins, I will be happy for him. It is spectacular what he's doing at this stage of his career." (AP)

Rayhan Thomas makes cut in Panama



PANAMA CITY, Jan 31: Two birdies in the last four holes earned India's Rayhan Thomas a place in the weekend rounds of the Panama Championship on the Korn Ferry Tour in the US.

Thomas, after 73 in the first round, was moving slowly with two birdies and three bogeys with four holes to go in the second round. He was then overall four-over and likely to miss the cut. He birdied the 15th and 17th and made the cut at 2-over and Tied-48th.

Stuart Macdonald, the 2024 Peru Open winner on PGA TOUR Americas, moved into the outright lead after two rounds. He posted a steady 3-under 67 to reach 8-under par and take a one-shot advantage into the weekend. Macdonald backed up his opening 5-under 65.

One shot behind the leader is Argentina's Jorge Fernández Valdés at 7-under after a sharp 4-under 66. American Ian Gilligan sits third at 6-under par and is poised for his best 36-hole position on the Korn Ferry Tour.

Overnight co-leader Ian Holt slipped to tied fifth at 4-under after following his opening 65 with a 1-over 71. (PTT)

Mertens and Zhang, Harrison and Skupski win Australian Open doubles titles



MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA), Jan 31: Elise Mertens marked her return to the No. 1 ranking in women's doubles by combining with China's Zhang Shuai to win the Australian Open title on Saturday at Melbourne Park.

Back together after four years apart as a team, Mertens and Zhang trailed 3-0 and 4-1 in the first set but rallied to beat Anna Danilina of Kazakhstan and Serbia's Aleksandra Krunic 7-6 (4), 6-4. Mertens and Zhang led the final set 5-0 before withstanding a comeback attempt when Danilina and Krunic won four straight games.

American Christian Harrison and Britain's Neal Skupski won the men's doubles trophy later on Day 14 at the season-opening major.

Harrison served an ace on match point for a 7-6 (4), 6-4 victory over the Australian pair of Jason Kubler and Marc Polmans. Kubler went into the match with a 14-3 doubles

record at his home major.

Harrison and Skupski, who both competed at last year's ATP Finals with different partners, joined as a team for the first time at Adelaide earlier this month, where they reached the semifinals.

Currently ranked No. 6 in doubles, Mertens, who won the Wimbledon doubles title last year with Veronika Kudermetova, will return to the No. 1 ranking after the Australian Open.

That will mark the Belgian player's 40th cumulative week as No. 1 in doubles and was guaranteed regardless of the outcome Saturday at Melbourne Park.

The win Saturday was Mertens' sixth Grand Slam doubles title, including 2021 and 2024 at Melbourne Park. Zhang now has three, including the 2019 Australian Open and the 2021 U.S. Open.

It was their first Grand Slam trophy as a team, having lost the 2022 Wimbledon final in their last appearance together.

"This is like cherry on the cake,"

Mertens said. "We paired up as a team very last-minute ... this was our first tournament back together. In the second round we saved three match points, so that kind of took us to another level. An unbelievable two weeks."

The narrow second-round win was over rising teenagers Iva Jovic and Vicky Mboko, who combined for doubles as they advanced in the singles.

Mertens reached the fourth round of women's singles at Melbourne Park this year before being beaten by eventual finalist Elena Rybakina.

Zhang said she and Mertens adapt well.

"We know how to play finals, we know how to win finals," Zhang said. "We are both very calm. If something doesn't work ... we always adjust."

Harrison said his men's trophy was an added plus.

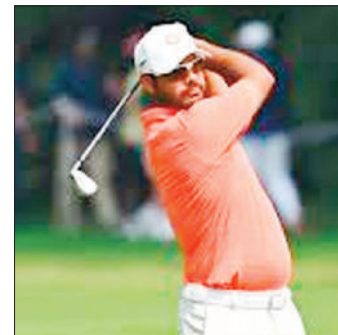
"For me, it's just simple," Harrison said. "The trophies, the tournaments are just a nice bonus. I love playing. Honestly, I just love stepping on the court and just having a good atmosphere. That's honestly what makes it just simple for me."

Skupski said that despite the pro-Australian crowd at Rod Laver Arena, he and Harrison handled the pressure well.

"We knuckled down and had to bring our best level," Skupski said. "I love playing. Honestly, I just love stepping on the court and just having a good atmosphere. That's honestly what makes it just simple for me."

The mixed doubles final was played on Friday, when Australians Olivia Gadecki and John Peers became the first team to win consecutive titles since 1989 after beating the French pair of Kristina Mladenovic and Manuel Guinard 4-6, 6-3, 10-8. (AP)

Sharma tied fourth after two rounds in Bahrain, Yuvraj Sandhu misses cut



BAHRAIN, Jan 31: Indian golfer Shubhankar Sharma carded a two-under 70 to make the weekend at the Bapco Energies Bahrain Championship here on Saturday.

Sharma, who missed the cut at the Hero Dubai Desert Classic last week, took his total to eight-under through 36 holes to be in a big pack of 11 players at Tied-fourth after two rounds.

After seven birdies against one bogey in the first round, Sharma had five birdies, twice having back-to-back gains, against three bogeys.

Sharma's compatriot, Yuvraj Sandhu (70,72) made a desperate run with three birdies in last four holes to try and make the cut, but he still failed to make the weekend by one shot.

He was 2-under after day 2 and the cut fell at 3-under. Meanwhile, Calum Hill moved into a four-shot lead after equalling the course record with a sublime 61 in the second round.

Last week's winner at the Hero Dubai Desert Classic, Patrick Reed, who has left LIV and plans to play the DP World Tour and the PGA Tour, shot 5-under 67 to add to his first round 71, and is now 6-under to rise to Tied-22nd. (PTT)

Cleared, grateful, hungry again: Krishna Prasad Garaga eyes fresh start after doping exoneration

NEW DELHI, Jan 31: For nearly a year and a half, the sound of a shuttle hitting the strings was both comfort and torment for Indian men's doubles player Krishna Prasad Garaga.

Comfort, because badminton was all he had known since childhood. Torment, because he did not know if he would ever play for India again.

A member of the country's historic Thomas Cup-winning squad in 2022, Krishna, the 25-year-old men's doubles player from Kakinada, had his rising career halted when he tested positive for human chorionic gonadotropin during an out-of-competition test in February 2024.

A four-year ban followed.

Earlier this month however, the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) appeal panel set aside the suspension, ruling that scientific evidence did not prove external use of the substance, restoring his results, rankings and eligibility with immediate effect.

"It was quite tough for me. It was really difficult at times but somehow it has passed so I am very relieved that the decision has come on my side," Krishna, a double gold medallist at the South Asian Games, told PTI, his voice steady but heavy with memory.

"It has been almost one and a half year and the toughest part would be still going to train and hoping that the decision comes my way and once it comes my way I'm ready to go."

That readiness became his anchor. Even when tournaments vanished from his calendar, he kept showing up at practice halls, hitting shuttles, sparring, trying to stay match-sharp. Some days he questioned everything. Most days he simply trained.

"Mentally it actually took a toll on me. Because there is so much uncertainty, I didn't know if I will continue playing and I didn't know when the decision will come. I cannot describe it actually," he



said, pausing.

"It was taking a toll on my mental

health as well because I wasn't looking forward for anything, it was just bad-

minton for me. So it was taken away."

Family, cousins and close friends formed his support system, nudging him back onto the court whenever doubt crept in. The gates at the Pulella Gopichand Badminton Academy stayed open too, allowing him to spar and stay connected to the sport.

Recently, he trained in Mumbai alongside top pair Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, a reminder that he still belonged at that level.

"So I'm also currently practicing in Mumbai right now. I came to practice with Satwik and Chirag actually as they were going to BATC. Coach Tan called me to come and spar with them," he said.

"Coach wanted to check my level as well... it was great to train with them in Mumbai. I also have to decide my new partner."

The day the clearance mail arrived it felt unreal.

"But somehow it went my way, so I'm thinking I'll put it to best use for me. The day I got the mail from next day I'm free to play the tournaments. They completely exonerated... it's a very rare case is what I'm thinking. So I'm very happy that the decision came my way."

Before the ban, Krishna and former partner K Sai Pratheek had surged into the world's top 40, even beating established pairs in internal trials. The momentum was building. Then everything stopped. Now, with a clean slate, he is focused on rebuilding, step by step, match by match.

"My fitness is quite okay because I was playing in clubs... I was also doing my job," said Krishna, who works with the Income Tax department.

"I always enjoyed playing badminton. Now I enjoy it even more because it was taken away from me for almost one and half years. So I am just looking forward to being back in the circuit." (PTT)

U-19 WC

After pep talk from Tendulkar, India eye revenge against Pak



BULAWAYO, Jan 31: Five-time champions India will look to avenge their humiliating Asia Cup final loss against arch-rivals Pakistan when the two teams lock horns in a Super Six match of the ICC Men's U-19 World Cup here on Sunday.

India lost to Pakistan by 191 runs in the Under-19 Asia Cup final in Dubai last December after winning the group match of the same tournament against the arch-rivals by 90 runs.

India are also likely to continue with their "no handshake" policy with Pakistan in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror attack and the ensuing Operation Sindoor carried out by the country's armed forces.

The Indian Under-19 team avoided the post-match handshake with Pakistan in the final of the U-19 Asia Cup. The Indians had skipped the gesture during the two sides' group stage match of that tournament as well.

And come Sunday, the Ayush Mhatre-led Indian side would be eyeing a revenge of that loss. Prior to any game, a virtual pep talk from Sachin Tendulkar is a stuff of dreams and the Indian boys did get some priceless advice from the legend.

"The India Under 19 team playing in the ongoing Under 19 World Cup had a virtual interaction with the legend of World Cricket, Mr. Sachin Tendulkar.

"In what was an invaluable experience, the next generation got insights and perspectives on the important ingredients for success and longevity in an ever evolving sport, not just limited to technical skills and remaining fit but also the importance of staying focused, disciplined, humble and rooted in success," the BCCI posted on X.

"Your experiences and perspective had a powerful impact. They were clearly inspired and motivated. These are lessons they will carry with them for a long time and they are truly grateful," wrote head of Centre Of Excellence VVS Laxman, who is also heading the team of support staff at the junior global event.

It has been a dominant run for India so far in the Under-19 World Cup. The Indians started their campaign with a comprehensive six-wicket win over USA, before beating Bangladesh and New Zealand in the group stage.

In their first Super Six match, India thrashed hosts Zimbabwe by a massive 204 runs on January 27 to continue their unbeaten run.

But in Pakistan a strong opponent awaits India and the big loss in the Asia Cup final would be haunting the Mhatre-led side.

Wicket-keeper Abhigyan Kundu (183 runs from four matches, 80 highest score) and Vaibhav Sooryavanshi (166 runs from four matches) have been consistent with the bat, scoring two fifties each, but they would look to convert those into three-figure marks.

Vihaan Malhotra (151 runs from four matches) is one more batter India would be banking on as the left-hander smashed an unbeaten 109 against Zimbabwe in the last match and would be looking to carry on his good form.

On the bowling front, right-arm medium pacer Henil Patel (10 wickets in four matches) and left-arm fast bowler Udhav Mohan, who picked up three wickets in the last match against Zimbabwe, have been the standout performers for India.

Skipper Mhatre too sparkled with his off-breaks, getting three scalps against Zimbabwe, while right-arm medium RS Amrith has also been among wickets upfront.

Pakistan, on the other hand, lost their opening group game against England but won their next two matches against Scotland and Zimbabwe.

They notched a comprehensive eight-wicket win over New Zealand in their Super Six match on January 27, and are coming into the India game with confidence.

Opener Sameer Minhas, who orchestrated India's defeat in the U-19 Asia Cup final with a magnificent 172, has been in impressive form in the tournament, scoring 74 not out against Zimbabwe in their group match and 76 in the win against New Zealand in Super Sixes.

Minhas will again be the thorn in the flesh for India who will plot to remove him early in the innings and curb his run-scoring.

In the bowling department, right-arm pacer Ali Raza has been Pakistan's key man with 12 wickets from four matches, and Indian batters will have to plan to tackle him. Another right-arm pacer Abdul Subhan has also been among the wickets with 10 from four matches.

The teams (From):

India: Aaron George, Abhigyan Kundu, Harvansh Pangalia, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, Vedant Trivedi, Ayush Mhatre (c), Vihaan Malhotra, RS Amrith, Kanishk Chouhan, Khilan Patel, Deepesh Devdaran, Henil Patel, Mohamed Eana, Udhav Mohan, Kishan Singh.

Pakistan: Farhan Yousaf (c), Usman Khan, Ali Hassan Baloch, Hamza Zahoor, Huzaifa Ahsan, Mohammad Shayan, Sameer Minhas, Ahmed Hussain, Abdul Subhan, Ali Raza, Daniyal Ali Khan, Mohammad Sayyam, Momin Qamar, Niqab Shafiq, Umar Zaib.

Match starts at 1pm IST. (PTT)