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'Infiltrators to be removed from voter list, country in 5 years'

Naxalism to end by March 31: Amit Shah

GUWAHATI, Feb 21: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday asserted that Naxalism would be eliminated from the country by the March 31 deadline set by the government, while illegal immigrants would be removed not only from the electoral rolls but also from the nation in the next five years.

On the second of his two-day visit to Assam, Shah attended the 87th CRPF Day Parade here and laid the foundation stone for the Rs 270-crore new campus of the state police's 10th Battalion, which would be constructed on land freed from encroachment by infiltrators. Addressing the CRPF Day Parade, the first ever in the northeast, Shah said the force played an important role in Jammu and Kashmir, where the number of stone-throwing incidents has dropped to zero, besides handling ethnic violence in Manipur and breaking the backbone of Maoists in only three years. Naxalism had spread across 12



states and countless districts of the country, and when the Centre resolved to uproot the menace, the CRPF and CoBRA force personnel played the most crucial role in the effort, he said. "Because of the CRPF personnel, we can confidently say that by March 31, 2026, the country will be completely free from Naxalism," he asserted. Shah said in the 86-year history of the force, this was the first time that its Raising-Day celebrations were held in the northeast, which is a matter of pride for everyone and the entire region. "In 2019, it was decided that the annual parade of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs)

would be held in different parts of the country. And today, the CRPF parade is being held in one of the most important parts of the country -- the northeast," he said. In the second event of the day, Shah asserted that if India can be free of Naxals, it can also be free of infiltrators. "Illegal immigrants would be removed not only from the electoral rolls but also from the country in the next five years", Shah said.

He was addressing a gathering after laying the foundation stone for a new campus of the Assam Police 10th Battalion, which he said would be constructed on 347 acres of land freed from encroachments by infiltrators in the state's tribal belt. Attacking Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, Shah said that the Congress leader had once said that infiltrators would be removed, but the grand old party cannot do it as "illegal immigrants (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Ensure basic facilities for Goalpara evicted families: HC



GUWAHATI, Feb 21: The Gauhati High Court has directed the Assam government to ensure that the families affected by eviction drives in Goalpara district in June last year are provided with potable water, basic medical and sanitation facilities, and food grains through fair price shops. It maintained that 'right to life' includes the 'right to live with dignity, right to potable water, right to sanitation, as well as right to basic medical facilities'.

The order was passed by a bench of Justice Devashish Baurah on a writ petition filed by 60 petitioners affected during the evictions carried out on June 16, 17 and 18, 2025, in Hashila Beel (wetland) area. The petitioners claimed that 566 families, including children, have been compelled to take refuge in a compact plot of patta land belonging to some other persons. They alleged that for more than eight months, the affected families,

including the petitioners, have been living in a state of destitution, with no availability of potable water, sanitation, food or proper medical care. It has been claimed that "a state of humanitarian crisis" has ensued, and the petitioners have sought various directions through the writ petition, including the institution of a judicial inquiry into the eviction drive. Justice Baurah, after hearing the arguments put forth by the advocate of the petitioner as well as those of the respondents, said in his order: "It is the opinion of this court that the right to life includes the right to live with dignity, right to potable water, right to sanitation, as well as right to basic medical facilities. This court is also of the opinion that under the Act of 2013, benefits are to be provided to the eligible persons." The 'Act of 2013' refers to the National Food Security Act of 2013.

The court ordered that proper potable water and basic medical facilities be (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

State Focus Paper for financial year 2026-27 released

NABARD pegs Assam's credit potential at ₹92,207.72 cr

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 21: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) has projected Assam's credit potential under the priority sector at ₹92,207.72 crore for the financial year 2026-27, according to its State Focus Paper (SFP) released on Saturday.

The projection was unveiled during the State Credit Seminar 2026-27 organised by NABARD's Assam Regional Office at Hotel Vivanta, Guwahati, under the theme "e-KCC driven Agriculture Credit Growth".

The SFP was formally launched by Aruna Rajoria, IAS, Commissioner and Secretary, Agriculture Department and Agriculture Production Commissioner, Government of Assam.

As per the report, the projected credit potential includes ₹32,603.91 crore for agriculture and allied activities, ₹52,450.29 crore for the MSME sector, and ₹7,153.51 crore for other priority sectors.

In his welcome address, Loken Das, chief general manager of NABARD Assam Regional Office, highlighted the institution's developmental initiatives in rural infrastructure, agricultural productivity enhancement, cooperative strengthening and MSME entrepreneurship promotion.

A detailed presentation on the SFP was delivered by Qamar Javed, General Manager, NABARD, outlining sector-wise credit opportunities. In her keynote address, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Around 1.50 lakh bighas of encroached land reclaimed: CM

Shah lays base of 10th Assam Police Battalion HQ at Sonapur

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 21: Union Home and Cooperation Minister Amit Shah on Saturday laid the foundation stone for the new campus of the 10th Assam Police Battalion at Kachutoli in Sonapur, in the presence of Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The project, to be constructed over 174 bighas of land at an estimated cost of more than ₹260 crore, will feature a modern battalion campus with advanced training facilities, residential quarters, healthcare services, sports infrastructure and provisions for a medical college and other key government institutions.

The land, part of a larger 708-bigha area at Kachutoli reclaimed from encroachment, falls under the Tribal Belt and Block category.

Addressing the gathering, the chief minister said the state government has taken a firm stance against encroachment over the past five years, reclaiming around 1.50 lakh bighas of land across Assam.

Of the reclaimed land, he said about 1.10 lakh bighas belong to wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and reserved forests, while 26,713 bighas are general government (khas) land, 4,449 bighas fall under other categories and 3,643 bighas are village grazing reserve (VGR) and professional grazing reserve (PGR) land.

He added that nearly 40 lakh bighas of land in the state still remain under encroachment and assured that further steps would be

Barpeta robbery: 4 held within 24 hours

BARPETA, Feb 21: Four persons were held in connection with an armed robbery at a jewellery store in Assam's Barpeta district, police said on Saturday.

Five persons allegedly robbed the store in Barpeta Road town on Friday afternoon, holding the staff and customers at gunpoint, according to its manager Dimpal Talukdar. The hands and mouths of the staff members were tied, with some of them also sustaining minor injuries, he said. Jewellery and cash worth around ₹ 25 crore were taken away, he claimed.

Police said four people have been detained from Goalpara district in connection with the case and brought here. (PTI)

The chief minister said improved infrastructure in the state has even enabled emergency aircraft landings on national highways and noted that the Guwahati Ring Road project is progressing near the encroachment-free land at Kachutoli.

He also highlighted the government's efforts to curb rhino poaching through strict enforcement measures.

Among those present at the ceremony were Union minister for ports, shipping and waterways Sarbananda Sonowal, revenue and disaster management minister Keshab Mahanta, water resources minister Pijush Hazarika, tea tribes and adivasi welfare minister Rupesh Gowala, MP Bijuli Kalita Medhi, MLA Atul Bora, Union home secretary Govind Mohan, chief secretary Ravi Kota, Intelligence Bureau Director Tapan Kumar Deka and Assam Director General of Police Harmeet Singh, along with other senior officials.

Piracy, migration, drugs: Navy chief calls for regional unity to tackle evolving maritime threats

PANAJI, Feb 21: Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Dinesh Tripathi on Saturday called for greater unity among Indian Ocean Region (IOR) nations to address evolving maritime threats, including piracy, irregular migration and drug trafficking.

He said criminal networks at sea have become "more organised, technologically aware and interconnected", stressing the need for collaborative operations to produce tangible outcomes. Delivering his closing remarks at the fifth edition of the Goa Maritime Conclave (GMC) at the Naval War College in Goa, Tripathi said the forum has evolved from a dialogue-based platform into an action-oriented framework.

The biennial conclave was held under the theme "Common Maritime Security Challenges in the IOR - Progressing Lines of Efforts (LoE) to Mitigate Dynamic Threats". It was attended by the heads of navies and

Assam BJP chief targets Rahul for protest at AI summit

GUWAHATI, Feb 21: Assam BJP president Dilip Saikia on Saturday condemned Youth Congress' 'shirtless protest' at the AI Impact Summit in Delhi as "global embarrassment" for India and claimed it was carried out at the "direct instruction" of their leader Rahul Gandhi.

He demanded a thorough inquiry into the incident and said the BJP and its allies' youth wings will stage protests across the state to "expose the ugly face" of the Congress. Addressing a press conference

here, Saikia said, "It was a national shame for us, a moment of global embarrassment. It shows Congress' anti-national stance." A group of Indian Youth Congress (IYC) workers had on Friday staged a dramatic 'shirtless protest' at an AI Impact Summit exhibition hall in the national capital, walking around holding t-shirts with slogans against the government and the India-US trade deal printed on those.

Four persons have been arrested in this connection, with IYC national president Uday Bhanu Chib asserting that the organisation was not against the AI summit but against "any compromise with India's interests". Saikia claimed that the protest was carried out at the "direct instruction of Rahul Gandhi", and said, "The conspiracy was hatched at the house of Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Man held with weapons in Tezpur raid

HT Correspondent TEZPUR, Feb 21: Police arrested a 29-year-old man and seized a firearm along with sharp weapons during a late-night raid conducted in Tezpur based on specific intelligence inputs, officials said on Saturday.

The accused has been identified as Ibrahim Ali, a resident of Samdhora under the Panchmilee area near the town.

He was apprehended from his rented accommodation during the operation carried out by Tezpur Police.

During the search, police recovered a factory-made .22 pistol along with five rounds of live ammunition. A sword and a khukuri were also seized from the premises. Police sources said the recovered weapons have been taken into custody as evidence, and legal proceedings have been initiated against the accused under relevant provisions of law.

AI IMPACT SUMMIT 2026

India-made robots shine after early controversy

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: Indigenously manufactured and developed robots emerged as a major attraction at the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi, despite an early controversy over an Indian university's claim that a China-made robot dog was its own.

Among these, SVAN-M2, a robot dog by Kanpur-based startup xTerra Robotics, was a crowd puller.

Co-founder of xTerra Robotics said the product took years of translational research by students and faculty of IIT Kanpur.

The SVAN-M2, which has an aluminium alloy body and legs, uses its light detection and ranging (LiDAR) device to create accurate 3D representations of its environment.

It can be used for monitoring a hazardous area or at power stations

for inspecting the facility with thermal imaging. In the security domain, the robot dog can play a key role in threat detection and save lives by 3D-mapping an area and relaying the images to a team away from the site.

Founded by Nimesh Khandelwal, Avinash Bhashkar, Amritanshu Manu, Aditya Rajawat and Shakti S Gupta in 2023, xTerra Robotics is on the IIT Kanpur campus.

The firm is planning to scale up production of SVAN-M2 and make the pricing more competitive, said Co-founder Sakshi S Gupta. The start-up and L and T are working together to bring SVAN-M2 and other such robots to construction sites.

"This scaling up would make the product extremely cost-competitive with the Chinese product. However, the current pricing of the product is



at par with that from China in the same class," she said.

The AI Impact Summit was held from February 16-20 at the Bharat

Mandapam, which saw the presence of several heads of state, many global artificial intelligence (AI) leaders, academicians and re-

searchers, heads of global tech giants, and philanthropists.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the summit here on Thursday, in the presence of several world leaders and heads of global tech giants.

The summit, however, was not without its share of controversies.

Private university Galgotias made the headlines for trying to pass off a Chinese innovation as its own. The university was asked to vacate the event premises on Wednesday and remove its stall.

Meanwhile, the United Nations World Food Programme's (UNWFP) robot drew significant attention. Conceptualised and developed in India, the eight-foot-tall tower-shaped robot, a pilot project, has been developed for the warehouses of the Food Corporation of

India and state godowns.

It has a plug-and-play infrastructure, and depending on sensors, can simultaneously detect things such as temperature and leakage of gases, including phosphine, which can be fatal for humans if inhaled.

The warehouses use phosphine as a fumigant to keep the pests away.

"If this robot is in the warehouse, then no one has to go inside for inspection during the fumigation. Whatever is happening inside the godown...this is our eye for it," said Amit Kumar of UN-WFP.

"We have just tested it in Narela (food storage depot). It needs a bit of optimisation, following which it will be piloted in a warehouse in around one to two months," he said.

The Madhya Pradesh pavilion displayed the state's first 3D printed

humanoid robot developed by students of Class 7 and 8 with support from startup, Youngovator.

The two-foot-high Yug Bot has a skeletal structure made of plastic with a few wires running across the structure from top to bottom and left to right. Its head is cuboid, which has two small circles in the centre, with artificial eyes.

"This is an out-and-out indigenous product," said Karthik Pandey, head of technical operations at the Youngovator.

The startup, which supports children at various schools in their tech-related endeavours, plans to scale up the bot.

Pandey said they are working with the Madhya Pradesh government and testing it for traffic and crowd management, given its hand-gesture functionalities. (PTI)

New Delhi Declaration on AI Impact adopted

US, UK, China among nations to endorse vision for collaborative AI

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: The US, UK, China, and France are among 88 countries and international organisations to endorse 'New Delhi Declaration on AI Impact', with its adoption marking a significant milestone in global cooperation on artificial intelligence, an official release said on Saturday.

On the principle of 'Sarvajana Hita, Sarvajana Sukhaya' -- Welfare for all, Happiness for all -- the declaration underscores that the benefits of AI must be equitably shared across humanity.

It emphasises strengthening international cooperation and multi-stakeholder engagement, respecting national sovereignty, advancing AI through accessible, and trustworthy frameworks.

The declaration is structured around seven key pillars, that represent the foundation of global AI cooperation. These are democratising AI resources, economic growth & social good, secure & trusted AI, AI for science, access for social empowerment, human capital development, and resilient, efficient & innovative AI systems.

"The AI Impact Summit 2026, held in New Delhi on 18-19 February, concluded with the adoption of the New Delhi Declaration on AI Impact, marking a significant milestone in global cooperation on artificial intelligence. The declaration has been endorsed by 88 countries and international organisations, re-



flecting a broad-based global consensus on leveraging AI for economic growth and social good," the release said.

The list of endorsing countries includes the US, China, the UK, Russia, France, Australia, Belgium, Bhutan, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Ethiopia, Japan, Italy, Israel, Ireland, among others.

Indonesia, Iran, Hungary, Greece, Germany, Finland, Mexico, Myanmar, Nepal, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Oman, The Philippines, Peru, Romania, Rwanda, Senegal, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, the UAE, Ukraine, the EU, and IFAD are also on the list on endorses.

According to the release, the

summit is expected to catalyse long-term international partnerships and position AI as a key driver of economic growth.

The summit delivered a series of voluntary, collaborative global initiatives, including Charter for the Democratic Diffusion of AI that seeks to promote affordable access to foundational AI resources, supports locally relevant innovation ecosystems.

Other aspects include global AI Impact Commons, with focus on platform to scale and replicate AI use cases globally, and enable cross-country collaboration for development impact; trusted AI commons, which is repository of tools, benchmarks, and best practices, with overall supports for development of secure and trustworthy AI

systems.

It also talks of international network of AI for science institutions, that facilitates global scientific collaboration and enhances AI-driven research capabilities.

Another area of focus is AI for social empowerment platform, that enables knowledge exchange and scalable solutions, and focuses on equitable AI adoption.

Other deliverables are AI workforce development playbook and reskilling principles (supports AI skilling, reskilling, and literacy, and prepares nations for an AI-driven economy); and guiding principles on resilient and efficient AI (focus on energy-efficient AI systems, and supported by a playbook on AI infrastructure resilience).

The declaration highlights the role of AI in driving economic transformation, the importance of open-source and accessible AI ecosystems, need for energy-efficient AI infrastructure, and expanding AI's role in science, governance, and public service delivery.

It places firm emphasis on strengthening global cooperation.

As per the official release, participants reaffirmed their commitment to advancing shared global priorities in AI governance; promoting voluntary, non-binding frameworks; and translating vision into action through continued collaboration. (PTI)

86 nations, two int'l organisations sign AI Impact Summit declaration: IT Min Vaishnav

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: As many as 86 countries and two international organisations have signed the AI Impact Summit declaration, IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnav on Saturday said, adding that the US, UK, Canada, China, Denmark, and Germany are among the signatories. The strong global backing for the declaration comes at the conclusion of the India AI Impact Summit in New Delhi. Vaishnav told reporters that nations across the world have formalised and upheld principles of 'welfare of all, and happiness of all'.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi's human-centric AI vision has been accepted by the world. Democratising Artificial Intelligence resources so AI facilities, services and technology can reach everyone in society has been accepted by all," the minister said.

Balancing economic growth with social good has been prioritised, he added.

"Not just economic growth, even social harmony has to be kept in mind. Safety and trust are at the centre, they have been brought among the main points," Vaishnav said, adding that a secure, trustworthy and robust AI framework has been focused on.

Other major areas of thrust include innovations and

development of human capital, he noted.

"For all these areas, all countries have agreed to work together. Almost all countries that participated, including the US, the UK, Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, and Germany... everyone has participated," the minister said. The mega AI Impact Summit secured investment commitments of over USD 250 billion in infrastructure alone, with Vaishnav on Friday terming it a "grand success".

Vaishnav had said participation at the summit crossed five lakh visitors, reflecting strong domestic and global engagement with India's AI push.

The India AI Impact Summit brought together global policymakers, industry leaders and technology experts, positioning India as a key player in shaping international AI governance and infrastructure development.

"More than five lakh visitors participated in the exhibition, learnt a lot, and interacted with many experts from around the world. We had practically every major AI player in the world participating in large numbers. We had so many startups getting the opportunity to showcase their work. Overall, the quality of the discussion was phenomenal," he had said. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Naxalism to end

are its votebank". "It is not enough to just evict infiltrators from encroached lands; they must also be sent out of India," the BJP leader said. He said the EC is conducting the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in several states, and it is obvious that the infiltrators will be identified, but "Rahul Gandhi is protesting the exercise, and hurling one bomb after another, but those do not make sounds of even firecrackers".

Shah said the new campus of the battalion will be developed on land freed from encroachments by infiltrators. "It is, however, not enough to evict the infiltrators from encroached land as they will go and settle somewhere else... They must be removed from the country," he said.

The home minister also alleged that the Congress' policy of protecting infiltrators has threatened Assam's 'jati' (people), 'mati' (land) and 'bhethi' (foundation).

"If the Congress is committed to getting rid of infiltrators, I challenge Rahul Gandhi to mention it in his manifesto," he said. The elections to the 126-member assembly of the state are likely to be held in March-April. He accused the Congress of encouraging infiltration, bringing the "state's demography to a crisis point".

"I want to ask: Who is responsible for Dhubri, Barpeta, Darrang, Morigaon, Bongaigaon, Nagaon and Goalpara becoming Muslim-dominated districts? It is the Congress. The BJP will make Assam free from the sin committed by the Congress of encouraging infiltration," he said.

The Himanta Biswa Sarma government has freed over 1 lakh bighas of land from encroachment by infiltrators, Shah said, adding that the CM has said that another 5 lakh bighas will be cleared over the next five years, if the BJP is voted to power. "I know him (Sarma) well... He keeps his promises," he said.

The eviction drive was carried out in two phases in September 2024 and April 2025, with the first phase turning violent and resulting in the death of two persons and injuries to 40 others.

Noting that infiltrators pose a threat to national security, Shah said, "I am happy that the threat has been neutralised and a campus for those who will protect the country will come up in an area where the Congress had encouraged illegal immigrants to settle."

On the first day of his visit, the home minister launched the second phase of the Vibrant Village Programme (VVP) for 17 states in the country from Nathanpur village in Assam's Cachar district.

He had also inspected a stretch of the Indo-Bangladesh border in Nathanpur and addressed a public meeting in the village. This is Shah's third visit since December 29 to poll-bound Assam, where the ruling BJP is aiming to retain power for the third consecutive term. (PTI)

Ensure basic facilities

provided to the petitioners along with the other affected families.

It directed the authorities "to find out avenues for setting up a proper temporary sanitation mechanism so that the petitioners and other families residing on the said compact plot of patta land can use the same".

It also directed to ensure that in the fair price shops tagged in the ration cards provided to the affected families, there is availability of adequate rations as per the Act of 2013 and upon production of ration cards, food grains are duly provided. The court said that these directions are required to be complied by the authorities.

It also asked the respondent authorities to bring on record their stand by filing the affidavits on or before March 9. "In these affidavits which are being filed, more particularly by the district commissioner, Goalpara there has to be special mention, as to whether the petitioners are being provided with the basic necessities of life forming part of the right to life," the order said, fixing the next date of hearing for March 11. (PTI)

Assam BJP chief

Gandhi Vadra and Sonia Gandhi. Perhaps, (Assam Congress president) Gaurav Gogoi was also present. "They can criticise Modi and the BJP, but demeaning India will not be tolerated," the Lok Sabha MP asserted. Saikia said the protest tried to tarnish the country's image in a platform attended by heads of states and top officials of leading companies. The BJP state chief maintained that the protest was an opposition to scientific temperament, against youth and innovativeness.

He alleged that the Congress has a habit of questioning whenever the country makes a mark at the global level, be it "raising doubts on the surgical strikes or the recent Operation Sindoor".

Noting that all the four arrested persons were office-bearers of the Youth Congress, Saikia said, "We demand a thorough inquiry into where the conspiracy was hatched."

"It was a good thing that they were 'blessed' with slaps and punches on the spot," he added.

Meanwhile, the youth wings of the BJP and the AGP jointly staged a protest in front of the state Congress headquarters, Rajiv Bhawan, here. Leading the protest, BJP's state youth wing president Rakesh Das criticised the Congress and accused its leaders of disgracing the country in front of the world.

Slogans against the opposition party and its top leaders were raised by the agitators. (PTI)

NABARD pegs Assam's

Rajoria praised NABARD's role in advancing agriculture and rural transformation in Assam, including support for infrastructure development, financial inclusion, farm innovation and the e-KCC initiative aimed at expanding digital agricultural credit access. She emphasised the need to address information gaps regarding farm sector credit availability and called for focused lending to promote commercial agriculture, alongside better branding and market linkages for farmer producer organisations (FPOs).

During the event, she also released a brochure on NABARD's FPO support initiatives in Assam and handed over a sanction letter to Bioztra Science & Technology Pvt Ltd for a technology-driven fisheries development project. Senior officials including Dilip Kumar Bora, IAS, Secretary (Finance, T&D), Government of Assam; T P Bhusal, ACS, Secretary (Agriculture); Sushmita Phukan, Regional Director, RBI; and P V S L N Murthy, Chairman-cum-Managing Director of North Eastern Development Finance Corporation, addressed the seminar. The event saw participation from government departments, RBI, commercial and cooperative banks, development agencies, NGOs, FPOs and self-help groups.

On the sidelines, products developed by tribal beneficiaries under NABARD-supported farm sector initiatives were also showcased.

Piracy, migration, drugs

piracy, armed robbery and trafficking as growing concerns. "Piracy, after years of relative suppression, has shown renewed adaptability with pirate groups operating as far as 600 nautical miles offshore, while recent ReCAAP assessments indicate rising armed robbery incidents in Asian waters," he said.

Trafficking of narcotics, arms and other contraband has shown a consistent upward trend in both volume and sophistication, with routes from the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle increasingly converging at sea, he said. Irregular human migration presents an even more troubling trend of increasing fatalities, as migrants are carried in unsafe vessels across longer distances, Tripathi added.

"Taken together, these activities reveal a common thread -- maritime criminal networks are more organised, technologically aware and interconnected -- demanding a credible and coordinated regional response," he said. About the future course of GMC, the Navy chief called for leveraging technology, undertaking joint operations and institutionalising cooperation.

"Firstly, in an era of artificial intelligence, autonomous systems and rapidly adapting threats, we need to leverage technology to move from awareness to early warning and, from early warning to collective response," he said. There is a need to strengthen operational linkages and embed advanced analytic tools to translate shared information into timely action at sea, said the Navy chief.

While the Indian Navy's NISHAR, or Network for Information Sharing, could be a tool for faster exchange of operational information, the Navy is willing to partner with GMC members to share expertise, support capacity building and explore a common digital framework that enhances monitoring, intelligence exchange and operational coordination, he said. Underscoring the need for coordinated efforts, he said, "Across the world, we have seen how collaborative maritime operations produce tangible outcomes. When nations operate together with clearly defined objectives, they generate both deterrence and reassurance." He cited the example of Operation Kurukuru against IUU fishing. Referring to India's initiatives, he said the month-long deployment of an Indian Naval Ship as Indian Ocean Ship SAGAR to the South-West Indian Ocean, with a multinational crew of 44 personnel from partner nations, was "a modest beginning."

"Building upon this experience and guided by our prime minister's vision of MAHASAGAR or Mutual And Holistic Advancement for Security And Growth Across Regions, we will be deploying IOS SAGAR 2.0 later this year with enhanced scope and participation. I invite your suggestions so that this initiative reflects our collective priorities," he said. Quoting PM Narendra Modi, Tripathi said, "Trust has become India's strongest currency." Pitching for cooperation beyond such biennial events, he said, "We have a duty to ensure regular interaction, structured follow-up and work towards incremental outcomes. This will ensure that this forum remains relevant not only to our navies, but to the people whose livelihoods depend upon safe seas."

Earlier, addressing a press conference, the Navy chief said any proposed joint maritime mechanism in the IOR would be based on consensus among participating nations, assuring India's support for partner countries in capacity-building efforts. He said the first session of GMC involved discussions, including the possibility of a joint task force-type arrangement. (PTI)

Zscaler, Bharti Airtel launch AI & Cyber Threat Research Center in India

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 21: Zscaler, in partnership with Bharti Airtel, has announced the launch of the AI & Cyber Threat Research Center -- India, a multi-stakeholder initiative aimed at strengthening cyber resilience and accelerating trusted adoption of artificial intelligence across the country.

The centre will focus on protecting critical sectors such as telecommunications, banking, energy and other essential digital infrastructure, while also supporting safer digital environments for users.

It is designed as a collaborative platform bringing together industry, government, academia and public institutions to enhance national cyber defence capabilities.

According to the companies, India has been a key hub for Zscaler's technology innovation and cyber research, and the new centre expands its presence into a national-level initiative. The programme is positioned as an "In India, For India" effort to strengthen cyber security preparedness and

build a future-ready talent pipeline aligned with the country's digital and economic growth goals.

The centre will leverage Zscaler's Zero Trust Exchange platform, which processes more than 500 billion transactions daily, to generate threat intelligence and support real-time responses to cyber risks. A specialised threat research team dedicated to India will be deployed as part of the initiative. Gopal Vittal, executive vice-chairman of Bharti Airtel, said the partnership will focus on addressing India-specific cyber challenges to build a safer and more resilient digital ecosystem.

He added that research-backed preventive mechanisms would help ensure secure digital engagement for citizens and enterprises.

Jay Chaudhry, chief executive officer and founder of Zscaler, said the initiative would bring the capabilities of the world's largest security cloud to safeguard public and private sectors, while helping develop a new generation of cyber defenders capable of tackling evolving threats.

Galaxy Cement donates dustbins to Batadrava Than

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 21: Galaxy Cement has donated dustbins to Batadrava Than as part of its ongoing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives aimed at promoting cleanliness and environmental awareness.

The company said the initiative is aligned with the objectives of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and is expected to help maintain hygiene and the overall cleanliness of the newly developed shrine premises.

Members of the shrine management committee and local residents expressed appreciation for the contribution, stating that the donation would play an important role in preserving the cleanliness and aesthetic appeal of the historic religious site.

Nipu Haloi, general manager of Galaxy Cement, said that maintaining a clean environment is essential for a healthy society and affirmed the company's commitment to continue supporting public welfare initiatives across Assam.

The programme was also attended by Samiran Deka, deputy general manager, along with other company representatives.

Galaxy Cement said it will continue to undertake social responsibility programmes focused on community welfare and environmental sustainability in the region.

Samsung offers pre-reservation benefits



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 21: Samsung India recently announced exclusive benefits for customers who pre-reserve its upcoming AI-powered Galaxy S series smartphone ahead of its global unveiling.

The company said customers who pre-reserve the device will receive a complimentary memory upgrade from 256GB to 512GB.

In addition, they will be eligible for benefits worth ₹2,699 upon purchasing the smartphone.

Samsung confirmed that the next Galaxy S series AI smartphone will be unveiled on February 25 at the Galaxy Unpacked event in San Francisco, California. Customers can pre-reserve the device by paying a refundable token amount of ₹999 until the launch date.

Pre-reservations are available through Samsung's official website, Samsung Exclusive Stores, and major online retail platforms including Amazon and Flipkart, as well as select offline retail outlets across India.

According to the company, the upcoming Galaxy S series is designed to integrate Galaxy AI features to simplify everyday interactions and enhance user convenience from the moment the device is activated.

NAME CHANGE

I have changed my name to Agnesh Marak. My previous name was Champa Ejung. Therefore the names Agnesh Marak and Champa Ejung are the names of the same and single person. Hence, for all intent and purposes, the name Agnesh Marak will be used.

Agnesh Marak, Village: Boldampara, PO- Satgaon, Pin Code- 782485, P.S: Baihalangso, Dis.: West Karbi Anglong (Assam)

Indian govt weighs impact of US Supreme Court tariff ruling: Comm Min

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: The Indian government is studying the developments on the US tariffs and their implications, the Commerce Ministry said on Saturday.

"We have noted the US Supreme Court judgement on tariffs yesterday (Friday). US President Donald Trump has also addressed a press conference in this regard. "Some steps have been announced by the US administration. We are studying all these developments for their implications," the ministry said.

In a major setback to Trump's pivotal economic agenda for his second term, the US Supreme Court, in a 6-3 verdict written by Chief Justice John Roberts, ruled that the tariffs imposed by the president on nations around the world were illegal and that he had exceeded his authority when he imposed the sweeping levies.

Later, Trump's proclamation, dated February 20,

said: "I impose, for a period of 150 days, a temporary import surcharge of 10 per cent ad valorem on articles imported into the United States, effective February 24, 2026". The US had imposed a reciprocal tariff of 25 per cent on India in August.

Later, an additional 25 per cent was imposed for buying Russian crude oil, taking the total tariffs on India to 50 per cent. Earlier this month, both countries agreed to finalise an interim trade deal, under which Washington will cut down the tariffs to 18 per cent.

So far, the punitive 25 per cent has been removed. The remaining 25 per cent exists.

After the proclamation, the tariffs on Indian goods will now be 10 per cent. The 10 per cent levy is over and above the existing MFN or import duties in the US. (PTI)

Artificial intelligence, hologram tech bring 'Arjuna', 'Lord Krishna' at AI Summit

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: Through cutting-edge hologram technology and power of artificial intelligence, 'Lord Krishna' and warrior 'Arjuna' from the epic Mahabharat have assumed a hi-tech digital avatar at a pavilion of the AI Impact Summit in Delhi.

At the 'Jio Intelligence' pavilion of Reliance Industries, the company has also given a glimpse of the making of the series, "Mahabharat: Ek Dharmayudh", which is fully generated by AI, and was launched few months ago. At the core of the set up is a cove-like structure on which, AI-generated content produced by the company, have been displayed, including some images from the series that is an AI-driven retelling of the Indian epic.

Flanking the cove are two long transparent cylindrical capsules, inside of which an AI-generated images each of 'Lord Krishna' and 'Arjuna', as in the series, have been projected. A console installed next to each capsule allows visitors to "ask a question" to them, and they offer verbal response to these set of queries.

So, visitors to the pavilion can choose from question such as -- "What is Dharma?", "Who is the biggest enemy inside of us?", "When life feels unjust what should we do?" or "What is the biggest trap for humans?".

The AI avatar of Lord Krishna,



shown holding his flute, is a striking one, depicting his famed dusky skin carrying a tinge of blue, and his divine raiment in golden hue, topped with his crown bearing the peacock's feather.

Arjuna's depiction is a sober one, a dhoti paired with a tunic in silver shade, as he holds his famed bow in his right hand, while his royal locks frame his elegant yet austere visage.

A senior official of the Reliance group told PTI that both older generation and youths have visited the pavilion in the last few days.

"Through technology, our endeavour is to make old epics meet newer generations. So, we have used AI to recreate, reimagine our epic Mahabharat. The entire show has been created using AI. It's already on our platform JioHotstar,

about 17 episodes now," the official told PTI.

A special wall at the pavilion also depicts how the characters of the series, were created.

"Our team has worked passionately on this project," the Reliance group official said. The pavilion also showcases AI-based tools for health, fashion, among others.

The AI Impact Summit is being held from February 16-20 at Bharat Mandapam, in which several heads of state, many global AI leaders, academicians and researchers, and heads of global tech giants, and philanthropists are taking part.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the AI Impact Summit 2026 here on Thursday, in the presence of several world leaders and heads of global tech giants. (PTI)

Nagaon unit warns of public health threat from illegal drug sales

Medicine dealers flag AI fake prescriptions, seek PM intervention

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Feb 21: Along with All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists, the Nagaon District Medicine Dealers Association expressed concern over AI-generated fake prescriptions and widespread illegal procurement of restricted medicines from pharmacies across the country, and sought the intervention of the Prime Minister in this regard.

In a press note, Jiban Banik and Manoranjan Borah, president and secretary of the Nagaon District Medicine Dealers Association respectively, stated that illegal procurement of restricted medicines through AI-generated fake prescriptions would pose a grave threat to public health at large. The



organisation sought a high-level probe into the matter and also urged the Government of India as well as the state government to

check the issue as early as possible with top priority so that it could be tackled before becoming a serious menace in society.

JASS 2026 symposium concludes at Tocklai Tea Research Institute

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Feb 21: A two-day symposium titled 'Joint Area Scientific Symposium (JASS) 2026', held at the Tocklai Tea Research Institute (TRRI), Jorhat, under the Tea Research Association (TRA), concluded on Saturday.

ATRI official informed that scientists, tea planters, industry stakeholders, policymakers and technology providers from across the country attended the event, which was organised after a gap of nearly twenty years with the aim to address emerging challenges and opportunities in the tea sector through collaborative dialogue and scientific exchange.

After holding several technical sessions during the two days covering diverse themes such as product diversification, manufacturing practices, tea tasting, plant protection, regulatory conformance and climate change, the valedictory session was held on Saturday evening. Delivering the closing remarks, TRA Director Dr Venkatesan Selvaraj emphasised the importance of continued collaboration between researchers and industry stakeholders to address emerging challenges in the tea sector. The vote of thanks was delivered by scientist Dr Santanu Sabhapondit.

Earlier, at the inaugural session

held on Friday, TRA Chairman Suneel Singh Sikand highlighted critical concerns confronting the industry, including pest and disease pressures, soil degradation, Maximum Residue Limit (MRL) challenges, declining productivity and the growing impact of climate change. He emphasised the need for collective brainstorming and adoption of emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, to enhance sustainability and competitiveness.

TRA Director Dr Venkatesan Selvaraj, in his welcome address, underscored the importance of the symposium as a platform for meaningful engagement between research and industry, particularly at a time when the tea sector is facing complex challenges. Former TRA Chairperson Nayantara Palchoudhuri and former TRA Chairman Prabhat Kamal Bezboruah also spoke on the occasion. Dr Mahipal Singh, Director (Research), Tea Board India and TRA Secretary Joydeep Phukan were also among those who addressed the gathering.

The JASS 2026 souvenir and a book titled 'Drainage for Sustainable Tea Cultivation — Concepts, Practices and Innovation', authored by Tocklai's Water Technologist Dr Ibrahim Kaleb, were released at the inaugural session.

NFR GM inspects 154-km safety stretch from Kamakhya to Dangtal

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 21: Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, General Manager of Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), undertook a comprehensive safety inspection of the Kamakhya – New Bongaigaon – Dangtal section on Friday, as part of the Railways' sustained efforts to strengthen operational safety and infrastructure reliability. The inspection covered a stretch of 154 kilometres. Senior officials from the Headquarters and the Division accompanied the General Manager during the inspection.

During the inspection, the General Manager carried out a detailed assessment of track conditions, minor and major bridges, signalling and telecommunication systems, traction installations, level crossing gates and station infrastructure along the section. Safety critical assets, curves, points & crossings and ongoing maintenance works were closely examined to ensure strict adherence to prescribed safety standards. He also interacted with railway officials and frontline staff to assess operational preparedness, safety awareness and alertness and reviewed the availability and condition of essential safety equipment at stations and work sites.

As part of the inspection programme, detailed stations inspections were conducted at Nalbari, Barpeta Road and New Bongaigaon. Developmental works in these stations are being executed with a focus on passenger amenities, stations modernisation and overall service quality.

The General Manager reviewed track behaviour and operational performance. The General Manager appreciated the efforts of railway staff and assured continued support for strengthening railway services in the region. Northeast Frontier Railway remains committed to providing safe, efficient and passenger-friendly rail services while continuously upgrading its infrastructure to meet growing transportation needs across the Northeast region.

114 class X students get tablet PCs under 'Arohan' scheme in Sonitpur

Distribution programme held at Tezpur Convention Centre for five Assembly constituencies

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Feb 21: Under the "Arohan" scheme, launched in 2022 by the Chief Minister of Assam with the objective of achieving academic excellence and benefiting students across the state, 114 Class X students from 114 secondary schools representing five Assembly constituencies of Sonitpur district were formally provided with tablet PCs on Saturday.

The distribution programme was organised by the District Elementary Education Department, Sonitpur, with support from Samagra Shiksha, Sonitpur at the Tezpur Convention Centre. The tablets were ceremonially handed over by District Commissioner, Sonitpur, Ananda Kumar Das in the presence of mentors, education department officials and teachers from across the district.

Welcoming the gathering, District Education Officer and Inspector of Schools, Sonitpur District Circle, Prabhat Das, stated that students in the district have benefited significantly from the Arohan scheme over the last three years. Among others present on the dais were Additional District Commissioner (Education) James Aind, Assistant Inspector



of Schools Nilotpal Sharma, District Programme Officer Krishna Kanta Deka and Secretary of the Sonitpur District Academic Council Bijoy Kandulana. A special audiovisual presentation highlighting the objectives and achievements of the Arohan scheme was also screened for the students.

Addressing the gathering as chief guest, District Commissioner Ananda Kumar Das

elaborated on the vision of the Arohan scheme and guided the mentees, observing that the period covering Classes IX and X forms the foundation of a student's academic journey. He urged students to make the best use of this crucial phase, stressing that becoming value-driven and socially responsible citizens is more important than merely aspiring to conventional notions of success.

UPPL organises car rally from Udalguri to Kokrajhar for peace, unity & harmony in BTR

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Feb 21: The United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) on Saturday organised a Mega Car Rally from Udalguri to Kokrajhar to promote peace, unity and harmony in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR).

The rally, organised by the Central Youth wing of UPPL, was flagged off by party president and former BTC CEM Pramod Kumar. The rally witnessed participation from a large number of party workers and supporters.

Vehicles carrying party flags and banners will travel through Tamulpur, Baksa and Chirang district through several areas en route, spreading the message of communal harmony and peaceful coexistence.

People cutting across the communities have extended their warm welcome the rally team at different places on their enroute and



concluded its destination at Banaragang Khagrabari playground in Kokrajhar.

Party leaders said the initiative was aimed at strengthening unity among communities and encouraging youth participation in maintaining peace and social cohesion in the region.

Karbi Anglong DC reviews Assam 2.0 preparation

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 21: In a proactive push toward administrative readiness and social welfare, District Commissioner of Karbi Anglong, Aranyak Saikia, IAS, chaired a high-level review meeting on Friday evening to oversee preparations for the upcoming Assam 2.0 programme.

The session focused on tightening inter-departmental synergy to ensure the high-profile initiative, scheduled for rollout within the next two to three weeks, proceeds without a hitch. The meeting brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including departmental heads, police officials, women's groups and civil society representatives.

Saikia conducted a detailed re-

view of key areas including logistics and infrastructure, covering venue management and necessary physical developments; security and transport, focusing on deployment strategies for security personnel and streamlined transportation for attendees and guest management, with the DC mandating superior accommodation and hospitality standards given the high influx of participants expected from across the region.

"The administration is committed to systematic planning. Every department must ensure the timely completion of their assigned tasks to reflect the excellence of the Assam 2.0 vision," Saikia said during the briefing.

Parallel to the administrative review, a sensitisation workshop for

media professionals was conducted at the Circuit House, Diphu, as part of the "Suroxita Xaishab Sonali Axom" (Safe Childhood, Golden Assam) 90-day campaign. Organised by the District Child Protection Unit in collaboration with the District Administration and the State Child Protection Society, the programme aimed to equip journalists with the tools for ethical reporting on sensitive issues.

The workshop focused on key areas including child rights and safety, covering issues of abuse, trafficking and child marriage; ethical reporting, urging media to maintain the privacy and dignity of minors while reporting on crimes and raising awareness about the 1098 Child Helpline, a 24/7 toll-free service for children in distress.

Leopard sighting triggers panic in Greater Taradubi

HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, Feb 21: Residents of the Greater Taradubi area in West Karbi Anglong are living in a state of high anxiety following the reported presence of a leopard in the vicinity. The panic is centred around Do Village, located within the 6-Bithung Rengthama constituency of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

The alarm was raised after villagers from Do Village and neighbouring areas discovered the carcasses of livestock, specifically goats, hidden among bamboo and teak groves. According to local reports, the predator has also been targeting wildlife, including monkeys and wild cats, locally known as Hapah, further confirming the presence of a dangerous carnivore.

In a desperate bid to protect their families and livestock, villagers from Do Village, Patiagaon, Norugaon and Milanpur spent the previous night on high alert. To drive the predator away, locals resorted to bursting firecrackers throughout the night to create loud noises, patrolling the outskirts of residential areas and keeping a close watch on their remaining livestock.

At the time of filing this report, personnel from the Forest Department had arrived on the scene and were working alongside the local community to chase the leopard back into the deep forest. Despite these efforts, a thick cloud of fear continues to hang over the Greater Taradubi region as the leopard remains at large.

International Mother Language Day celebrated

HT Correspondent

MORIGAOON, Feb 21: The International Mother Language Day was celebrated by Morigaon Zila Jatiya Vidyalaya Samanya Rakshi Samiti (MZJVSRS) in collaboration with Barapujia Lalsing Deka Jatiya Vidyalaya and Kaphaha Sankar-Madhab Jatiya Vidyalaya at Barapujia on Friday.

The daylong programme kicked off with the lighting of the ceremonial lamp by vice president of MZJVSRS, Pulindra Saikia. Thereafter, Principal of Lalsing Deka Jatiya Vidyalaya, Sumitjit Deka, offered floral tributes at the mar-

tyrdom memorial. The meeting was chaired by president of the School Management Committee, Kamal Chandra Deka, while the objectives of the event were explained by secretary of MZJVSRS, Biman Hazarika.

The event was attended by Dr Pradeep Kumar Deka, president of Barapujia Sakha Sahitya Sabha, writer Ajanta Sonwal and retired teacher Hemant Kumar Deka. Also present were acting president of MZJVCC, Md Majnu Hussain, Cultural Coordinator Bhaskar Jyoti Hazarika, Hemen Prasad Bardoloi, Anup Lahan and many other dignitaries.

Two-day Kishan Mela concludes in Biswanath

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 21: The Biswanath District Agriculture Department in collaboration with the Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) had conducted a two-day Kishan Mela, which started on Friday, at the premises of the Biswanath District Agriculture Office and concluded on Saturday. The District Commissioner of Biswanath Lakhinandan Saharia, ACS inaugurated the programme while the exhibition and sales stalls were inaugurated by Pramod Borthakur, M.L.A. Biswanath LAC who also lit the ceremonial lamp on the main stage. After welcoming the gathering by Pradip Talukdar, SDAO, the District Agricultural Officer, Baneswar Bey highlighted the achievement reports on various agricultural schemes being implemented during the current financial year. District Commissioner Lakhinandan Saharia, ACS addressed the farmers & kept his speech on importance of various developmental Agricultural Schemes,



urging the farmers to practice double cropping. Additionally, the local MLA urged farmers to be more interested in agricultural work and to avail government facilities in a timely manner.

The fair, provided a dynamic platform for farmers to showcase and sell their products directly. As a part of the Mela, exhibitions by various departments were displayed.

The inaugural speech was delivered by Sub Divisional Agricultural Officer, Pradip Talukdar, while the District Agricultural Officer, Baneswar Bey, provided a comprehensive overview of the ongoing schemes under the De-

40 weavers get looms to boost livelihood

HT Correspondent

MORIGAOON, Feb 21: A distribution programme of 52" R.S. Fly Shuttle Frame Loom (Steel) and accessories to the passed-out trainees of Handloom Training Centres of Morigaon district was held on Saturday at the office premises of the Office of the Assistant Director, Handloom and Textiles, Morigaon.

The programme was graced by Morigaon MLA Ramakanta Dewri and Additional District Commissioner Anushuya Sharma, ACS.

Altogether, 40 passed-out trainees were benefitted under the scheme. The trainees, along with their guardians and departmental staff, were present on the occasion. The distribution aims to empower the trained weavers by providing them with essential infrastructure to take up sustainable handloom activities and enhance their livelihood opportunities.

KADBS launches campaign to save Bodo-Medium Schools

HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, Feb 21: The Karbi Anglong District Bodo Sahitya Sabha (KADBS) in collaboration with its primary units has launched an extensive educational awareness campaign across the district. The initiative comes at a critical time as Bodo-medium primary schools in the region face the threat of closure.

Despite the Bodo language being recognised under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the state of Bodo-medium education in Karbi Anglong has become increasingly precarious. According to organisers, the primary cause of this decline is a shifting trend among parents: Many parents are choosing to enroll their children in English-medium or Assamese-medium private institutions. This shift has led to a drastic reduction in student numbers in government Bodo-medium schools, pushing many to the verge of extinction.

This situation has sparked deep concern among community leaders and intellectuals, who argue that the survival of the language at the grassroots level depends entirely on the health of primary education.

To combat this trend, a series of awareness meetings have been organised across various villages to educate parents on the importance of preserving their mother tongue through formal schooling.

On February 14, meetings were held in four villages under the Howraghat area: Dumukhi Jaluri, South Borganga, No 1 Kaligaon and No 3 Kaligaon. On February 19, the campaign reached the Howraghat Tinali area, covering Gorjoga and Chunpura villages. On Friday, a simultaneous drive was conducted in four locations within the Langhin

area: Phatikjan, Goroimari, Itapara and Dhupguri. The meetings saw active participation from prominent Bodo Sahitya Sabha officials across the four venues. Phatikjan was attended by Moge Narzary, Subhash Basumatary, Daoharu Khakhlari, Dinesh Daimary and Nakul Chandra Brahma. At Dhupguri, the meeting was attended by Rituraj Basumatary, Bistiram Daimary, Sonaram Basumatary, Madan Chandra Swargiary and Tanuram Daimary. Goroimari was attended by Nirmal Basumatary, Kalyan Rabha Brahma, Khagen Goyary, Rajaram Basumatary and at Itapara, the meeting was attended by Sumeshwar Basumatary, Ranjit Khakhlari, Dalsing Basumatary and Tulendra Khakhlari.

The speakers at these events emphasised that while learning multiple languages is beneficial, abandoning the mother tongue during foundational years could lead to a cultural and linguistic identity crisis for the next generation.

Block-level Science Congress held at Howraghat under ASTEC aegis

HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, Feb 21: Under the aegis of the Assam Science Technology and Environment Council (ASTEC), Department of Science and Technology, Government of Assam, a day-long block-level Science Exploration and National Children's Science Congress (NCSC) was successfully held on Friday.

The event, organised by the Aryabhata Science Centre (Howraghat Block) and the NCSC Karbi Anglong District in collaboration with Samagra Shiksha Assam, took place at Howraghat Government ME Higher Secondary School.

The competition was part of the Rashtriya Avishkar Abhiyan for the academic session 2025-26 and aimed to foster scientific temperament among students at the secondary level.

The programme was inaugurated by Bidyaram Singnar, Headmaster of Howraghat ME School. Bhabananda Khakhlari, District Coordinator of NCSC and Aryabhata Science Centre, Karbi Anglong and Krishna Rajbongshi, noted educationist and social worker, also attended the programme.

A total of 75 students representing 18 schools under the Howraghat Education Block participated in the event. In the Junior Group, 30 projects were presented, while the Senior Group saw eight projects. Out of the 38 total projects presented, 10 were selected by the judges to represent the block at the upcoming district-level competition.

The event concluded with the distribution of certificates to all participants, celebrating their hard work and scientific curiosity.



The legacy of Pratima Barua Pandey in the upliftment of folk music of Assam

By: Diganta Barooah

Padmashri Pratima Barua Pandey is a well-known name in the world of Assamese folk music. She sang Assamese folk 'Goalporiya' songs continuously from the 1950s to the 21st century, establishing a popular genre of folk music in West Assam and giving it a new dimension. Pratima Barua, the daughter of the famous royal family of Gauripur, threw away the royal nobility of the princess and lived an ordinary life among the common people. Her interest in sharing the happiness and sorrows of the common people, especially her tendency to avoid the mentality of royal life and come out of the egoistic walls of the nobility and blend with the common people brought Pratima Barua unprecedented popularity. Pratima inherited these qualities from her father. Pratima Baruah was born on 3rd October, 1934 at 19 Baliganj Chakula Road, Kolkata. She was born with a golden spoon in her mouth. She was a descendant of a prominent zamindar family in Assam. Her father was the famous elephant expert Prakritish Chandra Barua and her mother was Malati Barua. Pratima started singing folk songs at an early age. A report in a newspaper in Bengal is significant in this regard.



The news published on 4th May, 1973 read as follows: "Each of the descendants of Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua of Gauripur has left his or her mark in some aspects of art and culture. Pratima Barua continued the legacy and traditions of Gauripur for nearly two generations. She spent her life in schools and colleges in Kolkata but was attracted to the blue Hills, the red coloured River and the green valleys of Assam. From the age of five or six years, she has been singing indigenous folk songs listening from many people. In 1949, she sang for the first time at her first stage performance at a function in Kolkata. She was only eleven or twelve years old."

It is noteworthy that at that time the songs of the rural people were far away from the way of luxurious lifestyles of the royal family or Pratima Barua but eventually with the passage of time she considered those folk songs of the rural masses to be the heart and soul of her life. Though Classical music was given preference at the royal court and functions of royal family but Pratima Barua found in the common people's Goalporiya folk songs her food for the soul. By performing, Pratima Barua not only introduced a particular genre of folk music, but it is a great achievement for various reasons and can be considered magnificent cultural phenomena. There was a time when the Guwahati Radio Station refused to broadcast these folk songs. However, folk songs gained recognition through the efforts of great personalities like Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Rudra Barua, Purushottam Das and others. Since 1960, Goalporiya folk songs have been broadcasted on All India Radio. Therefore, the famous poet Hiren Bhattacharya once commented that Pratima Barua actually brought Goalpara closer to Assam.

Regional music and indigenous songs, as the people of this region call them, have a very important place in the western region of undivided Goalpara district, which can be said to be very bright and glorious. Apart from Goalpara, these songs were also popular in East Purnia district of Bihar, Jhapa and Marang districts of Nepal, Jalpaiguri, Kochbehar, Darjeeling districts of North Bengal, North Mymensingh district of Bangladesh, Rangpur and Dinajpur districts. For ethnological reasons, the social and cultural history of the region is often the same. There are some minor differences, but the root is the same and although the regions have been divided for the same political reasons, the folk songs of this region have not faded. The songs are characterized by the geographical, historical, social, economic, political and cultural context of the region and these influences. This is the characteristic of the region and social life and folk songs have played a communicative role in various aspects of it. The music is rich in the hopes and aspirations, happiness and sorrow, laughter and tears, customs and traditions of the people living in this region. These songs were first broadcasted by 'Sudhakantha' Dr. Bhupen Hazarika in 1958 as 'Goalporiya' folk songs from Aakashbani Guwahati station but the researchers of the present period have termed them as 'Rajbongshi' folk songs in historical context. Pratima Barua gave a respectable place to the folk culture of Goalpara. Folk songs, the main components of folk culture, are now synonymous with her name. Pratima Barua was the architect of the wave of the Renaissance of folk music of Assam and Goalpara. This period of Pratima Barua can be termed as the Romantic Age of this culture of folk music of Assam, India and Goalpara. This culture, which had been hidden in the darkness of the village life for so long, was abandoned by the orthodox society as uncultured and vulgar. There are many artists who had tried earlier to establish it in the civilized environment of the cities but Pratima Barua's innovative way of presenting the Goalporiya folk songs gave it a new lease of life. It was recognised in India that Pratima Barua Pandey was the heroine of the romantic era

of that culture of traditional folk songs whose new hopeful efforts brought this folk culture to such a level that people still remember her with immense respect and reverence. The artist Pratima Barua Pandey not only established the social value of folk music and songs but also made it acceptable to everyone among the masses. Pratima Barua did not want to sell folk music of Assam and Goalpara as a marketable product rather she established it as the very dimension of the social fabric of Assam and its common people.

The reason for this is very simple. She had immense respect and honor for folk music. It was because of Pratima Barua's unconventional rare qualities and talent that brought respect to the folk music of Assam and India. She was not swept away by the lure and temptation of money and fame rather she found immense pleasure and happiness staying with the common people who are sons of the soil. There was a time when folk music was looked down upon compared to other forms of music but Pratima Barua brought back that glory of folk music and presented it among the people by her own exemplary example. During her lifetime, Pratima Barua was able to bring the genre of folk music to a respectable level. She was a legendary, but unassuming figure in the world of folk music.

Through folk music, Pratima Baruah Pandey encouraged the people of Kamatapur who had lost their culture, literature, language and civilization to bring back that glory again of their long lost tradition and culture and she showed the path of light to the common people of Kamatapur in Assam. When the people of Kamatapur, disoriented by the twists and turns of time, listened to the songs sung by Pratima Barua Pandey in her soulful voice. They realized that the themes or characters of the songs were they were themselves. Even if they lost everything, some things are still alive in people's minds. Through the songs, their past life is restored again. Slowly and gradually, it dawned in the minds of the audience. One of the main reasons for this was that the language of the folk songs which was the spoken language of every person living in Goalpara or Kamatapur region of Koch Rajbongshi. Therefore, it is important to understand the importance of a language in the upliftment of a society in a country. The combination of the local language of the masses and the beautiful melody of the folk songs made the listeners wander into the past. In late 1959, with the release of the film 'Mahut Bandhure' which

was directed by late Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Rajbongshi folk songs spread far and wide. The main attraction of the film was its songs. The songs were sung by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika and Pratima Barua Pandey. People who were previously ashamed to sing Rajbongshi songs or speak this language could slowly realize the importance of the songs or the language without fear or hesitation by listening to the folk songs in their spoken language in the voice of great Pratima Barua Pandey.

There are many different types of folk cultures in our country. There was no way to attract the attention of the educated community, but Pratima Barua Pandey accomplished the impossible. Pratima Barua Pandey's folk songs could touch the hearts of all listeners, educated and uneducated alike. Such a widespread appeal of artists to all sections of society is certainly very rare. This was the greatness of Padmashri Pratima Barua Pandey as an artist. She was awarded the title of 'Lok Sangeetogyaa' at the Nalbari session of the Sahitya

Sabha in 1962 in honor of her artistic being.

In 1988, she received the Sangeet Natak Academy Award from His Excellency the President of India. She was also nominated for the Padma Shri, a prestigious civilian award in India, for her outstanding contribution to folk music. In addition, the University of North Bengal awarded her the Honorary D.Lit. Pratima Barua Pandey passed away on 27th December, 2002 at the age of 67 years leaving behind countless admirers of her music. She will be remembered forever as long as the folk music, art, tradition and culture of Assam and India stays in the very spirit and being of the generations of people of Assam and India. Long Live the folk music, art, culture and traditions of the common masses of Assam and India inspired by the greatness of Pratima Barua Pandey. (The author is the Assistant Development Officer, Transformation and Development Department, Government of Assam. He can be reached at digantaraju@gmail.com and digantabarooah1971@gmail.com)



Shankar: The end of an era in Indian literary humanism

By: Mowsam Hazarika

The passing of eminent Bengali author Mani Shankar Mukhopadhyay, fondly known as Shankar, on February 20, 2026, marks the end of a remarkable chapter in Indian literature. With his death at a Kolkata hospital, India has lost not merely a celebrated novelist but a chronicler of urban life, human aspirations, and moral dilemmas in a rapidly changing society. His literary voice, deeply rooted in lived experiences and empathetic observation, helped shape modern Bengali prose and influenced generations of readers across linguistic boundaries.

Born in 1933 in what is now West Bengal, Shankar's life itself was a story of resilience and determination. Orphaned at a young age, he grew up facing financial hardship, yet his struggles later became the foundation of his literary imagination. Unlike many writers who wrote from academic abstraction, Shankar wrote from the streets, offices, courtrooms, and corridors of everyday life. His early professional experiences, including his association with the legal world and corporate offices, exposed him to the complexities of human character and social mobility. These experiences were vividly reflected in his novels, where ambition, ethics, and survival often intersected.

Shankar's most celebrated work, Chowringhee, remains a timeless portrayal of life inside a grand Kolkata hotel, where stories of class, loneliness, love, and ambition unfold simultaneously. Through a mosaic of characters—from hotel staff to elite guests—he painted a nuanced picture of post-independence urban India. The novel's enduring popularity lies in its ability to humanize individuals across social hierarchies, a theme that resonated deeply with readers not only in Bengal but across the country through translations and adaptations.

Another landmark work, Seemabaddha, explored the corporate world and the moral compromises demanded by ambition. The story gained further prominence when it was adapted into a film by legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray, bringing Shankar's narrative depth to a wider audience. The cinematic interpretation reaffirmed the universality of Shankar's themes, particularly the ethical dilemmas of modern professional life.

What distinguished Shankar from many of his contemporaries was his unique narrative style—simple yet profound, accessible yet layered. His prose did not rely on ornamentation; instead, it drew strength from observation and psychological insight. He had an exceptional ability to capture the quiet struggles of middle-class existence, making his stories relatable to ordinary readers. In a literary landscape often divided between high modernism and populist writing, Shankar built a bridge, offering literary depth without alienating the common reader.

In an age of rapid digital storytelling and fleeting attention spans, Shankar's enduring relevance reminds us of the power of reflective writing. His legacy urges contemporary writers to observe deeply, write honestly, and remain rooted in human experience. Even in his absence, Shankar's literary universe will continue to illuminate the complexities of life, ensuring that his voice remains an inseparable part of India's literary heritage. (The author can be reached at 9435103685)

His writings also documented the transformation of Kolkata as a cultural and economic hub. Through his novels and essays, one witnesses the changing ethos of urban India—from colonial hangovers to the rise of corporate culture. In this sense, Shankar was not just a storyteller but also a social historian. His works preserved the emotional

geography of a city in transition, much like how regional writers across India have documented local realities through literature. Beyond his literary achievements, Shankar's contribution lies in democratizing reading culture. His books reached readers who might otherwise have felt distant from literary fiction. Students, office workers, and general readers found their own lives mirrored in his characters. That is why his popularity endured across decades, transcending generational shifts and evolving literary tastes.

For readers in Assam and the wider Northeast, Shankar's works hold particular relevance. His exploration of social mobility, migration, and ethical conflict reflects themes familiar to societies negotiating tradition and modernity. As a writer and observer of social change, his legacy reminds us that literature can serve as a mirror to society's aspirations and anxieties. Writers who document social realities—whether in Bengali, Assamese, or any other Indian language—share a common responsibility of preserving lived histories through narrative.

The demise of Shankar comes at a time when regional literatures are gaining renewed recognition in India's multilingual literary ecosystem. His life stands as a reminder that regional language writers can achieve national and global relevance without abandoning their linguistic roots. Like many literary stalwarts, he proved that authenticity of voice matters more than the scale of the platform.

In remembering Shankar, one must also acknowledge his humanism. His characters were rarely heroes or villains; they were flawed individuals navigating complex social structures. This moral realism gave his writing emotional credibility and intellectual depth. His stories did not preach; they revealed. They did not judge; they understood.

By: Satyabrata Borah

As the bicentenary of the Treaty of Yandaboo approaches, Assam finds itself standing at a quiet but deeply significant historical threshold. Two hundred years ago, a single treaty signed far away from the soil of Assam altered the course of its destiny forever. The Treaty of Yandaboo was not just a diplomatic document that ended a war between the British East India Company and Burma. It was a turning point that pushed Assam out of nearly six centuries of political independence and into the long, complex experience of colonial rule. Looking back today, it becomes clear that this treaty reshaped not only the political map of the region but also the confidence, identity, and historical momentum of an entire people.

Before 1826, Assam had existed for centuries as a distinct political and cultural space under Ahom rule. The Ahoms, who had established their kingdom in the thirteenth century under the leadership of Chaolung Sukapha, gradually built a state that was deeply rooted in the land and its people. Their rule was not merely administrative or military in nature. It evolved as a social and cultural system that accommodated local customs, languages, and traditions. Over time, the Ahoms adopted Assamese language and culture, forging a shared identity with the indigenous population. Religious tolerance, social balance, and the inclusion of diverse communities into the state structure became defining features of Ahom governance. For nearly six hundred years, Assam resisted repeated external invasions and maintained its sovereignty with remarkable resilience.

Yet history often turns not only on external threats but also on internal weaknesses. By the late eighteenth century, the Ahom state had begun to show signs of deep internal strain. The Moamoria rebellion shook the foundations of the kingdom, weakening its administrative and military strength. Prolonged civil conflicts, court intrigues, and power struggles eroded the authority of the monarchy. Decision-making became short-sighted and fragmented. The unity that had once allowed the Ahoms to repel powerful invaders slowly gave way to distrust and division. It was in this moment of vulnerability that

Assam became exposed to forces far beyond its control.

Taking advantage of Assam's internal turmoil, Burmese forces repeatedly invaded the region in the early nineteenth century. These invasions left deep scars on the collective memory of the Assamese people. Villages were destroyed, temples desecrated, and countless lives lost to violence, displacement, and fear. The Burmese occupation was marked by extreme brutality, and even today, stories of that period evoke a sense of horror and trauma. Faced with the inability to protect their kingdom, sections of the Ahom ruling elite turned to the British East India Company for military assistance. At that moment, seeking British help may have seemed like a necessary and unavoidable choice, a desperate attempt to escape immediate annihilation. However, history would soon reveal the heavy price of that decision.

The British intervention in the Anglo-Burmese War led to the defeat of Burmese forces. But victory did not restore Assam's independence. Instead, it paved the way for colonial control. On 24 February 1826, the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the British East India Company and the Burmese kingdom. Assam, which had already suffered immense devastation, was transferred to British authority without any consultation with its people. The Assamese had no voice at the negotiating table. Their land, their political future, and their sovereignty were decided by distant powers pursuing their own strategic interests.

With the signing of the treaty, Assam was abruptly transformed from an independent kingdom into a colonial possession. This shift marked the end of a long tradition of self-rule and the beginning of an uncertain new chapter. British rule brought with it profound changes to Assam's political, economic, and social life. Some of these changes were presented as reforms or progress, but beneath them lay the logic of colonial exploitation.

To the British, Assam was primarily valuable as a resource-rich territory. Its fertile land, forests, oil reserves, and especially its potential for tea cultivation made it strategically and economically attractive. The development of tea plantations did create a new economic landscape, but the benefits were unevenly distributed. Large

tracts of land were taken over for plantations, often displacing local communities. Labour was brought in from outside the region under harsh conditions, creating new social tensions. Local farmers found their landholdings shrinking, while changes in land revenue systems pushed many into debt and poverty. Assam's economy was increasingly shaped to serve imperial interests rather than local needs.

Colonial rule also brought significant social and cultural transformations. Western education was introduced, giving rise to a new educated middle class. This exposure to modern ideas encouraged rational thought, scientific temper, and eventually political awareness. At the same time, however, colonial policies often undermined local languages and traditions.

In the early years of British administration, Assamese was denied recognition as a separate language and was replaced by Bengali in official and educational settings. This decision deeply hurt Assamese society, creating a crisis of linguistic and cultural self-respect. Language, which had long been a pillar of Assamese identity, suddenly became a site of struggle.

The response to this cultural marginalisation laid the foundation for a powerful intellectual and cultural awakening. From the late nineteenth century onwards, Assamese thinkers, writers, and reformers began to assert the distinctiveness of their language and culture.

Figures such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, and later Lakshminath Bezbaroa played crucial roles in reviving Assamese literature and shaping modern Assamese identity. Literary movements, language campaigns, and cultural initiatives helped restore confidence and pride among the people. In an indirect yet profound way, the colonial experience initiated by the Treaty of Yandaboo forced Assamese society to reflect on itself and articulate its identity in modern terms.

As the bicentenary of the treaty draws near, it becomes evident that the legacy of Yandaboo extends far beyond the nineteenth century. Many of the political and economic structures introduced during colonial rule continue to influence Assam today. Questions surrounding land rights, resource control, migration, and centre-

state relations have roots in policies framed during the colonial period. Administrative boundaries, legal frameworks, and governance models created by the British still shape the functioning of the state in various ways.

The Treaty of Yandaboo should therefore not be remembered solely as a moment of defeat or loss. While it undeniably represents a painful rupture in Assam's history, it also serves as a powerful lesson. It reveals how internal disunity and lack of long-term vision can weaken even the strongest of states. The fall of the Ahom kingdom was not caused only by external aggression but also by internal fragmentation. This lesson remains deeply relevant in the present, reminding society of the importance of unity, foresight, and collective responsibility.

At the same time, the treaty reminds us that a nation's history is not built only on moments of glory. Defeat, suffering, and struggle are equally part of the historical journey.

Understanding these chapters honestly allows a society to grow stronger and wiser. The colonial period that followed Yandaboo also gave rise to resistance, reform, and the eventual aspiration for freedom. The growth of national consciousness, the defence of language and culture, and the desire for self-determination can all be traced, in part, to the disruptions caused by colonial rule.

For today's generation, the Treaty of Yandaboo should not remain confined to textbooks or academic discussions. It should be engaged with as a living history that continues to shape the present. It reminds us that freedom is never easily won, and once achieved, it must be carefully protected. Two hundred years later, the shadow of Yandaboo still lingers over Assam, but within that shadow lies the opportunity to draw strength, clarity, and purpose from the past.

If the lessons of history are understood with honesty and humility, the pain associated with Yandaboo can be transformed into a source of collective wisdom. By respecting the past, acknowledging historical truths, and remaining committed to justice, unity, and dignity, Assam can ensure that the memory of the treaty serves not as a symbol of helplessness but as a reminder of resilience. In this deeper understanding lies the true meaning of marking two hundred years since the Treaty of Yandaboo.

Indian puppetry: A new direction

By: Simanta Sarma

Indian puppetry is a very ancient, profound, and multidimensional performing art form enriched with diverse artistic techniques, deeply rooted in Indian civilization and culture. This art is not merely a medium of entertainment; it is a vivid expression of society's thoughts, beliefs, morality, and philosophy of life. It is also connected with fields such as education, commerce, science, and medicine, and is closely associated with rituals, mythological narratives, folklore, and social realities. Over the ages, this art has touched human hearts deeply and contributed to shaping society.

With the passage of time, as society, politics, and culture have changed, puppetry has also undergone transformations in its form, themes, and applications. Indian puppetry has occupied a prominent place on the global stage. In the modern era of India, this transformed form can be described as "a new direction in Indian puppetry."

The history of Indian puppetry extends back to ancient times. References to puppets are found in Sanskrit literature, particularly in the Natyashastra, where the term Sutraddhar reflects the philosophical significance of puppetry. The word Sutraddhar means a person who controls characters with the help of strings or threads. This concept compares life to puppets controlled by an invisible string, reflecting the depth of Indian spiritual philosophy. Moreover, literary works such as Panchatantra, Kathasaritsagara, Hitopadesha, and Burhi Aair Sadhu contain puppet-like characters and narrative structures, indicating that puppetry was an important medium of storytelling.

Archaeological evidence and folk traditions indicate that even before the development of formal theatre, puppetry was used in religious rituals, worship practices, and collective storytelling. Puppet theatre especially developed as a popular art form during temple festivals, royal court entertainment, and village fairs. Through this medium, religious beliefs, mythological stories, and the moral codes of society were communicated to the common people.

During the ancient and medieval periods, different forms of puppetry evolved across various regions of India. In Rajasthan, the Kathputli tradition became particularly popular, where wooden puppets controlled by strings were used to present tales of Rajput bravery and folklore.

In Karnataka, Gombeyatta; in Andhra Pradesh, shadow puppetry known as Tholu Bommalata; and in Kerala, Tholpavakoothu were widely practiced. In West Bengal and Odisha, rod puppetry (Putul Nach) flourished, while in north-eastern states such as Assam, folk-based puppet traditions played an important role in the dissemination of social and religious narratives. Stories from the great epics were often adapted for puppet performances. In this way, puppet theatre became a medium that integrated multiple artistic elements and served as a means of knowledge dissemination.

During the medieval period, particularly in the time of the Bhakti movement, puppetry was used as an important medium for religious devotion and moral education. Mythological narratives such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Krishna legends were presented to the masses through puppet theatre. During this time, puppetry was considered not merely a form of entertainment but also a powerful tool for social education.

During the colonial period, the influence of modern theatre and Western entertainment caused puppetry to face certain challenges. Nevertheless, in rural society and folk culture, the art managed to preserve its existence. After independence, puppetry experienced a revival through the initiatives of government cultural institutions, researchers, and artists. Cultural festivals, educational programs, and public awareness campaigns used puppetry to give new life to this art form.

In the present era, puppetry has gained a new direction by integrating traditional concepts with modern technology, new themes, and social messages. It has been widely used in educational programs, health awareness, environmental protection, and social reform initiatives. Thus, Indian puppetry has created a beautiful bridge between tradition and modernity.

Just like India's geographical and cultural diversity, puppetry has developed in multiple forms. Rajasthan's string puppets or Kathputli reflect royal court life, heroic legends, and folklore. In West Bengal, rod puppetry or Putul Nach is known for its strong social themes and dramatic language. In Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, shadow puppetry (Tholu Bommalata, Tolu Gombeyatta) is famous for its large leather puppets and lengthy epic presentations. Kerala's glove puppetry, Pavakathakali, is a puppet adap-

tation of the theatrical language of Kathakali. All these traditions reflect local society, beliefs, and lifestyles, making Indian puppetry a rich and diverse cultural heritage.

India is a country enriched with multiple languages, ethnicities, and cultures. This geographical and cultural diversity is clearly reflected in Indian folk arts as well. Puppetry or puppet theatre is one of the oldest and most popular folk performing arts of India. In different states of the country, various forms of puppetry have developed according to local traditions, beliefs, languages, and social environments. This regional diversity has established Indian puppetry as a unique cultural heritage.

In Rajasthan, string puppets or Kathputli are the most popular form of puppetry. The word Kathputli is derived from kath (wood) and putli (puppet). These puppets are usually made of wood and are decorated with colorful fabrics, ornaments, and royal costumes. They are controlled with the help of strings, which is why they are called string puppets.

Rajasthani Kathputli performances generally depict tales of Rajput bravery, royal court life, folklore, and historical events. These puppet plays are presented through a combination of music, dance, and humor. Traditionally, artists from the Bhat community have preserved this art form. This tradition reflects the social history and cultural heritage of Rajasthan.

In West Bengal, rod puppetry or Putul Nach is a significant form of puppetry. These puppets are generally large in size and are controlled with the help of rods or sticks. The performers dance and act along with the puppets, giving the performance a more lively and dramatic appearance.

The themes of Putul Nach are usually based on mythological stories, social issues, and moral lessons. Strong dramatic language, music, and dialogue are used in this art form, and it is also employed to create social awareness.

In South India, shadow puppetry is a very ancient and highly developed form of puppetry. In Andhra Pradesh it is known as Tholu Bommalata, and in Karnataka as Togalu Gombeyatta. These puppets are usually made of leather or translucent materials and are decorated with colorful designs.

In shadow puppet theatre, the shadows of the puppets are created using a light source and a screen. These performances are



generally based on the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other mythological stories. The presentations are lengthy and enriched with a combination of music, vocal narration, and dance. This art reflects the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of South India.

In Kerala, glove puppetry known as Pavakathakali is a unique form of puppetry influenced by the classical dance-drama Kathakali. These puppets are worn on the fingers and controlled by hand movements.

In Pavakathakali performances, costumes, facial expressions, and dramatic language similar to Kathakali are used. The themes are generally mythological and religious, and the art is closely connected with Kerala's traditional music and theatrical style.

Assam also has its own puppet tradition. Assamese puppet theatre is generally used to present folklore, mythological stories, and social messages. Puppets in Assam are made using bamboo, cloth, paper, and clay. Through puppet theatre, educational and social awareness is promoted. In modern times, puppetry in Assam has been used in education, health awareness, and social development programs. Puppetry performances are also inspired by stories from films and documentaries, making them engaging for audiences.

In the field of education, puppetry has been integrated with school curricula to help students understand lessons more easily. Small puppet-based performances, including drama and dance, are created based on classroom subjects to benefit learners. Educational puppet content has been developed on topics such as value education,

science, mathematics, social studies, religion, and spirituality. In this field, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) under the Government of India and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) under the Government of Assam have taken initiatives to incorporate such methods in education. Along with them, private institutions have also been working in this area. In this regard, Surojit Academy of Guwahati has been providing educational programs in schools through puppetry.

The regional diversity of Indian puppetry reflects the country's rich and multifaceted cultural heritage. These art forms represent local societies, religious beliefs, historical events, and lifestyles. Puppet theatre is not only a medium of entertainment but also a powerful tool for education, social awareness, and cultural preservation.

In the modern era, governments and various cultural organizations have undertaken several initiatives to preserve and promote puppetry. By including puppet theatre in schools, theatre festivals, and cultural programs, the younger generation is being introduced to this heritage.

Traditionally, puppetry was an important medium for social development. Stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, regional legends, and folklore were presented to the public in simple and engaging ways through puppet theatre. These stories conveyed moral values such as truth, duty, sacrifice, and justice.

Puppeteers were custodians of oral history. Through songs, dialogues, and dramatic structures,

they preserved the memories, experiences, and history of society. Puppet theatre also created awareness among people by presenting social inequalities, injustice by rulers, poverty, and everyday problems through satire and symbolism. Because of its simple visual language and theatrical structure, this art was easily accessible to people of all ages and educational levels. Although the cultural value of puppetry is immense, in the modern era it faces many challenges. Urbanization and the widespread influence of television, cinema, and digital media have gradually reduced audiences for traditional puppet theatre. Hereditary puppeteer families are facing economic difficulties, forcing many artists to shift to other professions.

Furthermore, the lack of proper documentation, limited training systems, and the absence of regular performance opportunities have caused puppetry to become neglected. Even where preservation efforts exist, there is often a lack of connection with contemporary society. Puppetry is one of India's oldest and most traditional folk performing arts. Over centuries, it has played an important role in religious storytelling, folk culture, social education, and entertainment. However, in the modern era, rapid social change, technological advancement, and lifestyle transformation have created numerous challenges and crises for puppetry. These problems threaten not only the survival of the art form but also the livelihoods of the artists associated with it.

In today's world, the widespread expansion of digital media such as television, cinema, mobile phones, and the in-

ternet has completely formed people's concepts of entertainment. The easy availability and attractiveness of digital entertainment have gradually reduced public interest in traditional puppet theatre. Earlier, puppet shows were popular in villages and towns during festivals, fairs, and social events, but now the number of such events has decreased. As a result, puppeteers are facing difficulties in obtaining regular performance opportunities.

Due to urbanization, the space for traditional folk culture has gradually shrunk. Because of the busy nature of modern life and lack of time, people have fewer opportunities to enjoy long folk dramas or puppet performances. Moreover, in urban society, modern entertainment media has gained greater importance, resulting in the neglect of folk arts. Puppetry was mostly preserved through hereditary traditions. Many families were associated with this art for generations. However, due to irregular income, limited performance opportunities, and lack of government support, many artists have been forced to shift to other professions. As a result, interest among the younger generation in learning this art has declined, threatening its continuity.

Traditionally, the guru-disciple system was used to teach puppetry. But in modern times, this tradition has gradually weakened. Organized education systems, training centers, and research opportunities related to puppetry are limited. Consequently, there is a risk that many subtle techniques and traditional knowledge may disappear without proper documentation (...to be continued in the next issue)

Bhukhan Pathak - Connecting Assam with the world through the life-changing influence of narratives

By: Prantik Deka

Bhukhan Pathak's journey transcends that of a typical digital creator; it is an extraordinary tale of a man who emerged from extreme poverty in Barpeta, Assam, to establish himself as one of the most courageous cultural ambassadors representing the Northeast on the global stage. Since 2016, he has emerged as a leading influencer from Northeast India and a pioneer in the Assamese social media domain, particularly on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. He holds the distinction of being the first Assamese YouTuber to earn the Silver Play Button and is acclaimed for creating top-notch content in the Assamese language, catering to a worldwide audience.

Throughout his journey, he may have lacked privilege, institutional backing, or government support. However, he carried an unwavering resolve, a deep sense of cultural pride, and the courage to bring Assam's story to the global stage, often at significant personal risk.

Bhukhan started his digital journey in 2016, aiming to promote Assamese voices and culture through social media. Over the years, he has built a strong regional digital community in Northeast India with impactful content. His digital journey began with 'Assamese Mixture', a YouTube channel he created to highlight various aspects of Assamese entertainment, culture, cinema, and personalities that are often overlooked by the mainstream media. The channel became a vibrant hub for celebrity interviews, film updates, box office insights, and authentic Assamese cultural stories, appealing to audiences in India and beyond. Currently, its reach highlights its credibility and audience connection: YouTube (Assamese Mixture) with 11.40 lakh subscribers, Facebook with 6 lakh followers, and Instagram with 1.58 lakh followers.

What really sets Bhukhan Pathak apart from his peers is his role as a cultural ambassador. Contrary to numerous digital influencers who depend on opulence and fads, Bhukhan Pathak stands out as a cultural advocate who takes financial, physical, and emotional risks to promote Assam's identity in every location he visits. Bhukhan, unlike many creators, ventures out without backing from any governmental or institutional sources. He jeopardizes his health, safety, and livelihood to share unheard stories, placing culture above comfort and impact over glamour. Each international journey serves as a platform for showcasing Assamese identity, with his vlogs serving as missions rather than mere performances.

Bhukhan embarked on a remarkable journey from Assam to Russia, exploring the vibrant cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg while presenting Assam's Gamosa as an emblem of global culture. His audacious

spirit shone brightly during his time in Siberia and Yakutsk, the coldest inhabited city on the planet, where the mercury dipped to a staggering -60°C. Undeterred by the severe threats to his well-being, he championed Assam's essence in one of the most unforgiving regions on Earth. Accompanied by a Russian friend and dressed in traditional Assamese dhoti and Gamosa, he visited a local school in Yakutia. There, he engaged with students, sharing insights about Assam, its rich tea heritage, the vibrant Bihu festival, and the famous one-horned rhino. The students reacted with a mix of amazement and enthusiasm, as it was their first introduction to Assam and Northeast India, conveyed with genuine pride and authenticity.

Bhukhan expanded Assam's cultural influence to Singapore and Malaysia, showcasing Assamese traditions in global urban settings. In Sri Lanka, his efforts held historical importance as he promoted Assamese culture in Colombo, Kandy, and Galle. During his visit to the World Heritage site Ashok Vatika, Bhukhan linked Assam's cultural identity with a broader pan-Asian heritage, proudly donning the Gamosa as a symbol of pride.

During the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar, Bhukhan took the Indian National Flag and Assam's Gamosa to highlight Assam on a global stage. His engagement with the Assam Society in Qatar created a significant emotional and cultural connection, reconnecting the diaspora with their heritage and presenting Assam to an international audience in a context that extended beyond sports.

Bhukhan's journey to China was driven by a blend of historical curiosity and significant personal risk. He ventured to the birthplace of Ahom king Chaolung Sukapha, uncovering and recording the historical ties that have greatly influenced Assam's identity. Through his vlogs, he highlighted Assam's Ahom legacy, the Great Wall of China, and daily life in China. A particularly notable aspect of his journey was his visit to Wuhan during the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite facing restrictions on movement and pressure to stop filming, he remained focused on presenting an authentic view of the situation. His unwavering dedication to honest storytelling stood out, prioritising truth over convenience.

In 2026, Bhukhan's work entered a new realm during his visit to Africa. Traveling through Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, he engaged deeply with indigenous communities, including the Maasai tribe, the Hadzabe tribe (considered the world's last hunter-gatherer tribe), and the Datoga tribe, among others. Within these culturally vibrant environments, he shared Assam's beloved artist Zubeen Garg with African communities, promoting Assamese songs, music, and the traditions of Bihu. To his surprise, both locals and Kili Paul, the well-known Tan-

zanian content creator famous for his Bollywood lip-synchs, initiated discussions about Indian politics and acknowledged Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma — reflecting the growing global awareness of Assam.

While visiting Bangladesh, Bhukhan observed once more the strong cultural and political connections that Assam maintains, as the local people showed a clear awareness of the state and its leaders. This experience reinforced his conviction that Assam's influence reaches well beyond its geographical limits.

Bhukhan Pathak's work has garnered millions of views, and deep trust from global audiences through authenticity and cultural responsibility. He has received several prestigious honours, including Excellence in Digital Content Creation — Radio Mirchi & Byatikram (2025), Rising Star of Northeast, Best YouTuber of Assam (2022), 8th National Achiever Award, Best YouTube Content Creator of Northeast (2024), and ASIANET Icon Award (2024).

Bhukhan Pathak is not just a content creator; he is also a risk-taker, historian, cultural diplomat, and a relentless advocate for Assam. With each journey, story, and frame, he passionately showcases Assam's pride worldwide. As a committed cultural ambassador, Bhukhan Pathak bridges global audiences with the rich roots, traditions, and pride of Assam.



Dog's sounds

By: Otteri Selva Kumar

In the heart of bustling Kosappettai, Chennai, where the hum of everyday life stirred the air, there were two streets renowned not just for their vibrant market scenes but for their illustrious canine inhabitants as well. Devaraj Street was famously patrolled by Jimmy and his loyal dog gang, while just a few blocks away, Richie reigned on Kandasamy Kovil Street with his own furry followers.

Though each gang had their separate territories and headquarters, they shared a common creed — loyalty and support for their pack. The unspoken rule between Jimmy and Richie had always been to avoid conflict, maintaining an unstated but respected boundary. However, peace is often a fragile serenity.

It began on a clear, sultry morning when a routine food scavenging mission went awry. Chiku, a spry, young member of Richie's gang, wandered a tad too far in his pursuit of a particularly tempting aroma wafting from a roadside vendor and found himself on Devaraj Street. Spotting him, Jimmy's gang didn't take kindly to the intrusion. Growls grew into barks as tensions, previously merely simmering under the surface, sparked into a confrontation.

News of Chiku's encroachment reached Richie as a whispered growl carried by the wind. Fluffed up with indignation, Richie led his pack to Devaraj Street, not to retreat with a tail between their legs, but to ask for Chiku's safe return. As the two groups met, the air thickened, fraught with snarls and paw-stamping, an imminent brawl looming overhead like dark monsoon clouds.

Jimmy, a seasoned leader with silver streaking his muzzle, stood his ground, yet his eyes bore the weight of unwanted conflict. Richie, though younger, was no less imposing, his coat a sleek shadow against the bright, sandy streets.

"What brings you here, Richie?" Jimmy's bark had a gruff edge, but beneath it was a call for reason.

"You know well, Jimmy. Chiku strayed, nothing more. We come only to take him back," responded Richie, his stance firm yet non-aggressive.

An agonizing moment passed as both packs sized each other up, the street a live wire between them. It was then that little

Momo, a feisty pup under Jimmy's care, yipped loudly, darting forward. However, her dash was not toward Richie or his gang but to a toy — a beaten old ball that had rolled out in the skirmish. With an innocent squeal, she pushed the ball towards the center.

The tension cracked. Chiku, looking distressed at the potential fight he had caused, trotted timidly towards the ball, his tail wagging in brief waves. Seeing their youngest members forgetting hostilities over a simple game, both leaders softened. Jimmy barked a soft, "Enough," and Richie responded with a nod.

"Perhaps," Jimmy suggested as he walked over to sit beside Richie, "our gangs wouldn't suffer from a bit of joint patrolling. Reduce misunderstandings, you know?"

Richie barked a laugh, the sound rolling over the street like welcomed thunder. "You mean to say, an alliance? Kosappettai could certainly benefit from that kind of peace."

The proposal didn't just end with words. Over the following weeks, under the gazes of their respective leaders, Devaraj Street's and Kandasamy Street's dogs began patrolling together, sharing responsibilities and food sources. The little scuffles and misunderstandings that had once sparked nerves faded as the packs integrated, learning not just to coexist but to cooperate.

The new alliance redefined their daily rounds. They were no longer just about defending territory but about enjoying it together. Momo and Chiku, now fast friends, were often seen leading the play, their joyful barks floating through the air like lively music.

Passersby soon took notice of the change. Where once they hurried, wary of the dog gangs, they now paused to admire this unique display of unity, often leaving behind extra treats and affectionate pats.

In the heart of Kosappettai, amidst its bustling daily life, the dogs of Devaraj Street and Kandasamy Kovil Street showed that even in a world marked by boundaries, there is a place for friendship and peace, stitched together not by territory, but by understanding and togetherness. The streets didn't just belong to a gang; they belonged to dogs community about with some great dogs sounds...

SC strikes down Trump's sweeping tariffs in 6-3 ruling

Doesn't matter because we have very powerful alternatives, says Donald

WASHINGTON, Feb 21: The Supreme Court struck down President Donald Trump's far-reaching global tariffs on Friday, handing him a stinging loss on an issue crucial to his economic agenda.

The 6-3 decision centres on tariffs imposed under an emergency powers law, including the sweeping "reciprocal" tariffs he levied on nearly every other country. The high court ruled his use of an emergency powers law to set import duties without Congress was illegal.

Trump told a news conference he's "absolutely ashamed" of justices who voted to strike down his tariffs, calling the decision "deeply disappointing."

"Their decision is incorrect," he said. "But it doesn't matter because we have very powerful alternatives." He did not immediately specify them.

His loss before the conservative-majority high court came despite a series of short-term Trump wins that have allowed him to move ahead with key aspects of his broad agenda.

It's the first major piece of Trump's broad agenda to come squarely before the nation's highest court, which he helped shape with the appointments of three conservative justices in his first term.

The majority found that it's un-

constitutional for the president to unilaterally set and change tariffs because taxation power clearly belongs to Congress. "The Framers did not vest any part of the taxing power in the Executive Branch," Chief Justice John Roberts wrote.

Justices Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh dissented.

"The tariffs at issue here may or may not be wise policy. But as a matter of text, history, and precedent, they are clearly lawful," Kavanaugh wrote.

Trump called the majority decision "a disgrace" when he was notified during his morning meeting with several governors, according to someone with direct knowledge of the president's reaction who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private conversation.

Trump was meeting privately with nearly two dozen governors from both parties when the decision was released.

The court majority did not address whether companies could get refunded for the billions they have collectively paid in tariffs. Many companies, including the big-box warehouse chain Costco, have already lined up in lower courts to demand refunds. Kavanaugh noted the process could be complicated.



"The Court says nothing today about whether, and if so how, the Government should go about returning the billions of dollars that it has collected from importers. But that process is likely to be a mess," as was acknowledged at oral argument," he wrote.

The Treasury had collected more than USD 133 billion from the import taxes the president has imposed under the emergency powers law as of December, federal data shows. The impact over the next decade was estimated at some USD 3 trillion.

The tariffs decision doesn't stop Trump from imposing duties under other laws. While those have more

limitations on the speed and severity of Trump's actions, top administration officials have said they expect to keep the tariff framework in place under other authorities.

Still, the decision is a "complete and total victory" for the challengers, said Neal Katyal, who argued the case on behalf of a group of small businesses.

"It's a reaffirmation of our deepest constitutional values and the idea that Congress, not any one man, controls the power to tax the American people," he said.

It wasn't immediately clear how the decision restricting Trump's power to unilaterally set and change tariffs might affect trade deals with

other countries.

"We remain in close contact with the US Administration as we seek clarity on the steps they intend to take in response to this ruling," European Commission spokesman Olof Gill said, adding that the body would keep pushing for lower tariffs. The Supreme Court ruling comes despite a series of short-term wins on the court's emergency docket that have allowed Trump to push ahead with extraordinary flexes of executive power on issues ranging from high-profile firings to major federal funding cuts.

The Republican president has been vocal about the case, calling it one of the most important in US history and saying a ruling against him would be an economic body blow to the country. But legal opposition crossed the political spectrum, including libertarian and pro-business groups that are typically aligned with the GOP. Polling has found tariffs aren't broadly popular with the public, amid wider voter concern about affordability.

While the Constitution gives Congress the power to levy tariffs, the Trump administration argued that a 1977 law allowing the president to regulate importation during emergencies also allows him to set import duties. Other presidents have used the law dozens of times,

often to impose sanctions, but Trump was the first president to invoke it for import taxes.

"And the fact that no President has ever found such power in IEEPA is strong evidence that it does not exist," Roberts wrote, using an acronym for the International Emergency Economic Powers Act.

Trump set what he called "reciprocal" tariffs on most countries in April 2025 to address trade deficits that he declared a national emergency. Those came after he imposed duties on Canada, China and Mexico, ostensibly to address a drug trafficking emergency.

A series of lawsuits followed, including a case from a dozen largely Democratic-leaning states and others from small businesses selling everything from plumbing supplies to educational toys to women's cycling apparel.

The challengers argued the emergency powers law doesn't even mention tariffs and Trump's use of it fails several legal tests, including one that doomed then-President Joe Biden's USD 500 billion student loan forgiveness program.

The three conservative justices in the majority pointed to that principle, which is called the major questions doctrine. It holds that Congress must clearly authorize ac-

tion of major economic and political significance.

"There is no exception to the major questions doctrine for emergency statutes," Roberts wrote. The three liberal justices formed the rest of the majority, but didn't join that part of the opinion.

The Trump administration had argued that tariffs are different because they're a major part of Trump's approach to foreign affairs, an area where the courts should not be second-guessing the president.

But Roberts, joined by Justices Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett, brushed that aside, writing that the foreign affairs implications don't change the legal principle.

Small businesses celebrated the ruling, with the National Retail Federation saying it provides "much needed certainty."

Ann Robinson, who owns Scottish Gourmet in Greensboro, North Carolina, said she was "doing a happy dance" when she heard the news.

The 10 per cent baseline tariff on UK goods put pressure on Robinson's business, costing about USD 30,000 in the fall season. She's unsure about the Trump administration's next steps, but said she's overjoyed for now. "Time to schedule my Say Goodbye to Tariffs Sale!" (AP)

Hungary says it will block key EU loan to Ukraine until Russian oil shipments resume

BUDAPEST (HUNGARY), Feb 21: Hungary will block a planned 90-billion-euro (USD 106-billion) European Union loan to Ukraine until the flow of Russian oil through the Druzhba pipeline resumes, Hungary's foreign minister said.

Russian oil shipments to Hungary and Slovakia have been interrupted since January 27, after Ukrainian officials said a Russian drone attack damaged the Druzhba pipeline, which carries Russian crude across Ukrainian territory and into Central Europe.

Hungary and Slovakia, which have both received a temporary exemption from an EU policy prohibiting imports of Russian oil, have accused Ukraine — without providing evidence — of deliberately holding up supplies.

In a video posted on social media Friday evening, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó accused Ukraine of "blackmailing" Hungary by failing to restart oil shipments.

He said his government would



block a massive interest-free loan the EU approved in December to help Kyiv to meet its military and economic needs for the next two years.

"We will not give in to this blackmail. We do not support Ukraine's war, we will not pay for it," Szijjártó said. "As long as Ukraine blocks the resumption of oil supplies to Hungary, Hungary will block European Union decisions that are important and favourable for Ukraine."

NATO member — has maintained and even increased its supply of Russian oil and gas.

Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has long argued Russian fossil fuels are indispensable for its economy and that switching to energy sourced from elsewhere would cause an immediate economic collapse — an argument some experts dispute.

Widely seen as the Kremlin's biggest advocate in the EU, Orbán has vigorously opposed the bloc's efforts to sanction Moscow over its invasion, and blasted attempts to hit Russia's energy revenues that help finance the war.

His government has frequently threatened to veto EU efforts to assist Ukraine.

Not all of the EU's 27 countries agreed to take part in the 90-billion-euro loan package for Ukraine. Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic opposed the plan, but a deal was reached in which they did not block the loan and were promised protection from any financial fallout. (AP)

Hungary's decision to block the key funding for Ukraine came two days after it suspended shipments of diesel to its embattled neighbour until oil flows through the Druzhba were resumed, and only days before the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion.

Nearly every country in Europe has significantly reduced or entirely ceased Russian energy imports since Moscow launched its war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Yet Hungary — an EU and

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India will be paying tariffs; we will not be paying tariffs: Trump after SC ruling

NEW YORK/WASHINGTON, Feb 21: US President Donald Trump said "nothing changes" in the trade deal with India in the wake of the Supreme Court verdict against his sweeping tariffs, as he responded to the ruling by announcing an additional 10 per cent global levies on items imported into the US.

In a major setback to Trump's pivotal economic agenda of his second term, the US Supreme Court, in a 6-3 verdict written by Chief Justice John Roberts, ruled that the tariffs imposed by Trump on nations around the world were illegal and that the President had exceeded his authority when he imposed the sweeping levies.

Trump lashed out at the Supreme Court justices who ruled against him, calling them "fools and lapdogs". "The Supreme Court's ruling on tariffs is deeply disappointing, and I'm ashamed of certain members of the Court, absolutely ashamed for not having the courage to do what's right for our country," Trump said in a news conference at the White House Friday, just hours after the verdict came in.

At the news conference, Trump again repeated his claim that he had solved the war between India and Pakistan last summer using the threat of tariffs, asserted that New Delhi, at his request, "pulled way back" from buying Russian oil and said that the ruling would have no effect on the trade deal that Washington and New Delhi announced earlier this month. He also spoke about his "great" relationship with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

When asked whether the framework for an interim agreement on trade with India, expected to be signed

soon, stands in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling, Trump said "nothing changes".

"Nothing changes. They'll (India) be paying tariffs, and we will not be paying tariffs. So deal with India is they pay tariffs. This is a reversal for what it used to be. As you know, India and I think Prime Minister Modi is a great gentleman, a great man, actually, but he was much smarter than the people that he was against in terms of the United States, he was ripping us off. So we made a deal with India. It's a fair deal now, and we are not paying tariffs to them, and they are paying tariffs. We did a little flip," Trump said.

"The India deal is on... all the deals are on, we're just going to do it" in a different way, Trump said.

To another question on his relationship with India, he said, "I think my relationship with India is fantastic and we're doing trade with India. India pulled out of Russia. India was getting its oil from Russia. And they pulled way back at my request because we want to settle that horrible war where 25,000 people are dying every month," Trump said.

He said his relationship with Prime Minister Modi "is, I would say, great." Trump then went on to repeat the claim, twice within the press conference, that he stopped the war between India and Pakistan using tariffs. "I also stopped the war between India and Pakistan. As you know, there were 10 planes were shot down. That war was going and probably going nuclear. And just yesterday, the Prime Minister of Pakistan said President Trump saved 35 million lives by getting them to stop," Trump said. (PTI)

Israeli strikes in Lebanon kill at least 12 people

BEIRUT, Feb 21: At least 12 people were killed and 24 wounded — including three children — in Israeli strikes in Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley Friday, the Lebanese Health Ministry reported. Another two people were killed by an Israeli strike on a Palestinian refugee camp earlier in the day.

Israel said it had hit "command centers" of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah in Bekaa Valley. There was no immediate statement from Hezbollah.

Local television footage from the scene of one of the strikes in the Bekaa showed the targeted site appeared to be an apartment building, and emergency crews were fighting a fire and searching in the rubble for survivors.

Earlier Friday, another Israeli strike had hit a Palestinian refugee camp in the port city of Sidon, killing two people.

The Israeli military said it hit a " Hamas command center" in the Ein el-Hilweh camp. Hamas acknowledged that two of its members had been killed in the strike but called the claim that a command center was struck a "filmy pretext." It said the targeted building belonged to a joint security force made up of various Palestinian factions that is tasked with maintaining se-

curity in the camp.

After the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israel triggered war in Gaza, Hezbollah began firing rockets from Lebanon into Israel in support of Hamas and the Palestinians.

Israel responded with airstrikes and shelling. The low-level conflict escalated into full-scale war in September 2024, later reined in but not fully stopped by a U.S.-brokered ceasefire two months later.

Since then, Israel has accused Hezbollah of trying to rebuild and has carried out near-daily strikes in Lebanon that it says target Hezbollah militants and facilities. Hezbollah has claimed one strike against Israel since the ceasefire.

The death toll from Friday's strikes was unusually high and comes at a moment of intensified tensions in the region as the United States has threatened to strike Iran — a backer of both Hezbollah and Hamas — if negotiations over Tehran's nuclear program fail to produce a deal.

During last year's Israel-Iran war, Hezbollah remained on the sidelines, but many in Lebanon fear that the country will be pulled in should another war break out. (AP)

GAZA CITY (GAZA STRIP), Feb 21: At the

inaugural meeting of his Board of Peace in Washington, President Donald Trump spoke of billions of dollars pledged to rebuild the Gaza Strip and a "new and harmonious" Middle East rising from the ashes of war. Videos aired at the meeting showed a future of gleaming high-rises and new soccer pitches.

There was no sign of such optimism in Gaza, where Palestinians who have spent months or even years in squalid displacement camps or the rubble of their homes hold out little hope for change.

"Since the beginning of the war, we've been hearing about conferences and meetings. They say there's a solution and peace, but it's all a joke. They're all liars," said Faraj Abu Anze, who is among tens of thousands of Palestinians living in a sprawling tent camp on the Mediterranean coast. "We see nothing of that on the ground. There is no hope. Education and health care are gone. There is no life," he said.

Pledges but no timeline

Trump announced that member countries of his ambitious board had pledged USD 7 billion for reconstruction and would send thousands of troops to take part in an International Stabilization Force.

But no timeline was given, and reconstruc-



tion has yet to begin.

Israel says Gaza will not be rebuilt until Hamas has laid down its weapons, an aspect of the October ceasefire deal that has emerged as a major sticking point.

The United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank have estimated the price of reconstruction at USD 70 billion — up to 10 times the amounts pledged Thursday. It could take several years just to clear away massive drifts of rubble laced with unexploded ordnance. More than 72,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war sparked by Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack into Israel, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. Part of the Hamas-run government, its statistics are seen as generally reliable by the United Nations and

independent experts.

Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, in the initial attack and took another 251 hostage. The ceasefire deal ended major military operations and led to the release of all remaining captives but left major questions about Gaza's future unanswered.

"We see nothing"

"There are meetings every day, but we see nothing," said Ahmad Abu Selme, who has been displaced twice during the war. "There are tents everywhere and people are frustrated. We are tired." "I hope a real peace takes place and that we can go back to our homes," he added. "I know there are no homes anymore, but we still want to return."

The US hopes to begin reconstruction in Rafah, on Gaza's border with Egypt. The city was largely destroyed and mostly depopulated during the war, and is now in the half of Gaza that is under full Israeli control.

Ruwaida Dheir, who was among tens of thousands of people displaced from Rafah, has little hope that she or other residents will see any of the pledged money.

"The most important thing is that they put the money where it belongs and give it to the people," she said. "They'll say they spent it on infrastructure, but we won't see it." (AP)

Venezuela's new amnesty law has chilly response from opposition and detainees' families

CARACAS, Feb 21: Members of Venezuela's opposition, prisoners' rights groups and relatives of people long detained for political reasons gave a lukewarm reception Friday to an amnesty measure expected to free hundreds of activists and human rights defenders.

Some viewed the law as a small but significant victory for the thousands targeted during the ruling party's 27-year tenure. Others considered it a mockery of the pain of families and people behind bars — particularly members of the military, who were excluded from the measure.

Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodríguez on Thursday signed the amnesty measure into law, signalling a major shift in policy following last month's stunning US military raid in the capital, Caracas, to capture then-President Nicolás Maduro.

Venezuelan authorities for

decades denied holding any political prisoners. But Rodríguez said during the signing ceremony that the law showed leaders were "letting go of a little intolerance and opening new avenues for politics in Venezuela."

Venezuela-based prisoners' rights group Foro Penal estimates that more than 600 people are in custody for political reasons.

Under the new law, trial courts must approve each amnesty request within 15 days. However, the requirement for judicial oversight has fuelled scepticism about how applications will be handled.

"The law benefits a significant group of people, but the essence of the problem Venezuela is experiencing regarding political persecution remains," Alfredo Romero, president of Foro Penal, told reporters Friday. "The same judges and prosecutors who have unjustly or arbitrarily accused people are the same judges whom the law itself designates to in-



terpret the law in order to grant benefits."

Romero underscored that the new law is not a prerequisite for the government to free prisoners, like it has done since Jan. 8, when Rodríguez's government announced it would re-

lease "a significant number." Foro Penal has counted 448 releases since then.

The bill's purpose is to grant people "a general and full amnesty for crimes or offenses committed" during specific periods since 1999 that

were marked by politically driven conflicts in Venezuela, including "acts of politically motivated violence" in the context of the 2024 presidential election. The aftermath of that election led to protests and the arrest of more than 2,000 people, including minors.

The amnesty excludes those convicted of human rights violations, war crimes, murder, drug trafficking or corruption. It also denies relief to people "who are being prosecuted or may be prosecuted or convicted for promoting, instigating, soliciting, in-voicing, favouring, facilitating, financing, or participating in armed or forceful actions against" Venezuela "by foreign states, corporations or individuals."

That could leave out members of the opposition who have supported US President Donald Trump's policy toward Venezuela, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate María Corina Machado.

The law allows people living in exile to seek amnesty through a lawyer, removing the requirement to return to Venezuela to file in person. Once someone abroad has filed a request for amnesty, the law shields them from arrest when they return to the country for their scheduled court rulings.

Magalli Meda, Machado's 2024 campaign manager, took to social media to reject the law. Meda has been in exile since May, when she and other Machado staffers left the Argentine diplomatic compound in Caracas, where they had sheltered for more than a year to avoid arrest.

"Who can be free in Venezuela under these terms of amnesty?" she wrote on X. "They are trying to whitewash their image. They want us to forget their crimes and act with impunity forever. They want a country of slaves and accomplices, and they intend to expel anyone who isn't one of them." (AP)

Pak defence minister says Khyber Pakhtunkhwa CM's job 'at risk'

ISLAMABAD, Feb 21: Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has warned that the recently announced "Release Imran Khan Force" by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Sohail Afridi was unconstitutional and illegal, speculating that the PTI leader's job "was at risk."

Asif's remarks come days after Afridi announced the Force to work towards the release of former prime minister and founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Imran Khan, imprisoned since August 2023.

"I think his job is at risk and through the release-force like statements, he wants to strengthen his position," Asif told Samaa News channel on Friday.

Asif also spoke with Geo News on Friday where he said: "The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister announced the release-force to save his job. Except for the federal government, no one has the right to create any force." The defence minister clarified that there had never been any discussion about moving the PTI founder abroad or to Bani Gala, Khan's residence in Islamabad suburbs.

"Perhaps, approaches were made regarding facilities," Asif said, adding, "Some try to keep their shop open through such talk."

Earlier on February 18, after lawmakers from the PTI and the multi-party opposition alliance Tehreek Tahaffuz-e-Aiyeeen Pakistan (TTAP) called off their days-long sit-in at Parliament House in Islamabad, Chief Minister Afridi announced to form the "Release Imran Khan Force."

Addressing a press conference outside the Supreme Court, Afridi said that he had been assigned the responsibility of leading a "street movement" by the incarcerated PTI founder.

He alleged that court orders were being "thrown into the dustbin" and claimed that the PTI founding chairman is still being denied access to his personal doctors, according to the Geo News report.

However, Afridi's statement went unnoticed until the defence minister commented on it. (PTI)

Manipur CM hails him as compassionate leader injured in 2023 violence PM Modi mourns BJP MLA Valte's death

IMPHAL, Feb 21: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday paid rich tributes to Manipur's BJP MLA Vungzagin Valte and said he worked diligently towards bringing a positive difference in the society and will be remembered for his outstanding service to the people of the state.

Valte, who sustained injuries in a mob attack during the early period of ethnic violence in Manipur in 2023, died at a private hospital in Gurugram on Friday at the age of 61.

"Pu Vungzagin Valte will be remembered for his outstanding service to the people of Manipur. He worked diligently towards bringing a positive difference in society. His interventions in the assembly were always insightful. Pained by his passing. Condolences to his family, friends and supporters," Modi wrote on X.

On Friday, Modi, while condoling Valte's death, said the MLA loved serving people and dedicated his life towards societal progress and well-being.

Valte, a former minister, belonged to the Zomi tribal community and hailed from Pherzawl district.

Also, Manipur Chief Minister Y Khechhand Singh said Valte, who had sustained injuries in a mob attack during the early period of ethnic violence in 2023, devoted his entire life to the service of the people.



The chief minister, in a post on X, expressed "profound sadness and deep grief over the untimely demise of Vungzagin Valte of Thanlon Assembly Constituency, who passed away in New Delhi while under intensive medical care".

Valte, the 61-year-old leader, a former minister, hailed from Pherzawl district and he belonged to the Zomi tribal community.

Singh said, "Pu Valte was not only a dedicated public representative but also a compassionate leader who devoted his entire life

to the service of the people. His unwavering commitment to the welfare, progress and holistic development of Manipur reflected his true spirit of selfless service."

The chief minister said the BJP legislator from the Thanlon assembly seat "worked tirelessly" to strengthen infrastructure, uplift communities and bring meaningful change to the lives of countless people, "earning the respect, trust and affection of all".

"His passing is an immense loss not only to his family and loved ones but also to the people of

Thanlon and the entire state of Manipur. We have lost a sincere leader, a humble human being and a pillar of strength who always stood for the welfare of his people," Singh said.

The chief minister also extended heartfelt condolences to his bereaved family, relatives, supporters and well-wishers.

"My thoughts and prayers are with them during this difficult time. May the Almighty grant them strength, comfort and courage to bear this irreparable loss," the CM said.

Valte had been battling with serious injuries he had sustained during a mob attack in Imphal's Nagamapal area when ethnic violence broke out in May 2023 and went to Delhi for medical treatment. After nearly two years of treatment there, Valte returned home to Churachandpur, accompanied by his wife, in April last year.

On February 7, his health condition suddenly worsened and he was taken to the national capital the next day via an air ambulance, his family said.

Valte was first elected to the assembly on a Congress ticket in 2012 from the Thanlon seat. Five years later, he got elected again but on a BJP ticket and became a minister for the general administration and transport departments, according to the Manipur government website. He was re-elected to the assembly in 2022. (PTI)

'Such disruptions risk undermining India's credibility': Sikkim CM slams protest at AI summit



GANGTOK, Feb 21: Condemning the protests by Youth Congress members at the AI Impact Summit in Delhi, Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang on Saturday said such disruptions risk undermining India's credibility at a moment of significant international attention. In a social media post, he said the protests cast a shadow on the country's global image, a behaviour which was neither responsible nor acceptable.

"I strongly condemn the actions of the Congress party at a time

when India is hosting the prestigious Global AI Summit in New Delhi, showcasing its rapid strides in innovation and technological advancement before the international community," he said.

Tamang said national interest must always take precedence over partisan politics.

A group of Youth Congress workers on Friday staged a dramatic 'shirtless protest' at an exhibition hall at the AI Impact Summit, before being whisked away by security personnel. (PTI)

Militant arrested in Manipur's Imphal West



IMPHAL, Feb 21: A militant was arrested in Manipur's Imphal West district, police said on Saturday.

The member of the banned Kangleipak Communist Party (PSC) was arrested from Tera Lukram Leirak on Friday, they said.

In another operation in Imphal East district, arms and ammunition were recovered, they added.

Among the recovered items were a .303 rifle with a magazine, a .22 rifle, a 9 mm submachine gun with a magazine, two hand grenades, an improvised bomb, an MK-1 grenade and 57 bullets of different calibres, police said.

Acting against drugs, security forces destroyed 30 acre of illicit poppy cultivation in the Senapati and Churachandpur districts.

Illicit poppy cultivation on 10 acre was destroyed at Kangiang Hill Range in the Senapati district. Twenty acre of poppy plantation was destroyed at Mongken in Churachandpur. (PTI)

NPF slams Congress disruption at AI Summit

KOHIMA, Feb 21: The Naga People's Front (NPF) expresses its strong disapproval of the disruption reportedly caused by members of the Indian National Congress during the India AI Impact Summit 2026, held at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi on Friday.

The NPF fully respects the democratic right to protest and recognises dissent as an essential element of India's democratic framework. However, it views the interruption of a global summit at a time when India is presenting its technological progress and leadership to the international community as unfortunate and ill-timed. Such actions risk undermining the nation's image and distracting from its strategic priorities.

The India AI Impact Summit 2026 was an official Government of India programme, not a party event and was attended by international delegates, technology leaders, investors and policymakers. As such, it represented a platform to showcase India's innovation, stability and policy commitment to the world.

The NPF therefore appeals to all political parties to exercise restraint and to refrain from using international forums for partisan confrontation. Disagreements, no matter how strongly felt, should be expressed through Parliament and other constitutional mechanisms, where they can be debated responsibly and transparently. National interest must always take precedence over party politics.

Warns against mandatory singing before national anthem in Naga homeland

NSF opposes MHA directive on Vande Mataram in Schools

KOHIMA, Feb 21: The Naga Students' Federation (NSF), the apex Naga student body, has expressed strong opposition to the recent instructions issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India, for mandating that the "Indian national song, Vande Mataram, be played or sung before the national anthem, Jana Gana Mana, during specific high-level official functions and for imposing the same upon educational institutions".

In a statement issued on Friday, the apex Naga student body said the directive, "which lays down a rigid sequence of precedence and crucially", to schools, represents an imposition that fails to account for the historical, political and cultural realities of the Naga people. "While the NSF is aware of the constitutional framework of the Indian State, including Article 51A(a), we categorically assert that no authority can compel cultural or ideological conformity upon the Naga homeland in a manner that disregards our unique history and identity", the NSF asserted.

The Naga student body then said the specific instruction that the day's work in all schools may begin with the community singing of Vande Mataram, coupled with directions to "popularise" the national song and anthem is deeply concerning. It added that schools are institutions of learning and critical thought, not instruments for enforcing symbolic compliance.

The NSF hereby "strongly warns" that no

such activities mandating the compulsory singing or playing of Vande Mataram before Jana Gana Mana shall take place in schools across the "Naga homeland". The apex Naga student body also impressed upon the Nagaland Board of School Education (NBSE) to refrain from issuing any circulars, notifications or instructions enforcing this protocol within its jurisdiction. The NSF said the NBSE must uphold the sensitivities and rights of the Naga people and ensure that educational institutions are not subjected to directives that will create unrest or coercion among students.

The NSF then further cautioned school authorities and administrators against implementing these guidelines in letter or spirit without due consultation with stakeholders and an understanding of the ground realities. It added that such unilateral action in this regard will be viewed as a serious affront to the collective sentiments of the Naga students' community.

In this regard, all federating units and subordinate bodies of NSF are "herby advised to exercise strict vigilance to ensure that such activities are not carried out in their respective jurisdiction".

The NSF then called upon all responsible authorities to respect the distinct political and cultural rights of the "Naga homeland" and to refrain from imposing measures that undermine mutual respect and understanding. (NPN)



Manipur journalists protest attack on editor, urge CM for safety

AMWJU, EGM demand FIR, probe and protection after Naharolgi Thoudang editor beaten

IMPHAL, Feb 21: Journalists in Manipur urged the Manipur Chief Minister for "urgent action to ensure a secure environment for journalists working in Manipur".

Journalists in Imphal carried out a sit-in protest on Friday after Khoirom Loiyalakpa, editor of daily newspaper Naharolgi Thoudang, was beaten up by armed persons in Imphal East district late Wednesday night. Reasons for the act and the identities of the perpetrators are not known till date.

After the sit-in protest, the All Manipur Working Journalists' Union (AMWJU) and the Editors' Guild Manipur (EGM) jointly submitted a memorandum to the Manipur chief minister, expressing their "profound concern and deep anguish" over the recent attack on Khoirom Loiyalakpa, editor of Naharolgi Thoudang, "who was shot at and severely beaten by unidentified assailants while traveling in his car on February 18, 2026". He has been grievously injured and is currently undergoing treatment at Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS) Hospital, the memorandum mentioned.

It said this "brutal attack marks yet another assault on a working journalist in the state of Manipur". Unfortunately, it is not an isolated incident. In the past, Loiyalakpa and other media practitioners have been targeted, threatened and intimidated by acts which not only endanger individual lives but also undermine freedom of expression and democratic principles, the two journalist bodies said in the memorandum.



Earlier complaints and appeals, including representations made by the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) and the Editors' Guild of Manipur (EGM) to the Director General of Police, Manipur have sought a secure environment for journalists. However, attacks have continued and no effective deterrent measures have been instituted, they rued.

The two journalist bodies then said "this state of insecurity" has reached a critical level. Journalists in Manipur must be able to perform their duties without fear of violence, retaliation, or reprisal, they added.

In view of the foregoing, the AMWJU and the EGM "respectfully" urged the chief minister to take immediate and time-bound registration of FIR against the perpetrators of the attack on Khoirom Loiyalakpa. They also urged the chief minister for a swift and transparent investigation to identify, apprehend and prosecute all persons responsible for this crime. The two jour-

nalist bodies further urged the chief minister for protection measures and safety protocols for journalists, reporters and editors working across the state including threat assessment and preventive mechanisms.

They also urged the chief minister for "periodic engagement" with journalists' associations such as the AMWJU and the EGM to understand ongoing safety concerns and implement suitable safeguards.

The two journalist bodies then drew attention to the fundamental role of a free press in strengthening democratic governance, ensuring accountability and upholding the rule of law. They said the repeated targeting of journalists weakens public confidence and fosters an environment of fear and self-censorship.

The AMWJU and the EGM "earnestly" appealed to "your leadership to ensure justice for Loiyalakpa and safeguard the right to life, liberty and freedom of the press for all media professionals in Manipur". (NPN)

Tripura CM welcomes resumption bid of Agartala-Kolkata bus service via Dhaka after year-long hiatus



AGARTALA, Feb 21: Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Saturday welcomed the initiative to resume India-Bangladesh bus service connecting Agartala with Kolkata via Dhaka.

The Royal-Maitri international bus service has been suspended for the past year due to political turmoil in the neighbouring country, resulting in visa issues and a sharp decline in the number of passengers. With the situation improving, the operator now seeks to recommence the service and initiate a trial run.

"I welcome the move to resume Indo-Bangla bus service connecting Agartala with Kolkata via Dhaka. The uncer-

tainty is over with the formation of an elected government in Bangladesh. This is a good sign in bilateral ties. We hope other issues will also be addressed," he told reporters.

A year after the suspension of the Indo-Bangla bus service, the operator brought a bus to Krishnanagar depot in West Tripura from Dhaka to resume the service.

Contacted, Manoranjan Debnath, the manager of the international bus service, said the Indo-Bangla bus service has been suspended for one year due to political turmoil in Bangladesh.

"Due to this, the number of passengers

had fallen to an all-time low and the visa problem had prompted us to shut down the service. With the situation improving in Bangladesh, we want to resume bus service by next week," he said.

Debnath added, "Today, the bus left Krishnanagar bus depot (Agartala) for Dhaka as a trial run. This will continue for two or three days. Once the system is stable, we will restart bus service thrice in a week".

The fare of the around 500 km journey from Agartala to Kolkata via Dhaka is ₹ 2800. A train from Agartala needs to travel 1567 km to reach Kolkata via Guwahati. (PTI)

GOVT. OF ASSAM
OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS::
KARBI ANGLONG DISTRICT CIRCLE,
DIPHU

No. IS/Sec. Teacher/Appt/2025/1110 Dated Diphu the 20/02/2026.

NOTICE

It is for information of all candidates who have applied for the post of Intermediate Teacher (Arts/Science/Hindi) under Secondary Education Department, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Diphu in response to the advertisement issued from the Office of the Inspector of Schools, Karbi Anglong District Circle, Diphu vide memo no. IS/Sec. Teacher/Appt/2025/02 Dated 24th December, 2025 that the TET Cum Recruitment Test Examination is scheduled to be held on 01st March, 2026.

Therefore, all candidates are informed to collect their calling letters for appearing the said TET Cum Recruitment Test Examination for the post of Intermediate Teacher (Arts/Science/Hindi) under Secondary Education Department, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Diphu w.e.f., 23rd February, 2026 to 28th February, 2026 (including local holiday on saturday) during office hours.

Sd/-
 Inspector of Schools,
 Karbi Anglong District Circle,
 Diphu.

BJP backlash over AI Summit protest

RSS defamation: Rahul names Sapkal new court guarantor

THANE/MUMBAI, Feb 21: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Saturday appeared before the Bhiwandi magistrate's court to furnish a fresh surety in a 2014 defamation case filed by an RSS activist, naming the party's Maharashtra chief Harshwardhan Sapkal as his new guarantor.

Gandhi, on his way to the court in Maharashtra's Thane district, faced a black-flag protest by BJP activists at Mulund toll plaza, who shouted slogans, accusing the opposition Congress of maligning India's image through the Youth Congress's protest at the AI Impact Summit in Delhi.

The Court of Joint Civil Judge and Judicial Magistrate First Class (JMFC) P. M. Kolse scheduled the next hearing in the defamation case for April 4 after completing procedural formalities regarding Gandhi's new surety. The Congress leader had already been granted exemption from personal appearance in the case filed by RSS activist Rajesh Kunte, alleging that the Congress leader, while addressing a rally at Sonale village during the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, stated that the Sangh was behind the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.

The court had asked the Lok Sabha Leader of Opposition to appear before it in person to furnish

a new surety in the case following the death of his previous guarantor, former Union Minister Shivraj Patil Chakurkar, on December 12, 2025.

Patil had stood as a guarantor for Gandhi in 2016 when the court granted him bail after he appeared before it. On Saturday, the new surety proceedings were conducted in a fast-track setup, lasting approximately 15 minutes.

"The court has formally accepted the surety papers of Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) president Harshwardhan Sapkal. The matter is now adjourned to April 4," Gandhi's counsel Narayan Iyer told PTI. He said we have full faith in the judiciary and are confident that justice will be served. "While Gandhi has been granted permanent exemption from personal appearance in future hearings, we will present our defence witnesses at the appropriate time," Iyer said.

He said that the cross-examination of the investigating officer (IO) would resume now that the bail formalities are complete, clarifying that there was no examination of Gandhi scheduled for the day. Iyer noted that the proceedings were held in accordance with the Supreme Court's directives to expedite cases against sitting MPs



and MLAs through fast-track courts. The entire procedure was completed in around 15 minutes, after which Gandhi drove back to Mumbai, accompanied by senior Congress leaders. He didn't speak to the media.

Later, Gandhi met his colleagues in Mumbai and questioned the reasons behind the Congress's poor show in the January 15 Mumbai civic polls. He took stock of the prevailing political situation and steps being taken to strengthen the Congress's position across Maharashtra before flying to Delhi, party functionaries said.

Sapkal and Mumbai Congress

chief Varsha Gaikwad were present at Gandhi's luncheon meeting in a suburban hotel. Gandhi questioned the poor showing by the Congress in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation polls, sources said.

The party won just 24 seats in the 227-member BMC, triggering a debate on the rationale behind contesting the polls solo without allying with Maha Vikas Aghadi allies Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (SP). The Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha told the Mumbai unit to gear up to strengthen the organisation at the grassroots, sources added.

"Gandhi took a review of the

party's position in Mumbai and Maharashtra. He had a one-on-one meeting with Sapkal on the party organisation," they added.

Referring to the demonstration by Youth Congress workers at the AI Summit, protesting BJP workers alleged that Gandhi consistently opposes the initiatives of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Rahul Gandhi opposes whatever the Prime Minister does, even on issues concerning the nation. The Youth Congress workers raised slogans at the AI Summit, maligning the country's image. That is why we protested against him," a BJP supporter said.

The police had made elaborate security arrangements for Gandhi's visit to prevent any confrontation between workers of the ruling and Opposition parties. The Congress and NCP (SP) slammed the BJP for staging protests. Responding to the protest by BJP workers, Congress leader Sachin Sawant said it was "an attempt to divert attention from key national issues".

Sawant questioned the reasons behind what he termed the BJP government's "surrender" before US President Donald Trump and sought clarity on matters related to financier Jeffrey Epstein, saying the party owed an explanation to the people. (PTI)

TMC govt in West Bengal will have to fully support SIR now: Rijju

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: Union minister Kiren Rijju on Saturday described the Supreme Court's order for the deployment of judicial officers to assist in the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in West Bengal as a "very significant directive" and said the Mamata Banerjee government will have to fully support the exercise now.

Rijju said the apex court's directive in the matter has also "completely exposed" the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, which he alleged wants to win the upcoming state Assembly polls by including illegal infiltrators in the voter list. Dismissed over the ongoing tussle between the West Bengal government and the Election Commission (EC), the Supreme Court issued an "extraordinary" direction on Friday, asking the state to deploy serving and former district judges to assist the poll panel in the controversy-ridden SIR process.

Ruing the "unfortunate blame game" and "trust deficit" between the EC and the "democratically-elected" TMC government, a bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joydalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi passed a slew of fresh directions to ensure the completion of the SIR. Asked about the

court order, Rijju said, "The Supreme Court's directive was very necessary and significant for democracy. The Congress and the TMC will now have to extend full support to the SIR for democracy."

"This is very good news for West Bengal and the country. The Supreme Court has given very strict directives. The West Bengal government, the DGP and the entire state machinery will have to abide by the Supreme Court's decision," the senior BJP leader told reporters at the party headquarters here. He alleged that the TMC is against the SIR because it wants to "rig" the state Assembly polls, due in the next few months.

"It wants to win the election by adding the names of illegal ghuspathiyas (infiltrators) in the voter list. The TMC government stands completely exposed now," he said.

The top court has ordered the deputation of judicial officers for the adjudication of claims and objections of those put under the logical-discrepancy lists and facing removal of their names from the electoral rolls. Logical discrepancies in progeny linking with the 2002 voter list include instances of a mismatch in the parent's name and the age difference between a voter and his parent being less than 15 years or more than 50 years. (PTI)

Maharashtra: BJP and Shiv Sena workers protest against Rahul

MUMBAI, Feb 21: Activists of the BJP and Shiv Sena staged demonstrations against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in Mumbai and Thane on Saturday in response to the Youth Congress's protest at the AI Summit in New Delhi.

Shiv Sena MP Naresh Mhaske demanded the registration of a seditious case against Gandhi for his frequent "anti-national" statements and for obstructing the functioning of Parliament. BJP workers waved black flags at Gandhi's car at Mulund toll plaza when he was headed to Bhiwandi in neighbouring Thane district to appear before a court in the 2014 defamation case filed against him by an RSS activist. The police had made elaborate security arrangements for Gandhi's visit to prevent any confrontation between workers of the ruling and Opposition parties.

Protesters alleged that Gandhi consistently opposes the initiatives of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and accused him of tarnishing the country's image. "Rahul Gandhi continuously opposes whatever the Prime Minister does. Even on issues concerning the nation. The Youth Congress workers raised slogans at the AI Summit, maligning India's image. That is why we protested against him," a BJP supporter said. A day earlier, a group of Indian Youth Congress workers staged a dramatic 'shirtless protest' at an AI Impact Summit exhibition hall, walking around holding t-shirts with slogans against the government and the India-US trade deal printed on them.

Separately, the Thane district unit of the Sena staged a "jode maro" protest at the busy Tembhi Naka area and raised slogans against the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. "Our country is moving confidently on the path of progress under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. While the world was witnessing India's technological prowess at the AI Summit, Congress workers chose to embarrass the nation by protesting shirtless against the India-US trade agreement. (PTI)

Congress claims US trade deal has become an 'ordeal', Rahul says 'PM compromised'

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: After the US Supreme Court struck down President Donald Trump's global tariffs, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of being "compromised", saying his "betrayal" in the India-US interim trade deal stood exposed.

"The Congress alleged that the trade deal had become an 'ordeal' for the country subjected to by the prime minister's 'desperation and surrender'."

"The PM is compromised. His betrayal now stands exposed. He can't renegotiate. He will surrender again," Gandhi said in a post on X.

This comes a day after the US Supreme Court struck down President Donald Trump's global tariffs.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh claimed that if Prime Minister Modi had not been so "desperate" to protect his "fragile image" and waited just 18 days more, Indian farmers would have been saved from the agony and distress, and Indian sovereignty would have been protected.

"Yesterday after the US Supreme Court struck down his tariffs policy, President Trump declared that (i) Mr. Modi is his great friend; (ii) the India-US trade deal will continue as announced; (iii) he had personally halted Operation Sindoore on May 10 2025 by threatening to increase tariffs on Indian exports to the US if India did not halt Operation Sindoore," Ramesh said on X on Saturday.

On February 2, President Trump was the first to announce that the India-US trade deal had been finalised and said that "out of friendship and respect for Prime Minister Modi and, as per his request, effective immediately, we agreed to a trade deal between the United States and India", the Congress leader said. "What forced Prime Minister

Modi to ensure President Trump announced the India-US trade deal in the night of February 2...?" Ramesh asked. "What had happened in the Lok Sabha that afternoon that had compelled Mr. Modi to get so desperate and reach out to his good friend in the White House to create a diversion?"

"The India-US trade deal is really an ordeal that India is being subjected to by the Prime Minister's desperation and surrender," he said.

Congress general secretary Randeep Surjewala after the US Supreme Court quashed presidential powers to impose tariffs under the IEEPA (International Emergency Economic Powers Act, 1977), President Trump has announced the imposition of 10 per cent additional tariffs under Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974.

"The simple questions are - are these tariffs sustainable viza-viz India? Can these tariff provisions be justifiably applied to India?"

"Will these new tariffs still hold the US-India Trade Deal (Framework Agreement), which is being widely opposed by farmers, small and medium businesses, energy and data experts, and economists alike," he posted on X.

"Will the Modi government now show the courage to walk out of a one-sided US-India Trade Deal?" Surjewala asked.

He also asked if Modi Government will now declare in "national interests" that it will buy cheaper Russian and Iranian crude oil with a view to ensure "energy security" of the country.

"Will the Modi government declare that it will no longer withdraw 'non-tariff barriers', i.e., withdraw the meagre subsidy on agriculture or permit import of genetically modified crops into India, thereby protecting our seed integrity, purity, and biodiversity?"

"Will the Modi Government



now declare that it is no longer under an obligation to import USD 500 billion worth of American goods (Rs 45 lakh crore) over the next 5 years on zero tariff and thereby protect Indian manufacturers and industry? Will the Modi government promise to protect India's data and digital security?" he asked.

In the wake of the Supreme Court verdict against Trump's tariffs, he said he is imposing, for a period of 150 days, a "temporary import surcharge of 10 per cent ad valorem" on articles imported into the United States, effectively lowering the tariff rate to 10 per cent from 18 per cent.

In a major setback to what was Trump's pivotal economic agenda in his second term, the US Supreme Court, in a 6-3 verdict written by Chief Justice John Roberts, ruled that the tariffs imposed by Trump on nations around the world were illegal and that the president had exceeded his authority when he imposed the sweeping levies.

Earlier this month, as the US and India announced they reached a framework for an Interim Agreement on trade, Trump issued an Executive Order removing the 25 per cent punitive tariffs imposed on India for its purchases of Russian oil, with the US president noting the commitment by New Delhi to stop directly or indirectly importing energy from Moscow and purchasing American en-

ergy products. Under the trade deal, Washington would charge a reduced reciprocal tariff on New Delhi, lowering it from 25 per cent to 18 per cent.

Shortly after the court verdict, Trump asserted that there is "no change" in the trade deal with India.

"I think my relationship with India is fantastic and we're doing trade with India... India was getting its oil from Russia. And they pulled way back at my request, because we want to settle that horrible war where 25,000 people are dying every month," Trump said at a news conference Friday in the White House.

Trump said his relationship with Prime Minister Modi "is great". He then went on to repeat the claim that he stopped the war between India and Pakistan last summer using tariffs.

When asked about the deal with India, Trump said, "Nothing changes. They'll be paying tariffs, and we will not be paying tariffs."

"This is a reversal for what it used to be, as you know, India - and I think Prime Minister Modi is a great gentleman, a great man, actually. But he was much smarter than the people that he was against in terms of the United States, he was ripping us off."

"So we made a deal with India. It's a fair deal now," Trump said. (PTI)

If Sharad Pawar wishes to fight RS polls, MVA allies will have to discuss, says Raut

MUMBAI, Feb 21: Amid a tussle in the Maha Vikas Aghadi over the selection of a candidate for its lone winnable Rajya Sabha seat from Maharashtra, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut on Saturday said the opposition alliance will have to discuss if Sharad Pawar expresses his wish to contest the election.

Seven members, including NCP (SP) chief Pawar, are retiring from the Rajya Sabha in April. The opposition MVA can potentially send one candidate to the Rajya Sabha due to its depleted strength. Along with Pawar, the Rajya Sabha stint will also end for Sena (UBT) leader Priyanka Chaturvedi, Fauzia Khan of NCP (SP), Ramdas Athawale of RPI (Athawale), BJP's Bhagwat Karad, Congress' Rajani Patil and NCP's Dhairysheel Patil.

Earlier this week, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aaditya Thackeray appeared to stake his party's claim to the MVA's lone winnable seat in the Upper House of Parliament. Considering the numbers in the assembly, the Rajya Sabha seat "belongs" to his party, and "talks will definitely happen in that direction in the MVA", he had said.

Talking to reporters at Malegaon in Nashik district on Saturday, Raut said, "I do not have the details and I am very much attached to the party's decision policy. If Sharad Pawar wishes to contest the elections, then what - that is the only question before us. Whoever is nominated by the Shiv Sena (UBT), then we will make efforts for the victory. If Sharad Pawar himself expresses his wish then we will have to discuss it. I have said nothing more than that. I have not taken anyone's name."

On February 14, Raut had claimed that Pawar wanted to contest the Rajya Sabha polls, and MVA will hold discussions about it. Asked about Aaditya Thackeray's remarks that Priyanka Chaturvedi be given another opportunity to avoid complications if the two NCP factions come together, Raut said Thackeray was a senior leader and Maharashtra should consider what he has stated.

On the controversy surrounding the display of a portrait of Tipu Sultan in Malegaon deputy mayor's office, Raut

alleged that the BJP was selectively invoking the 18th-century ruler to inflame communal tensions.

"BJP leaders should first listen to what former President Ram Nath Kovind had said about Tipu Sultan in the Karnataka assembly. Even in Mumbai, the current mayor as well as Mumbai BJP president Amet Satam, had supported resolutions to name certain streets and gardens after Tipu Sultan when they were corporators. Now they have suddenly changed their stand. BJP can take any issue to start a Hindu-Muslim conflict," he said.

It was a fact that Tipu Sultan fought against British rule and was killed in a battle (against them), but the allegations of forced conversions were also part of the record and nobody is supporting him for that, Raut added.

"But BJP has supported Tipu Sultan earlier and now wants to stoke a political controversy," he said. Responding to Maharashtra Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal's claim that Shiv Sena (UBT) corporators did not support the Congress in appointing its mayor in Chandrapur Municipal Corporation, Raut termed the allegation as "wrong" and attributed the outcome to internal factionalism within the Congress.

He said a high-level meeting was held in Delhi to resolve the differences between two groups in the party, but they could not reach an understanding.

Raut also took a swipe at the BJP over allegations by its leader Kirit Somaiya that Bangladeshi nationals had encroached on railways' land in Mumbai. Listing former railway ministers in the BJP regime, including Ram Naik, Nitish Kumar, Suresh Prabhu and current minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, he sought to know what action was taken by them to remove the alleged encroachments. He further targeted Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, saying he had served three terms as chief minister and longer as home minister.

"What has he done so far? Just levelling allegations does not have any meaning. What is the purpose of a state government? It should solve these issues. Or is it only an election gambit raised during campaigns?" Raut asked. (PTI)

The situation has been exacerbated in recent years, amid rising instances of human-tiger conflict

Climate change adds to woes of 'tiger widows' of Sunderbans

GOSABA (SUNDEARBANS), Feb 21: Even in knee-deep murky waters, Rina Sarkar is nimble on her feet as she navigates the slippery mudbanks of Chorgheri village on Satjalina island in the Sunderbans. She is one of the 150 local women who have come to the embankment, walking through a dense forest, to plant 2,000 mangrove saplings as part of a green initiative.

Rina, like several of her companions, is a "tiger widow" -- a local woman whose husband has been taken by the Bengal tiger. "In 2022, my husband Sudipto Sarkar went to catch fish and crabs, and never returned. He was killed by a tiger," Rina says as her voice trails off.

According to locals, there are thousands of tiger widows in the expansive Sunderbans region -- their lives riddled with social ostracisation, financial instability, and psychological distress.

The situation has been exacerbated in recent years, amid rising

instances of human-tiger conflict, primarily due to the adverse effects of climate change.

While there are legal provisions to provide compensation for wildlife-related fatalities, and several non-government organisations (NGOs) and community-based initiatives to help tiger widows, these women continue to face challenges.

Debaroti Das, who works with Purbasha Eco Helpline Society (PEHS), a Sunderbans-based NGO, says, "Human beings have three basic needs for survival: food, clothes, and shelter. In the Sunderbans, however, there are not many sources of income; here, attaining a quality life is near impossible. Even if people somehow manage to build a house, frequent cyclones that hit the region destroy them."

A bad omen
The husband of Anima Mondal, a resident of the Chorgheri village, was killed by a tiger around 20 years ago when he went to catch



crabs -- one of the few sources of income in the region, selling for up to ₹800 per kg.

The attack did not just leave Anima without a husband, the family's main breadwinner, but also turned her into an outcast. She was believed to be a bad omen and labelled as "swami-khejo", an insult innate to the region, signifying "husband-eater".

Das says, "The ostracisation of tiger widows leads to isolation, without financial or social support. I recently found that sons of these women are not even allowed to see the face of their mothers before they leave home for work in the morning, as it is believed that it would bring bad luck."

To make matters worse, many tiger widows are denied financial

compensation for wildlife-related fatalities under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972.

Umashankar Mandal, founder of PEHS, says, "Since many men enter the forests without official permits, their deaths are often considered illegal, disqualifying their families from receiving government compensation."

This leaves numerous tiger widows vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Several studies have revealed cases of physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and trafficking into sex work.

Climate change adds to plight
In recent years, the Sunderbans -- the world's largest mangrove forest, where around 4.5 million people live -- has been a hotbed of climate change, facing an existential threat from rising sea levels, frequent and intense cyclones, and increasing salinity in water. These have also led to an increase in the frequency of human-tiger conflicts, according to experts.

For instance, in 2015-2016, the

region -- stretching across 10,000 sq km across the Indo-Bangladesh border -- had shrunk by 210 sq km since the 1960s due to rise in sea level. Also, a gradual reduction in sediment flow from rivers to the Sunderbans region has resulted in loss of land mass.

Das says, "Habitat for both humans and tigers is getting submerged due to rising sea level. When the islands where tigers live submerge, the animal moves to human-inhabited areas, resulting in more number of attacks."

Climate has led to an increase in water salinity, threatening the health of mangrove forests and the quality of soil and crop. This has also caused disruptions to fish populations in the region, affecting livelihood of residents who depend on them for income.

"In search of fish and crabs, village residents are forced to enter forests illegally, and fall prey to tiger attacks," Das says.

Every year, around 40 people are targeted by tigers in the region,

according to an article published in the Asian Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies in March 2025.

This number is expected rise, as no suitable tiger habitat will be left in the Sunderbans by 2070 because of climate change and rise in sea level, according to a 2019 study published in the Science of The Total Environment journal.

Conservation efforts
To curb the adverse impacts of climate change, Mandal and his organisation, PEHS, have been planting mangrove saplings in the Sunderbans since 2009.

Mandal says, "Cyclone Aila in 2009 caused large-scale destruction in my village, Chorgheri. It was then that I realised the significance of mangroves, and decided to start planting and nurturing them." Mangrove forests act as a natural shield against cyclones, tidal surges, and coastal erosion. They can also be a rich carbon sink, a storehouse of carbon -- the primary driver of climate change. (PTI)

AI in legal sector needs ethical guardrails, strong data protection: Experts

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: The growing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in the legal sector has brought with it significant opportunities as well as broader ethical and regulatory challenges, legal experts said.

India is hosting the world's largest artificial intelligence conclave, the AI Impact Summit-2026, to make a big pitch for the new technology.

Ajay Bhargava, senior partner at Khaitan & Co, speaking to PTI, said that while AI is poised to augment legal capabilities, it remains a supportive tool that cannot replicate the intuition, ethical reasoning or strategic judgment of an experienced advocate.

Bhargava flagged some risks, saying over-reliance on AI-generated

drafts could be problematic because of potential inaccuracies. So, rigorous human verification of all AI-generated output was essential.

"The integration of AI in the legal sector also raises broader challenges, underscoring the need for clear ethical guidelines governing its use by lawyers, alongside strong data protection laws," he said.

Advocate Tarun Rana said AI was more of a support tool, helping lawyers in research and understanding of case laws.

"AI tools for legal research can be helpful but not completely reliable. It can swiftly track relevant case law with corresponding provision, saving the lengthy time to compare through the manual

search, but on occasions it might give overruled, outdated or incorrect case references. It could also misunderstand the context of a judgment," Rana said.

He underlined that blindly trusting AI could be risky, and it must be subjected to rigorous human verification.

Speaking about the use of AI by legal firms, Bhargava said AI as a support tool was presently being used for data-intensive tasks, such as document review, research and case management.

"At Khaitan & Co, we use proprietary AI tools for assistive drafting and research. However, the final judgment and strategic decision remain firmly with our lawyers, who bring an understanding of the complex Indian legal



system and market context."

"Over the years, it is likely to become more integrated into the legal system through indigenous tools, shifting the role of junior lawyers from manual tasks to analytical and strategic work. Within

Legal, pointed out an existing regional constraint in the use of AI by legal practitioners across the country.

"The role of AI in legal practice is quite limited, and confined to urban clusters or metros. It is surely not a decision-making tool. We do not use AI for drafting/contracts. The Supreme Court is already mentioning the havoc of AI-related case citations, and a lot of caution is needed," Mishra said. He said that it was futile to compare AI with the intent, intelligence, emotional core, critical, refined and experienced mind of a seasoned practitioner of law.

"AI will not reduce job opportunities. We need hundreds of hard-working lawyers to bridge the gap in access to justice for all," Mishra

said. Regarding the requirement of a specific regulatory framework for AI in the legal sector, Rana said it was a must.

He said, "This becomes important to ensure the accuracy, transparency and accountability as it relates to the right of a litigant. Other aspects, such as risk of infringement of privacy, leakage of vital information of the client, also need to be well protected."

Rana also spoke about the instances of fake citations being placed before courts by lawyers without proper verification from authentic judgment repositories. "Before placing a citation before a court, lawyers are duty-bound to verify its authenticity and find whether the judgment still prevails or has been over-ruled," he said. (PTI)

Modi-Lula talks

India, Brazil set USD 20-billion annual trade target, sign critical minerals pact

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: India and Brazil on Saturday set an annual bilateral trade target of USD 20 billion in the next five years and signed a pact for cooperation in the area of critical minerals following wide-ranging talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

The two leaders also vowed to shore up ties in a range of other sectors, including defence, energy, healthcare and digital public infrastructure, while emphasising a deeper India-Brazil strategic engagement to navigate the fragmented geopolitical environment.

Modi said India and Brazil are unanimous that terrorism and its supporters are "enemies" of humanity even as he noted that both sides agreed that reform of global institutions is essential to address the challenges facing the world.

President Lula is in India on a five-day visit from February 18, primarily to attend the India AI Impact Summit and hold talks with Modi.

"Brazil is India's largest trading partner in Latin America. We are committed to taking the bilateral trade beyond USD 20 billion in the next five years. Our trade is not just a figure, it is a reflection of trust," Modi said in his media statement in the presence of the Brazilian leader.

In 2024-25, the India-Brazil trade volume reached USD 12 billion, with Indian exports amounting to USD 6.77 billion and imports from Brazil totalling USD 5.43 billion.

The prime minister said the agreement on critical minerals and rare earth is a major step towards building resilient supply chains.



Besides the pact on critical minerals, India and Brazil also signed a joint declaration on digital partnership and signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) for cooperation in the areas of mining, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), healthcare and traditional knowledge system.

"Our cooperation in the field of defence is also continuously growing. This is a great example of mutual trust and strategic coordination. We will continue to strengthen this win-win partnership," Modi said.

The prime minister noted that the voice of the Global South becomes stronger and more confident when India and Brazil work together.

"The India-Brazil partnership on the global stage has been strong and influential. As democratic countries, we will continue to advance the priorities and aspirations of the Global South," he said.

"We believe that every problem must be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy. India and Brazil

are unanimous that terrorism and its supporters are enemies of all humanity," Modi added.

In his remarks, Lula slammed terror attacks in Kashmir and said terrorism must not be linked to any religion or nationality.

The president said the "turbulent global environment" requires India and Brazil to deepen their strategic ties and that dialogue between the two powers is an engagement of "superlatives". "We are not just the two biggest democracies of the Global South. This is a meeting of a digital superpower with a renewable-energy superpower. We are both mega-diverse countries and we both defend multilateralism and peace," he said.

The Brazilian leader argued that there is no possibility of fair and sustainable development in a conflict-ridden world and quoted Modi's remarks at last year's BRICS Summit that one cannot run "21st-century software on 20th-century typewriters".

"We emphasised our commitment to the UN reform, particu-

larly of the UN Security Council, so that it represents the interests of the Global South. Brazil and India are natural candidates to become permanent members of the Security Council," he said.

In his statement, Modi said the India-Brazil ties have long benefited from Lula's vision and that his visit has given new energy to the strategic partnership between the two countries.

The prime minister also made a mention of the India-Mercosur trade agreement and said it will further strengthen the economic ties between the two countries.

"Our cooperation in technology and innovation is important for both countries, as well as for the entire Global South. I am pleased that we are working on establishing a Centre of Excellence for Digital Public Infrastructure in Brazil," he said.

"We are also prioritising our cooperation in areas, such as artificial intelligence, supercomputers, semiconductors and blockchain. We both believe that technology must be inclusive and it must become a bridge for shared progress," Modi said.

He described the India-Brazil energy cooperation as a strong pillar of the bilateral relationship.

"Along with hydrocarbons, we are also accelerating cooperation in many areas, such as renewable energy, ethanol blending, sustainable aviation fuel. Brazil's active participation in the 'Global Biofuel Alliance' reflects our shared commitment to a green future," the prime minister said.

In the talks, Brazil also proposed to co-chair the India-backed Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). (PTI)

RSS not seeking political power, focused on uniting Hindu society: Bhagwat

MEERUT, Feb 21: RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on Friday said the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is not driven by any desire for political power and is solely committed to organising the entire Hindu society and fostering character-building among individuals.

Interacting with around 950 national and international sportspersons at Madhav Kunj in Shatabdi Nagar here, Bhagwat emphasised the importance of social unity and said the organisation does not work in opposition to or competition with any particular group.

Addressing the gathering for about 50 minutes, he highlighted the RSS' nearly 100-year journey since its inception and called upon the youth to play an active role in nation-building, according to participants at the programme. "RSS is not driven by any desire for political power. Its sole objective is the organisation of the entire Hindu society and character-building of individuals," one of the participants told reporters, quoting Bhagwat.

Explaining the idea of India, Bhagwat said the country cannot be confined merely to geographical boundaries but draws inspiration from the traditions of Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, Lord Buddha, Lord Mahavira, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayanand and Mahatma Gandhi, the participant said. He said the term "Hindu" denotes unity in diversity rather than caste, adding that while modes of worship and deities may differ, the cultural foundation is harmony and unity. Whenever social unity weakened, the nation faced crises, he was quoted as saying.

The RSS chief also outlined four pillars of society -- value inculcation, Sanatan culture, spirit of dharma and embodiment of truth -- and reiterated that the Sangh's mission is to organise the entire



Hindu society through individual development. Volunteers, he said, are active across various fields of social life and place national interest above all else.

Bhagwat told the sportspersons that nation-building is the responsibility of society as a whole, not any single organisation, and described sports as a "powerful medium to bring people together", according to the participant.

Recalling Meerut's role in the First War of Independence of 1857, he said the historical backdrop later inspired Keshav Baliram Hedgewar to establish the RSS in 1925. He also shared five guiding principles for those wishing to associate with the RSS -- understanding the organisation from within, connecting with its affiliated bodies, supporting its programmes, maintaining dialogue and working selflessly for the nation -- and answered questions from athletes, the participant added. Bhagwat is currently on a tour of Uttar Pradesh. As part of the RSS centenary celebrations, he attended a two-day outreach programme in Lucknow on February 17 and 18 and had earlier visited Gorakhpur.

In Lucknow, he briefly met Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on

Wednesday evening, while both deputy chief ministers called on him on Thursday morning before he departed for Meerut by train.

Arjuna Award-winning wrestler Alka Tomar, who attended the event, termed the event "grand" and praised the arrangements made by RSS volunteers.

"We should learn how well such programmes are organised. RSS workers are working effectively for the nation. The effort here was to show how we can take the country forward," she told reporters.

Tomar said nation-building is the responsibility of every sportsperson and that such interactions are beneficial for athletes. She said she had been following Bhagwat for some time and appreciated his emphasis on working in the national interest.

Para Cricket Club of India player Surya Pratap Mishra of Bareilly, selected for a Sri Lanka tour, described Bhagwat's approach towards sports and para athletes as commendable. "He assured all possible support for para athletes so that they can enhance the country's pride through their talent," Mishra said, adding that the players were extended best wishes for their future and promised better platforms. (PTI)

Centre targets six crore 'Lakhpati Didis' by 2029-30: Union Minister Chouhan

HYDERABAD, Feb 21: Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Saturday said the Centre would strive to achieve the target of creating six crore 'Lakhpati Didis' under the rural livelihoods mission by 2029-30. He said the previous target set by PM Modi to create three crore 'Lakhpati Didis' by end of 2027 was achieved by 2025 with the contribution of rural development ministry's team, bankers and also state governments.

Chouhan was speaking during the Central Level Coordination Committee (CLCC) Meeting and the National Launch event under DAY-NRLM (Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihoods Mission here).

Explaining the term, he said 'Lakhpati Didi' refers to a woman whose net come per year is one lakh rupees or more.

As on date, 3.01 crore women have achieved this milestone. Addressing reporters, he said, "Now, Prime Minister has revised the target. He said now we have to make six crore (Lakhpati Didis). 10 crore sisters have joined us in Self Help Groups (SHGs). The target is to make six crore 'Lakhpati

We have prepared a roadmap for it."

He noted that it was relatively easier to realise the target of three crore 'Lakhpati Didis' because the income of many women was ₹50,000 to ₹60,000.

But, enhancing the income of women with lower earnings would require greater effort.

"We will try to achieve this target 2029-30. It is difficult compared to the past," he added. Chouhan said the government would launch a special drive to enrol women who are not yet part of the SHGs into the Groups. (PTI)

regulatory framework.

Institutions such as CRI, Nadda observed, have played a significant role in achieving these standards.

The Union minister recalled that historically, vaccine and drug development timelines were long, tetanus vaccine development took decades globally, tuberculosis medicines took nearly 30 years to evolve, and the Japanese Encephalitis vaccine took almost a century of scientific effort. On the other hand, during the COVID-19 pandemic, India developed two indigenous vaccines within nine months and administered over 220 crore doses, including booster doses.

Nadda also highlighted that COVID-19 vaccination certificates were delivered digitally, demonstrating India's digital transformation in public health delivery.

Referring to India's global solidarity efforts, he stated that under the Vaccine Maitri initiative, India supplied vaccines to nearly 100 countries, of which 48 countries received vaccines free of cost.

The minister noted that the contributions of public sector institutions such as CRI strengthened India's capacity to serve both domestic and global needs. (PTI)

Joint maritime mechanism in IOR will be based on consensus: Navy Chief

PANAJI, Feb 21: Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Dinesh Tripathi on Saturday said that any proposed joint maritime mechanism in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) would be based on consensus among participating nations, assuring India's support for partner countries in capacity-building efforts.

Addressing a press conference on the sidelines of the Goa Maritime Conclave (GMC) 2026, Admiral Tripathi said the first session of the conclave involved discussions regarding enhanced cooperation among IOR nations, including the possibility of a joint task force-type arrangement.

"The GMC is based on consensus. There has to be a consensus among all nations. All of us have different capabilities, so what everyone brings to the table has to be taken into consideration," he said.

The Navy chief noted that the idea of closer opera-

tional cooperation was well accepted and said modalities of a joint task force would have to be worked out collectively. He highlighted a previous initiative, referring to Indian Ocean Ship (IOS) SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), under which personnel from 10 IOR countries embarked on an Indian naval platform last year and sailed together for 41 days, making port calls across the region.

"The experience and feedback we got was very positive, including from the maritime and political leadership of various countries. Based on that, we have decided to have IOS SAGAR 2.0 this year. We are deciding the date," he said.

Such initiatives, where officers and sailors from IOR nations sail and work together, help build a common understanding of the maritime environment, he said. (PTI)

Nadda launches India-made tetanus and adult diphtheria vaccine

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: Union Health Minister J P Nadda on Saturday launched the indigenously manufactured tetanus and adult diphtheria (Td) vaccine at the Central Research Institute in Himachal Pradesh's Kasauli.

With the formal launch of the Td vaccine, the vaccine has now been introduced for supply under the Universal Immunization Programme (UIP).

The Central Research Institute will supply 55 lakh doses to the UIP by April, with production expected to scale up progressively in subsequent years to further strengthen the central government's Universal Immunization Programme, Nadda said.

Addressing the gathering, Nadda congratulated the scientists, technical experts and staff of the Central Research Institute Kasauli, describing the launch Td vaccine as a momentous and historic occasion.

He stated that the launch marks a significant step towards safeguarding national health security and strengthening India's public health infrastructure.

The minister underlined that the government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has set clear targets for achieving



self-reliance in the health and pharmaceutical sectors. Nadda noted that the launch of the indigenously manufactured Td vaccine represents a concrete step towards the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat in health and medicine.

Highlighting nation's global standing, the minister also stated that India is widely recognised as the "pharmacy of the world" and is among the leading vaccine manufacturers globally.

He further noted that India has achieved maturity Level 3 in the World Health Organization's global benchmarking of regulatory systems, reflecting the robustness of its vaccine

Final electoral roll published in Kerala; around 9 lakhs names removed

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Feb 21: The ECI on Saturday published the final electoral roll in Kerala after the SIR exercise, with around nine lakh names removed from the list.

The total number of voters in the state now stands at over 2.69 crore. The Election Commission of India also shared a link—<http://electoralsearch.eci.gov.in>—enabling the public to check their names on the updated list.

According to data released by the ECI at a press meet on Friday, the revised electoral roll has 2,69,53,644 voters, compared to 2,78,50,855 before the Special Intensive Revision began in October last year. As many as 8,97,211 voters were removed following the SIR exercise, the ECI said.

In the revised list, male voters number 1,31,26,048, female voters 1,38,27,319, and transgender voters 277, officials said.

The number of overseas voters

in the updated roll is 2,23,558, while service voters stand at 54,110.

ECI officials said 36.88 lakh voters were issued notices for hearings as part of the SIR process, of whom 53,229 were excluded from the final list.

Meanwhile, the voter list of the State Election Commission, based on which the 2025 local body elections were conducted, had 2,86,07,658 voters. The ECI said an additional 4,01,368 applications for correction, inclusion and deletion were received between January 31 and February 16.

The Commission added that aggrieved voters can approach it after the release of the final list for inclusion or deletion. The final list will also be provided to political parties for verification.

Officials added that names can be included in the electoral roll until the last date for filing nominations for the Assembly elections. (PTI)

Court denies bail to PFI national leader

KOCHI, Feb 21: A court has dismissed the bail petition of the national in-charge of the education wing of the banned PFI after the NIA opposed the plea, alleging that he had organised armed training and propagated ISIS ideology.

NIA Court judge MK Mohandas on Friday dismissed the bail plea of Ashraf alias Karamanna Ashraf Moulavi, the national in-charge of the PFI education wing and vice president of the All India Imams Council affiliated to the banned organisation.

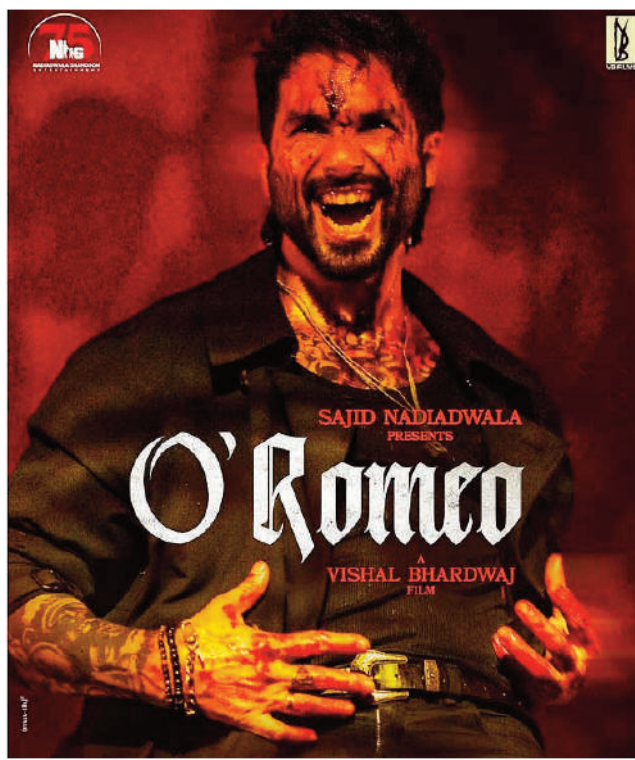
He is the second accused in the case registered in connection with alleged anti-national activities of the Popular Front of India (PFI). He is also an accused in the murder of RSS leader Sreenivasan in Palakkad.

Objecting to the bail plea, the NIA submitted that Ashraf organised arms training imparted by the PFI at Periyar Valley in Kochi and at the Trivandrum Educational Services Trust (TEST) as preparation for committing terrorist acts.

The order, referring to the NIA's objections, stated that the statement of Protected Witness No. 3 revealed that Ashraf, along with other accused, organised armed training at Periyar Valley through the 15th accused, Muhammad Mubarak.

"During the search of the residence of Mubarak on December 29, 2022, three swords and one axe were seized. It is submitted that an axe was used by PFI cadres in the hand-chopping case of Prof Joseph in Kerala, investigated by the NIA," the order stated, citing the agency's submission. The NIA further submitted that Ashraf, along with other accused, was involved in the conspiracy relating to the murder of Sreenivasan.

"The Protected Witness No. 4 stated that the petitioner, along with others, conducted arms training for PFI cadres at TEST, Thiruvananthapuram," the order said. (PTI)



WANTED TO BREAK OUT, REINVENT MYSELF: VISHAL BHARDWAJ ON 'O' ROMEO'

Wrapped in "John Wick" and Quentin Tarantino style action sequences, "O' Romeo" is a "deep and unusual" love story and one that is very different in mood from "Maqbool", "Haider" and "Omkaara", says Vishal Bhardwaj. His newest will also be his most successful, he adds with confidence.

The Shahid Kapoor-Triptii Dimri starrer is stylised, funny, romantic, next level violent. And is not an adaptation of Shakespeare's

"Romeo and Juliet" though it has hints of the play on the star-crossed lovers.

Happy he has broken out of the mould critics had cast him in, Bhardwaj said he doesn't know how he got the image of an intellectual and recounts a message from a childhood friend about "O' Romeo": "I didn't know you had the capacity for this violence, blood, gore and, of course, love."

"We have been friends for over 40 years. I told him, 'You should have led with love and then the violence and gore could come later'. Because, essentially, it is a very deep and unusual love story," Bhardwaj told PTI in an interview.

"This is going to be one of the most successful films of my life. I have to say this to break the heart of those critics who have criticised this film. I'm so proud of this film. I am not ashamed of anything. I am so proud of the violence and the love story I have created in this film," he added.

The director-music composer-singer is

known for successfully reinterpreting William Shakespeare's three tragedies - "Macbeth" and "Othello" in the Hindi heartland through "Maqbool" and "Omkaara" and "Hamlet" in the wintry landscape of Kashmir with "Haider".

"O' Romeo" is a fictional take on the real life story of gangsters Sapna Didi and Hussain Ustara and inspired by a chapter of Hussain Zaidi's "Mafia Queens of Mumbai".

Produced by Nadiadwala Grandson in association with Vishal Bhardwaj Films, its earnings have crossed Rs 75 crore since its release a week ago. The film, with music by Bhardwaj and lyrics by Gulzar as always, also stars Avinash Tiwary, Farida Jalal, Nana Patekar, Tamannah Bhatia and Vikrant Massey.

Shahid, who has reunited with Bhardwaj for the fourth time for a film, plays a quirky, music loving gangster who is quite the master when it comes to killing his enemies with a barber's razor. He has fallen foul of former friend Jalal and now works as a covert operative for an IB officer. He falls for a woman who comes to him seeking vengeance on those responsible for her husband's death.

Bhardwaj, who has also made children's films like "The Blue Umbrella" and "Makdee" and dramas like "Kaminey", "7 Khoon Maaf", "Rangoon" and "Khufiya", said he is filtering out reviews for now and

will read the critics' verdict - good, bad, mixed - a few months later.

"Some critics have an issue with my reinvention. They want to cage you in the personality they have made of you. There is a difference between individuality and personality. They don't know who I am. I have grown up on Manmohan Desai's cinema - 'Parvarish', 'Amar Akbar Anthony', 'Suhag'.

"I don't know how I got this intellectual image. Maybe my aesthetic grew deep on the other side because of my love for poetry and music. But in cinema, I am totally 'desi'. When I started making movies, I made certain kinds of films. But this was the time to reinvent myself, which I did. I think I succeeded at the box office but whether I have succeeded with critics, I don't know."

With "O' Romeo", he said, he wanted to create a spectacular story with its climax in a Spanish bullring. He penned an emotional note on the eve of the film's release.

"I was very scared. It took so much out of me physically, emotionally. But even then, when this film ended, I felt so full, so happy and I wanted to write it on the eve of or before the release because when the critics and the reviewers start talking about your film, whether good or bad, you get coloured." (PTI)

FARHAN AKHTAR 'HONOURED AND GRATEFUL' TO PLAY RAVI SHANKAR IN SAM MENDES' BEATLES FILMS



Actor-filmmaker Farhan Akhtar on Thursday said he is "honoured and grateful" to be part of the legacy of The Beatles and sitar maestro Ravi Shankar as he prepares to portray the Indian music icon in filmmaker Sam Mendes' upcoming four-part cinematic event on the legendary British band.

Sony Pictures had last week announced that Akhtar will star as Ravi Shankar in "The Beatles - A Four-Film Cinematic Event", directed by Mendes, the Oscar-winning filmmaker known for "American Beauty", "1917" and James Bond hits "Skyfall" and "Spectre".

The ambitious project will chronicle the story of the iconic band through four separate films, each told from the perspective of one of its members. In a post on Instagram, Akhtar thanked Mendes and called the opportunity "the stuff dreams are made of".

"Honoured and grateful to be part of the ever expanding legacy of @thebeatles and of Pandit Ravi Shankar ji. Their creative genius is a rite of passage for generation after generation of listeners... Thank you Sam Mendes... been an ardent admirer of all your work and to be directed by you in this film, is the stuff dreams are made of," the actor wrote.

"The Beatles - A Four-Film Cinematic Event" will feature Paul Mescal as Paul McCartney, Harris Dickinson as John Lennon, Barry Keoghan as Ringo Starr and Joseph Quinn as George Harrison.

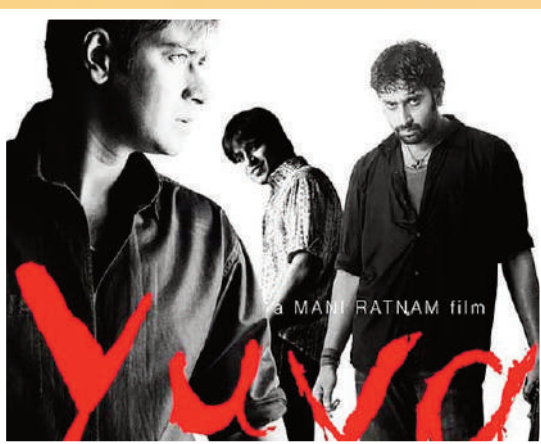
Formed in 1960 by Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Starr, The Beatles became one of the most influential bands in music history with songs such as "Hey Jude", "I Want to Hold Your Hand", "Yesterday" and "Penny Lane", before breaking up in 1970.

Ravi Shankar's music had a profound influence on the band, particularly Harrison, who learned the sitar from the Indian maestro. The Beatles incorporated Indian instruments into several of their songs, including "Norwegian Wood", "Within You Without You" and "Love You To". Shankar and Harrison remained close friends and collaborated at the Concert for Bangladesh in August 1971.

Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr and the families of the late John Lennon and George Harrison have granted Mendes full life story and music rights for the films, which are slated to release in theatres in April 2028.

Akhtar was last seen in the war drama "120 Bahadur" and has also appeared in the Marvel Studios series "Ms. Marvel". (PTI)

PVR INOX ANNOUNCES RE-RELEASE OF MANI RATNAM'S 'YUVA'



Filmmaker Mani Ratnam's critically-acclaimed film "Yuva" is set to return to the big screen as PVR INOX Ltd announced the movie's re-release across its theatres from February 20.

Originally released in 2004, "Yuva" is a multi-narrative film that explores themes of love, youth, anger, rebellion, class and the clash with power and corruption, capturing what the makers described as the restless spirit of a generation.

The film features an ensemble cast led by Ajay Devgn, Abhishek Bachchan, Rani Mukerji, Kareena Kapoor Khan, Vivek Oberoi, Esha Deol and Sonu Sood.

Oberoi, who played a pivotal role in the film, said Yuva remains one of the most special projects of his career.

"It came at a very important time in my life and pushed me as an actor in ways I hadn't experienced before. Working with Mani Ratnam sir and sharing the screen with such talented co-actors shaped me both personally and professionally. I'm excited that a whole new generation will get to watch it on the big screen," he said in a statement.

Esha Deol also recalled her experience of working on the film, calling it a "special journey", and wished the team well for the re-release. (PTI)

Furore over 'The Kerala Story 2': parties divided, producer says real life stories

The yet to be released Hindi film "The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond" on religious conversion is at the centre of an escalating row, much like its 2023 predecessor, with Left and Congress leaders terming it hate propaganda and the BJP backing it as "legitimate concern".

The trailer of the film, produced by Vipul Amrutlal Shah and directed by Kamakhyaa Narain Singh, released on Tuesday and landed straight into controversy. It tracks the stories of three Hindu women from three different states going against their families to marry Muslim men and then being forced to convert.

"The movie is based on real life stories... I want audiences to judge whether we are showing the truth or propaganda," Shah told PTI as the storm brewed in Kerala and elsewhere too.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan slammed the filmmakers, saying the intent is to "spread hatred against the state and undermine its secular tradition".

"The reports regarding the release of a sequel to the hate-mongering film 'The Kerala Story' should be seen with utmost gravity. Having already seen through the communal agenda and blatant lies of the first part, Kerala will once again reject this attempt to demonise our secular fabric with contempt," the CPM leader said in a post on X.

"It is shocking how fabricated narratives aimed at inciting communal discord receive a free pass, while critical expressions of art get gagged. We must stand united against these attempts to paint our land of harmony as a hub of terror. The truth shall always prevail," he posted.

Congress general secretary K C Venugopal agreed.

He alleged that the BJP-led Central government, which honoured the first film with a national award, was encouraging and legitimising such hate campaigns.

"It is extremely objectionable to portray a state, known for its secularism and for not discriminating between people on the basis of food or clothing, in this way," Venugopal said, adding that the people of Kerala should dismiss with contempt such "poisonous campaigns".

The film received support from the BJP.

Kerala BJP chief Rajeev Chandrasekhar accused Vijayan and the Congress of selective outrage

and said in a post on X, "Freedom of expression for radicals. Moral outrage when the vote bank feels uncomfortable. This is the #CPMCongressKuruvaSangam's idea of secularism - selective outrage for political survival."

"Love Jihad is a legitimate concern for many. If filmmakers choose to examine it, there is nothing wrong with that. If you don't like a film, don't watch it. But CM @PinarayiVijayan does not get to decide whether it should exist. You cannot defend free speech when it suits your ecosystem and attack it when it challenges your narrative. BJP/NDA will not

allow this double standard. #TheKeralaStory2 #TheKeralaStory," he wrote on X. The first film, titled "The Kerala Story", was also based on the religious conversion and radicalisation of young women and was also the centre of furious debate. It was directed by Sudipto Sen and earned over Rs 300 crore despite being banned in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Besides, it won the National Film Award for best direction for Sen and best cinematography.

Shah, who produced "The Kerala Story" as well and has co-written the second one, fought back against the criticism of his new project.

He said the film does not target any particular state, religion or community and talks about the racket of forced conversions.

"If I had to make the film for the benefit of any political party, then I would have made a story on Bengal. Bengal has elections. I would have made a story on Assam. But here we have stories from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Kerala. "It is wrong to say that we are targeting Kerala only. This racket is spread all over India. And our title says the 'story goes beyond'. But people don't read the full title," Shah told PTI.

Hitting out at his critics, he said they were of the view that even if girls are losing their lives and getting trapped, their lives ruined, the perpetrators should not be exposed.

"These criminals, whom I call terrorists, if you cannot help us in exposing them, then no problem. But after exposing them, you are in the government, you have all the authority, why don't you take any action against them?" (PTI)



IMPORTANT TO SAY IT LOUD AND CLEAR: ANUBHAV SINHA ON EXPLORING RISING RAPE CASES IN 'ASSI'

Filmmaker Anubhav Sinha, known for his hard-hitting social dramas, says his new film "Assi" is an attempt to understand the reasons behind rising sexual assault cases in a society that has grown numb to such violence.

Starring Kani Kusruti in the role of a rape survivor and Taapsee Pannu, as her lawyer, the movie narrates the story of a Delhi woman's quest for justice following a violent sexual assault, and focuses on the obstacles faced during the police and court proceedings.

The title of the film is derived from the statistics that approximately 80 ("Assi") rape cases are reported daily in India.

Every 20 minutes in the film, the screen appears red, reminding viewers that another rape has taken place in the country.

"The idea was to re-normalise the news (about rape cases) that we have accepted as a part of life. And as long as it's happening a thousand kilometers away from us to someone else's daughter, we are not fine with it but we take it as 'Ho gaya hai, ab kya kare'. I think we as a society collectively need to think about it," the director, known for films like "Mulk", "Article 15", "Thappad", "Anek", and "Bheed", told PTI in an interview.

Sinha said a significant number of these incidents occur within the home and by known people, and he believes that society must



"collectively" confront the problem rather than solely "blaming the judiciary or police".

"(Rape cases) is uncomfortable and conventionally, we don't talk about this in families, we find the adjectives disturbing. Human beings are always looking for a shield to hide behind, like when you realise you put on some weight,

you avoid the mirror because you know what you are going to see there.

"So, that mirror is uncomfortable. It was important to say this loud and clear. And also sort of wrap it inside a dramatic story so that it gets your attention and engages you for those two hours that you spend with it." Sinha asserts that "Assi" is not based on any particular case, instead, it is a culmination of

numerous stories that tragically share the similar pattern.

The 60-year-old filmmaker considers films like "Assi" to be "real mainstream cinema" because they tell stories relevant to the audience's lives.

"In my view, this cinema (referring to films like 'Assi') is the future of Hindi cinema. These are the films that will run the engine, that will make the other mainstream cinema. I call it the other mainstream cinema as this is the real mainstream cinema as it is their story, it's happening a kilometer around us," he said.

One of the most striking revelations from "Assi" is the inclusion of children, which Sinha said, was a conscious decision.

In order to shield children from the film's dark subject material, the director said he followed a two-script strategy, one for the lead cast, other for child actors, who were told that the story is about a man snatching a bag from her mother.

"As a senior member of the civil society, I'm looking at the next generation and saying please help me because I messed up. While I say that to them, I'm also aware that, where they stand is a mess, it is not the beginning of civilization where you can start writing a new script.

"They are standing in the middle of a messed-up situation so we need to hold their hands as

people who have lived a longer life," he said, hoping the number of rape cases come down.

The film boasts of an ensemble cast including Mohd Zeeshan Ayyub, Kumud Mishra, Revathi, Manoj Pahwa, Naseeruddin Shah, Supriya Pathak, and Seema Pahwa.

Sinha said the veteran actors worked for free out of passion for the film. The director worked with Shah on his OTT series, "IC 814: The Kandahar Hijack", while "Assi" marks his maiden collaboration with Supriya and Seema.

"I told Naseer bhai if we can meet over breakfast and he invited me to his house. Initially, I was going around the bush and after a while he asked me what exactly I want from him and I told him I need him for a guest appearance for the film ('Assi') and he said, 'Ok, I'll do it'.

Three days before the shoot, he said, 'Send me my scenes', I told him, 'I'll send you the script, do read it.' For one of the scenes, we needed Supriya ji, I called her from Delhi and said, 'Ma'am I need you for a scene in the film', and she said, 'Yes'. Same thing (happened) with Seema ji."

"I had sent them money but everyone sent it back to me. I often invite them over for food and feed them. It's just their love for me, and I love them too," the director said.

Backed by T-Series and Sinha, "Assi" is scheduled for release this Friday. (PTI)

Battle for spin bowling supremacy on cards as England take on Lanka in Super 8s

PALLEKELE (SRI LANKA), Feb 21: A battle for spin-bowling supremacy is on the cards as England look to draw inspiration from their recent series whitewash of Sri Lanka when the two sides clash in a Super Eight match of the T20 World Cup here on Saturday.

England had beaten Sri Lanka 3-0 in their T20I series here earlier this month and they would be happy to return to the island nation for the Super Eight match, having played all their group games in India.

The two-time champions are, however, yet to convince at this T20 World Cup, with three nervy victories against associate nations and a loss at the hands of former champions West Indies.

Co-hosts Sri Lanka began with wins over Ireland and Oman, and were at their best against Australia, whom they beat by eight wickets while chasing 182 here. The Lankans, however, lost their momentum, losing to giant-killers Zimbabwe in their last group match in

Colombo on Thursday.

It will be a fresh start for both the sides with Sri Lanka looking to cash in on the home advantage while England would be looking to pick up steam in the tournament at a place where they had done well less than a month back.

For Sri Lanka, Pathum Nissanka would be looking to continue his top form at the venue where he had hit 100 not out in the win against Australia. He is among the three centurions in this T20 World Cup and is at the second spot among highest run getters so far.

Kusal Mendis has also been in good touch with three half centuries in four matches and he would be one of the key Sri Lankan batters the England bowlers would want to target.

England batters, meanwhile, have been struggling so far with Jacob Bethell the best among them with 143 runs from four matches with one half century. The form of captain Harry Brook and senior player Jos Buttler will be crucial for



England's success. In the bowling department, off-spinner Maheesh Theekshana has been the best Sri Lankan bowler with six wickets from

four matches.

Sri Lanka were dealt a blow after pacer Matheesha Pathirana was ruled out of the rest of the tournament on the eve of Thursday's defeat to Zimbabwe. Dilshan Madushanka, who replaced Pathirana in the squad, conceded just 20 runs from his three overs against Zimbabwe.

Seamer Dushmantha Chameera is set to return to the side after being rested for the final group game.

England would be looking up to the spin duo of Adil Rashid and Liam Dawson, as well as pacer Jofra Archer to get wickets.

Veteran Rashid, one of the best leg-spinners in the world currently, has taken six wickets from four matches -- the same as Archer -- and he could be the England trump card once again on Sunday.

Dawson has been reasonably economical till now while Rashid had one outstanding game against West Indies (2 for 16 in four overs) but was otherwise expensive, taking a combined 4 for 121 in

11 overs against Associate opposition.

Conditions should also favour England's part-time options with the likes of Will Jacks and Bethell in the side. Both played vital roles with the ball in England's 3-0 series win earlier this month on a slow, used surface here. The match could also be disrupted as there is prediction of rain in the afternoon.

The Squads:

England: Harry Brook (c), Tom Banton, Jos Buttler, Ben Duckett, Phil Salt, Jacob Bethell, Sam Curran, Liam Dawson, Will Jacks, Jamie Overton, Rehan Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Adil Rashid, Josh Tongue, Luke Wood.

Sri Lanka: Kusal Mendis, Kamil Mishara, Pathum Nissanka, Kusal Perera, Pavan Rathnayake, Dasun Shanaka (c), Charith Asalanka, Dushan Hemantha, Janith Liyanage, Kamindu Mendis, Dushmantha Chameera, Dilshan Madushanka, Pramod Madushan, Maheesh Theekshana, Dunith Wellalage.

Match starts at 3pm. (PTI)

Lionel Messi's Inter Miami reloads for a run at a second straight MLS title

MIAMI, Feb 21: Less than three months removed from his first MLS Cup championship, Lionel Messi's Inter Miami shows no signs of a letdown.

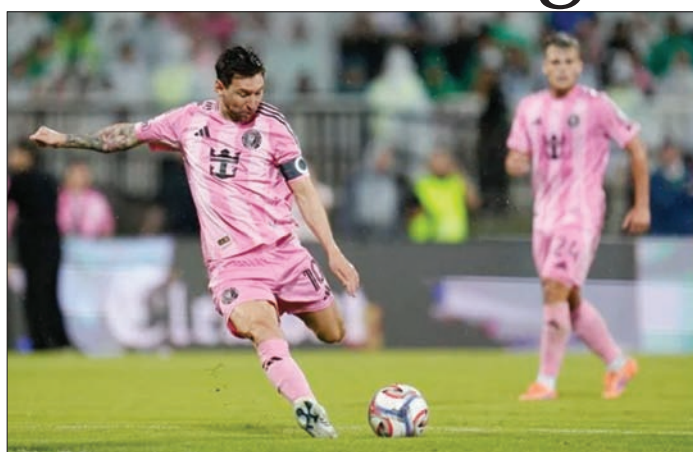
The Herons have assembled one of the strongest rosters in Major League Soccer history heading into a season that begins this weekend and bookends around the biggest event of them all, the World Cup hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada.

The ageless Messi — he turns 39 in June — is coming off his second straight MVP award, the first player in MLS history to accomplish that feat. He just keeps adding to a legacy that already ensures he'll be remembered as one of the greatest ever to play the beautiful game.

"He's a quiet guy, but on the pitch he transforms into an animal," teammate Yannick Bright told Italy's La Gazzetta dello Sport. "After all he's won, he never wants to lose, not even in training."

Messi is hardly going it alone in Miami, which pulled off an impressive reload after bringing a title to South Florida.

MLS goalkeeper of the year Dayne St. Clair was lured away from Minnesota United, addressing the club's biggest area of concern. Germán Bertrame arrived from Liga MX's Monterrey to fill a designated player spot, giving the



Herons another dynamic threat up front. Newcomers Micael, Sergio Reguilón and David Ayala should help the club cope with the departures of Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba.

Miami begins its title defense Saturday night with a prime-time matchup against Los Angeles FC at the iconic Coliseum, which is expected to draw a crowd of more than 60,000.

Messi dealt with a muscle issue during the preseason, which put his availability for the opener in question. But he returned to full training this week and is expected to play.

Adding to the excitement in Miami, the Herons will hold their first game at their new Freedom Park stadium on April 4. The

25,000-seat facility completes a more than decade-long quest to build a soccer-specific stadium within the city.

Miami's possible challengers
The Vancouver Whitecaps, who were bolstered by the summer signing of longtime German star Thomas Müller, reached the final of both the MLS Cup and CONCACAF Champions Cup in 2025.

They came up short in both games, losing 3-1 to Messi's squad for the league title and 5-0 to Mexico's Cruz Azul for the continental championship. With Müller set for his first full season in MLS, the Whitecaps are eager to bring home a trophy.

Los Angeles FC could be

strongest club this side of South Florida, with Son Heung-Min also set for full campaign after his mid-season arrival from Tottenham Hotspur provided a dynamic pairing with Denis Bouanga.

"I let Messi win this year," Son joked during a December visit to Tottenham, "but next year ... we'll be at the top."

Also keep an eye on the Philadelphia Union, which claimed the Supporters' Shield for the league's best record during the regular season, and Minnesota United FC with its newest addition, Colombian icon James Rodríguez on a short-term deal.

World Cup break
The league's 30 clubs will have to navigate a seven-week shutdown while the expanded World Cup is held in North America.

MLS stadiums in Atlanta, New England, Seattle, Vancouver and Toronto will host World Cup matches, and many of the league's training facilities will be utilized by nations from around the globe.

The unique schedule has led to some strange quirks in the schedule, such as Atlanta United going more than three months between home games at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

When MLS resumes play in mid-July, it will be interesting to see which teams do the best job of handling the long layoff. (AP)

PALLEKELE (SRI LANKA), Feb 21: England captain Harry Brook on Saturday admitted underestimating some teams in their group and promised to dish out stronger performances in the Super 8 stage in the T20 World Cup.

England, the two-time champions of the tournament, have been far from convincing thus far with three nervy victories against associate nations and a loss at the hands of former champions West Indies.

They nearly lost to lowly Nepal before scraping to a four-run win, suffered a comprehensive 30-run defeat to former champions West Indies, before beating Scotland and Italy to reach the Super 8s.

They face co-hosts Sri Lanka in their first Super 8s match here on Sunday.

"It was obviously a niggly start to the competition. We probably underestimated a few of the sides and they put up a really good fight and yeah, look, we came here to get through that stage and thankfully we have, so we're here in the Super 8s and that's our main focus now," Brook said during the pre-match press conference.

"We see it as a new competition now. Obviously with the no carrying over of points or anything like that, it's a completely fresh start and we can see it like that as well."

"Just a few people haven't fired yet but hopefully with the compe-

tion we're about to come up against, them boys can start to fire and have some good match-winning performances."

England registered a 3-0 T20 series whitewash of Sri Lanka at the same venue earlier this month as a tune-up to the T20 World Cup.

"We obviously had a very good series against them here and on this particular ground as well, so we can take a lot of confidence having played here and experience on this surface and this ground."

"We're really looking forward to taking them on. And yeah, hopefully we can play our best cricket and really put them under pressure."

Brook also conceded that his side had been "slightly too careful with the bat" in the group games and indicated that they would look to be more aggressive going forward.

"We've been slightly too careful with the bat. We can probably be a bit more brave in certain situations and having more faith in the guys behind us to be able to go out there and put a decent score on as well."

Talking about the Sri Lankan team, he said, "I've learned that you can't take any team for granted as we've seen in the group stages. We've managed to sneak through in a couple of games."

"Some of their batters are batting really well. So hopefully we

can get a few wickets in the power play. And Nissanka is on a bit of a heat at the minute. So it would be ideal if we can get him out early."

"We just want to go out there and play our best cricket. We can really look to put them under a little bit more pressure, especially with the batting depth that we got."

"They're obviously a strong side with a lot of confidence as well after a few very good wins and if we stick to our guns and play our best cricket there's no reason why we can't beat them."

Asked if batting all-rounder Jacob Bethell is fit to bowl, Brook said, "Not sure yet... he's got a decent cut in his finger. So he'd have to have strapping on his finger but if there's some way we can get around that then we'd like to bowl him but at the minute I don't think it's possible."

"Hopefully he can somehow get over that and roll a few out."

Asked about rain forecast on Saturday, Brook said, "You can sometimes go down a bit of a rabbit hole thinking that you're going to play a five over game and then it ends up being a T20 and you kind of play it slightly differently."

"So we've just got to prepare as if it is a T20 game and hope that the rain stays away. And then if it doesn't, then we've got to adapt and realise you've got to play the game slightly differently." (PTI)

BCCI announces structured support for Cricket Association for the Blind



NEW DELHI, Feb 21: The BCCI on Saturday announced a structured support framework for the Cricket Association for the Blind in India (CABI), including international exposure, home series assistance and venue access, reaffirming its commitment to inclusive growth in the sport.

India's visually impaired cricketers have achieved remarkable success on the global stage over the past decade, winning multiple men's World Cup titles along with a historic inaugural women's World Cup.

Recognising these achievements and the challenges faced by blind cricketers, the BCCI has committed to extending support to both the men's and women's teams.

"The achievements of India's visually impaired cricketers are a source of immense pride for the cricketing fraternity," BCCI President Mithun Manhas said in a release.

"Through this support framework, the BCCI aims to strengthen opportunities, infrastructure and exposure for these athletes. Inclusive growth remains central to our vision for the game."

"We hope this support will further empower the teams to pursue excellence with confidence and inspire many more to take up the sport. The BCCI remains committed to playing its part in ensuring that cricket continues to be a game for all."

Under the initiative, the BCCI will extend assistance in three key areas. International exposure: Provision of international travel support for two overseas tournaments annually for both the men's and women's teams. (PTI)

Would be a shame if Pak players are not part of the The 100; Brook

PALLEKELE, Feb 21: It would be "a shame" if Pakistan cricketers are excluded from the The Hundred, England's limited-over skipper Harry Brook said here on Saturday.

There have been reports that Indian-owned Hundred franchises -- Manchester Super Giants, MI London, Southern Brave and Sunrisers Leeds -- may refrain from picking Pakistan players at the auction amid concerns over potential political backlash in India due to ongoing tensions between the two neighbours.

"Our main focus now is what's coming up in the T20 World Cup. It's not really any of our business, to be honest," Brook, who has been signed by Indian-

owned Sunrisers Leeds, said ahead of his team's Super Eight clash against Sri Lanka.

"But what I would say is Pakistan have been a great cricket nation for many years. I think there's about 50, 60 players in the auction, and it would be a shame to not see some of them in there."

As many as 67 male and female cricketers from Pakistan, including almost the entire men's T20 World Cup squad, have registered for The Hundred auction to be held in London.

Several Pakistan players, including Mohammad Amir, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shadab Khan and Haris Rauf, have featured in The Hundred.

Baboo and Manju walk away with full marathon titles on Day 1 of Indian Open Race Walk event

CHANDIGARH, Feb 21: Uttar Pradesh's international athlete Ram Baboo and Punjab's Manju claimed gold medals in the newly-introduced men's and women's full marathon walk events respectively at the Indian Open Race Walk Competition held on Saturday.

The 26-year-old Baboo clocked three hours, nine minutes and 17 seconds to win the gold medal in the gruelling 42-km full marathon walk event introduced by the Athletics Federation of India (AFI).

On his way to gold in his season's first event, the Asian Games bronze medallist in 35km mixed walk team event, edged past his more fancied rival Sandeep Kumar of Haryana at the course just beside the picturesque Sukhna Lake.

Olympian and Commonwealth Games medallist Sandeep settled for silver with a time of 3:11:18.00.

Baboo was excited to have started his 2026 season on a bright note, saying he was mentally and physically prepared to win first position here.

"Preparation was good and I'm happy with my performance," he said.

However, his main goal this season is a podium finish at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in Japan.

"In my next race I will try to improve my performance," Baboo said of his future goal.

Manju emerged on top in a strong field that included experienced race walker and Olympian Priyanka Goswami of Uttar Pradesh.

Manju stayed with the leading group of three athletes, including Priyanka, till the 32km mark of the race. Thereafter she made a decisive move. As the race progressed, she left behind Priyanka who finished second.

"There was no one to challenge me otherwise I could have improved my time," Manju said in a post-race interaction.

Manju's winning time of 3:33:24.00 was nearly four minutes faster than Priyanka who finished second with a time of 3:37:25.00.

Manju's future plans like Baboo is to stay healthy and win a medal at the Asian Games in September.

"Asian Games is the main target this year," Manju added.

Manju and Baboo had won bronze in the 35km mixed race walk team event at the 2022 Asian Games in China.

Army's promising race walker Nitin Gupta claimed the gold medal in the men's 10m race walk. Gupta, representing Uttar Pradesh, clocked a time of 41:44.00.

Reshma Patel of Uttar Pradesh dominated the women's 10km race walk. Her winning time was 46:19.00. (PTI)

Winter Olympics recap: US and Canada win and will square off for gold medal in men's hockey

MILAN, Feb 21: The Olympic final that many hockey fans wanted is set: Canada will play the United States for the gold medal at the Milan Cortina Games.

Both teams took care of business in Friday's semifinals, though Canada needed a late goal to get past Finland 3-2. The Americans then overwhelmed Slovakia 6-2 behind Jack Hughes' two goals and Zach Werenski's three assists.

They'll meet on Sunday for the title, a year after the North American rivals played two memorable games against each other at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

The U.S. men last reached the Olympic final in 2010, when they lost to Canada in overtime on Sidney Crosby's famous golden goal. They haven't won it all since 1980 in Lake Placid following the "Miracle on Ice."

Canada and the U.S. squared off in the women's final on Thursday, when the Americans won gold with 2-1 overtime victory.

On Friday, Canada's men advanced after Nathan MacKinnon scored the go-ahead goal with 35.2 seconds left in the third period.

The tournament favorite had trailed 2-0 before Sam Reinhart cut the deficit in the second and Shea Theodore tied it midway through



the third.

Crosby did not play for Canada because of an injury. It was not immediately clear if the 38-year-old Pittsburgh Penguins star would be available Sunday.

Crosby appeared to injure his right knee in the second period of the quarterfinals against Czechia on Wednesday night.

Finland will play Slovakia in the bronze-medal game on Saturday night.

US freeskier Ferreira wins halfpipe gold

American freeskier Alex Ferreira won silver at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games and bronze four years ago in Beijing in the men's halfpipe.

The 31-year-old Ferreira added a

gold medal to his collection by winning the halfpipe final on Friday.

The Aspen, Colorado, native also delivered the United States its first gold medal in nearly two weeks of freeskiiing or snowboarding at the Livigno snow park in the Italian Alps.

Dutch skaters deliver more speedskating gold

Antoinette Rijpma-de Jong of the Netherlands won her first Olympic gold, and sixth career medal overall, by finishing first in speedskating's 1,500 meters.

Rijpma-de Jong finished in 1 minute, 54.9 seconds, as thousands of Dutch fans roared in the stands.

She was 0.06 faster than silver medalist Ragne Wiklund of Norway.

Canada's Valerie Maltais took

bronze.

Earlier at these Games, Dutch women also took gold at other distances — Femke Kok in the 500 and Jutta Leerdam in the 1,000.

Later, the Netherlands added to its impressive short-track speedskating haul at these Games by winning its first men's 5,000-meter relay at the Olympics.

Jens van 't Wout, who skated the anchor leg, earned his third gold and fourth medal overall in Milan, while his nation earned its fifth gold and seventh medal overall in the short-track speedskating program.

Canada women stunned in curling semifinals

Sweden beat top-ranked Canada 6-3 to advance to the gold-medal game in women's curling. The Swedes, ranked No. 12, will face Switzerland in Sunday's final.

Sweden has won the women's competition three times since curling returned to the Olympic program in 1998.

Switzerland beat the United States 7-4 in Friday's other semifinal and will be aiming for its first women's gold at the Olympics.

Canada will play the U.S. for bronze on Saturday.

In the men's competition on Friday, Switzerland routed Norway 9-1 for the bronze medal. (AP)

India Women beat Australia by 17 runs; clinch historic T20I series victory

ADELAIDE, Feb 21: An entertaining century partnership between Smriti Mandhana and Jemimah Rodrigues powered India to a 17-run win over Australia in the third and final Women's T20I here on Saturday, sealing their first bilateral T20I series triumph against the formidable rivals in a decade.

Mandhana smashed 82 off 55 balls (8x4, 3x6), while Jemimah Rodrigues struck 59 off 46 deliveries as the two senior batters stitched a commanding 121-run stand to propel India to 176 for six after electing to bat.

India's bowlers then seized control as young spinner Shreyanka Patil (3/22) and pace spearhead Renuka Singh (1/29) ripped through the top order to leave Australia reeling at 32 for 3.

The early strikes set the tone for a dominant display as India eventually restricted hosts to 159 for 9 to seal a memorable T20I series 2-1, registering their first T20I series win in Australia since 2016.

Young left-arm spinner Shree Charani (3/32) underlined her credentials, claiming three crucial wickets to play a pivotal role in cementing India's historic victory.

After electing to bat, India endured a slightly tricky start as Shafali Verma (7) departed early.

Mandhana and World Cup hero Rodrigues then took charge of the innings. The duo cut loose in the sixth over bowled by left-arm



spinner Sophie Molineux, collecting three boundaries in a 14-run burst that firmly put India back on track.

At the end of the Powerplay, India were 54 for 1.

Both Mandhana and Jemimah kept the scoreboard ticking, with the former in a particularly punishing mood. She took on leg-spinner Georgia Wareham in the ninth over -- Wareham's first -- executing a powerful sweep that bisected deep square leg and deep midwicket to perfection.

India's half-century came up in just 35 balls.

Mandhana brought up her half-century in style, reaching the milestone off 38 balls with a six off pacer Darcie Brown. She swung across the line and connected sweetly on the second ball of the 12th over, sending it sailing over the ropes.

It was her 33rd fifty in international cricket, achieved in her 160th appearance.

The century stand for the second wicket came up in just 66 balls, laying a strong plat-

form for a late surge. However, Mandhana fell in the 17th over, dismissed by Sutherland as she holed out to deep midwicket. Ashleigh Gardner completed a well-judged running catch to bring the flourishing 121-run partnership to an end.

Skipper Harmanpreet Kaur promoted Richa Ghosh to No. 4, and the move paid dividends, as the keeper-batter hit a brisk cameo of 18 off just seven balls.

India then had Australia under immediate pressure as openers Georgia Vull (10) and Beth Mooney (6) -- were dismissed early. Off-spinner Shreyanka struck in the second over to remove Vull, while veteran pacer Renuka accounted for Mooney in the third.

Vull miscued a big top edge that ballooned into the air, and Renuka ran back from short fine leg to complete a well-judged catch. Mooney, on the other hand, whipped one towards deep square leg but found Charani stationed perfectly, hitting it straight to the fielder.

Australia were in all sorts of trouble when Ellyse Perry was clean bowled for 1 by Patil, leaving the hosts reeling at 32 for 3 inside four overs.

Ashleigh Gardner (57 off 45 balls) mounted a spirited fightback with a composed half-century, but her resistance was finally broken when Arundhati Reddy struck in the 16th over to tilt the contest decisively in India's favour. (PTI)

SUPER 8S

Tilak and Surya's guarded batting approach to face its first real test vs SA



AHMEDABAD, Feb 21: Skipper Suryakumar Yadav and Tilak Varma's rejigged philosophy of dropping anchor rather than going for big strokes will be tested by a quality South African side that seems ready to find chinks in the Indian armour during their opening Super Eight match of the T20 World Cup here on Sunday.

The Proteas team boasts of a formidable bowling line-up comprising Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj and Aiden Markram and the defending champions will be mindful of the challenge.

The two teams would be playing for the sixth time in the last two months and it remains to be seen for which side the familiarity works better on Sunday night.

India have not exactly been asked probing questions at the group league stage but the home favourites are well aware that their batting has left a lot to be desired.

Save for opener Ishan Kishan (two fifties and Strike Rate of 202), the other three batters in the top four haven't exactly set the stage on fire till now.

Abhishek Sharma is literally out of runs with three ducks and as much as Suryakumar and Tilak justify playing an anchor role, the Mumbai Indians colleagues have looked far from smooth on tracks where the ball is gripping.

India's run-scoring has needed brute power that Hardik Pandya (Strike Rate of 155) and Shivam Dube (Strike Rate of 178) are providing at the back-end.

With Abhishek falling to off-spinners twice in a row, it will be interesting to see whether skipper Markram decides to bowl off-breaks in the Powerplay.

While Abhishek's form remains a concern, Tilak's scratchy batting throughout the first leg cannot be brushed under the carpet. Against Pakistan, he scored 25 off 24 balls while against Namibia it was 25 off 21 and versus Netherlands, it was a painstaking 31 off 27 balls.

His strike rate in the tournament is just above 120, which is significantly less than his career average of 141.

Save his match-winning 84 not out off 49 balls against a US attack, which lost two of its bowlers to hamstring strain, Suryakumar hasn't displayed a lot of smoothness in his batting either against Pakistan or Netherlands.

His tournament strike rate of 136 plus is way below his career

strike rate of 163 plus.

An Indian team that plays with eight batters and believes in going all out irrespective of opposition and surface, cannot afford to have two batters who are not able to score freely on tacky surfaces.

In tournaments like the T20 World Cup, discretion isn't always the better part of valour.

The overall quality of this team is undeniable which is the reason that good teams score 200 on their good days and this Indian team conjures near 200 on its average days.

But what makes India a scary proposition and still a runaway favourite is the bowling attack with Jasprit Bumrah and Varun Chakravarty bowling those eight out of 20 overs. In the initial round, none of the four teams, including a second-rate Pakistan side, could negotiate the duo.

Chakravarty, with nine wickets in four games, has bowled at a stunning economy rate of 5.16 and Bumrah, miserly as ever in his three games, has gone for only six runs per over.

But against an in-form batting line-up, which has freaks like Quinton de Kock, Markram, Dewald Brevis, Tristan Stubbs, Ryan Rickleton, David Miller and Marco Jansen in its top seven, the entire bowling unit will need to come good.

The South Africa match will be an indicator of how this Indian team's campaign at the business end of the tournament will pan out. As far as changes are concerned, India are expected to play Kuldeep Yadav in place of Arshdeep Singh, and Axar Patel will be back after a one match rest to replace Washington Sundar.

As far as South Africa is concerned, Jansen, Ngidi and Maharaj, all of whom were rested against the UAE, will be making a comeback.

Squads: India: Suryakumar Yadav (captain), Ishan Kishan (wk), Abhishek Sharma, Tilak Varma, Shivam Dube, Hardik Pandya, Rinku Singh, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Jasprit Bumrah, Varun Chakravarty, Sanju Samson (wk), Mohammed Siraj, Washington Sundar, Arshdeep Singh.

South Africa: Aiden Markram (captain), Quinton de Kock (wk), Ryan Rickleton, Dewald Brevis, Tristan Stubbs, David Miller, Marco Jansen, Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, Keshav Maharaj, Corbin Bosch, Anrich Nortje, Kwena Maphaka, George Linde, Jason Smith.

Match Starts: 7 pm. (PTI)

I am worried for all those who are worried about Abhishek's form: Suryakumar

AHMEDABAD, Feb 21: Suryakumar Yadav was cheeky and sarcastic at the same time when the inevitable query on Abhishek Sharma's hat-trick of ducks came up ahead of India's T20 World Cup game against South Africa on Sunday.

"About Abhishek's form, I worry for the people who are worried about Abhishek's form. I worry about them. Why are they so worried about Abhishek's form?" Surya, the protective skipper, who walks the talk when it comes to team ethos "All For one and One For All", said dismissing the query like his customary 'Supla' shot.

"Last year, Abhishek covered for all of us. Now it is our duty to cover for him," said Surya, with an obvious reference to his own wretched form that continued for last one year.

For world's No 1 ranked T20 batter Abhishek, the skipper was ready to go that extra mile for what all his junior teammate achieved in the one year run-up to the World Cup.

"But I think about those teams who are going to play against him. That he has not yet scored a run. You know the rest of the answers. When he scores a run, you have seen what happens. It happens, it's a team sport, it keeps going on."

Abhishek has been dismissed by off-spinner in successive games trying to slog and the skipper is least bothered about the type of bowling that's getting him out or the manner of dismissal.

For Surya, important point is to see Abhishek playing his natural attacking game, hell or high water.

"Our team requires a certain kind of game from Abhishek and he is trying to play in that manner. We never want him to lose his identity. If his method doesn't work, we are there to cover for him," Surya said. (PTI)

ICC's revenue sharing model counter-productive for associates: Netherlands cricket board member Shah

NEW DELHI, Feb 21: The International Cricket Council's existing commercial model that distributes majority of the revenue to the Test playing nations is counter-productive for associate members like the Netherlands, its board member Rashid Shah told PTI.

Roughly 40 per cent of ICC's revenue, an estimated USD 231 million per year, will go to India in the 2024-2027 cycle with the cricketing powerhouse generating majority of the global body's revenues driven by media rights.

Shah, however, also praised the BCCI's achievements and its massive contribution to the growth and global expansion of cricket.

Out of the estimated USD 600 million annual earnings in the 2024-2027 period, close to USD 533 million will be distributed among the 12 full members while roughly USD 67 million will be shared by the associate teams.

Shah, a former cricketer who played a lot of cricket in Jammu and Kashmir before moving to the Netherlands more than two decades ago, said the ICC revenue sharing model is not helping the smaller nations grow the game.



"Well, obviously, we are an associate cricketing nation. We don't get to play the bigger nations quite often. Financial models are not sustainable for us. ICC's commercial model is counterproductive for us. We get a fraction of the funds from there," said Shah.

"We have to generate our own models to get the finances and get the cricket development going. But yeah, playing World Cup in India was a massive boost for us."

"Playing a game with India in Ahmedabad, watched by around 70,000 people in the stadium, with global viewership of around 160

million, was a massive achievement for us also."

Despite the challenges, Shah said the game has grown rapidly in the Netherlands in the last five years. The overall numbers though remain small with around 8,000 people involved with cricket.

Shah, a tech entrepreneur, informed that the Netherlands board KNCB has a clear plan in place for the game till 2030.

"Well, my heart is here now. I've been living in Holland for the last 26 years. I played cricket in Holland for almost 13-14 years. (PTI)

Klaebo becomes 1st athlete to win 6 golds

TESERO, Feb 21: Norway's Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo completed his historic gold medal sweep of the men's cross-country skiing events on Saturday by winning his sixth race and set the record for the most golds by one athlete in a single Winter Olympics. Klaebo's victory in the 50-kilometer mass start race shattered the nearly 50-year record set by American speed skater Eric Heiden, who won five golds in the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics.

All of Heiden's wins were in individual races and two of Klaebo's have come in team events, so Heiden's record for individual wins still stands. Klaebo's teammates, Martin Loewstroem Nyenget, took silver, and Emil Iversen, won bronze in a Norwegian sweep.

The three Norwegians broke out to an early lead and then continued to build the gap on their chasers.

In the final lap, Nyenget and Klaebo pushed uphill and dropped Iversen. Klaebo stayed in second waiting to launch his textbook charge uphill. As the two reached the final hill, Klaebo literally ran away from Nyenget and was bound for glory. As he glided toward the finish, he pointed his fingers toward the sky, took one stride across the line, toppled over on his right hip and rolled onto his back. (AP)

He told blatant lies: Bangla assistant coach slams former sports adviser Nazrul for T20 WC fiasco

DHAKA, Feb 21: Bangladesh assistant coach Mohammad Salahuddin has hit out at former sports adviser Asif Nazrul, alleging that he misrepresented facts and shifted his position regarding the national team's participation in the ongoing T20 World Cup.

Salahuddin added that it was extremely difficult for the players to come to terms with their exclusion from the tournament, claiming that two members of the squad were left mentally shattered. Nazrul, who served under Bangladesh's former interim leader Muhammad Yunus, had initially maintained that the decision not to travel to India due to security concerns was taken by the government. However, shortly before stepping down from his post, he stated that the call had been made by the Bangladesh Cricket Board

(BCB) and the players.

"He told such blatant lies," Salahuddin told reporters. "I am a teacher myself, and teachers generally lie a bit less. That he would say such lies so openly - I honestly can't even imagine it. How will I even show my face in front of the boys? He took such a U-turn."

Salahuddin suggested the players had no role in the decision-making process.

"He is a teacher at Dhaka University. A person from the highest educational institution of my country saying such lies - we can't accept this. How can we accept this? He said one thing earlier and later took a U-turn," he added.

Bangladesh were replaced by Scotland in the tournament after they refused to travel to India for their games.

The BCB had proposed relocating Bangladesh's matches in India to co-hosts Sri Lanka, but the ICC rejected the request and opted to replace the team instead. Salahuddin added that the players were devastated to know about the T20 World Cup exclusion.

"Look, when a boy goes to play in a World Cup, he carries his dream - his 27-year-old dream with him. You destroy that dream in one second," said Salahuddin.

"Fine, if it's a country's decision taken for national reasons, they will sacrifice for the country. But if you talk about loss, I will talk only about personal loss. Personally, you completely ended a boy's dream. I know that two of my players went into coma mentally for five days, completely lost," Mohammad Salahuddin added. (PTI)

India suffer 0-2 loss to Spain in opening match of Australian leg of FIH Pro League

HOBART, Feb 21: India's hopes of a revival in the FIH Men's Pro League were dashed as they suffered a 0-2 loss to Spain, continuing their unabated slump in form here on Saturday. Goals from Ignacio Abajo (6th minute) and Ignacio Cobos (36th) proved decisive as Spain combined clinical finishing with disciplined defending to secure the win.

The Spaniards capitalised on their chances while India were unable to convert promising opportunities despite sustained attacking intent.



Outplayed by the opposition teams in the home leg in Rourkela with two losses each against Belgium and Argentina, the Indian team was hoping to bounce back and make a fresh start under new skipper Hardik Singh during the overseas leg.

The Hobart leg of the series, which also features hosts Australia, will be held till February 25.

India began the match with sharp, quick passing, looking to control possession early, but Spain's counter-attacking approach proved effective. Abajo capitalised on one such move, neatly deflecting the ball into the net to hand Spain an early lead.

Unfazed by the setback, India stayed committed to their structure, circulating the ball swiftly through midfield and probing Spain's defence with intent. The Indian team created multiple promising openings and nearly found the equaliser towards the end of the quarter when Abhishek fired a powerful strike, only to be denied by an excellent save from Spanish goalkeeper Luis Calzado. (PTI)

We played enough against England, now able to react to different situations: SL coach Sridhar



PALLEKELE (SRI LANKA), Feb 21: Fielding coach R Sridhar on Saturday said Sri Lanka have moved on from their home 0-3 drubbing by England in the run-up to the T20 World Cup, and believed that his side is now better equipped to react to different situations in Sunday's Super Eights match against the Three Lions here.

England whitewashed Sri Lanka in a three-match T20I series just seven days before the start of the ongoing T20 World Cup, but Sridhar did not count that as a deterrent in producing a good outing against Harry Brook's side.

"At this stage of this tournament, it's a lot different from what a bilateral series is. I mean, bilateral series and private leagues, there's no pressure as much as it would be in a World Cup Super-8 game. And it is for all teams. It is for all teams, whether it is England, whether it is Sri Lanka, whether it is India or Pakistan, whoever it is, when you're playing a super 8 game, you will not play with the same freedom as you would do in a bilateral or a private league," Sridhar said in the pre-match press conference.

"So, the pressure will be same for both teams. The teams which do the things correctly under pressure, the teams which make lesser mistakes is the team that is likely to go through," he added.

Despite the heavy reversal, the former India fielding coach said there were a lot of positive takeaways from the series against England.

"We played, I remember the first game, we were bundled out for 130-odd and there are a couple of learnings from that as a batting unit. We learned immediately in the next game, we posted a score of 180, 190, I

guess. Then there was a bit of a rain interruption and we saw some good batting at the back end from Tom Banton and the rest of the team which took the game away.

"So, that was a learning but we don't have the same bowlers now. (Wanindu) Hasaranga who played that game is injured. Matheesha (Pathirana) who played that game is injured. He's not available. So, slightly depleted in the bowling front. But at the same time, we've taken the lessons forward."

"I'm not talking about the third game because that is not the kind of a pitch I guess we'll be playing on tomorrow. So yeah, we played enough against this team to be able to react to different situations, to different batters. We saw them play in India as well, at the Wankhede where the ball was gripping a bit. So yeah we got the plans in place," he said.

Sridhar said the bowlers need to execute their plans better to restrict the explosive English batting line-up.

"England team obviously is one of the best in the world. They have some big power hitters. So, we would be relying on our bowlers to kind of execute the plans with more clarity and try and come back."

"There are going to be moments when you're going to be hit for a six, four, again and again but we're going to try and come

back and look for that one-dot ball, look to finish the over well, and look to complement our partner in the bowling, stuff like that, so that we can have a very competitive game."

"I mean the team, they know what is required from them at this stage and like all good teams do it's very important to reflect learn and move on whether you had good game or whether you had a loss, it is important for the team to move on and focus on what they need to do for the next game," he said.

Sridhar said Sri Lanka were a bit complacent in the defeat against Zimbabwe in their last group match.

"I think that was a good lesson -- Zimbabwe game. I think there could have been a little bit of complacency after the score we put up on the board on that pitch. But that was again a fantastic lesson to learn and yes, we were below par in terms of fielding inside the inner ring," he said.

"That is something which has been spoken about already and this ground will probably prove a different challenge because the outfield being under covers for so many times and so much of activity happening on the ground it's going to be a challenge to be really flash and brilliant on this ground so we'll have to look at the strategies we adapt as a fielding team on this outfield," he added. (PTI)