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Governor attends Pran Pratishtha of newly built Shiv Mandir at Dhekiajuli
HT Bureau
DIPHU, Feb 8: Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya on Sunday attended the Pran Pratishtha ceremony of the newly constructed Shiv Mandir at Hindu Vedic Kshetra in Dhekiajuli, Sonitpur district, in the presence of Health and Family Welfare Minister Ashok Singhal.

Addressing the gathering, Governor Acharya said that participating in the Pran Pratishtha ceremony on the historic land of Dhekiajuli was a moment of great joy and spiritual fulfilment for him.

He remarked that Assam has always been deeply rooted in cultural richness and spiritual consciousness.

The Governor noted that the spiritual teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva have kept Assam's social fabric vibrant, while the ancient Shaiva tradition has

(CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Gaurav, wife have 'deeper connection' with Pak agent; FCRA violated to pay Elizabeth Colburn salary: Himanta
State govt puts the ball in Centre's court

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday alleged that Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi, his British wife Elizabeth Colburn and Pakistani national Ali Tauqeer Sheikh had a "deeper connection", and that information from the Intelligence Bureau was secretly passed on to the neighbouring nation.

Addressing a press conference here ahead of the Assembly polls, Sarma also claimed that Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) rules were violated when Colburn was paid salary by Sheikh while she was working in India.

The CM also alleged that Gogoi undertook a "very confidential" visit to Pakistan in 2013 and was believed to have undergone "some kind of training" there, daring the Congress leader to come clean on



the trip or face charges of "rashtra-droh" (treason).

Gogoi, also the state Congress chief, termed Sarma's presser "worse than a C-grade cinema" a "super flop".

The CM said, "We believe there is a deeper connection between Gogoi, Colburn and Sheikh. We believe that Colburn and Sheikh were part of an international conspiracy."

Sarma asserted they bypassed the Indian government to work with local municipal agencies, and this cannot be probed by the

Assam Police. "So we recommended a national probe by the Ministry of Home Affairs," he added.

Sarma claimed that Colburn had worked with LEAD Pakistan, an organisation run by Sheikh, before being transferred to India to work with the same group. "But her salary continued to be paid by Sheikh," he said.

LEAD Pakistan sent money to LEAD India, and the latter paid to Colburn by bypassing FCRA regulations, the CM alleged.

"Pakistani agencies cannot donate to an Indian entity as it's an enemy nation. Probably special permission was obtained in UPA time to pay Colburn," he added.

The CM claimed that after working in India, Colburn started gathering information surrounding India (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Worse than C grade cinema: Gaurav
LS dy leader brings land-grabbing slur against Himanta



GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi on Sunday dismissed CM Himanta Biswa Sarma's allegations about his Pakistani connections as "most mindless and bogus".

Gogoi called the press conference, where Sarma made the allegations, "worse than C-grade cinema", which was "super flop".

"I pity the journalists from Delhi and Assam who had to suffer the most flop press conference of the century. This was worse than a C grade cinema. Most mindless and bogus points offered by the so called political shrewd Chief Minister," he said in a post on X.

"This #SuperFlop is in contrast to our #XomoyParivartanYatra which has been a hit in uncovering the 12,000 bighas (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

People's court to decide Gaurav's 'anti-India' activities: CM

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Calling Gaurav Gogoi a "key player" in the anti-India network and his wife a Pakistani "agent", Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday left it to the "people's court" to decide the Congress leader's activities against the country.

Earlier during the day, Sarma in a press conference alleged that Gogoi, his British wife Elizabeth Colburn and Pakistani national Ali Tauqeer Sheikh had a "deeper connection", and that information from the Intelligence Bureau was secretly passed on to the neighbouring nation.

Saying "Satyamev Jayate" and tagging the Union Home Ministry in a

BJP holds protest rally in Dibrugarh

HT Correspondent
DIBRUGARH, Feb 8: Hundreds of workers and leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party staged a massive protest rally in Dibrugarh on Sunday, demanding a thorough investigation into alleged links with Pakistan involving Congress leader and Lok Sabha MP Gaurav Gogoi, who is also the president of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee.

The protest procession was led by Dilip Saikia, Assam BJP president and Darrang-Udalguri MP.

The rally began from the old High (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Karbi Anglong observes 116th birth anniversary of Semson Sing Ingty

HT Bureau
DIPHU, Feb 8: Karbi Anglong on Sunday paid rich floral tributes to Semson Sing Ingty, regarded as the architect of modern Karbi Anglong, on his 116th birth anniversary.

Late Ingty (1910-1948), widely revered as the "Father of the Karbi People" and the "Father of Karbi Nationalism", was a pioneering social reformer, author and leader who played a crucial role in uniting the Karbi community.

He founded the Karbi Adorbar



in 1946 to press for administrative autonomy, a movement that ultimately led to the formation of the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district.

In Diphu, the Chief Executive Member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) Tuliram Ronghang, along with executive members, MACs and other dignitaries, offered floral tributes at the statue of late Ingty during a commemorative programme held at the Old Semson Sing Ingty Memorial Park.

Meanwhile, at Hidipi Market, a life-size statue of late Ingty was unveiled (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

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Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister, Assam.



Shri Hagrama Mohilary
BTC Chief

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Govt to constitute high-level panel on banking soon: FM

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: The government will soon constitute a High-Level Committee on Banking for Viksit Bharat to draw up a blueprint to create mega-lenders capable of meeting the financing needs of a developed India, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said.

"We want the committee to tell us what kind of things we need to do so that banking is made available for funding Viksit Bharat," she told PTI Videos in an interview.

Asked if it would suggest a merger of public sector banks, Sitharaman said one should not narrow it down like that.

"It is for India's banking sector to be made big enough, big enough in the sense, made or primed to take care of Viksit Bharat funding. You have to reach Viksit Bharat destination...it (Viksit Bharat) needs money, it needs financing, it needs credit, it needs banking facility to reach the common man."

When asked about the timeframe for formation of the committee, she said, "We will do it at the earliest". "I propose setting up a 'High



Level Committee on Banking for Viksit Bharat' to comprehensively review the sector and align it with India's next phase of growth, while safeguarding financial stability, inclusion and consumer protection," she had said in the Budget speech on February 1.

To achieve scale and improve efficiency in the public sector NBFs, as a first step, the Budget also proposed to restructure the

Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and Rural Electrification Corporation (REC).

"A lot of work has happened in the ministry concerned. They have come up with this expectation. Let's see how they play it out," she said, when asked if a merger is on the cards.

REC is a subsidiary of state-owned power sector lender Power Finance Corporation (PFC). Both

entities play a key role in funding power generation, transmission and distribution projects.

In March 2019, PFC completed the acquisition of a majority stake in REC Ltd by transferring Rs 14,500 crore to the government.

PFC acquired 103.94 crore shares, constituting 52.63 per cent stake, held by the government in REC, along with the management control. The acquisition price was worked out to Rs 139.50 per share. This stake acquisition came following the in-principle approval from the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs.

Both PFC and REC are Navratna central public sector enterprises, and this acquisition was a step toward consolidating companies operating in the same space.

Last week, the PFC board gave in-principle approval for the merger of the non-banking finance company REC Limited with itself.

The board approval for the merger of PFC and REC came after an announcement made in this regard in the Budget on Sunday. (PTI)

Shree Cements eyes Q4FY26 volume rebound, plans aggressive RMC expansion

KOLKATA, Feb 8: Shree Cements expects a strong rebound in cement volumes in the fourth quarter of the current financial year, aided by a pick-up in infrastructure activity and higher government spending towards the fiscal year-end, the management said in a Q3 analyst concall.

The company is targeting sales volumes of 9-9.5 million tonnes in the January-March quarter.

It noted that the Centre's push to utilise infrastructure allocations by March 31 is likely to support demand.

While pricing remained a focus in the earlier part of the year, the company is now looking to ramp up capacity utilisation as volumes improve, an official said.

Separately, Shree Cements outlined an aggressive expansion plan for its ready-mix concrete (RMC) business, with the company aiming to scale up its RMC footprint to 45 plants from the current 19 units over the next six to eight months.

The management said the RMC push is part of a broader strategy to move up the construction value chain, adding that around 45 per cent of the cement consumed at these plants is

sourced internally, supporting higher utilisation levels.

On capacity expansion, the company said its total cement capacity is expected to reach 72 million tonnes by March 2026. For the next financial year, Shree Cements has earmarked a baseline capital expenditure of ₹ 500 crore, primarily towards RMC expansion and infrastructure projects such as railway sidings.

The company reiterated its long-term capacity target of 80 million tonnes but said future expansions would be calibrated in line with demand conditions to avoid idle capital. On the operational front, Shree Cements said it continues to maintain industry-leading cost metrics, with fuel costs at ₹ 1.56 per kilo calorie. Green energy accounts for 61 per cent of its total power consumption, supported by a renewable capacity of 634 MW.

The company remains debt-free and has cash reserves of around ₹ 6,000 crore, the management said, adding that the company expects that the total dividend payout for the current fiscal may be higher than that of the previous year. (PTI)

Delhi five-star hotel room tariffs skyrocket as AI Summit sparks record demand

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Five-star hotels in the national capital are witnessing an unprecedented surge in room tariffs and high occupancy rates on peak demand as thousands of delegates are set to descend on New Delhi for the India AI Impact Summit 2026, scheduled from February 16-20 at Bharat Mandapam.

According to an official release earlier this week, the Summit has garnered strong interest from the global community, with over 35,000 registrations received ahead of the event.

With demand outstripping supply, steep room tariffs and near-full occupancy rates at most sought-after five-star hotels in New Delhi are expected to send prospective tourists' plans for bookings around the India AI Impact Summit dates into a tizzy.

Hotel websites and travel portals show that standard rooms at premier five-star hotels in the city, which usually fall in the ₹ 20,000 to ₹ 40,000 per night range, have now been listed at rates approaching lakhs and in some categories exceeding ₹ 4 lakh to ₹ 5 lakh per night for peak summit dates around February 19-20.

At some flagship properties in Delhi, including The Leela Palace, ITC Maurya and Taj Palace, rooms that normally retail at moderate luxury pricing are now being offered at sky-high peak-season rates, with premium suites and club-level categories commanding several lakh rupees per night or only available under stringent minimum-stay conditions.

Moreover, hotels in the heart of the national capital, such as The Park Hotel, Shangri-La Eros, and The Imperial in Connaught Place, are either nearly sold out around the peak Summit dates between February 18-20 or listing rooms at steep prices.

The India AI Impact Summit is being billed as the largest of the four global AI summits hosted to date.

It is expected to see participation from over 100 countries, including 15 to 20 heads of government, 50 plus ministers from various countries, and 40 plus prominent global and Indian companies.

Around 500 leading names from the global AI ecosystem, including innovators, researchers and Chief Technology Officers, are also expected to attend. (PTI)

Assam Cabinet clears Sia Buildcon's proposal for development works in state

HT Correspondent GUWAHATI, Feb 8: The Assam government has approved an application submitted by Sia Buildcon, a Jaipur-based construction company, allowing it to undertake development-related works in the state.

The approval was granted at a Cabinet meeting held on Friday, during which the company's proposal was examined and accepted.

With this clearance, Sia Buildcon will be eligible to collaborate in development-oriented construction activities across Assam.

Officials said the decision comes at a time when several major infrastructure projects are underway in the state under various government initiatives.

These include construction works related to the Gauhati High Court, the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), a five-star hotel at Kaziranga, and newly built stadiums.

The government believes that the participation of experienced construction firms such as Sia Buildcon will help ensure faster execution and timely completion of large-scale infrastructure projects, thereby strengthening Assam's overall development momentum.

UIDAI completes over 1 crore mandatory biometric updates for school children across 83,000 schools

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: Aadhaar custodian UIDAI has completed mandatory biometric updates (MBU) for one crore school children covering 83,000 schools across the country, an official statement said.

A child under the age of five can enrol for Aadhaar by providing the photograph, name, date of birth, gender, address and birth certificate but the fingerprints and iris biometrics of a child are not captured for Aadhaar enrolment below the age of five as these indicators are not mature by then.

Therefore, providing fingerprints and iris information in Aadhaar by following the process of MBU, upon crossing the ages of 5 and 15 years, is an essential requirement for children. Lack of MBU in Aadhaar may lead to difficulties while carrying out authentication for receiving benefits under various government schemes, registering in competitive and university examinations like NEET, JEE, CUET etc.

"The UIDAI has crossed the milestone of completing over one crore Mandatory Biometric Updates (MBUs) for school-children studying in 83,000 schools across the country," the statement said.

Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) has made MBU



free for children in the age group of 7 to 15 years from October 1 for one year period.

"UIDAI had initiated this special MBU drive for school-children in September 2025 after a successful technological integration with the Unified District Information System for Education Plus application, that enabled visibility of MBUs status of children at schools. This breakthrough helped the UIDAI and schools to jointly identify children who were due for an MBU, and hold camps at schools to complete the MBU," the statement said.

UIDAI CEO Bhuvnesh Kumar has written to Chief Secretaries of all States and Union Territories about the initiative by the author-

ity and requested their support in conducting focussed MBU camps at schools.

"The mission mode campaign continues to be operational till such time all schools in the country are covered. This initiative has already benefited 1 crore children in 83,000 schools and many more are set to gain from it," the statement said. In addition to camps held at schools, children can also complete their MBU at any of the Aadhaar enrolment centres and Aadhaar Seva Kendras running across the country.

"About 1.3 crore MBU transactions have also been completed in the same period, by children visiting these centres," the statement said. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

State govt puts

and used to give reports to Sheikh. "Colburn got information from IB sources about climate action after Narendra Modi came to power. She sent a 45-page report to Sheikh," he added.

He also alleged that Colburn travelled to Islamabad six times while working with LEAD India and visited Pakistan thrice after joining another NGO.

The chief minister claimed that direct receipt of Pakistani funds in violation of FCRA norms was not easy and suggested that there could be "another handler very close" to the UPA government establishment.

He also alleged that Colburn had a Pakistani bank account to receive salaries there, but she did not reply during questioning if it was closed or still active.

"Gogoi, however, did not mention this Pakistani account in his election affidavit. Now, I feel his opponent should complain to the EC about giving wrong information in the affidavit," he added.

Assam govt will seek cancellation of OCI (Overseas Citizenship of India) of Colburn as her presence is detrimental to India.

While the press conference was going on, Gogoi in a post on X said, "I pity the journalists from Delhi and Assam who had to suffer the most flop press conference of the century. This was worse than a C grade cinema."

"Most mindless and bogus points" have been offered by the "so-called political shrewd" CM of Assam, he said.

"This #SuperFlop is in contrast to our #XomoyParivartanYatra which has been a hit in uncovering the 12,000 bighas of land occupied by the Chief Minister and his family members," Gogoi said.

Sarma further said the Congress MP undertook a "very confidential visit" to Pakistan in December 2013, when his wife was already posted in India, and he was staying at the CM's residence then. His father, late Tarun Gogoi, was Assam chief minister at that time.

"He stayed there for 10 days. Strangely, Gogoi was digitally silent and no social media post was made. We suspect he went through some kind of training in that period," Sarma said.

Sarma claimed that after returning from Pakistan and becoming an MP, Gogoi asked questions in Lok Sabha on military preparedness, security matters, defence hardware, nuclear plants, espionage, Kashmir conflict and other sensitive issues.

"A first-time MP asking such confidential questions, how can it not be linked to his Pakistan visit?" the CM questioned.

Sarma said that Gogoi surrendered his son's Indian passport in 2022 after the minor was given British citizenship.

"Gogoi's son used to write Hindu as religion in Indian passport, but kept the column blank after change in citizenship. His daughter writes Christianity in her British passport. Gogoi's religion is Hindu as per his passport. So, he will always be minority in his home," he added.

To a question, the CM said Assam Police's SIT did not question Gogoi during its probe "as he is a sitting MP. We have left it to the Centre, showing some respect to his position".

"If I arrest Gogoi now, I will be accused of doing politics before elections. Arresting is a harsh step. I feel Gogoi is the most vulnerable politician in India now, as all his movements in the 10-day stay must have been photographed and recorded in Pakistan," Sarma said.

"If Gogoi cannot come out clean on his Pakistan stay, then charges of 'rashtra-droh' (treason) will have to be imposed on him," the CM added.

The BJP leader further said that the Sheikh visited India 13 times from 2010 to 2013 during UPA tenure and focused on "anti-India narrative globally".

"After Assam Police began the probe, Sheikh deleted all tweets to protect someone," he added. (PTI)

Worse than C grade

of land occupied by the Chief Minister and his family members," he claimed.

In another post, Gogoi said that Sarma has "embarrassed himself" in front of the media, adding, "After 2.5 hours press conference even the journalists in the room remain unconvinced."

Gogoi, the Congress' deputy leader in the Lok Sabha, maintained that "nobody in Assam is taking his words seriously".

"He should rather explain how and his family managed to acquire 12,000 bighas or 4,000 acres of prime property across Assam. When we will come to power, we will take those lands and distribute amongst the poor and landless," he added.

Sarma alleged that Gogoi, his wife Elizabeth and a Pakistani national, Ali Tauqueer Sheikh, have a "deeper connection", and information from IB was secretly provided to the neighbouring nation.

The CM also alleged that Gogoi undertook a "very confidential" visit to Pakistan in 2013 and is believed to have undergone "some kind of training" there. (PTI)

Governor attends Pran

continued to flourish across the region. He said devotion to Lord Shiva is deeply ingrained in the spiritual life of the people, and the newly consecrated temple stands as a symbol of this enduring faith.

Highlighting the significance of the Pran Pratishtha ceremony, the Governor said it symbolises the invocation of divine energy into the deity and serves as a reminder to awaken inner consciousness through values, discipline and righteous conduct.

Such sacred occasions, he added, promote spiritual growth and collective social harmony.

Referring to the historical importance of Sonitpur, Governor Acharya said the region, once the capital of the great Shiva devotee King Banasura, has remained an important centre of Shaiva worship for centuries.

He cited revered shrines such as the Mahabhairav Temple at Tezpur and the Gupteshwar Mahadev Temple at Dhekiajuli as living symbols of this spiritual legacy.

The Governor further stated that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is reconnecting with its Sanatan heritage through major initiatives such as Kashi Vishwanath Dham, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Somnath and Ayodhya, reflecting a broader spiritual and cultural renaissance.

Appreciating the role of minister Ashok Singhal, the Governor said the temple, whose construction began in 2022, stands as a result of his farsighted vision and commitment to cultural values.

He added that temples are not only places of worship but also centres of social unity, value education and collective harmony.

The programme was attended by MP Ranjit Dutta, Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam Ravi Kota, National General Secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Sant Samiti Swami Jitendranand Saraswati, Chief Priest of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Varanasi, Dr Shrikant Mishra, National General Secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad Ashok Yadav, along with several other dignitaries.

People's court to

hatched by Ali Tauqueer Sheikh, a Pakistani national, to embed an agent Elizabeth Coleburn to study India's development and find ways to derail it through environmental activism," Sarma said in the post.

He claimed that through layers of shady employment contracts, concealed funding patterns, suspicious travel activity and transmission of sensitive information, this setup ran a "web of anti-India activities".

"What's deeply unfortunate is that a Congress MP from Assam, who also happens to be the son of a former chief minister, was also a key player in this entire network and directly or indirectly facilitated these activities through sourcing sensitive parliamentary answers, undertaking secret Pakistani trip and maintaining relations with Pakistani officials in India in the guise of youth exchange," the CM said.

He commended the officers of Assam Police who despite their limitations have been able to reveal this "dangerous nexus" and bring startling revelations to the fore.

"The depth of material in hand and the many unanswered questions call for greater scrutiny by a Central Govt agency and we have referred the matter to the Ministry of Home Affairs for further directions," said Sarma, who also holds the Home portfolio in Assam.

He further said when this matter surfaced, nobody imagined the "sheer scale of the anti-India activities". Gogoi, who is also the Assam Congress chief, dismissed Sarma's allegations about his Pakistani connections as "most mindless and bogus".

Gogoi called the press conference, where Sarma made the claims, "worse than C-grade cinema", which was "super flop". (PTI)

BJP holds protest

School Field and passed through several key thoroughfares of the city, drawing large participation from party workers and leaders.

Senior BJP leaders, including Power Minister and Dibrugarh MLA Prasanta Phukan, Lahowal MLA Binod Hazarika, Naharkatia MLA Taranga Gogoi and state BJP general secretary Rituparna Baruah, were present during the demonstration.

Protesters raised slogans as they marched through the streets, demanding action against the Congress leader and calling for a detailed inquiry into the allegations.

Addressing the gathering, Saikia demanded immediate intervention by the central government. He said a strong probe was necessary to establish the truth behind what he described as serious allegations and added that the people of Assam had the right to know whether there were any anti-national links.

Echoing similar views, Phukan said the allegations were serious and warranted investigation. He stated that any individual found to be involved in activities detrimental to national interest should be exposed and dealt with strictly.

The rally marked a further escalation in the political confrontation between the BJP and the Congress in Assam, with both parties trading sharp accusations ahead of the coming political battles.

Karbi Anglong observes

by KAAC Executive Member Surjya Rongphar, who is in charge of the Health and Family Welfare and Art and Culture departments.

The unveiling ceremony was preceded by traditional rituals performed by kurusars (Karbi traditional priests) in accordance with Karbi customary faith.

Following the unveiling, attendees and kurusars representing the five clans of the Karbi tribe offered floral tributes and lit incense to honour the revered leader.

Addressing the gathering, Rongphar said the statue was sponsored by the KAAC Art and Culture Department. Emphasising the importance of preserving Ingty's legacy, he said statues of the leader should be installed in rural and remote villages so that future generations are made aware of his life, vision and contributions.

He added that the Art and Culture Department is planning to install statues of late Ingty at three more locations in Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong in the coming years.

Highlighting Ingty's contributions, the executive member said it was through his visionary leadership that the Karbi people were united and empowered.

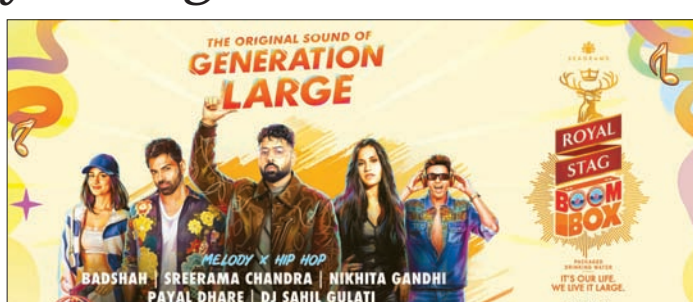
The commemorative programme was attended by Karbi Lammam Amei general secretary On Teron, VDC chairman Sonaram Singnar, Board chairman Philip Teron, principal of the Karbi Traditional Music and Culture Research Institute Bonsam Kathar, along with several other dignitaries and members of the public.

Seagram's Royal Stag BoomBox returns with Season 4

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 8: Seagram's Royal Stag BoomBox, the popular experiential music festival that fuses Bollywood melodies with the high-energy beats of hip-hop, is set to return with its much-anticipated Season Four, promising its biggest and most ambitious edition yet.

Branded as the Original Sound of Generation Large, Royal Stag BoomBox Season 4 will travel across four major youth-centric cities — Kolkata, Vizag, Mumbai and Mohali — bringing together music lovers for a one-of-a-kind live entertainment experience.

Building on the success of its earlier editions, the festival continues to redefine India's live music landscape through genre-defying collaborations and immersive cultural showcases.



Royal Stag BoomBox has carved a distinct identity by blending key passion points of today's youth — music, fashion, food and gaming — into a single platform.

Since its inception, the IP has been known for electrifying performances that bring together iconic Bollywood voices and contemporary hip-hop artists on the same stage.

Season 4 will kick off in Kolkata on February 21, 2026, followed by Vizag on March 7, Mumbai on March 14 and Mohali on March 28.

This year's star-studded line-up includes rap sensation Badshah, chart-toppers Armaan Malik and Divine, along with acclaimed singers Neeti Mohan, Nikhita Gandhi, Rashmeet Kaur and

Sreerama Chandra. The line-up also features iconic rock band Fossils, hip-hop heavyweights Raftaar and Dino James, along with DJ Sahil Gulati.

Adding a new dimension to the festival's immersive experience, fans can also look forward to an adrenaline-fuelled gaming face-off featuring popular gaming creator Payal Dhare, further reinforcing the festival's connect with youth culture.

Known for its high-impact sound and lighting, interactive fan zones and city-inspired cultural elements, Royal Stag BoomBox continues to offer a multi-sensory live music experience that captures the unique spirit of each host city, making Season 4 a celebration of music, creativity and contemporary youth expression.

CBC 35101/13/0111/2526



Rainwater Conservation to Transform Rural Landscape
Rooftop Rainwater Harvesting-Enabled Buildings to Be Constructed, Mass Plantation Drive to Create Greener Villages

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CEM Tuliram lays foundation stone for Kopili River Bridge

Bridge to connect West KA with Hojai, easing travel and boosting local development

HT Correspondent
KHERONI, Feb 8: In a major boost to regional connectivity, the foundation stone for a strategic bridge over the Kopili River was officially laid on Sunday. The bridge will serve as a vital link between the West Karbi Anglong and Hojai districts.

The foundation stone was laid by the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Dr Tuliram Ronghang. The bridge will connect the Sildubi area of West Karbi Anglong directly with Hojai district.

The Project Cost is estimated cost of the project is ₹74 Crore. The initial phase of the project is valued at ₹38 Crore.

For years, residents of Sildubi and surrounding areas have faced significant challenges in crossing the Kopili River. This new infrastructure is expected to reduce travel time by drastically by 20



minutes between the two districts. In addition it will facilitate the smoother transport of agricultural produce to markets in Hojai. It will give a boost to healthcare facilities and higher education centres for the local population.

During the ceremony, CEM Tuliram Ronghang emphasised the government's commitment to transforming rural infrastructure

and ensuring that remote areas are no longer left behind in the development race.

A girl student expressing gratitude to the new push in infrastructure said, "I am very grateful as a college student studying in Hojai I have to cross the river on a daily basis. When the flood comes we get wet and I have to attend college in those clothes, it is very uncomfortable. Sometimes the boat went capsized. It was very difficult. We used to miss our exams and accumulated 'backs'. It is for development. I thank the CEM for this."

The villagers express similar sentiment saying there are a lot of problems due to lack of a bridge, particularly the student community. The CEM Dr Tuliram Ronghang on the sideline of the inauguration said, "It is a long standing need. The Sildubi Bazaar extends to Hojai. We intimated the matter to the chief minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma that it is very difficult to traverse between Sildubi and Hojai. The bridge has been sanctioned. Within a year the bridge will be completed, from tomorrow itself the process of construction will begin."

The state government had formed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe a case of alleged interference of Sheikh, who was claimed to have links with Gogoi's British wife Elizabeth Colburn, in India's internal affairs.

The SIT submitted its report to Sarma, who also

Assam cabinet decides to refer case of Gaurav Gogoi's 'Pakistan links' to MHA

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: The Assam cabinet has decided to refer the case of Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi's alleged Pakistan links to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said.

He maintained that there are "three key players" in the case - an MP, his British wife and Pakistani national Ali Tauqeer Sheikh.

"The Assam government had constituted an SIT to inquire into the alleged anti-India conspiracy of Sheikh in connivance with a British citizen and an MP. Keeping in mind the seriousness of the matter, it was decided to hand it over to the MHA," Sarma said, while addressing a press conference after chairing a cabinet meeting on Saturday.

"The SIT report and the case registered on the basis of which the probe was conducted will be forwarded to the MHA. It can use any of its investigating agencies to take it forward," he said.

The chief minister stated that the cabinet was of the view that the case "involves national security and is not a personal one, with three players involved."

Sarma and the BJP have been attacking Gogoi, who also heads the state Congress, over his wife's alleged connection with Pakistan's spy agency ISI.

The state government had formed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe a case of alleged interference of Sheikh, who was claimed to have links with Gogoi's British wife Elizabeth Colburn, in India's internal affairs.

The SIT submitted its report to Sarma, who also

holds the Home portfolio, on September 10, the date initially set by the chief minister for providing evidence to support his accusations against Gogoi.

Sarma said the "information that is not confidential will be revealed at a press conference" on Sunday, with the cabinet authorising him to do so.

Without naming Gogoi, Sarma said, "I can at least confirm that an honourable MP from Assam visited Pakistan when his father was the chief minister."

Gaurav's father, late Tarun Gogoi, had helmed Congress governments in the state from 2001 to 2016.

The CM claimed that information about the MP's visit to Pakistan was not shared with the central government, adding that he had "blacked out" of social media for the duration of his stay in the neighbouring country.

Gogoi has maintained that Sarma's remarks were "ridiculous, baseless, insane and nonsense" and that he was behaving like an "IT cell troll" without talking facts. Sarma also did not rule out the "angle of religious conversion", though he refused to share details.

He said that "sensitive information and materials" have been obtained by the SIT from various sources, though it was not possible for the state-level investigating agency to take the probe forward beyond a point. "Help from the Interpol is required. Sensitive information from the central government and Parliament is required. As such, it was decided to entrust the case to a central government agency as selected by the MHA," Sarma said. (PTI)

ABSU's 58th Delegate Convention concludes at Swlwnghai Fwthar

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, Feb 8: The 58th Delegate Convention of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) concluded on Saturday after a three-day-long programme held at Swlwnghai Fwthar, Tangla in Udalguri district.

The convention discussed various issues and aspects concerning the Bodo community, including educational upliftment, social development and maintaining peace and tranquillity across the state. During the delegate session, the students' union adopted several resolutions focusing on quality education, social upliftment and safeguarding the dignity and integrity of the Bodo community. An open session was held on the concluding day with ABSU president Dipen Boro in the chair. Former Governor of Meghalaya and retired Director General of the National Security Guard (NSG), Ran-

jit Shekhar Mooshahary, attended the programme as the chief guest. Assam cabinet ministers Urkhao Gwra Brahma and Ranjit Kumar Dass, along with noted Gandhian and scholar Prof Ramesh Bhardwaj, graced the occasion as special guests. Addressing the gathering, Mooshahary praised ABSU for its sustained initiatives towards the welfare and development of the student fraternity and for promoting community integration since its inception. Speaking on the occasion, ABSU president Dipen Boro stated that the convention concluded successfully after three days of deliberations. He said the students' union discussed various issues and welfare aspects related to the development of the Bodo community and reaffirmed ABSU's commitment to work for the welfare and development of the Bodos and other down-trodden communities across the state.

'No ST, No Vote' campaign threatened ahead of 2026 Assembly polls Koch-Rajbongshi bodies warn BJP of poll boycott over ST demand

HT Correspondent

GOSSAIGAON, Feb 8: The undivided Goalpara Koch-Rajbongshi Sanmilani and its Youth and Students' Wing on Friday issued a stern warning to the BJP-led governments at the Centre and in Assam, threatening to bar the party from Koch-Rajbongshi-dominated areas and launch a "No ST, No Vote" campaign if Scheduled Tribe (ST) status is not granted to the community before the 2026 Assam Legislative Assembly elections.

Addressing a press conference at the Kamal Nath Club-cum-Library here, Sanmilani president Surat Chandra Ray accused the BJP of indulging in "long-standing deception" over the issue of tribal status, even as the Assembly elections draw closer. He said the Koch-Rajbongshi community, an indigenous population of lower Assam, particularly in the undivided Goalpara district, continues to remain severely backward in the fields of education, healthcare, economy and political representation.

Ray said the Koch-Rajbongshi community has been demanding ST status since 1965 to ensure a dignified existence. He recalled that during the tenure of former chief minister Hiteswar Saikia, ST status was granted to the community through a Presidential Order.



nance. However, the status was withdrawn within a year after the Asom Gana Parishad came to power in 1996, following an adverse report, as the Centre failed to secure parliamentary approval for the bill.

He further stated that the community had earlier been recognised as extremely backward by former chief minister Sarat Chandra Sinha and had also received favourable recommendations from a three-member parliamentary select committee and various commissions. Despite this, ST status has still not been accorded to the Koch-Rajbongshis, he alleged.

The Sanmilani president accused the BJP government of misleading the community by making repeated promises. He said that in 2019, community leaders were invited to Khanapara and assured that a "modality" for granting ST status would be worked out, which helped the party overcome electoral hurdles in the 2019 Lok

Sabha and 2021 Assembly elections. "Now, ahead of the 2026 Assembly polls, the government has again started confusing people by floating new classifications like ST (V) and ST (P)," Ray said, demanding immediate fulfilment of the promise if the government was sincere about addressing indigenous issues.

Issuing a final warning, Ray said the Koch-Rajbongshi community would boycott the BJP in the 2026 elections if ST status was not granted before the polls.

Echoing the demand, Youth Sanmilani president Bishnu Ray warned that failure to grant ST status would trigger a massive agitation, with lakhs of people from Assam as well as Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, West Bengal and Bihar expected to participate. He made a controversial remark, stating that he was prepared to "take the first bullet" if the government resorted to firing on protesters.

E-rickshaw driver brutally attacked and looted bike rider

HT Correspondent

DHUBRI, Feb 8: A shocking incident of road rage followed by mob violence occurred in the heart of Dhubri town on Saturday, leaving a local resident injured and raising serious concerns about public safety. A bike rider was allegedly intercepted, assaulted and robbed by a group of individuals on a busy highway in full public view.

The incident took place at around 9 AM when Prakash Kumar Shah, a resident of Nuniapatti area under Ward No 10, was on his way to drop his young daughter at Happy Convent School. According to the complaint, an e-rickshaw bearing registration number AS 17ER 2029 took a sudden turn and collided with Shah's motorcycle.

The impact caused Shah and his school-going daughter to fall onto the road. Local bystanders rushed

to their aid, following which an argument reportedly broke out between Shah and the e-rickshaw driver. Before proceeding to the school, Shah took a photograph of the e-rickshaw on his mobile phone and informed the driver that he would approach the police to seek legal action over the accident.

After dropping his daughter at school, Shah headed towards the Dhubri Sadar Police Station to lodge a complaint. However, at Police Point No 2, his motorcycle was allegedly stopped by a group of individuals who blocked his path. The attackers reportedly dragged Shah along with his bike, pulled his T-shirt over his face to blindfold him and then subjected him to a brutal physical assault.

As stated in the First Information Report (FIR) later lodged by the victim, the assailants also looted ₹45,000 in cash from his pocket during the attack.

NFR to run 5 pairs of Holi special trains

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 8: In a bid to ensure smoother travel during the Holi festival, Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) will operate five pairs of special trains, part of Indian Railways' broader plan to run 1,500 festive services this year. Last year, 1,144 special trains were operated across the country to meet increased passenger demand.

The Holi special trains will run on the following routes, each completing six trips in both directions: Narangi-Gorakhpur, Katihar-Amritsar, Dibrugarh-Jaynagar, New Jalpaiguri-Muzaffarpur and Kishanganj-Lalkuan. Key schedules include Narangi-Gorakhpur (05633), running Thursdays from February 19 to March 26, departing Narangi at 13:20 hrs, with the return train (05634) running Fridays from February 20 to March 27; Katihar-Amritsar (05736) Wednesdays from February 18 to March 25, with the return (05735) Fridays from February 20 to March 27; Dibrugarh-Jaynagar (05974) Tuesdays from February 17 to March 24, with the return (05973) Wednesdays from February 18 to March 25; New Jalpaiguri-Muzaffarpur (05740) Saturdays from February 21 to March 28, with the return (05739) on the same schedule and Kishanganj-Lalkuan (05741) Thursdays from February 19 to March 26, with the return (05742) Fridays from February 20 to March 27. These services aim to connect key destinations, reduce congestion on regular trains and allow passengers to celebrate Holi safely and conveniently. Details of stoppages and timings are available on the IRCTC website and NFR's official social media platforms. Passengers are advised to verify train details before travelling.

Tinsukia prepares for smooth HSLC and HS exams

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Feb 8: The district administration has taken comprehensive measures to ensure the smooth and fair conduct of the upcoming Higher Secondary Leaving Certificate (HSLC) and Higher Secondary (HS) final examinations in Tinsukia district. As part of the arrangements, one flying squad has been formed for each co-district with each squad led by an Executive Magistrate. The decision was taken during an important meeting held on Friday under the chairmanship of Tinsukia District Commissioner Sumit Sattawan, during which detailed instructions were issued to concerned officials regarding examination preparedness and security measures.

According to District Information and Public Relations Officer (DIPRO) Bikash Sharma, a total of 13,385 students will appear in the HSLC examination, which is scheduled to begin on February 10,

at 30 examination centres across Tinsukia district. Meanwhile, 9,120 candidates will appear in the Higher Secondary final examination starting from February 11 at 24 centres in the district.

Adequate security arrangements have been put in place at all examination centres. Entry of any person other than examinees and personnel assigned for examination duty has been strictly prohibited within a 100-metre radius of the centres. Examinees have been barred from carrying any electronic devices, including mobile phones, smart watches, calculators and similar items, into the examination halls. They have been instructed to bring only their admit cards, valid identity proof and necessary writing materials.

District Commissioner Sumit Sattawan has directed the officers-in-charge of all examination centres to strictly enforce the security measures and ensure a smooth,

Demow Police Station wins Best Police Station Award

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, Feb 8: Demow received a moment of pride on Saturday as the Demow Police Station was selected for the prestigious "Best Police Station" Award by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Every year, the Ministry of Home Affairs selects one police station at the national level and one police station from each state for the "Best Police Station" Award. According to information received, the Demow Police Station has been chosen for this honour in recognition of its efforts in maintaining good relations with the public, ensuring law and order and expediting criminal investigations. The Demow Police Station team is led by Officer-in-Charge Bisadu Singpho, under whose leadership the station achieved this milestone.

Jorhat Cong denies reports of 300 members quitting

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Feb 8: The Jorhat District Congress Committee has denied reports circulating in some digital media claiming that 300 Congress members in the district have left the party. In a press statement, the Committee said the reports were misleading, noting that certain anti-Congress elements had misused the official pad of the District Committee to circulate false claims of mass resignations. The statement said the reports were aimed at creating confusion among the public.

Over two lakh devotees attend three-day state conference 95th annual conference of Srimanta Sankardev Sangha concludes

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 8: The 95th annual conference of the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha, convened by the Tezpur district committee, concluded on Saturday amid a massive turnout of devotees and visitors from across Assam and abroad. The Jyoti-Bishnu Samannay Khetra at the Soibari-Naharbari paddy field witnessed an overwhelming gathering of more than two lakh people, turning the venue into what many described as a second Baikunthpuri on the third and final day of the state-level conference.

The atmosphere at the conference site resonated with spiritual fervour as Bhagawat orations, Dihanaam, Kirtan, Naam Prasanga, 'Doba-kah' and the rhythmic sounds of Nagara filled the surroundings, creating an ambience of devotion and holiness.

The final day's programme began with a cleanliness drive, followed by Pratah

Prasanga and Naam Prasanga in the morning. Padadhikar Bhabendranath Deka inaugurated the Sangha flag at 9 AM, along with the hoisting of 55 Sangha flags by representatives of various district committees. The Bhagawat Bhraman and a multi-cultural procession were also inaugurated by the Padadhikar.

The grand procession commenced from the Jyoti-Bishnu Samannay Khetra and passed through Bakola, Katharbari, Muradol, Gerekichuk, Tamulchuk, Salaguri, Panchajanya Khetra, Madhupur, Bogakura and Panigaon, covering a distance of nearly 10 kilometres before returning to the conference site. Around 150 teams representing diverse communities including Assamese, Bodo, Mising, Gorkha, Marwadi, Arunachali, Naga, Deuri, Bengali and tea-tribe communities participated in the procession. The rally featured spectacular replicas and depictions of Bhagawat, Kirtan Path, Naam



Prasanga, Rash festival, Sati Jaymat, traditional 'mukha' art, presentations from Zubeen Garg's musical albums and various

forms of Sankari art and culture, drawing wide appreciation from spectators.

The open session was held in the afternoon at the Dharma Ratna Gahan Chandra Goswami and Golak Kakaty Memorial main pandal, with Padadhikar Bhabendranath Deka presiding over the session. Kamala Kanta Gogoi, advisor of the Sangha, inaugurated the open session. Kushal Thakuriya, principal secretary of the Sangha, presented the annual report, followed by a written address from the Padadhikar.

On the occasion, Gyani Jasbir Singh, representing the Assamese Sikh community, conferred the 'Shrestatwa Sanman' on Padadhikar Bhabendranath Deka. The honour included a Sikh turban, the Granth Sahib and 'Saruwa'.

The open session featured Rajani Kanta Dutta as the appointed speaker, Darshit Barua as the child speaker, Anirban Chetia as the youth speaker and Mousumi Barua as the women speaker. Among those present as distinguished

guests were Debabrata Saikia, Leader of the Opposition in the Assam Legislative Assembly, Padma Hazarika, MLA from Naduar, Utpal Sarma, president of the All Assam Students' Union, Diganta Ghatowal, MLA from Behali LAC, Rana Pratap Barua, along with several others.

At the conclusion of the conference, the Sangha flag was formally lowered by the principal secretary and handed over to the Lakhimpur district committee by the Padadhikar and office bearers. Samiran Hazarika inaugurated the colourful cultural evening programme.

It may be mentioned that the three-day 95th session of the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha began on February 6 at the Jyoti-Bishnu Samannay Khetra at the Naharbari-Soibari paddy field and concluded on Saturday under the aegis of the Tezpur district committee of the Sangha, in association with the general public of the area.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

No one is perfect – that's why pencils have erasers.
- Wolfgang Riebe

Mamata fights her own case

Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday created a sort of history by appearing in the Supreme Court of India as the first sitting CM to defend the people of her state from being “bulldozed” through Special Intensive Revision (SIR) by Election Commission of India (ECI). “Please Protect the people,” she requested the bench. The Apex Court decided to hear the case further in February 9, and in the meanwhile gave several directions to the ECI including to send notices over SIR carefully. It is worth noting that ECI has sent notices to several public figures including former navy chief Admiral Arun Prakash (retd), Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, and Indian cricketer Mohammed Shami under the SIR. CM Mamata has been opposing the SIR for a long time, and wanted the upcoming Assembly elections in the state due in April-May to be conducted as per the voting list of 2025. She had moved an interlocutory application in the court seeking permission for to present her argument in person. The SC Bench comprised of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, Justice Joymalya Bagchi, and Justice Vipul M Pancholi has been hearing a batch of petitions against SIR. In the last hearing on January 12, the bench had issued directions to ECI to make the SIR more transparent, accessible, and voter-friendly in West Bengal.

After hearing Mamata Banerjee, the Bench ordered issuance of notice in two petitions and directed that a connected matter, in which the ECI has already filed an affidavit, also be listed on February 9. All issues will be heard on that day, the court said. Banerjee questioned the intention of ECI behind conducting SIR in West Bengal and asked why the exercise was not being carried out in Assam? “When people are out they did it. BLOs died by suicide and they blamed the election officials. It is because of the harassment, West Bengal is targeted, why not Assam?! Why not Assam?!” she said. She gave specific examples of discrepancies in the SIR process, such as names of women were deleted from the list because they changed their last names after marriage. It was considered mismatch. Some daughters who shifted to in-laws house ... their names were also deleted, she submitted. Over the deleted name, she said that 58 lakhs deleted and they did not have option to appeal.

She expressed her gratitude to the Bench for giving her chance to represent the case of people of her state. She said, “When justice is crying behind the door... then we thought we are not getting justice anywhere. We wrote 6 letters to the election commission. I am a bonded labour... I prefer that, I am not fighting for my party.”

Rafiqul Hussain: A wandering life devoted to art and society

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Few lives in contemporary Assamese culture have carried such quiet yet profound weight as that of Rafiqul Hussain. When he left us on the night of February 7, something larger than an individual departed—an entire way of experiencing, creating, and sharing art that refused separation from the pulse of ordinary people. His existence was movement itself: a continuous journey across Assam’s rivers, floodplains, char-chaporis, tribal hamlets, and forgotten villages. That physical wandering was never decorative. It constituted the very method through which he understood life and the only honest ground from which he believed authentic art could grow.

Hussain entered Assamese literature first as a poet whose voice arrived already mature and unmistakably his own. The 1984 collection *Sharobiddho Akash* appeared at a moment when Assam was still reeling from political upheaval, uncertainty, and collective searching for identity. The title—*Sky Pierced by Arrows*—carried an image both violent and open, suggesting beauty that survives wounding. His early poems did not offer easy consolation. Instead they held love and separation, social erosion, fragile human bonds, and the stubborn persistence of dignity within the same frame. The language was intimate, tactile, never ornamental. Readers encountered not polished abstraction but sensations: the smell of river mud, the creak of a bamboo platform under cattle hooves, the low voices of women working late. Poetry, for him, remained a form of close listening. He treated it as one of the few remaining ways to register what society was quietly losing.

That same listening instinct soon pulled him toward theatre. After his first play *Ajonmo* in 1981–82, he moved decisively into dramatic writing and direction, yet he never abandoned the poet’s eye. The transition felt organic because both arts, in his hands, served the same purpose: to make visible what power prefers to keep invisible. His major plays—*Ujaan*, *Jalashoy*, *Daiboki*, *Dhowa*, *Jalprapat*, *Shoponor Brindaban*, *Aranyot Urmila*, *Ratir Akash*—form a coherent body of work that is deceptively simple in surface and devastating in implication. He avoided theatrical fireworks. Instead he trusted the power of ordinary speech, of characters who speak exactly as people speak when no audience is watching. A fisherman arguing with the river that keeps eating his land, a woman quietly refusing the script written for her, a young man torn between inherited custom and new aspirations—these were not symbolic figures. They were people he had met, listened to, travelled with. That refusal to invent suffering from a distance gave his plays moral clarity and emotional immediacy.

What truly set Hussain apart was the deliberate choice to root his creative life

among those who are rarely represented as subjects rather than objects of art. For more than thirty years he lived as a traveller by necessity and conviction. He worked under boat canopies, on cattle platforms during floods, inside chang houses in remote hills. These were not fieldwork trips followed by retreat to a study. They were his studio, his rehearsal space, his source. The authenticity that marks his writing did not come from research. It came from proximity—from sleeping where people slept, eating what they ate, hearing stories at the same fire. Characters in his poems, plays, and later stories are therefore never generic. They carry specific scars, specific accents, specific ways of holding silence. That fidelity to lived texture is perhaps his greatest formal achievement.

As a director he extended the same principle. He staged more than a hundred productions across Assam, often with groups that had few resources and even fewer illusions of glamour. Direction, for him, was never only about blocking movements or lighting cues. It was about guiding performers toward a deeper understanding of the material—and of themselves. He conducted workshops that functioned as quiet acts of emancipation, helping actors locate their own emotional truth rather than imitating someone else’s. Many of today’s respected theatre artists openly say they discovered their own voice because Rafiq Da refused to let them settle for surface performance. His rehearsals were disciplined yet deeply humane. Timekeeping mattered, craft mattered, yet so did mutual respect. He treated every participant as a co-creator, never as hired labor.

Even in prose Hussain remained theatrical. The 2015 collection *Eta Petikotor Kahini Aru Anyanya* gathers stories that read like chamber plays performed on the page. Serialized earlier in *Sadin* and *Satori*, they draw directly from his wandering years: strange encounters, absurd situations, moments of unexpected tenderness. The narrative voice carries the same rhythmic pulse as his stage dialogues. Readers feel they are watching rather than merely reading. This seamless movement between genres—poetry feeding drama, drama feeding fiction—demonstrates how completely integrated his artistic imagination had become. He did not compartmentalize forms. He treated them as different entrances into the same house.

Hussain’s contribution to Assam’s amateur-professional theatre tradition is difficult to overstate. In decades when commercial mobile theatre dominated rural entertainment with spectacle and formula, he chose the harder path: small venues, demanding scripts, audiences expected to think. He believed theatre should sharpen perception rather than dull it. His experiments blended older Assamese forms (*Bhaona*, *Ojapali* echoes) with contemporary concerns without ever appearing forced. The result was a living tradition—adaptable, inclusive, rooted yet forward-looking. He be-

Meghalaya’s repeating mine tragedy

The phrase “distressing regularity” fits Meghalaya’s rat hole mining with painful accuracy because the tragedy does not shock anymore, it repeats. Every few months, news emerges of workers trapped underground, bodies recovered after days, or families waiting endlessly for answers that never fully come. Each incident briefly jolts public attention, prompts official statements and ritual expressions of concern, and then quietly fades, leaving the system unchanged. The mines remain. The tunnels remain. The desperation that drives men into these holes remains. What changes is only the count of the dead.

Rat hole mining is not an accidental byproduct of development. It is a deliberate, organised, and sustained activity carried out despite a clear ban by the National Green Tribunal. The method involves digging narrow vertical shafts and horizontal tunnels just wide enough for a person to crawl through, often without ventilation, structural support, or safety equipment. Coal is extracted manually in conditions that are closer to suffocation than labour. The earth above is unstable, water can rush in without warning, and oxygen levels can drop suddenly. Anyone entering such a tunnel knows, at least vaguely, that death is a real possibility. Yet people continue to go down because hunger is more immediate than fear.

Meghalaya’s geology and land ownership patterns are often cited as reasons for why rat hole mining took root. Much of the land is privately or community owned, and coal seams lie close to the surface, making small scale extraction appear easy and profitable. Over time, what began as informal local mining turned into a networked economy involving contractors, transporters, traders, and political patrons. The coal extracted through these illegal means feeds industries far beyond the state. It powers kilns, factories, and markets that prefer cheap fuel without asking uncomfortable questions about its origin.

This is why the problem cannot be reduced to a few irresponsible mine owners or rogue labour contractors. Rat hole mining survives because it is economically convenient for many and socially tolerated by even more. The workers are often migrants from Assam, Bihar, West Bengal, and Bangladesh. They are invisible in everyday life and remembered only when they die. Their deaths are described as accidents, as if the danger were unpredictable, rather than as outcomes built into the very design of the activity. Language itself softens the crime.

A tunnel collapse sounds unfortunate. A flood inside a mine sounds natural. In reality, these are foreseeable consequences of illegal and reckless extraction.

The ban on rat hole mining, though legally sound, has struggled in implementation. Enforcement agencies face a complex mix of terrain challenges, political pressure, and economic dependence. Local communities that rely on mining fear loss of livelihood. Officials tasked with enforcement often operate within social environments where everyone knows everyone else, making strict action personally risky. Corruption further weakens oversight. Trucks carrying coal move openly on highways. Stockpiles appear near roadsides. Documents are forged, coal is relabelled as pre ban stock, and accountability dissolves into paperwork.

What makes the situation particularly tragic is that deaths in rat hole mines are rarely sudden shocks. They are slow emergencies. When a tunnel floods or collapses, rescue is almost impossible. Narrow shafts prevent the use of modern equipment. Oxygen levels drop quickly. Water pumping teams reach the site, survival chances are minimal. Families wait outside mine entrances for days, clinging to hope while knowing the odds. When bodies are finally retrieved, compensation becomes another struggle, delayed by disputes over employment records and legal status.

The recurring nature of these tragedies should have triggered a deeper moral reckoning by now. Instead, they have become part of the background noise of governance failure. Each incident is treated as an isolated event rather than as evidence of a systemic crime that continues with impunity. This normalisation is perhaps the most disturbing aspect. When deaths repeat with regularity, society adapts by lowering its expectations of justice.

Making illegal mining socially expensive is therefore as important as making it legally risky. As long as rat hole mining is seen as an unfortunate necessity or a local issue best ignored, it will continue. Social expense means changing the way communities, consumers, and institutions perceive and respond to the activity. It means that benefiting from illegal coal should carry reputational damage. Industries that use such coal should face public scrutiny. Transporters and traders should be named and held accountable, not quietly fined and released. Silence should no longer be the comfortable option.

Operationally prohibitive enforcement requires more than periodic raids. It demands sustained surveillance, transparent data on coal movement, and coordination between state agencies. Technology can play a role through satellite monitoring, GPS tracking of transport vehicles, and digital records of coal stocks. But technology alone cannot overcome political reluctance. Enforcement will only work if there is a clear message from the top that illegal mining will not be tolerated, regardless of who is involved. Selective action breeds cynicism and encourages the belief that rules apply only to the weak. At the same time, any serious attempt to end rat hole mining must address livelihoods. Simply shutting mines without creating alternatives pushes workers into deeper precarity. Many miners accept the risks because safer employment is unavailable or poorly paid. Skill development, alternative employment in agriculture, forestry, infrastructure, and regulated mining must be part of the transition. This requires investment, planning, and patience. It also requires listening to local communities rather than treating them only as subjects of enforcement.

Legal mining, if conducted responsibly, could offer a way forward. Meghalaya does have coal resources, and completely denying their extraction may not be realistic. What is unacceptable is extraction that treats human lives as disposable. Scientific mining methods, environmental safeguards, and labour protections are not luxuries. They are the minimum requirements of a society that claims to value life. Transitioning from illegal rat hole mining to regulated practices will be complex, but complexity cannot be an excuse for inaction.

There is also a need to recognise the human cost beyond numbers. Each miner who dies leaves behind a family whose economic and emotional stability collapses overnight. Children drop out of school. Debts multiply. Widows struggle to claim compensation in unfamiliar bureaucracies. These stories rarely make headlines, but they are the true legacy of rat hole mining. When society tolerates such deaths, it implicitly decides whose lives are worth protecting and whose are expendable.

Media attention plays a crucial role in shaping public response. Reporting on rat hole mining often peaks during disasters and fades quickly afterward. Sustained investigative journalism that follows the money, exposes networks, and tracks en-



forcement failures can help keep pressure alive. Civil society organisations, too, have a role in advocating for miners’ rights and environmental protection. Courts can issue orders, but without public vigilance, those orders risk remaining on paper.

Education and awareness within local communities are equally important. When mining deaths are seen as inevitable or as the price of survival, resistance weakens. Highlighting alternative livelihoods, sharing information about health and safety, and involving communities in monitoring can slowly shift attitudes. Social disapproval can be a powerful force. When illegal mining brings shame rather than acceptance, participation declines.

Ultimately, the question is not whether rat hole mining can be stopped, but whether there is sufficient collective will to stop it. The knowledge of its dangers is widespread. The legal ban exists. The repeated tragedies provide undeniable evidence. What remains lacking is moral urgency translated into consistent action. Distressing regularity should not become destiny.

Illegal mining must become operationally prohibitive through strict enforcement, technological oversight, and accountability that reaches beyond the lowest rung. It must become socially expensive through public scrutiny, ethical consumer behaviour, and community engagement. And it must be replaced by economic alternatives that do not force people to choose between starvation and suffocation.

Meghalaya’s rat hole mines are not just holes in the ground. They are holes in governance, empathy, and justice. Filling them requires more than condolences after each death. It requires a decision to value human life above cheap coal, and to act on that decision every day, not just when tragedy briefly captures attention. Until that happens, the regularity of distress will continue, and with it, the quiet acceptance of a crime that should never have been allowed to become normal.

Supreme Court’s refusal to hear direct cash transfer to voters case is flawed

By: Dr Gyan Pathak

The Supreme Court’s refusal to entertain a petition challenging the direct cash transfer to voters while Model Code of Conduct (MCC) for election was in operation, the Election Commission of India’s turning blind eye to the violation of MCC in this way, and deploying beneficiaries on election duty on the polling day is flawed because it has identifiable legal weaknesses and also political overtones bullying a petitioner political party for its failure in election while making it one of the grounds without going into the merit of the allegations.

While refusing to hear the petition on Friday February filed by Jan Suraj Party founded by a well known political strategist Prashant Kishor, the Supreme Court Bench comprised of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi directed the petitioner to approach the Patna High Court. The petitioner had sought annulment of the 2025 Bihar Legislative Assembly Election and appropriate guidelines and direction to ensure free and fair elections by stopping the corrupt practice resorted to by the ruling establishments to win elections.

The most disturbing was the political comment of the CJI, “How many votes did your political party get? People reject you and they you use judicial platform to get popularity. ... We cannot issue an omnibus direction for the entire state that too at the instance of a political party.”

It is unfortunate that CJI took this view while ignoring the issue that was raised in the petition. JSP had moved the petition alleging that the Bihar government violated the MCC by transferring Rs 10,000 to women beneficiaries under the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Rojgar Yojna that was launched virtually by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The petitioner had alleged that the debt-ridden state disbursed Rs 15,600 crore influencing voters in violation of the Article 324 of the Constitution of India, and Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act.

Supreme Court erred while it resorted to bullying the petitioner merely because its failure in the election. How many votes did you get? – the court asked and added in the same breath – Once people reject you, you use the judicial forum to get relief! It was only a partial and one-sided view of looking at the matter. Though we know that JSP could not win any single seat and most of its candidate forfeited their

deposits, it is also a fact that JSP has got over 16 lakh votes which was 3.34 per cent of the total valid votes polled. It means JSP is the voice of so many people of the state, and therefore it can’t be summarily dismissed.

Courts reference to the petitioner’s electoral failure and perceived search for publicity has other flaws also, such as Constitutional jurisprudence does not recognize electoral success as a criterion for legal standing, or failure as forfeiture of their right to demand justice. Historically speaking, many transformative constitution cases were brought by those who were politically marginal actors.

Therefore, to weigh a petitioner’s electoral popularity while deciding entertainability of a legal petition risks introducing a subjective and extra-legal standard into constitutional adjudication. Judiciary is expected to adjudicate claims, not motives. How can a court decide about the motive without hearing the merit of the case? Politically unsuccessful parties have also right to raise issues like violation of MCC during election, since they are victims of the distortion of the level playing field vitiating free and fair election.

Another question is raised by the critics about other observations of the court, such as “Somebody should have challenged the scheme itself then. That is not the prayer before us. You just want the election to be declared null and void.” CJI also said, “We will consider the freebies issue. But we have to see the bona fide also... we cannot look at that at the behest of a party which has just lost. When you come to power, you will do the exact thing.”

Take the last comment first. Telling a political party that when you come to power, you will do the exact thing, is just imagination of the court, and it is like an astrological prediction, to sound legal consideration. The court has no business to use such speculative language. It is just running down someone even before they commit something wrong.

A political party is a stakeholder in a democracy, and perhaps CJI can’t justifiably say “we cannot look at that (the issue of freebies) at the behest of a party which has just lost.” Then we have to see the bona fide also, the court said. One fails to understand how raising an issue that is prima facie violation of MCC by a political party that lost election is not bona fide. Any citizen of the country is bona fide, and he must be heard, even he is a total failure.

The petition was filed under Arti-

cle 32 of the Constitution of India, which allows direct access to the Supreme Court for enforcement of fundamental rights), but the court said the appropriated remedy was to file petitions in the High Court because it was “state specific”. However, simply being state-specific doesn’t automatically make article 32 unavailable, especially where constitutional rights like free and fair election under Article 324 and equality under article 14 are allegedly violated.

Court did not examine whether the alleged violation of the MCC might constitute corrupt practice. It is precisely for this reason, the Supreme Court decision of refusal to entertain the petition is seen to have done on political consideration, that is party’s lack of electoral success, and procedural technicalities such as jurisdiction rather than an assessment of the legal merits of the allegations. Taking the view by the Supreme Court that it looked like an election dispute and hence to be decided by High Courts in only partially current, and may be not wrong in principle. However, when the allegations like systemic violation of free and fair election, misuse of state machinery, mass inducement or bribery of voters, breach of equality under Article 14, and distortion of electoral choice under Article 19(1)(a) are involved, Supreme Court’s refusal is not sound. It is especially when the Supreme Court has already decided that free and fair elections are part of the basic structure of the Constitution of India.

The Court has flawed when mixed political commentary with legal jurisdiction while referring to electoral defeat, loss of seats, or seeking publicity. Courts are expected to separate political popularity from constitution justiciability. Refusal to entertain the petition without testing “systemic impact” is flawed also because the petitioner raised systemic distortion of electoral choice which is a constitution issue, and it is not individual corrupt practice that should be handled by election petitions. Court’s refusal is not aligned with its own constitutional precedents and decisions.

The strength of constitutional democracy lies not in protecting electoral outcomes, but in safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process itself. Even weak or unpopular petitioners can expose constitutional fault lines. By declining to examine those fault lines at the threshold, the Court may have missed an opportunity to reinforce, rather than retreat from, its role as the guardian of free and fair elections. (IPA Service)

Exit poll shows Japan Premier Takaichi's ruling bloc on path to win majority

TOKYO, Feb 8: Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's governing coalition is almost certain to win a single-party majority in a key parliamentary election Sunday, NHK public television and other major networks say, citing their exit poll results.

NHK says Takaichi's ruling coalition, led by her Liberal Democratic Party, could win more than two-thirds of the 465-seat lower house, the more powerful of the country's two-chamber parliament.

The huge jump from the pre-election share could allow Takaichi to make progress on a right-wing agenda that aims to boost Japan's economy and military capabilities as tensions grow with China, and she tries to nurture ties with Washington. Takaichi took office in October, pledged to "work, work, work," and her style, which is seen as both playful and tough, has resonated with younger fans. The latest surveys indicated a landslide win in the lower house for the LDP. The opposition, despite the formation of a new centrist alliance and a rising far-right, is seen as too splintered to be a real challenger.

Takaichi bet that her LDP party, together with its new partner, the Japan Innovation Party, would secure a majority in the 465-seat lower house, the more powerful of Japan's two-chamber parliament.

If the LDP fails to win a majority, "I will step down," she said.

Pushing right-wing policies

A big win by Takaichi's coalition could mean a significant shift to the right in Japan's security, immigration and other policies, with its right-wing partner JIP's leader Hirofumi Yoshimura saying his party will serve as an "accelerator."

Elaborating on engagement in the security domain, Modi said cooperation in counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, and maritime security will be strengthened, adding that both sides will further expand defence ties.

"Along with AI and digital technologies, we will advance partnerships in semiconductors, health, and food security," he said, noting that the discussions at the CEO Forum opened new opportunities for trade and investment.

The prime minister touched upon India's position on Indo-Pacific and its steadfast views on the 10-nation grouping ASEAN's centrality in the region.

"The Indo-Pacific region is emerging as the world's growth engine. We, along with ASEAN, are committed to development, peace, and stability throughout the Indo-Pacific region," he said.

"With the support of friendly countries like Malaysia, India will further expand its relations with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). We agree that the review of the ASEAN-India Trade Agreement, ITIGA, should be completed expeditiously," he added. Modi said he and Ibrahim also had a "meaningful discussion" on regional and global issues.

"In this environment of global instability, the growing friendship between India and Malaysia is of vital importance to both countries."

"We share the view that reform of global institutions is essential to address today's challenges. We will continue to support all efforts for peace. And our message on terrorism is clear: No double standards; no compromise," he added.

"We appreciate your commitment to India-Malaysia relations. Let us together realise your dream of a prosperous Malaysia and our resolve for a developed India," he said. (PTI)

Both Modi, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday, and Ibrahim appreciated efforts to promote the usage of local currencies -- the Indian Rupee and Malaysian Ringgit -- for trade settlement.

"We will pave the way for economic transformation through strategic trust," Modi said, describing the India-Malaysia relationship as "special". "We are maritime neighbours. For centuries, our peoples have had deep and cordial ties," he said in his media statement. Modi also announced India's decision to establish an Indian Consulate General in Malaysia.

In his remarks, Ibrahim noted India's economic growth and said his country would benefit immensely if it could secure more ways and opportunities to collaborate with New Delhi.

"It (India's economic growth) is one spectacular rise in the international eco and trade scene," he said, describing the decision to use local currencies for bilateral trade as "remarkable".

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Japan has recently seen far-right populists gain ground, such as the anti-globalist and surging nationalist party Sanseito.

Takaichi has pledged to revise security and defence policies by December to bolster Japan's offensive military capabilities, lifting a ban on weapons exports and moving further away from the country's postwar pacifist principles.

She has been pushing for tougher policies on foreigners, anti-espionage and other measures that resonate with a far-right audience, but ones that experts say could undermine civil rights.

Takaichi also wants to increase defence spending in response to

Trump's pressure on Japan to loosen its purse strings.

Nation-splitting policies are not clearly explained

Though Takaichi said she is seeking the public's mandate for her "nation-splitting policies," she avoided contentious issues such as ways to fund soaring military spending, how to fix diplomatic tension with China and other controversial issues.

In her campaign speeches, Takaichi enthusiastically talked about the need for "proactive" government spending to fund "crisis management investment and growth," such as measures to strengthen economic security, tech-

nology and other industries. Takaichi also seeks to push tougher measures on immigration and foreigners, including stricter requirements for foreign property owners and a cap on foreign residents.

The snap election after only three months in office "underscores a problematic trend in Japanese politics in which political survival takes priority over substantive policy outcomes," said Masato Kamikubo, a Ritsumeikan University politics professor.

"Whenever the government attempts necessary but unpopular reforms ... the next election looms."

The impact of snow and younger voters is uncertain

There were some uncertainties. The hastily called election that gave little time for people to prepare invited complaints.

Sunday's vote also coincided with fresh snowfall across the country, including in Tokyo. Record snowfall in northern Japan over the past few weeks blocked roads and was blamed for dozens of deaths nationwide.

Kazuki Ishihara, 54, said he voted for the LDP for stability and in hopes of something new under Takaichi. "I have some hope that she could do something" her predecessors could not. (AP)

Iran's top diplomat strikes hard line on US talks



DUBAI, Feb 8: Iran's top diplomat insisted on Sunday that Tehran's strength came from its ability to "say no to the great powers," striking a maximalist position just after negotiations with the United States over its nuclear program and in the wake of nationwide protests.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, speaking to diplomats at a summit in Tehran, signalled that Iran would stick to its position that it must be able to enrich uranium - a major point of contention with President Donald Trump, who bombed Iranian atomic sites in June during the 12-day Iran-Israel war.

While Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian praised the talks on Friday in Oman with the Americans as "a step forward," Araghchi's remarks show the challenge ahead. Already, the US moved the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, ships and warplanes to the Middle East to pressure Iran into an agreement and have the firepower necessary to strike the Islamic Republic should Trump choose to do so.

"I believe the secret of the Islamic Republic of Iran's power lies in its ability to stand against bullying, domination and pressures from others," Araghchi said. "They fear our atomic bomb, while we are not pursuing an atomic bomb. Our atomic bomb is the power to say no to the great powers. The secret of the Islamic Republic's power is in the power to say no to the powers."

The 'atomic bomb' as a rhetorical device

Araghchi's choice to explicitly use an "atomic bomb" as a rhetorical device likely wasn't accidental. While Iran has long maintained its nuclear program is peaceful, the West and the International Atomic Energy Agency say Tehran had an organized military program to seek the bomb up until 2003.

Iran has been enriching uranium up to 60 per cent purity, a short, technical step to weapons-grade

levels of 90 per cent, the only non-weapons state to do so. Iranian officials in recent years had also been increasingly threatening that the Islamic Republic could seek the bomb, even while its diplomats have pointed to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's preachings as a binding fatwa, or religious edict, that Iran wouldn't build one.

Pezeshkian, who ordered Araghchi to pursue talks with the Americans after likely getting Khamenei's blessing, also wrote on X on Sunday about the talks.

"The Iran-US talks, held through the follow-up efforts of friendly governments in the region, were a step forward," the president wrote. "Dialogue has always been our strategy for peaceful resolution. ... The Iranian nation has always responded to respect with respect, but it does not tolerate the language of force."

It remains unclear when and where, or if, there will be a second round of talks. Trump, after the talks on Friday, offered few details but said: "Iran looks like they want to make a deal very badly -- as they should."

Aircraft carrier in the Arabian Sea

During Friday's talks, US Navy Adm. Brad Cooper, the head of the American military's Central Command, was in Oman. Cooper's presence was likely an intentional reminder to Iran about the US military presence in the region. Cooper later accompanied US special envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, to the Lincoln out in the Arabian Sea after the indirect negotiations.

Araghchi appeared to be taking the threat of an American military strike seriously, as many worried Iranians have in recent weeks. He noted that after multiple rounds of talks last year, the US "attacked us in the midst of negotiations." "If you take a step back (in negotiations), it is not clear up to where it will go," Araghchi said. (AP)

PM Modi vows stronger India-Malaysia ties in strategic pivot

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 8: India and Malaysia on Sunday vowed to expand their ties in the high-priority sectors of trade and investment, defence, energy, advanced manufacturing and semiconductors with Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserting that both sides are committed to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Following his wide-ranging talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Modi reiterated India's position on combating terrorism as he said: "Our message on terrorism is clear: No double standards, no compromise."

The two sides inked a total of 11 agreements and documents to expand cooperation in a range of key areas, including a framework pact for deeper engagement in the semiconductor sector.

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"We will pave the way for economic transformation through strategic trust," Modi said, describing the India-Malaysia relationship as "special". "We are maritime neighbours. For centuries, our peoples have had deep and cordial ties," he said in his media statement. Modi also announced India's decision to establish an Indian Consulate General in Malaysia.

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Palestinians attempt to use Gaza's Rafah Border crossing amidst delays

CAIRO, Feb 8: Palestinians on both sides of the crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which opened last week for the first time since 2024, were making their way to the border on Sunday in hopes of crossing, one of the main requirements for the US-backed ceasefire. The opening comes as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to travel to Washington this week, though the major subject of discussion will be Iran, his office said.

The Rafah Crossing opened to a few Palestinians in each direction last week, after Israel retrieved the body of the last hostage held in Gaza and several American officials visited Israel to press for the opening. Over the first four days of the crossing's opening, just 36 Palestinians requiring medical care were allowed to leave for Egypt, plus 62 companions, according to United Nations data.

Palestinian officials say nearly 20,000 people in Gaza are seeking to leave for medical care that they say is not available in the war-shattered territory. The few who have succeeded in crossing described delays and allegations of mistreatment by Israeli forces and other groups involved in the crossing, including an Israeli-backed Palestinian armed group, Abu Shabab.

A group of Palestinian patients and wounded gathered on Sunday morning in the courtyard of a Red Crescent hospital in Gaza's southern city of Khan Younis, before making their way to the Rafah crossing

with Egypt for treatment abroad, family members told The Associated Press.

Amjad Abu Jedian, who was injured in the war, was scheduled to leave Gaza for medical treatment on the first day of the crossing's reopening, but only five patients were allowed to travel that day, his mother, Raja Abu Jedian, said. Abu Jedian was shot by an Israeli sniper while he was building traditional bathrooms in the central Bureij refugee camp in July 2024, she said.

On Saturday, his family received a call from the World Health Organisation notifying them that he is included in the group that will travel on Sunday, she said. "We want them to take care of the patients (during their evacuation)," she said. "We want the Israeli military not to burden them."

The Israeli defence branch that oversees the operation of the crossing did not immediately confirm the opening. A group of Palestinians also arrived Sunday morning at the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing border to return to the Gaza Strip, Egypt's state-run Al-Qahera News satellite television reported.

Palestinians who returned to Gaza in the first few days of the crossing's operation described hours of delays and invasive searches by Israeli authorities and an Israeli-backed Palestinian armed group, Abu Shabab. A European Union mission and Palestinian officials run the border crossing, and Israel has its screening facility some distance away. (AP)

Russian airstrike on Ukrainian city kills 1 as US pushes June deadline for peace deal

KYIV, Feb 8: A Russian airstrike on a residential area in eastern Ukraine killed one person and wounded two, officials said on Sunday, after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the US has given Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach a peace deal.

The attack on the city of Kramatorsk in Ukraine's Donetsk region caused a fire in a nine-story apartment block, according to Ukraine's State Emergency Service.

Russia also struck energy infrastructure in Ukraine's Poltava region overnight on Sunday, Serhii Korotkiy, chief executive of Ukraine's state-owned gas company Naftogaz, said. Russia has hammered Ukraine's power grid, especially in winter, throughout the nearly 4-year-old war. It aims to weaken the Ukrainian will to resist

in a strategy that Kyiv officials call "weaponising winter." Zelenskyy told reporters Friday the US has given Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach a deal to end the war. If the June deadline is not met, the Trump administration will likely put pressure on both sides, he added.

"The Americans are proposing the parties end the war by the beginning of this summer and will probably put pressure on the parties precisely according to this schedule," Zelenskyy said. "And they say that they want to do everything by June. And they will do everything to end the war. And they want a clear schedule of all events." He said the US proposed holding the next round of trilateral talks next week in their country for the first time, likely in Miami. (AP)

4 Indian students among several injured in stabbing attack in Russia

MOSCOW, Feb 8: Four Indian students were among at least six people injured in a stabbing attack on Saturday at a university in Russia's Bashkortostan Republic, the Indian mission here said.

According to preliminary reports, a teenager armed with a knife entered a dormitory of the State Medical University in Ufa in the Bashkortostan Republic. He attacked the students living there and stabbed several of them, the Interior Ministry said.

"The attacker resisted arrest, during which two police officers were stabbed. Furthermore, the suspect also inflicted bodily harm on himself," Interior Ministry spokesperson Maj General Irina Volk was quoted as saying by RTVI.com webpage.

Calling it an "unfortunate incident", the Indian Embassy here said. "Several persons in-

cluding four Indian students have been injured."

The Embassy said it is in touch with the authorities, and officials from the Consulate in Kazan are en route to Ufa to provide assistance to the injured students.

In a release, the Russian Federal Health Ministry said that four people injured in the attack are receiving medical care. One is in serious condition, while three others are in moderate condition, it added.

The attacker, identified as a 15-year-old youth, has also been admitted to a local children's hospital in serious condition, the Baza telegram channel said.

Authorities in Ufa, the capital of the Bashkortostan Republic about 1,200 km east of Moscow, have launched a high-level probe into the incident. (AP)

Gaza's Rafah border crossing reopened but few people have crossed

KHAN YOUNIS (GAZA STRIP), Feb 8: When the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt finally reopened this week, Palestinian officials heralded it as a "window of hope" after two years of war as a fragile ceasefire deal moves forward.

But that hope has been sidetracked by disagreements over who should be allowed through, hours-long delays and Palestinian travellers' reports of being handcuffed and interrogated by Israeli soldiers.

Fewer people than expected have crossed in both directions. Restrictions negotiated by Israeli, Egyptian, Palestinian and international officials meant that only 50 people would be allowed to return to Gaza each day and 50 medical patients -- along with two companions for each -- would be allowed to leave. But over the first four days of operations, just 36 Palestinians requiring medical care were allowed to leave for Egypt, plus 62 companions, according to United Nations data.

Palestinian officials say nearly 20,000 people in Gaza are seeking to leave for medical care that they say is not available in the war-shattered territory.

Amid confusion around the reopening, the Rafah crossing was reportedly closed Friday and Saturday.

Hours of questioning

The Rafah crossing is a lifeline for Gaza, providing the only link to the outside world not controlled by Israel. Israel seized it in May 2024, though traffic through the crossing was heavily restricted even before that. Several women who managed to return to Gaza after its reopening recounted to The Associated Press harsh treatment by Israeli authorities and an Israeli-backed Palestinian armed group, Abu Shabab. A European Union mission and Palestinian officials run the border crossing, and Israel has its screening facil-

ity some distance away.

Rana al-Louh, anxious to return two years after fleeing to Egypt with her wounded sister, said Israeli screeners asked multiple times why she wanted to go back to Gaza during questioning that lasted more than six hours. She said she was blindfolded and handcuffed, an allegation made by others.

"I told them I returned to Palestine because my husband and kids are there," al-Louh said. Interrogators told her Gaza belonged to Israel and that "the war would return, that Hamas won't give up its weapons. I told him I didn't care, I wanted to return."

Asked about such reports, Israel's military replied that "no incidents of inappropriate conduct, mistreatment, apprehensions or confiscation of property by the Israeli security establishment are known."

The Shin Bet intelligence agency and COGAT, the Israeli military body that handles Palestinian civilian affairs and coordinates the crossings, did not respond to questions about the allegations. The long questioning Wednesday delayed the return to Gaza of al-Louh and others until nearly 2 am Thursday.

Later that day, UN human rights officials noted a "consistent pattern of ill-treatment, abuse and humiliation by Israeli military forces."

"After two years of utter devastation, being able to return to their families and what remains of their homes in safety and dignity is the bare minimum," Ajith Sunghay, the agency's human rights chief for the occupied Palestinian territories, said in a statement.

Numbers below targets

Officials who negotiated the Rafah reopening were clear that the early days of operation would be a pilot. If successful, the number of people crossing could increase. (AP)

Very excited to invite India to join Pax Silica, says top US official

NEW YORK, Feb 8: The US has said it is "very excited" to have extended an invitation to India to join the Pax Silica initiative on supply chain security and will be soon signing with the Indian Government, underlining there is "very positive momentum" in relations with New Delhi.

Highlighting the "great relationship" between President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Washington also stressed that India is probably the only other country on Earth to be able to "rival China" in terms of the sheer volume of its human talent.

"We are very excited to have extended an invitation for India to join" Pax Silica, and "I'll be travelling to India in just a couple weeks for a major signing with the Indian Government." Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Jacob Helberg told reporters on Friday.

The US had last year in December launched 'Pax Silica', a strategic initiative to build a secure, prosperous, and innovation driven silicon supply chain—from critical minerals and energy inputs to ad-



vanced manufacturing, semiconductors, AI infrastructure, and logistics.

The signatories are Australia, Greece, Israel, Japan, Qatar, South Korea, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. India was not included in the initial group of countries for the Pax Silica initiative.

Helberg added that while the Pax Silica was launched in December, and by January, the US had "already had a meeting of the minds" around India joining Pax Silica.

"And so we're very pleased at the pace at which things have been moving in a very positive direction with our partners in India," Helberg said during a briefing organised by the Washington Foreign Press Centre on the Critical Minerals Ministerial that the US hosted last week.

"India is also home to a large -- very large mining and processing operations, which obviously holds great promise to make significant contributions to the supply chain ecosystem. And so there's a lot of terrain in which we will be able to

partner on with India," he said. Helberg further pointed out that outside of China, "India is probably the only other country on Earth to be able to rival China with respect to the breadth and depth of the sheer volume of young, technically trained talent, human talent."

"We view India very positively, and President Trump has a great relationship with (Prime Minister) Narendra Modi," he added.

Helberg also said that "we're very excited and very proud about the bilateral trade deal being concluded with India."

Helberg's comment about the trade deal came just hours before India and the US issued a joint statement announcing that the two sides have reached a framework for an Interim Agreement regarding reciprocal and mutually beneficial trade.

Under the agreement, India will eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and a wide range of US food and agricultural products, including dried distillers' grains, red sorghum for animal feed, tree nuts, fresh and processed fruit, soybean oil, wine and spirits, and additional products. (PTI)

Ready to step down if Sangh asks me to do so: Bhagwat

MUMBAI, Feb 8: RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on Sunday said the Sangh had asked him to continue working despite his age, while stressing that he would step down from the post whenever the organisation directs him to do so.

He also said that the person heading the Sangh will always be a Hindu, irrespective of his caste, with the top post going to the best available candidate.

"There is no election to the post of RSS chief. Regional and divisional heads appoint the chief. Generally, it is said that after turning 75, one should work without holding any post," Bhagwat said.

He was responding to questions during an interactive session with attendees here at a programme to mark the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) centenary.

"I have completed 75 years and informed the RSS, but the organisation asked me to continue working. Whenever the RSS asks me to step down, I will do so, but retirement from work will never happen," he said.

The RSS does not have community-based representation, and volunteers rise through ranks

based on their work, Bhagwat said, adding that the RSS chief has to be a Hindu, irrespective of caste. He pointed out that when the RSS was founded, its work began in a Brahmin-dominated community and hence, most of its founders were Brahmins, which led to the organisation being labelled as a Brahmin outfit at the time.

People always look for an organisation that has representatives from their community, he said.

Bhagwat said he could not give a definite answer on whether the Sangh head would be from the SC or ST background, as the decision rests with those who appoint the chief.

"If I were to choose a chief, I would go by the 'best available candidate' criterion. When I was appointed RSS chief, there were many best candidates, but they were not available. I was the one who could be relieved from duties and appointed," he said.

He said that to belong to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe communities is not a disqualification, and neither is being a Brahmin a qualification to become the RSS chief.

The RSS chief further said situations could be supportive or adverse, and there was no need to

dwell excessively on them.

"What we need to think about is finding solutions rather than focusing on problems. As long as truth does not come forward, illusion remains effective," he added.

In a lighter vein, Bhagwat said the organisation "extracts work till the last drop of blood from its volunteer" and maintained that there had not yet been a situation in the RSS's history where someone had to be retired.

Bhagwat said the Sangh's work was about inculcating "sanskar" (values) and not about campaigning.

"We have lagged behind in promoting ourselves. Excessive campaigning leads to publicity and then arrogance. One needs to protect oneself from it. Publicity should be like rainfall, adequate in timing and quantity," he said, adding that the RSS was carrying out outreach initiatives.

Bhagwat further said that English would never be the medium of communication in RSS functioning, as it was not an Indian language. "We want to work with Indians. Wherever English is necessary, we use it. We are not averse to it," he said.

He said people should be able to speak English in such a manner that native English speakers would be willing to listen. "We should master English, but that does not mean we forget our mother tongue," Bhagwat said.

Recalling a similar interaction in Bengaluru, he said representatives from several southern states could not understand Hindi, and he had responded to their queries in English.

He added that while interacting with the Indian diaspora abroad, communication was done either in Hindi or the mother tongue, depending on whether they were from English-speaking or non-English-speaking countries.

Asked about the work of Sangh volunteers in Muslim communities despite resistance, Bhagwat said that if both sides oppose each other, there would only be confrontation, and no work can be done. He asserted that the RSS does not target any caste or community but works geographically.

"If an area has a population of 10,000, we try to work there. Once we spread geographically, all classes and communities will be reached. If you look at the top circle of the RSS, most communities have representation," he said.



Bhagwat said the RSS believes in exposing corruption and supports anyone fighting against it. "Our volunteers are told to support those who fight corruption. The RSS is in favour of strict laws and legislation against corruption and will support action against corrupt people," he said. He said corruption lies in people's minds and not in the system. "There are people who corrupt the system and some who improve it," he added. (PTI)

'Diplomacy means nation first, development is the foundation of the country' No 'saudebaazi', India-US trade deal safeguards farmers: Chouhan

BHOPAL, Feb 8: Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Sunday asserted the India-US trade deal reached through constructive dialogue, not "saudebaazi" (bargaining), while hitting out at the Congress over its allegations that it was a surrender.

The pact provides complete protection to the agriculture sector and keeps farmers' and the national interests paramount, Chouhan said, asserting that key agricultural products vital to cultivators have been excluded from the agreement.

"No product that would cause even the slightest harm to Indian farmers has been included in this agreement," the senior BJP leader said at a press conference at his residence here.

He further slammed the Congress, pointing out that despite ruling for years, the party had failed to connect farmers to global markets or bring stability to the Indian economy.

"The India-US trade deal has sent a message to the world that Bharat's policy is one of commitment, not compromise. With self-confidence, we take decisions in the country's interest," the Union minister said.

The Congress on Saturday claimed that India has not benefited from the trade agreement and that it is "not a deal but a surrender" of the country's self-esteem and interests.

Dismissing the Opposition party's claim, Chouhan said, "We did not do 'saudebaazi' (underhand dealing or bargaining) but did it (reached the deal) by a balanced approach with constructive dialogue."



The pact was a unique example of India's diplomacy, development and dignity, he asserted.

"Diplomacy means nation first, development is the foundation of the country, and dignity means the dignity (garima) of farmers has been fully taken care of," he said.

US President Donald Trump on Monday said India and the US have agreed to a trade deal. On his part, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he was delighted that "made in India products will now have a reduced tariff of 18 per cent".

Congress's media and publicity department head, Pawan Khera, claimed that India will soon become a dumping ground for American products, which would hurt the interests of farmers and small and medium industries here.

Chouhan rejected the Congress's charges, saying the party had ruled the country for years but did little for farmers.

"The Congress ruled the country

for decades, including 10 years of the UPA, but failed to connect farmers with global markets or provide stability and momentum to the Indian economy," he said.

He said the Indian economy was the world's sixth largest at the time of Independence, but was pushed down to the 11th position.

"We are now moving rapidly towards becoming the world's third largest economy," he added.

He clarified that agricultural products, which are the core strength of the country's farmers, have been kept out of this agreement. "National interest is paramount, farmers' interest is paramount," he asserted.

He noted that Prime Minister Modi had said he would not let the country bow and would not allow any harm to farmers' interests.

"You will see in this trade deal that both these aspects have been fully taken care of," the Union minister said.

Chouhan also stressed that India

will not allow the entry of any genetically modified (GM) products, calling it a very big decision.

"This will preserve the purity of Indian agriculture. Our soil and our seeds will remain safe," he maintained.

Chouhan further said that no tariff concessions have been given to the US on products such as meat, poultry, dairy, soybean, maize, rice, wheat, sugar, coarse grains, bananas, strawberries, cherries, citrus fruits, green peas, chickpeas, moong, oilseeds, ethanol and tobacco.

He said dehusked grains and flour, potatoes, onions, peas, beans, cucumbers, mushrooms, frozen vegetables, oranges, grapes, lemons and mixed canned vegetables will also not enter India.

Dairy products, including liquid, powdered and condensed milk, cream, yoghurt, buttermilk, butter, ghee, butter oil, paneer, whey products and cheese, will also not be allowed entry into India.

Spices, including black pepper, cloves, dried green chillies, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, asafoetida, ginger, turmeric, carom seeds, fenugreek, mustard, and other powdered spices, will also not come in, he informed.

This would ensure the livelihoods of Indian farmer families remain secure, the agriculture minister said.

The Congress on Saturday took a swipe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the interim trade agreement with the US, claiming the deal is against India's interests, and that all the "huglomacy and photo-ops" have not amounted to much. (PTI)

Agencies hired by govt selectively targeting booths where SP won elections: Akhilesh

LUCKNOW, Feb 8: Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav on Sunday alleged large-scale misuse of the Special Intensive Revision exercise in Uttar Pradesh, claiming that professional agencies hired by the government were selectively targeting booths where his party had won elections.

Addressing a press conference here, Yadav said, "The government has hired certain agencies comprising professionals sitting in Delhi, Lucknow and other places across the country. They have access to the entire electoral roll data and, using that, they are identifying booths where the Samajwadi Party won elections previously. Form-7 is being systematically filled and sent from such booths."

According to the Election Commission, Form-7 is used to either object to someone's inclusion in the electoral roll or request deletion of a name already listed.

"The forms are properly filled, printed and then sent. At many places, this has led to protests and disturbances," Yadav claimed.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister also alleged that the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise had already influenced election outcomes in the country.

"Through the SIR, they (the BJP) have managed to win the Bihar elections. The exercise played a major role there," he claimed. Alleging that similar attempts were being made in poll-bound West Bengal, Yadav said, "The BJP is trying to do the same thing in Bengal. That is why the Bengal government and its chief minister (Mamata Banerjee) are repeatedly saying that the poll panel has become the BJP's commission."

On Mamata Banerjee arguing her case against the SIR before the Supreme Court as a lawyer, Yadav



said, "She was forced to wear the black coat and stand before the Supreme Court against the BJP. This shows the kind of discrimination that is taking place and how the Election Commission has become a 'Sahyogi Dal' (ally party) of the BJP."

He also claimed that several Samajwadi workers and PDA 'praharis' had flagged the suspicious forms. "From time to time, the PDA praharis and Samajwadi workers and leaders have given us forms which were already filled," he claimed. PDA is a political acronym coined by Yadav to represent a coalition of backward classes (Pichhda), Dalits, and minorities (Alpsankhyak).

Yadav also referred to specific cases, naming individuals who, he claimed, were victims of forgery. "A matter involving Dashrath and Nandlal has now come to light. Nandlal is with us today. I am happy that brave Nandlal is standing with us," he said.

Alleging signature forgery, Yadav said, "This is the same Nandlal whose thumb impression was allegedly taken by the BJP. Just think of all the sections that

are invoked when someone forges a signature. The Election Commission also has rules on this."

"I have given Rs 1 lakh to Nandlal for his courage, for helping to save democracy, and for bringing the truth before us. BJP leaders were pressuring him earlier."

Yadav also said that a temple was being constructed at Nandlal's house in his native village.

"The Samajwadi Party will fully cooperate in the construction of the temple. It is because of Goddess Durga that he has shown such courage, and because of that courage, the BJP has been exposed," he claimed. Yadav also demanded an immediate halt to the use of Form-7, saying, "The Election Commission should stop getting Form-7 filled. When the entire exercise has been completed, the use of Form-7 should stop, and the action taken under it be cancelled immediately."

Raising concern over the safety and welfare of booth-level officers (BLOs), Yadav said, "Many BLOs have lost their lives, but the government has not provided any help. Instead, pressure is being mounted on them." (PTI)

Stalin urges PM Modi to expedite rail projects in TN

CHENNAI, Feb 8: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin on Sunday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking his urgent intervention to direct the Ministry of Railways to expedite sanctioned projects in the state by releasing required funds and reviving those kept in abeyance.

Stalin highlighted that the progress of several crucial railway projects is being hindered by "delays in releasing funds by the Ministry of Railways" and the practice of providing partial funding for individual projects.

He noted that while the state government has granted administrative approval for acquiring 2,500.61 hectares for various federal railway projects, the Railway Department is yet to allocate funds for 931.52 hectares, an official release said.

"The delays in releasing funds and the piecemeal allocation... have hindered the progress of railway projects in Tamil Nadu," the chief minister stated, adding that this has created a state of "prolonged uncertainty" for affected landowners.

Stalin pointed out that land acquisition is 94 per cent complete for 19 major projects, with 1,198.02 hectares already handed over to the Railways. He specifically cited the "Thiruvananthapuram-Kanniyakumari Broad Gauge Doubling" project as a case where 16.86 hectares of land acquisition remains stalled because the Railways has not yet released the necessary Rs 289.78 crore for compensation.

The CM urged the Prime Minister to ensure that funds for sanctioned projects are released "in full and on a priority basis" to facilitate smooth land acquisition. (PTI)

Policy should not always favour non-performing states: Chandrababu Naidu

AMARAVATI, Feb 8: Poor-performing states of the country have inevitably ended up with a higher share in the Centre's devolution of tax revenues at the expense of better performers such as Andhra Pradesh, Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu said on Sunday, acknowledging that it is a good sign that the laggards are gradually getting their act together.

For the country to prosper, all its regions have to prosper, Naidu said in an interview with PTI Videos, adding that the states are allies, not enemies.

"Deliberately, they (the Centre) do not want to do any injustice. There are some parameters of backwardness, population -- all these things. South India has gone ahead with population control. Because of economic reforms, south India has taken the lead in technology and the growth rate. The per capita income is very high in south India. Because of that, devolution is a problem. Population poverty is (among) the cri-

teria for devolution," Naidu said.

"Naturally, there will be heart burning. Our policy should not always be for non-performing states. At certain times, protection is okay. Ultimately, everybody has to perform. I am confident now that every state is moving forward. That is the responsibility of the respective state governments or political parties. They have to perform," he added.

The prevailing view on population, he said, has moved from "population control" to "population management".

"We are now facing the problem of an ageing population and also, loneliness. Look what is happening in Europe, Japan and South Korea. I was the first to say that our people should have more children, after which (RSS chief) Mohan Bhagwat and (Tamil Nadu Chief Minister) M K Stalin said the same thing," Naidu said.

Asked if he sees a role for himself in central politics at any point in the future, the

Telugu Desam Party (TDP) president ruled out the possibility.

"Never have I expected any role at the Centre. I am always interested to work in Andhra, and either combined Andhra, or now, the new Andhra Pradesh.

"Hyderabad was agrarian when I became the chief minister in 1995. Consciously, I built a technology and industrial ecosystem. Today, Telangana is the richest state in terms of per capita income. I am representing one more state now. But I have that satisfaction that I produced a model. I have done my best for the nation and that will continue," he said.

Asked whether his party and other constituents in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) deserve credit for the ruling coalition at the Centre functioning seamlessly as it did when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had a majority on its own in the two previous terms, Naidu said the support is mutual. (PTI)

At AIIA-Goa, ayurveda, rehabilitative therapies to the rescue of those battling substance abuse

NEW DELHI/PANAJI, Feb 8: A de-addiction and mental health programme at the All India Institute of Ayurveda in Goa is blending ayurveda, psychiatry, yoga, diet and rehabilitative therapies to help those struggling with alcohol and tobacco dependence besides mental health issues.

Operational for the past three years at the institute's Dhargalim campus in North Goa, the programme functions through a dedicated Manasaroga and De-addiction Outpatient Department, providing specialised services for those suffering from alcohol and tobacco dependence, alongside mental health conditions, Institute Director Dr P K Prajapati said.

In 2025, the OPD recorded 109

outpatient cases related to nicotine and tobacco addiction.

Patients receive comprehensive care, including management through panchakarma, liver-focused interventions, yoga, de-addiction counselling, family counselling and structured follow-up.

"A key strength of this programme lies in its integrative approach, where classical ayurvedic principles are applied alongside clinical assessment tools, therapeutic yoga, pathyaahar (wholesome diet) and counselling to address both substance dependence and associated mental health issues," Dr Sujata Kadam, Dean, AIIA, Goa said.

A distinctive feature of the centre is the availability of an in-house psychiatrist working in close coord-



ination with 'Kayachikitsa' specialists, enabling early identification and management of withdrawal-related psychological symptoms, cravings and relapse risk, Dr Kadam stated.

The de-addiction programme incorporates a range of panchakarma therapies, tailored to the patient's clinical stage and symptom severity, she stated.

These are supported by the use

of specific ayurvedic formulations aimed at reducing cravings, stabilising withdrawal symptoms and restoring metabolic balance.

Citing the case of a 28-year-old man who came to the institute with a decade-long history of alcohol use, Dr Ashwin Chandra, Head of the Department of Kayachikitsa at AIIA Goa, said the patient could overcome his withdrawal symptoms after a 17-day integrative treatment protocol combining ayurvedic medicines, panchakarma procedures, yoga-based breathing practices, healthy diet and counselling.

"The case highlights how stage-wise ayurvedic management, guided by objective clinical assessment tools and supported by multidisciplinary care, can play a meaningful role in managing alco-

hol withdrawal safely and effectively," Dr Chandra said.

Beyond de-addiction, the Manasaroga OPD also caters to patients with stress-related disorders, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression and mood disorders, recognising the close link between mental health vulnerability and substance dependence, Dr Kadam said.

Dr Prajapati said the institute is working towards strengthening standardised treatment protocols and clinical documentation to support wider adoption of integrative de-addiction models.

"Our vision is to build evidence-informed, patient-centred care pathways that can be integrated into the public health system and adapted to regional needs," Dr Prajapati said. (PTI)

'We need at least a 100 billion dollar plus only for the aviation sector'

Will be easy to purchase goods valued much more than USD 500 bn from US: Goyal

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: India will have no difficulty in purchasing goods worth USD 500 billion from the US over the next five years, as envisaged under the bilateral trade pact, and in fact, this is an "extremely" conservative number for a country which aspires to become a USD 30 trillion economy, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal said on Sunday.

"My sense is we need at least a 100 billion dollar plus only for the aviation sector, in addition to oil, LNG, LPG, and crude oil," Goyal said in an interview with PTI Videos.

According to a joint statement issued by both sides on Saturday on the framework for the first phase of the bilateral trade agreement, India has expressed its intention to purchase USD 500 billion of US energy products, aircraft and aircraft parts, precious metals, technology products and coking coal over the next five years.

The Commerce and Industry Minister said that Indian goods facing 18 per cent tariffs will still have a competitive advantage in US markets compared to products from China and other competitor countries, which face higher levies. China has been slapped with 35 per cent tariffs, and other countries in Asia face 19 per cent and up.

At present, he said, India could source imports worth about USD 300 billion from the US that it currently buys from other countries.

"We are even today importing 300 billion dollars of goods that can be imported from the US. We are importing from all over the world. That is going to grow up to two trillion in the next five years...I told my



counterparts that look, I can assure you that there is demand in India, but you have to be competitive," he said.

Goyal said that as the country's economy is growing at a faster pace, demand for a variety of goods ranging from semiconductor chips, high-end machinery and data centre equipment to aircraft, aircraft parts and energy goods is also increasing.

He said at present, India is importing goods worth about USD 40-50 billion from the US every year.

Citing examples where purchases from the US can be enhanced, he said big tech firms have announced large investments in India and, therefore, "my sense is that we will see 10 gigawatts of data centres" in the country, and for that India will need equipment, which the US can supply.

"We are going to need aircraft. We are going to need engines for aircraft. We are going to need spare parts. We already have USD 50 billion worth of orders on Boeing alone for aircraft. We have orders

for engines," he added.

"So, almost 80-90 billion (dollars) is already on order for the next five years. We will actually need more than that. I read the other day that Tata plans to place some more orders," Goyal said.

Further, the country requires cooking coal for the steel industries. India is already importing about 17-18 billion tonnes of coking coal.

"When we reach 300 billion (dollars), which is a stated target, expansion is going on at breakneck speed in the steel industry. We'll need 30 billion dollars per year for coking coal alone. And all of these products I'm mentioning are already being imported since the Congress time, since the UPA was in power. Nothing new," he said.

"There's a growth in demand and consumption of all of these products. In addition, we announced in the budget that we want to promote data centres, we want to promote the AI mission, and we want to promote critical manufacturing and critical minerals processing in India.

"So, we have to see our competitive advantage over others. And comparatively, India's RTs amongst our peer countries, emerging market economies, and developing countries are amongst the lowest. (PTI)

All of this will require high-quality machinery, ICT products, and Nvidia chips, as well as machinery for AI for quantum computing. Where is all of that going to come from?" he said.

He added that the most powerful technology provider is the United States.

"So, 100 billion (dollars per year) is very conservative. I think it's extremely conservative for a country which wants to become a 30 trillion dollar economy, which India intends to," Goyal noted.

Asked whether the USD 500 billion purchase plans from the US include orders India has already placed for Boeing aircraft, he said: "Everything that we are talking about is in continuation and includes what we already are purchasing."

Further, he said reciprocal tariffs (RTs) on India are now among the lowest compared to its competitor nations.

These countries include China (35 per cent), Thailand (19 per cent), Myanmar (40 per cent), Cambodia (19 per cent), Bangladesh (20 per cent), Indonesia (19 per cent), Brazil (50 per cent), and Vietnam (20 per cent).

With lower tariffs, India's labour-intensive sectors, such as textiles, leather and footwear, handicrafts, chemicals, and gems and jewellery, will be more competitively priced in the US market compared to these nations.

"So, we have to see our competitive advantage over others. And comparatively, India's RTs amongst our peer countries, emerging market economies, and developing countries are amongst the lowest. (PTI)

Religious conversion, infiltration and low birth rate are reasons behind population imbalance: Bhagwat

MUMBAI, Feb 8: RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on Sunday identified religious conversion, infiltration, and a low birth rate as the three main factors behind population imbalance, saying scientific research suggests "we should have three children in a family," which, however, is a matter of choice.

He condemned the use of force, inducement or deception to convert people and increase the number of a sect, noting that "ghar wapas" is the answer for those wishing to return to their original faith.

Responding to a query on infiltration, he said that RSS workers identified suspected infiltrators through language and reported them to authorities.

Bhagwat was responding to questions during an interactive session with attendees here at a programme to mark the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) centenary.

On population imbalance, Bhagwat said, "There were three major reasons; the first being religious conversion. While freedom of faith was guaranteed, using force, inducement or deception to convert people and increase the numbers of a sect was totally condemnable."

He cited the example of poet Narayan Vaman Tilak to underline the freedom of belief, while asserting that "ghar wapas" is the answer for those wishing to return to their original religion.

Those who want to come back, we pave the way for them, he said.

"The second reason was infiltration, for which the government needed to undertake extensive work," the RSS chief said.

He added that detection and deportation had begun slowly and would gather pace, citing the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exer-

cise under which some individuals were identified as non-citizens and removed from electoral rolls.

"RSS workers also identified suspected infiltrators through language and reported them to authorities," Bhagwat said, adding that while Indian citizens, including Muslims, would be employed, foreigners would not be.

He said the third reason for population imbalance is low birth rate.

Responding to a question, the RSS chief said doctors have advised that marriages between the ages of 19 and 25 and having three children help keep both parents and children healthy, while psychologists believe that three children help siblings manage ego-related issues and ensure a stable family life in the long term.

He said population scientists warn that a population is threatened when the fertility rate falls below 2.3 and that a country is considered to be in decline at that level.

"We are now going below 2.1 and are being saved only because of states like Bihar," Bhagwat said, adding that several countries had taken steps to reverse population decline.

Referring to India's population policy, he said the prescribed fertility ratio of 2.1, when rounded off, effectively means three children.

"All kinds of scientific research now indicate that we should have three children in a family," he said, stressing that it remained a matter of choice for men, women, and families, and should be considered as a broader social issue.

Citing the English book "Cheaper by the Dozen", the RSS chief said it showed that raising multiple children need not be a major concern.

Referring to the author's personal account of raising 12 children in the US, he said the book argued that having more children could be economical, and a film had also been made based on it.

He said marriage was not merely about a physical relationship between two individuals but an institution meant to create a family, which in turn formed part of society.

"It should not be the case that one marries without taking responsibilities," he said, adding that while remaining unmarried was a personal choice for RSS volunteers, family life involved duties and relationships that must be maintained.

Speaking on infiltration, Bhagwat said RSS workers also identified suspected infiltrators through language and reported them to authorities, adding that while Indian citizens, including Muslims, would be employed, foreigners would not be.

Vigilance is necessary, he said, noting that Hindu society had largely moved away from menial or routine jobs in pursuit of higher salaries, creating space for infiltrators to take up such work.

"We do not want to take away anyone's jobs, but our people should get jobs first," Bhagwat said, adding that even citizens who did not identify as Hindus should be given priority in local employment.

Referring to employment and technology, he said India had a large population and needed technologies that created more jobs.

While not opposing artificial intelligence, he said it should be used in ways that generate employment.

Bhagwat called for "production by the masses", instead of mass production. (PTI)

Modi should step down for 'harming' India's sovereignty with US trade deal: Siddaramaiah

BENGALURU, Feb 8: Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday claimed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has harmed India's sovereignty and weakened the farmers' livelihood by signing the trade deal with the US and demanded he step down.

"A Prime Minister who exposes the nation to pressure, weakens farmers' livelihoods, and damages India's dignity cannot continue in office. For the harm caused to India's sovereignty and self-respect, 'compromised' PM Narendra Modi must take responsibility and immediately resign," Siddaramaiah said in a post on 'X'.

According to him, the interim trade deal announced by Modi and US President Donald Trump did not come from equal and fair negotiations.

It followed "tariff threats, pres-

sure tactics, and public warnings" by the United States on India's trade and energy choices and yielding under such pressure is not diplomacy but "surrender", he charged.

"By accepting these terms, Narendra Modi has weakened India's independence and lowered the country's standing in the world," he alleged.

Siddaramaiah said the framework is deeply unfair because the US will continue to impose tariffs of around 18 per cent on Indian goods, while India is being pushed to reduce tariffs on American goods to zero and remove other barriers.

He added that there are claims that India will import American goods worth USD 500 billion. US leaders have openly said this framework will benefit American farmers and rural America. (PTI)

CM Vijayan slams Centre for saying increasing paddy production 'burden' to country

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Feb 8: Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Sunday criticised the Centre's stance that an increase in paddy production was a "burden" on the country, calling it a challenge to farmers and a reflection of hostility towards Kerala.

In a statement, the chief minister said the central government has demanded that Kerala discontinue the additional incentive bonus being given to paddy farmers.

Vijayan said the Union Finance Ministry's Expenditure Secretary had officially informed that since paddy production was more than required, procurement costs would become a burden on the public exchequer.

Vijayan said a letter conveying this position had been received by the State Chief Secretary.

The CM said the state government supports paddy farmers by

providing a bonus over and above the Minimum Support Price fixed by the Centre, and questioned why the union government was uncomfortable with this.

He pointed out that Kerala provides an additional Rs 6.31 per kilogram for paddy procurement.

Those who do not hesitate to write off corporate loans worth thousands of crores of rupees were portraying the bonus given to paddy farmers as a major burden, he alleged.

By interpreting increased production as a liability, pressure was being exerted on the state to review the existing bonus policy, Vijayan said, adding that this reflected a hostile attitude not only towards farmers but towards Kerala as a whole.

He also asked whether the move was the first step towards opening the market to American agricul-

tural products as part of the Indo-US trade agreement.

The chief minister further said the Centre was taking such steps even as it failed to release its share of assistance due to paddy farmers on time.

Vijayan's hard-hitting statement came a day after ruling LDF convenor T P Ramakrishnan demanded that the Centre immediately withdraw its direction given to discontinue the additional incentive bonus provided by the state government for paddy procurement. Ramakrishnan had alleged that such an intervention would weaken the country's food self-sufficiency.

He had also urged strong protests against the move and demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Centre's decision, stating that it poses a threat to the country's food security. (PTI)

No clarity on whether India will stop buying Russian crude oil

NEW DELHI, Feb 8: India on Saturday neither confirmed nor denied if it has decided to stop procuring Russian crude oil after the US rolled back a punitive 25 per cent tariff it had slapped on Indian goods over New Delhi's purchases of petroleum products from Russia.

US President Donald Trump signed an executive order removing the 25 per cent additional tariff.

The move came days after the US president announced a trade deal with India and said that Washington would slash the tariffs on Indian goods to 18 per cent from 50 per cent in exchange for India halting Russian oil purchases and lowering trade barriers.

"Specifically, India has committed to stop directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, has

represented that it will purchase United States energy products from the United States, and has recently committed to a framework with the United States to expand defence cooperation over the next 10 years," Trump said in the executive order.

If the US Secretary of Commerce finds that India has resumed directly or indirectly importing Russian oil, Trump's team shall recommend "whether and to what extent I should take additional action as to India, including whether I should reimpose the additional ad valorem rate of duty of 25 per cent on imports of articles of India," the order said.

However, there was no clear response by Indian officials to Trump's comments that India is stopping the purchase of Russian crude oil. (PTI)

Quantum computing India's ticket to leading role in global tech space: Naidu

AMARAVATI, Feb 8: India is poised to become a leading player in quantum technology, which could prove to be a game-changer for the IT sector and the wider economy, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu said on Sunday, he Quantum Valley initiative launched in Andhra Pradesh is set to usher in the next wave of the information technology (IT) revolution in the country, Naidu said in an interview with PTI Videos, emphasising that it would position India as a hardware-and-manufacturing powerhouse, in addition to being a software-and-services hub. "Technology is mature now. AI is a reality. Real-time data collection is a reality. The next level is quantum computing as it has unlimited capabilities. As of today, this is the fastest, the father of all technologies or, you can say, the mother of all technologies," he said.

"Only a few countries have taken the lead in quantum technology and we are one of them. The Government of India has announced the quantum mission. Now, we are establishing it (Quantum Valley) here. With that, our people are ready to produce quantum computers and get into manufacturing now," Naidu said. Acknowledging that MoUs and investment pledges often make headlines but do not eventually lead to enough action on the ground, the chief minister said he is working on improving that conversion rate and putting in place safeguards to ensure that non-serious players are weeded out.

"Earlier, I used to say ease of doing business. Now, I am going for speed of doing business. Any investor, when he invests, he is expecting returns. Then only will he survive. If his project is delayed abnormally, then naturally it will not be viable. All hurdles I want to remove. I am introducing escrow accounts for all benefits or subsidies," he said. (PTI)

Venture capitalists must increase support for defence startups, says NITI Aayog's Saraswat

NAGPUR, Feb 8: NITI Aayog member and former DRDO director general VK Saraswat on Sunday said venture capitalists must increase financial support for Indian defence startups, which he asserted have come a long way.

On a question about deepening defence ties with the US and the balance required to ensure the enduring partnership with Russia is not affected, he said the prime focus was on meeting India's requirements rather than "choosing between A and B".

Speaking with PTI Videos on the sidelines of 'Advantage Vidarbha -2026 Business Conclave and Investment Summit' here, Saraswat asserted India will continue to progress on its path in the same way as the country has done in the past irrespective of what is happening in geopolitical framework.

Queried on what policymakers need to keep in mind to ensure ties with Russia do not get affected while the defence partner-

ship with US deepens, the former DG of the premier Defence Research and Development Organisation said, "It is about how we look at our own business requirements. It is not a question of choosing between A and B. It is a question of how do we meet our requirements of security and latest technology in terms of weapons and ensuring it happens."

Queried on the robust allocation for defence in the 2026-27 Union Budget presented in Parliament on February 1, Saarswat said it indicated that the country's focus would now be on large scale production of weapons and equipment required in future wars.

"It is also for indigenisation, for ensuring the private sector gets more participation for bringing down the cost and increasing the rate of production, and ensuring our products become cost effective and competitive," he said.

Saraswat stressed the Budget allocations

are in keeping with the lessons learnt in Operation Sindoor on the choice of weapons and the priority of its manufacturing.

"Whether I should go for long range supersonic missiles or standalone weapons that are needed for attacking from a distance. Because the future of war is non-contact warfare and in non contact warfare the technologies that are going to be used are of different nature. This Budget and the R&D initiative which the government has started with the participation of the private sector is totally in that direction," he said.

The defence outlay in the 2026-27 Union Budget stood at a whopping ₹ 7.85 lakh crore, up from last year's allocation of ₹ 6.81 lakh crore. Out of the total allocation, ₹ 2,19,306 crore has been earmarked for capital expenditure to the armed forces that largely includes purchasing new weapons, aircraft, warships and other military hardware. (PTI)

Surajkund swing collapse: Police arrest ride operator, staff

FARIDABAD, Feb 8: Police on Sunday arrested a swing operator and one of his staff members, a day after an on-duty inspector died and 12 others got injured when a giant 'Tsunami' swing snapped mid-air and collapsed at the Surajkund fairgrounds here.

The tragedy struck the 39th Surajkund International Crafts Mela on Saturday evening, when about 19 people were riding the swing before it suddenly tilted and then crashed onto the ground.

Inspector Jagdish Prasad (58), who died trying to save people, joined the Haryana Armed Police in 1989 and was to retire in March after completing 36 years in the force, officials said.

His body was handed over to his family on Sunday after an autopsy, police said.

"A special investigation team formed to probe the incident has arrested two accused - Mohammad Shakir, a resident of Himachal Pradesh's Sirmour district, and the proprietor of Himachal Fun Care that operated the giant swing, and Nitesh from Meerut in Uttar Pradesh, who worked under Shakir. The role of others is being examined," Yashpal, a spokesperson for Faridabad police, said.

A total of 12 people were injured in the accident, including female ASI Neelem, female constable Sharmila, SPO Rajesh, Harsh Prakash, Prashant, Amisha, Parvinder, Sunil, Shivani, Balbir, Anuj and Pooja, Yashpal said, adding that five of them have been discharged from the hospital after treatment. Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Sunday directed the concerned officials to ensure strict adherence to safety standards in the fair and other public events.

"The government stands firmly with the family of Jagdish Prasad in this difficult time. Those seriously injured in the accident will receive financial assistance of ₹ 1 lakh each from the state government," Saini said.

The district administration, meanwhile, has said that the fair will continue

on Sunday, with the swing area cordoned off pending further investigation.

On Saturday night, Haryana DGP Ajay Singhal announced a compensation of ₹ 1 crore for the brave inspector and a government job to one member of his family.

Stating that Prasad will be given the status of a martyr, the DGP lauded the officer for sacrificing his life trying to save the lives of others.

On Sunday, DGP Singhal and Faridabad Commissioner Satendra Kumar Gupta met Prasad's family and offered their condolences. They also visited a hospital to inquire about the injured, police said.

"Inspector Jagdish Prasad made a commendable effort to rescue the injured while on duty. His death is a profound tragedy for the police department.

"The department will provide financial assistance to the family as much as possible, and employment will be provided to an eligible member under the compassionate leave policy," the DGP said.

On Sunday, Tourism Director Parth Gupta and Faridabad Deputy Commissioner Ayush Sinha inspected the fairground to review security arrangements.

The accident occurred barely an hour after a gate collapsed at the fairground, injuring two, including a child, officials said. Police earlier formed a four-member SIT to investigate the case, headed by DCP (Crime) Mukesh Kumar, with ACP (Crime) Varun Dahiya, and sub-inspector Sanjay Kumar from the Surajkund police station as members, a senior police officer said.

The SIT has been tasked with carrying out a detailed probe into the incident, including fixing responsibility for negligence, if any, and evaluating adherence to the safety compliance measures.

According to the complaint filed by Assistant Sub-inspector Sunny, he was present at the fairground with Inspector Prasad when many people were seen enjoying the 'Tsunami' ride. (PTI)

New dragonfly species found thriving in Kerala farmlands

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Feb 8: Researchers have identified a new dragonfly species, *Lyriothemis keralensis*, found in the low-lying coastal plains of Kerala.

Commonly known as the Slender Bombardier, the insect was formally identified after more than a decade of investigation, researchers said on Sunday.

After extensive research, it was finally distinguished from its close relative, *Lyriothemis acigastra*, which is found in Northeast India.

The breakthrough, led by a collaborative team including Dr Dataprasad Sawant, Dr A Vivek Chandran, Renjith Jacob Mathews, and Dr Krushnamegh Kunte, was recently published in the International Journal of Odonatology.



First sighted in 2013 in the Varappetty region of Kothamangalam, scientists initially believed the dragonfly was part of the *Lyriothemis acigastra* or Little Bloodtail odonate family, widely found in northeastern India.

However, recent specialised studies revealed that *Lyriothemis keralensis* has unique physical and behavioural characteristics that qualify it as a distinct species of odonate.

The research paper published in the International Journal of Odonatology explains that, apart

from Little Bloodtail, *Lyriothemis keralensis* has a slim abdomen and a unique tail and genital structure.

Males are characterised by a deep blood-red abdomen with black markings, while females, slightly broader, display yellow and black colouration.

Measuring approximately three centimetres in length, *Lyriothemis keralensis* was confirmed through the study of century-old museum specimens.

The species is unique in its habitat preference, thriving in irrigation landscapes such as pineapple and rubber plantations rather than in protected forest sanctuaries.

It is commonly found in shaded vegetated canals and seasonal pools within these agricultural areas. (PTI)

Man United wins again to make it four in a row for Carrick, Arsenal extends lead to 9 pts

MANCHESTER, Feb 8: It's four Premier League wins in a row for Manchester United under Michael Carrick and a season that was unraveling just weeks ago now looks full of promise.

United won 2-0 against Tottenham on Saturday to extend Carrick's 100% start as head coach and boost hopes of a return to the Champions League after missing out for the last two years.

Arsenal powered nine points clear at the top, with Viktor Gyokeres coming off the bench to score two goals in a 3-0 win against Sunderland.

Second-place Manchester City plays Liverpool on Sunday while Aston Villa, in third, slipped further adrift after a 1-1 draw at Bournemouth.

Cole Palmer scored a first-half hat trick in Chelsea's 3-1 win at last-place Wolves.

Is Carrick the leading contender for Man United job? Victory for United will further strengthen Carrick's case to be given the job on a long-term basis.

"Michael has won everything here and he knows what it means for these fans, what it means for the club to win and how much is needed to win at this football club. I think that adds something special to the team," United captain Bruno Fernandes told TNT Sports.

Bryan Mbeumo and Fernandes scored in each half at Old Trafford after Spurs went down to 10 men when captain Cristian Romero was sent off in the 29th minute.

It is the first time in two years that United has won four straight Premier League games.

Carrick has transformed United's fortunes since he was para-



chuted in to replace the fired Ruben Amorim last month. Initially given a contract until the end of the season — having previously had a three-game interim spell in 2021 — his impressive impact will likely put him in serious contention to keep the job as the club's hierarchy consider its long-term plans.

"I think Michael came in with the right ideas of giving the players the responsibility," said Fernandes. "He's very good with the words."

"I think he still remembers what I told him the last time he was our manager for our last game. I was sure that Michael could be a great manager, and he's just showing it."

Fernandes' goal, with a controlled finish off his shin in the 81st, was his 200th goal involvement since joining United in 2020.

United is fourth and after moving up to 44 points, the 20-time English champion has already exceeded last season's total of 42 points for the entire campaign.

It has been eliminated from both domestic cup competitions, but Champions League qualification would represent a successful season.

Arsenal powers further clear Arsenal's title charge looks in good shape after sweeping aside Sunderland.

Gyokeres took his season's tally to 13 goals and extended his streak to six in eight games. Even more impressive was the fact that his double arrived after coming on as a 60th-minute substitute at the Emirates.

His run comes after overcoming a difficult start since his move from Sporting Lisbon last summer, when questions were raised about his ability to repeat the outstanding scoring form he showed in the Portuguese league. He managed only three goals in his first 11 games.

"He's very demanding of himself, he's constantly trying to improve and that's really, really good," said Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta. "When you feel confident, when you feel important, when you feel at your best, that's when you can really take your game to the highest level."

Martin Zubimendi opened the scoring in the first half for his sixth goal of the season.

Arsenal's title pursuit has been helped in recent weeks by its title rivals slipping up. On Saturday, a bookmaker said it was pay-

ing out on Arteta's team being crowned champion for the first time since 2004.

Arteta said the size of Arsenal's lead meant "nothing, we still have to win so many games to achieve what we want."

City has won one of its last six league games and faces the daunting task of a trip to Anfield on Sunday. Villa, meanwhile, dropped points for the second time in as many games.

Despite going ahead through Morgan Rogers at the Vitality Stadium, Villa was held to a draw after Brazilian Rayan's equalizer after the break.

Chelsea is fifth after cruising to victory at Wolves. Palmer's hat trick included two penalties.

The England international is the first player to score three first-half hat tricks in the Premier League.

West Ham on the move Three wins in four have given West Ham hope of avoiding the drop.

Crysencio Summerville and Valentin Castellanos scored first-half goals to secure a 2-0 win at fellow relegation fighter Burnley.

Nottingham Forest's loss to Leeds on Friday means West Ham is just three points behind its nearest rival in the battle for survival, and just six back from Tottenham.

Newcastle has lost its last three in the league, and won just one in eight in all competitions, after a 3-2 defeat to Brentford at St James' Park.

Dango Ouattara scored the winner in the 85th, six minutes after Bruno Guimaraes' penalty had leveled it at 2-2. Everton came back from a goal down to win 2-1 at Fulham. (AP)

Yamal atones for bad miss with classy goal as La Liga leader Barcelona beats Mallorca 3-0

MADRID, Feb 8: Teenage star Lamine Yamal made up for missing an open goal with a trademark curler from outside the penalty area as Barcelona beat Mallorca 3-0 to move four points ahead at the top of La Liga.

Robert Lewandowski had put Barcelona ahead and 18-year-old homegrown player Marc Bernal scored his first career goal late on to seal a convincing win. Yamal and Lewandowski have scored 10 league goals each this season.

Second-place Real Madrid can close the gap to one point if it wins at Valencia on Sunday.

Lewandowski pounced from close range in the 29th minute following good work down the left from Marcus Rashford. His shot was blocked and Lewandowski showed typically cool composure to control the ball and guide it past a defender before picking his spot.

Rashford's form has improved throughout the season and he came close to scoring in first-half injury time when his curling free kick produced a brilliant save from Leo Roman.

The ball fell to right back Jules Koundé near the penalty spot and his scuffed shot landed at the feet of



Yamal, who somehow skewered wide from almost on the goal line.

The 18-year-old prodigy was given a pat on the back by Lewandowski, who is one of the modern era's most prolific scorers with over 650 club goals — including 344 with his former club Bayern Munich and more than 100 for Barça.

Yamal showed his class in the 61st minute with a brilliant strike, ghosting past one defender on the edge of the area and then planting a powerful dipping shot into the bot-

tom corner, a strike hit so cleanly with his left foot that Roman did not even move.

Yamal and Lewandowski were replaced and both applauded Bernal's excellent goal in the 83rd.

Barça sliced Mallorca open in midfield with four quick passes to send Bernal racing through, and he showed good composure to cut inside a defender and stroke the ball inside the post.

In Saturday's only other game, Real Sociedad beat Elche 3-1 to move into eighth place.

Goals from Croatia midfielder Luka Sucic and Spain forward Mikel Oyarzabal put Sociedad 2-0 up, only for Portugal striker André Silva to pull one back close to half-time.

Iceland captain Orri Stein Oskarsson replaced Oyarzabal near the end and netted his side's third goal in the 89th.

Matches postponed Two matches were called off.

Rayo Vallecano's home match against Oviedo was postponed at short notice because of safety concerns over the field at Vallecas Stadium. The league also called off Sevilla vs. Girona due to adverse weather conditions.

While Oviedo said it understood the decision, the team criticized the short notice and was considering legal action.

Cutting ties Barcelona became the latest club to cut ties with a proposed breakaway European Super League.

It had previously led the fight to get a rival competition to the Champions League off the ground. But, in a short statement on Saturday, Barcelona said it would no longer be part of the contentious project. (AP)

Sooryavanshi headlines U-19 World Cup Team of the Tournament



DUBAI, Feb 8: Batting sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi was among the three Indians named in the Team of the Tournament for the ICC Under-19 World Cup on Sunday.

The 14-year-old Sooryavanshi, who scored a majestic 175 from 80 balls in the final against England and was subsequently crowned Player of the Tournament, is joined by compatriots Kanishk Chouhan and Henil Patel in the 12-member team. India won the title for a record extending sixth time.

Chouhan made consistently valuable contributions with bat and ball, while Patel's 11 wickets included a superb spell of five for 16 against the USA.

Runners-up England are also represented by three players, with Thomas Rew named as the captain and wicketkeeper.

Rew scored 330 runs at an average of exactly 66, including a knock-winning century in the semi-final against Australia.

Manny Lumdsen, who was the tournament's top wicket-taker with 16, and Ben Mayes, the competi-

tion's leading run-scorer with 444, including 191 against Scotland, join Rew in the team.

Mayes was one run away from equalling the all-time record for the highest individual score at an U19 Men's World Cup, which had been set four days earlier by Sri Lanka's Viran Chamuditha — who is also selected.

Chamuditha's trailblazing 192 came against Japan and included 26 fours and a six.

Afghanistan duo Faisal Khan Shinozada and Nooristani Omarzai are both chosen after playing key roles in their country's run to the semi-finals.

Faisal finished the tournament with back-to-back centuries against Ireland and India, while Nooristani took 14 wickets, with a best of five for nine against Tanzania.

Australia captain Oliver Peake also scored two centuries, reaching three figures against West Indies and in a losing cause against England in the last four, while Pakistan's Ali Raza and West Indies' Vitel Lawes complete the selection.

Raza took 13 wickets at 13.92 apiece, going at just over four an over, while Jamaican left-arm spinner Lawes took 10 scalps in his five matches.

The selection panel was made up of Ian Bishop (Convenor), Lydia Greenway, Andy Flower, Telford Vice.

ICC U19 men's World Cup Team of the Tournament: Vaibhav Sooryavanshi (India), Viran Chamuditha (Sri Lanka), Faisal Khan Shinozada (Afghanistan), Thomas Rew [w, capt] (England), Oliver Peake (Australia), Ben Mayes (England), Kanishk Chouhan (India), Nooristani Omarzai (Afghanistan), Vitel Lawes (West Indies), Ali Raza (Pakistan), Manny Lumdsen (England), Henil Patel (India). (PTI)

Italians collect medals on a feel-good first day for the hosts at the Milan Cortina Olympics

MILAN, Feb 8: The 2026 Winter Games are off to a promising start for host nation Italy with gold, silver and bronze on the first day of medal events.

But it was Switzerland's Franjo Von Allmen who captured the first gold medal of the Milan Cortina Olympics on Saturday.

There were no Americans on the podium, though Lindsey Vonn impressed in her second training run ahead of the women's downhill on Sunday.

Birthday gold for Lollobrigida Lollobrigida celebrated her 35th birthday by winning the host nation's first gold medal of these Olympics — in the 3,000 meters. It's also Italy's first gold in women's speedskating at any Winter Games.

Competing in her fourth Olympics, Lollobrigida outskated Ragne Wiklund of Norway for her first Olympic gold after winning silver and bronze in Beijing four years ago.

Her great aunt was the late Gina Lollobrigida, a star actress of the 1950s and '60s.

Von Allmen strikes gold on Olympic debut Italy had a strong day on the slopes, as well, with Alpine skiers Giovanni Franzoni and Dominik Paris taking silver and bronze, respectively, in the men's downhill — the first medal event of the Games. However, neither could beat Von Allmen's time of 1 minute, 51.61 seconds in Bormio.

The 24-year-old Swiss skier was the leader after his downhill run, but the wait for his rivals to finish was nerve-racking.

"I tried to enjoy the moment, but I didn't quite realize what was going on today," von Allmen said after his first Olympic race.

Paris, 36, was delighted with his bronze after coming away empty-handed in his four previous Olympics. "It's my fifth Olympics, and getting the first medal in front of the home crowd, that's really special," Paris said.

Lindsey Vonn feeling good ahead of women's downhill In Cortina, Lindsey Vonn completed another downhill training run and was set for Sunday's medal race despite tearing her left ACL a little more than a week ago.

The 41-year-old American

crossed the line in third position and told The Associated Press "all good."

She has been wearing a large brace on her injured knee.

Kagiyama stuns Malinin in figure skating team event Yuma Kagiyama landed near-perfect quads and scored 108.67 points in his short program to help Japan put pressure on the defending champion U.S. in the figure skating team event. Malinin, the two-time reigning world champion, was second with 98.00.

But a brilliant free skate by Madison Chock and Evan Bates pushed the U.S. score to 44 points — five more than Japan ahead of the men's, women's and pairs free skates to decide the medals Sunday.

Disappointment for Jessie Diggins in skiathlon Jessie Diggins, the most decorated American cross-country skier ever, finished eighth in the 20-kilometer women's skiathlon in Tesero. She finished more than 2 minutes behind winner Frida Karlsson of Sweden.

"I had a crash on the first lap, where my tip just disappeared in the slush, and unfortunately it was a tough spot where you lose all your momentum," the 34-year-old Minnesota native said.

JD Vance and Jake Paul attend U.S. women's hockey game U.S. Vice President JD Vance sat with influencer and boxer Jake Paul as they watched the U.S. women's hockey team beat Finland 5-0 on Saturday. Paul's fiancée, Jutta Leerdam, is a speedskater for the Netherlands.

Finland played two days after the team's game against Canada had to be postponed because of a stomach virus affecting players. Switzerland played Canada a day after announcing that one of its players tested positive for the norovirus. Canada won 4-0.

Norwegian upsets Slovenian favorite in women's ski jumping Norway — the nation with the most medals in Winter Olympics history — got its first gold of the Games in the women's ski jumping. It was unexpected.

Anna Odine Stroem of Norway won the normal hill competition ahead of Slovenian favorite Nika Prevc, who has dominated the sport this season. Nozomi Maruyama of Japan won bronze. (AP)

We were surprised as wickets in Mumbai are generally flat: Axar Patel

MUMBAI, Feb 8: India vice-captain Axar Patel said the team was surprised by the nature of the pitch in its T20 World Cup opener against USA at the usually high-scoring Wankhede Stadium.

Despite the batting collapse on a tricky pitch, Axar said the team was confident of putting a competitive total on board.

After put in to bat, India slipped to a dangerous position of 77/6 against the USA but skipper Suryakumar Yadav's 49-ball 84 not out bailed them out, propelling the hosts to a match-winning 161/9.

India restricted USA to 132/8 to win the contest by 29 runs.

"The planning is according to the match situation. Generally, the wicket in Mumbai is flat (and) we took about three overs to determine what would be a good score," Axar told the reporters after the match.

"The dressing room atmosphere

was like that... the kind of confidence with which we are coming in, we knew even if one batter gets going we would reach around 140-150. The wicket was also behaving (differently)."

"We were surprised because we thought that this is a flat wicket which generally in Mumbai is," he added.

Axar added that the dressing room did feel a little pressure given India suffered a batting collapse that too in the opening match of the T20 World Cup.

"Obviously, you feel that because in last (so many) tournaments there has been such an early collapse. Cricket is like this, (but then) it's good that it happened in the first match," he said.

"It is important to understand the nature of the wicket and the type of cricket we have been playing, we were not able to execute the shots. If it happens again, we will have the experience to take it

to 160-170."

"You have to change your style looking at the wicket but we were playing attacking cricket only and not just playing defensively or taking singles or doubles. You have to hit the way the wicket is behaving," Axar said.

Axar said the plan was to put a score in the vicinity of 140, adding that in such situations the team ends up getting a total in excess.

"We (Suryakumar and I) talked about taking it till the end because we had no batter left. We wanted to stick around for the next 2-3 overs and then accelerate," he said.

"The player that he is, you know what happens when he is in form. After last year, the form he showed in the New Zealand series and is continuing to show it and he knows what his game is, which he showed in a big match today (Saturday), Axar added. (PTI)

'Wanted to stick Ranji Trophy line and lengths'

I know how I have to prepare for T20Is: Siraj

MUMBAI, Feb 8: India pacer Mohammed Siraj said he was clear about his preparation for the shortest format on his return to T20Is after June 2024, adding that sticking to the line and lengths he bowled in the Ranji Trophy was his plan against the USA in the T20 World Cup opener.

Siraj, who was not part of India's build-up to the World Cup which got underway on Saturday, returned to the squad and the playing eleven to take 3/29 in the hosts' 29-run victory at the Wankhede Stadium.

"The emotions are always there because as a player when you are playing in a World Cup, the dream is different as a professional as well for the tournament," Siraj told reporters after the match.

"I was coming off the Ranji Trophy, so my line and lengths... when we were batting it was not easy to hit the new ball and it was important to stick to the wicket-to-wicket (length) and if you got wickets, it would be good for the

team. So that was the plan and I went to bed last night, the plan was to use my weapons and I will stick to those (plans) with which I have got success."

Siraj, who came into the squad as a last-minute replacement for an injured Harshit Rana, said he did not think he would get into the playing XI immediately but the experience of captaining Hyderabad in the Ranji Trophy helped.

"First of all, I did not know I would play. I was happy being called-up but I got to know in the morning that I am playing, so I was a little more excited because I had only arrived yesterday (Friday)," he said.

"The way I was playing in the Ranji Trophy, I was captaining (Hyderabad) as well, so I wanted to keep myself calm and I was only thinking about how I can put pressure and attack. Whatever I could think of, I was able to execute."

"Of course I watched the videos after arriving here at 3:00pm. Without any preparation you cannot take the field, it is a World Cup



after all."

Siraj, who revealed he still has the Cristiano Ronaldo wallpaper on his phone which he had famously shared during the England tour, said he knows how to prepare for the format despite not playing regularly.

"The wallpaper is still the same. You have to be mentally ready a lot, especially when you are playing in a World Cup. I am nearing 10 years of playing for India, so when you are getting the opportunity you do not need that much time...," he said.

"As I am playing regularly for India, I know how I have to prepare myself for the format and



NEW DELHI, Feb 8: The Kickboxing Super League (KSL) was unveiled on the sidelines of the WAKO India National Championship here.

The launch on Saturday took place in the presence of senior government representatives, national sports officials, athletes, coaches, and stakeholders from across the Indian sporting ecosystem.

"KSL aims to professionalise kickboxing in India by introducing structured competition, athlete contracts, performance-linked rewards,

and a clear pathway from grassroots to elite competition," said the organisers in a release.

Season one will feature eight franchise teams, each comprising 34 fighters.

"The league has committed to a 60:40 men-to-women participation ratio, reinforcing its focus on inclusivity and women's participation," the release added.

The league will also confer a Mega Performance Award of up to ₹ 1 crore on the best-performing fighters, said the organisers.

Co-founder Ajay Adlakha emphasised the league's institutional approach.

"KSL is being developed with strong governance, transparent systems, and sustainable economics. Our vision is to build a league that benefits athletes, partners, and the larger sports ecosystem, while standing up to global benchmarks," he noted. (PTI)

was playing and he knows the wicket. He is from Mumbai and he said 'I am here, do not worry'," Siraj said.

"The kind of batter that he is, he plays around with the field. The bowler had put off-side field and bowled a wide yorker and fine-leg as well as the square-leg were inside.

"He thinks about playing around with the field, so it is important to trust your belief and the way he bats it is always difficult as a bowler. Hats-off to him, because so many wickets had fallen early but he remained calm, it is not a (bilateral) series, it is a World Cup and in such a big event to play such an innings, truly hats-off to him."

Siraj added that opener Abhishek Sharma could not be on the field for long during the second half due to an upset tummy.

"He just had a little tummy upset, but I am sure he will show his magic in the next match," Siraj said. (PTI)

"We were calm because Surya

I DON'T FOLLOW TRENDS, I MAKE MY OWN: FASHION DESIGNER SIDDARTHA TYTLER



Designer Siddhartha Tytler, known for his structured high-glamour garments, says fashion for him is not about following trends but about making his own, whether they work or not.

The designer showcased his latest collection "Miraas" at the fourth edition of the FDCI India Men's Weekend 2026, which began on Saturday at Diggi Palace here.

Inspired by royal lineages and cultural heirlooms, Tytler collection presented a range of silhouettes, largely rooted in menswear, with select womenswear looks woven into the line-up.

Featuring a blend between the Indian and fusion aesthetics, the outfits included sherwanis, bandhgallas, suits, crop jackets, kurtas, sharrara sets, anarkalis and sarees.

The colour palette moved between black, white and grey, with touches of gold and beige.

Most of the models walked the runway to a remixed version of Britney Spears' "Toxic", wearing gold face-net accessories that lent a high-fashion edge to the presentation.

Tytler experimented with both structured and fluid forms. Standout pieces included structured kurtas paired with loose trousers and heavy embroidery, while in womenswear, a grey saree styled with an overcoat and head accessory drew attention.

"I don't follow trends. I make my own, whether they work or not," he told PTI in an interview.

The designer said men are ready to experiment in fashion, especially in the age of social media.

"The fact is that the women's market is a little

saturated and in today's world with social media, men are ready to experiment in fashion. So it's great when a client likes what we made and it's always encouraging. Effectively that's why we have several collections for men in the event," he said.

On whether social media has made it more challenging for designers, Tytler said he has learned to strike a balance and emphasised the need to keep evolving and learning.

"All our clients are celebrities, normal people, small and big influencers. So we have found the balance... With the world moving so fast with social media, if you don't keep track, you will get lost. So I am keeping track of everyone... so effectively that's how you have to evolve with the world and learn," he said.

"The world is so fast forward. Everyone is moving at lightning speed when it comes to fashion. You have one style today, it changes and evolves working a week. But it's fine you just have to know it and evolve along with it," he added.

Tytler has a reverse way of designing compared to most of his contemporaries, who first decide on a story or theme and then design clothes to fit that story.

"Usually the story unfolds while the collection is being made. But I work backwards. I don't make a story and then make a collection. I find a point where I want to start, an inspiration point, and then we make a story around it. So the story is literally made with the clothes," he said.

The fashion gala will conclude on Sunday with the final showcase by J J Valaya. (PTI)

FWICE ASKS NEERAJ PANDEY TO WITHDRAW TITLE 'GHOOSKHOR PANDAT', WARNS OF STRICT ACTION

The Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE) has strongly raised objection to the title of filmmaker Neeraj Pandey's upcoming production "Ghooskhor Pandat", saying it might disrupt the social harmony and unity in society.

The film, which is produced by Pandey and features Bajpayee as a corrupt cop, was announced earlier this week and sparked a controversy on Friday over its title with politicians and social media users calling it casteist.

"FWICE and all its affiliated associations strongly object to the use of this title, as it appears to single out and target a particular community and its traditional means of livelihood in a derogatory and offensive manner," the FWICE, which represents 36 affiliated associations and scores of members comprising workers, technicians, and artists of the media and entertainment industry, said in a letter to Netflix and other OTT platforms like Amazon Prime, Hotstar, ZEE5, and SonyLIV.

The letter has also been sent to industry organisations like Producers Guild of India (PGI), Indian Motion Picture Producers Association (IMPPA), and Indian Film and Television Producers Council (IFTPC).

"Such a title has the potential to hurt sentiments, provoke misunderstanding, and disturb social harmony. FWICE believes that there should be no division in society on the grounds of caste, creed, religion, or profession and deserves respect," the letter read.

Featuring Bajpayee in the title role, the crime thriller follows Ajay Dikshit, also known as Pandat, a corrupt police officer whose plans for a lucrative and eventful night are disrupted when he finds himself caught in the middle of a global conspiracy unfolding in the heart of Delhi.

The film is directed by Ritesh Shah, who has also penned the story with Pandey. It is produced by Pandey through his banner Friday Filmworks.

The FWICE emphasised on the "social responsibility" of the film industry and said it must ensure that the content or title do not promote "hatred" or cause "unrest" among people.

"We therefore appeal to all producer bodies to refrain from allowing the registration or continuation of film titles that are provocative in nature and capable of creating unrest



among Indians.

"FWICE strongly condemns the registration of the said title and advises Neeraj Pandey and his production house Friday Filmworks to withdraw the same with immediate effect in the larger interest of social harmony and unity," the note read.

The body also warned of action against Pandey if he doesn't take appropriate action.

"Please note that if the needful is not done forthwith, FWICE shall be compelled to advise all its affiliated associations and its scores of members to distance themselves from any project of the said producer."

In a social media post on Friday, Pandey acknowledged that the film's title has "hurt" a section of the audience and added that all promotional materials of the film will be taken down for the time being.

"The story focuses on an individual's actions and choices and does not comment on or represent any caste, religion, or community. As a filmmaker, I approach my work with a deep sense of responsibility - to tell stories that are thoughtful and respectful," the filmmaker, known for directing acclaimed movies like "A Wednesday", "Special 26" and

"Baby", said.

Bajpayee, who plays the lead in the movie, said he respects the emotions and concerns people have shared and takes them seriously.

"When something you are part of causes hurt to some people, it makes you pause and listen. As an actor, I come to a film through the character and the story I am playing. For me, this was about portraying a flawed individual and his journey of self-realisation. This was not meant to be a statement about any community," he said on Friday.

The controversy over the movie's title has also drawn political and legal action, with the Uttar Pradesh Police registering an FIR against the film's director at Hazratganj police station on the directions of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

On Friday, a senior BJP leader said the Centre has asked Netflix to remove the teaser and other promotional material of the film from social media.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) also condemned the title, with former UP chief minister and BSP chief Mayawati demanding an immediate ban on the "casteist" movie. (PTI)

FOREST DEPT ISSUES NOTICE TO FILM DIRECTOR ANURAJ MANOHAR OVER VIDEOGRAPHY AT PAMPA

The Forest department has issued a notice to Malayalam film director Anuraj Manohar for interlocking for allegedly videographing the Sabarimala Makaravilakku celebration at Pampa here, an official said on Sunday.

The department has registered a case alleging videography inside the forest area without obtaining permission from the competent authority, an officer said.

According to officials at the Goodarical Forest Range Office, a notice has been served directing him to appear for interrogation on February 11.

He has been asked to report at the Palappally forest station as part of the probe, officials said.

Manohar is facing investigation for videography carried out at the Pampa forest area on the day of the Makaravilakku festival last month.

Though he had approached the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) seeking permission for videography at Sabarimala Sannidhanam, the request was denied.

Following information about videography without permission, the TDB Vigilance and Security Wing conducted a preliminary inquiry and interrogated Manohar.

The probe found that the director had carried out videography at Pampa without any authorisation, an official said.

Following the probe by the TDB team, the Forest department registered a case and initiated further investigation. Manohar has directed hit films including 'Narivetta' and 'Ishq'. (PTI)



Veteran Nepali actor Sunil Thapa dies at 68, Manoj Bajpayee & Priyanka Chopra Jonas pay tributes



Veteran Nepalese actor Sunil Thapa, who featured in the hit series "The Family Man" and "Mary Kom", has passed away at the age of 68.

According to Nepalese newspaper The Kathmandu Post, Thapa was rushed to Norvic Hospital in Thapathali in capital Kathmandu after he was found unconscious at his apartment in Shankhamul.

He died during treatment with doctors suspecting cardiac arrest as the cause.

Actor Priyanka Chopra Jonas, who starred alongside Thapa in 2014's biographical drama "Mary Kom", posted a tribute for the actor on Instagram, saying Thapa was a mentor who supported her during a difficult period in her life.

"You will always be my Coach Sir. You kept me together when I had just lost my dad. You loved me and helped me through many tough days without even realizing. Your warm hugs and your laugh will always be part of my memories.

"Gone too young but never forgotten. Thank you for your kindness at a time that I was broken. Rest in peace Sunil Thapa. My condolences and prayers are with the family and loved ones," she wrote alongside a video clip from the movie.

In the movie, based on the life of boxer Mary Kom, Thapa essayed the role of her coach Narjit Singh and his performance earned him a Filmfare nomination. The movie featured Chopra Jonas as Mary Kom.

More recently, he played a pivotal role in the third season of filmmaker duo Raj and DK's series "The Family Man", headlined by Manoj Bajpayee.

In a post on his Instagram Stories, Bajpayee wrote, "It's so so sad. God bless your soul Sir. My third season 'The Family Man' memories will live forever because of you."

In a career spanning many decades, Thapa appeared in more than 300 Nepali films and was widely known for portraying antagonistic roles.

He became a household name after his performance as 'Rate Kaila' in the film "Chino", a role that established him as one of the industry's most sought-after villains.

His notable Nepali films include "Gorkha Paltan", "Shikari", "Shikari 2", "Papi Manche", "Papi Manche 2", "Aljhechha Kyare Pachhauri", "Dewar Babu" and "Karma Yodda", among others. His most recent screen appearance was in the Nepali film "Eklo".

Thapa's career extended beyond Nepal as he featured in many Bollywood as well as Tamil and Bhojpuri films. He made his Bollywood debut with 1981's "Ek Duije Ke Liye", starring Kamal Haasan and Rati Agnihotri.

He later appeared in several Hindi films including "Manav Hatya", "Aaj Ki Awaaz", "Manu The Grey", "Albela" and "Naseebwala". (PTI)

Numbers and art are not different; they are reflection of one another: Tamannaah Bhatia

I'm all for numbers, actor Tamannaah Bhatia said on Saturday, stressing that views, likes and box-office figures are an indication of how many people have engaged with a film or song. Bhatia believes that if a piece of work connects with people, that connection will usually show up in the numbers.

"I believe we should give importance to numbers because from that we can ascertain which film or song has been watched a lot by people. So, numbers and art are not different, rather they are reflections of one another," the actor said.

The 36-year-old gave the example of her hit song "Aaj Ki Raat" from the 2024 blockbuster "Stree2".

"(It) got a billion likes and shows that people have liked that song and have watched it multiple times,"

the actor said.

"I'm all for numbers because it's due to the numbers that we get to know whether our work has reached the audience or not. I don't see it as a wrong thing. We should be proud of our numbers, I don't think we need to be ashamed that numbers are less or more," she said.

Bhatia was talking on the sidelines of the 24th edition of the Zee cine awards press conference here.

During the event, superstar Akshay Kumar announced that the award shows would take place on February 28 and March 1. He also shared his plans to perform at the awards gala.

Others who attended the event included actors Jacqueline Fernandez, Sonam Bajwa, Aparshakti Khurrana, music composer Mithoon and his singer-wife

Palak Muchhal.

Mithoon said he and Muchhal will pay tribute to veteran actor Dharmendra, who passed away at the age of 89 in November last year, at the upcoming ceremony.

"Some of the greatest songs are from his films and they've been created by stalwarts like Laxmikant-Pyarelal ji, Kalyan ji-Anand ji, Madan Mohan ji, and Panoram da," the composer said.

"I feel sometimes we deprive Indian cinema of its dignity, and take it lightly. We must not forget that the history of our cinema is vast. It's not just a form of entertainment. Last year, also my attempt was to present the history of music of Indian cinema and I'm glad people liked it and supported us. That's what we intend to achieve this year too," Mithoon said.



Bajwa, a popular Punjabi film actor, said she is thrilled about her debut performance at the Zee cine awards.

"I'm looking forward to performing. This is the first time I'm performing at the Zee cine awards. I'm nervous," said the actor, who has

also acted in Hindi films like "Housefull 5", "Ek Deewane Ki Deewaniyat" and recently "Border 2". (PTI)

Atal played a good supporting role, but could not force the pace on his own

Seifert's fifty, bowlers' diligence carry NZ to 5-wicket win over Afghanistan

CHENNAI, Feb 8: Tim Seifert's typically aggressive fifty was the moving force behind New Zealand's five-wicket victory over Afghanistan in a Group D match of the T20 World Cup here on Sunday.

Seifert (65, 42b, 7x4, 3x6) showed why he has been nicknamed 'Bam Bam' in Kiwis' circles, helping his side go past the target of 183 with considerable ease.

Seifert had an equally single-minded partner in Glenn Phillips (42, 25b) as the third wicket pair added 74 runs in 47 balls to rescue New Zealand from a wobbly 14 for two. The turbulence was the after result of the little passage of magic by spinner Mubeen ur Rahman, who dismissed Finn Allen and Rachin Ravindra off successive balls in the second over.

But the Antipodeans clawed back through Seifert, who fetched his fifty off 39 balls with a six off off-spinner Mohammad Nabi. As the noon moved on, the assistance for spinners from the pitch was reduced to a good extent.

Phillips focused more on Rashid Khan, slamming him for a four and six as New Zealand got a real



move-on.

However, Nabi had the last laugh, dismissing Seifert, and Rashid too got his revenge through the wicket of Phillips. Seifert was dropped on 48 by Rashid off his own bowling, and the wicket-keeper batter maximised the let-off. But by then, New Zealand were so close to home and reached there through Daryl Mitchell and Mitchell Santner, who knocked off the remaining 28 runs without much ado.

Earlier, seasoned Gulbadin Naib

made a free-flowing fifty but Afghanistan had to settle for slightly below-par total of 182 for six. Naib (63, 35 balls) and Sediqullah Atal (29, 24b) added 79 runs off 51 balls for the third wicket but the general sense was that of labour on a pitch that had a hint of slowness.

It reflected in Afghanistan's scoring pattern — steady rather than flashy: 44/2 in Power Play, 77/2 after 10 overs and 130/3 after 15 overs.

The last five overs produced fur-

ther 52 runs, but ideally the Afghans would have wanted a few more on the board.

Opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz (27, 22b) looked in fine fettle, but a slower delivery from pacer Lockie Ferguson disturbed his furniture in the sixth over.

In the same over, Ferguson, who used leg-cutters to good effect, jet-tisoned opener Ibrahim Zaido to peg back Afghanistan.

Naib, who brought up his fifty in 29 balls, played a forceful innings, tonking pacer Jacob Duffy for two sixes and a four as Afghanistan seemed to have found some momentum in the middle overs.

Atal played a good supporting role, but could not force the pace on his own and his stay was curtailed by Duffy.

But his dismissal came as a blessing in disguise as Naib and Darwish Rasooli (20, 13b) added 33 in 17 balls as Afghanistan crossed the 150-run mark.

However, Naib fell to part-time spin of Rachin Ravindra in the 18th over as Afghanistan could not get a desired death over flourish. Azmatullah Omarzai hit a couple of sixes to push his side past the 180-run mark. (PTI)

Lovlina, Arundhati lead as India claim nine gold medals in BOXAM Elite 2026

LA NUCIA (SPAIN), Feb 8: Olympic medalist Lovlina Borgohain and former Youth World champion Arundhati Choudhary led from the front as India wrapped up a highly successful BOXAM Elite International 2026 tournament with a dominant show, clinching nine gold medals in the event here.

In a standout achievement, India was represented in seven elite women's finals on Saturday, including an all-Indian title clash in the 54kg division and emerged with gold in each of them.

The BOXAM Elite 2026 featured over 200 boxers from 20 nations, providing a high-quality international test early in the season. India finished as the competition's most successful team with nine gold, three silver and seven bronze medals.

"BOXAM Elite offered exactly the kind of exposure we were seeking at this stage of the season, including strong international opposition, depth across weight categories, and high-pressure bouts. The performances in Spain, particularly the conversion rate in finals, reflect the progress of our programme," Boxing Federation of India (BFI) president Ajay Singh said.

"With a demanding year ahead, this tournament has been a valuable step in preparing our boxers for the challenges to come. Congratulations to the entire contingent on an outstanding campaign."

Indian women set the benchmark on the final day. Manju Rani (48kg) and Nitu (51kg) opened proceedings with emphatic unanimous wins over Spain's Marta Lopez and Noelia Gutierrez respectively, before

Poonam (54kg) edged past compatriot Preeti in a hard-fought all-Indian final.

Priya (60kg) and Arundhati (70kg) followed with commanding 5:0 victories over Ukrainian opponents, while Lovlina (75kg) displayed her trademark control and composure to defeat England's Mary-Kate Smith 4:1. Naina (80kg) completed the sweep with a measured win over Ukraine's Raisa Piskun.

Reflecting on the women's performances, Indian women's head coach Santiago Nieva said, "This was an exceptional showing from the women, not just in terms of medals, but in how they boxed with discipline, clarity, and confidence. Reaching seven finals and winning all seven speaks volumes about the work being done across the system."

"Credit also goes to the entire Indian team, the men and women pushed each other throughout the tournament, and that collective environment is key to sustained success."

In the men's finals, Sachin (60kg) produced one of the day's most gripping performances, edging out Canada's Keoma-Ali Al Ahmadieh 3:2, while Akash (75kg) added another gold after a tense 3:2 win over Kazakhstan's Aman Komsbekov.

Deepak (70kg) and Ankush (80kg) settled for silver medals after facing strong opposition from Kazakhstan and Ukraine, respectively.

India's performance in Spain adds further momentum as the national programme builds towards a packed international calendar, with major championships and multi-sport events on the horizon. (PTI)

Yadav has got poise which MS Dhoni also had later in his career: Harmeet

MUMBAI, Feb 8: The calm confidence that India captain Suryakumar Yadav displays in pressure situations, reminds USA spinner Harmeet Singh of the poise with which the legendary MS Dhoni played his cricket.

Suryakumar channelled his experience in the T20 World Cup opener between India and USA here on Saturday to lift the hosts out of the woods, with his 49-ball 84 not out proving the difference between the two teams.

"Of course, we used to imagine all that but success came late for him. He was always... I think he has got the poise now which MS Dhoni also had later in his career," Harmeet told reporters after the match when asked if he and Suryakumar had imagined the Indian skipper's career would pan out this way.

"The flair that he had as a stroke-player, he played a sensible innings and he finished the game and played a proper knock." (PTI)

Football giants Italy begin cricket World Cup's maiden campaign against Scotland

KOLKATA, Feb 8: Football powerhouse Italy will get a chance to make a mark in cricket's biggest stage when they face Scotland in a historic ICC T20 World Cup debut game here on Monday.

Winner of four FIFA World Cups, the Azzurri will now give way to Gli Azzurri who find themselves scripting an unlikely cricketing chapter after making the expanded 20-team tournament through the European regional qualifiers last July.

Italy and Channel Islanders Jersey, who upset Scotland, finished on five points, but the Italians sealed the second place behind the Dutchmen on superior net run rate to book their maiden appearance at the global showpiece.

For a country with its cricket history dating back to 1793 -- when English naval hero Horatio Nelson reportedly "organised the first-ever recorded game in Naples" -- the qualification marks a curious return to forgotten roots.

The sport's legacy still survives in the football heartland as Genoa, Italy's oldest soccer club founded in 1893, is still called Genoa Cricket and Football Club, while AC Milan began life as Milan Football & Cricket Club.

More than a century later, Italy may not have a single turf wicket, but the game is sustained by around 4,000 registered men's players and nearly 80 clubs in a two-tier league system, with a national side built largely around players of Italian heritage or first and second-generation immigrants.

Captain Wayne Madsen is South African-born and qualifies through his Italian grandmother as he's set for his debut in a cricket World Cup two decades after representing his native country in the hockey edition.

Bowler Crishan Kalugamage moved to Italy from Sri Lanka at 15, while wicketkeeper Marcus Campopiano was born in England to an Italian father.

The 15-man squad includes two sets of Australian brothers with Italian family connections -- Harry and Ben Manenti, and Anthony and Justin Mosca -- while former South Africa all-rounder JJ Smuts adds experience.

Former Ireland all-rounder Kevin O'Brien is part of the coaching staff.

Back home, awareness of the achievement remains limited.

"I'm sure no more than 10 per cent in the country knows that Italy is making its debut in T20 World Cup," someone from the team said.

Madsen, however, feels the momentum is slowly building.

"I know there have been some articles in local papers, so the message is starting to get out that we're here at the World Cup and it's going to be our first,

and it's obviously going to be a big moment for cricket in Italy and for growing the game.

"But I think as the World Cup starts and once the games start on television, that is only going to grow further and further. So yeah, we're expecting more momentum in that regard once the tournament is underway properly for us."

Unlike their rivals, who made a dramatic late entry into the tournament after Bangladesh's withdrawal, Italy arrive with preparation and planning behind them.

There is also a broader sporting rivalry at play. Only on Saturday night, Italy edged Scotland 18-15 in the Six Nations rugby in Rome.

"We saw the rugby team get one over Scotland yesterday in the Six Nations, so hopefully we can emulate that tomorrow when we start against Scotland," said the Italian skipper.

On current form, Italy will, however, not be pushovers. They have won their last three matches -- two warm-up fixtures against Canada and the UAE before beating Ireland in their build-up series, a result that marked their first-ever victory over an ICC Full Member.

They had also stunned Scotland by 12 runs in the European qualifier, a win that proved decisive in sealing qualification to the World Cup.

Scotland, though, remain wary of the threat.

"Yeah, obviously, I think that was a disappointing defeat. Like I said, we did have a bit of a hiccup during that tournament. But we're looking to just work on ourselves and what we can do better," said pacer Safyaan Sharif.

Having made a late entry into the tournament, Scotland showed flashes of promise but their batting faltered in a 35-run defeat in their opening match at this venue on Saturday.

"Look, one team's going to lose anyway. Unfortunately, it was us. But the way we showed our character today when it was the first half and the second half, I think, it's just exciting things to come yet," he added.

Teams (from)

Scotland: Richie Berrington (captain), Tom Bruce, Matthew Cross, Bradley Currie, Oliver Davidson, Chris Greaves, Zainullah Ihsan, Michael Jones, Michael Leask, Finlay McCreath, Brandon McMullen, George Munsey, Safyaan Sharif, Mark Watt and Brad Wheel.

Italy: Wayne Madsen (captain), Marcus Campopiano, Gian Piero Meade, Zain Ali, Ali Hasan, Crishan Jorge, Harry Manenti, Anthony Mosca, Justin Mosca, Syed Naqvi, Ben Manenti, Jaspreet Singh, JJ Smuts, Grant Stewart and Thomas Draca.

Match starts: 11am IST. (PTI)

England survive massive scare against Nepal, win T20 World Cup opener by 4 runs

MUMBAI, Feb 8: Two-time champions England survived a massive scare against a doughty Nepal in their Group C clash of the T20 World Cup, clinching a narrow four-run win in a tense finish to their tournament opener here on Sunday.

Nepal came within touching distance of creating history as they nearly upset one of the teams to beat in the competition, scoring 180/6 in reply to England's 184/7.

Lokesh Bam (39 not out off 20 balls) kept Nepal in the hunt for an upset victory but could not finish the game in the final over after a heroic effort. Needing 10 runs off the last over, Nepal couldn't find a boundary as their inspired show with the bat ended in a narrow loss.

Sam Curran nailed his yorkers relentlessly as all that Nepal could manage were five runs.

Nevertheless, more than 17,000 fans thronged the iconic Wankhede Stadium and witnessed Nepal punching far above their weight, with majority of them being from the Himalayan nation.

Skipper Rohit Paudel (39), Dipendra Singh Airee (39), Kushal Bhurtel (29) and Lokesh, who smashed four boundaries and two sixes in a late assault, fought valiantly but they could not take their side over the line.

Lokesh went hammer and tongs when Nepal's backs were against the wall, hitting two sixes off Jofra Archer's 18th over and two consecutive fours off Luke Wood's penultimate over when they needed 46 runs off the final three overs. Bhurtel had provided early fireworks while a robust 82-run stand for the third wicket between Paudel and Airee consolidated Nepal. Even as Nepal lost an early wicket in the form of Aasif Sheikh (7), Bhurtel cut loose to score a 17-ball 29 with four boundaries and a six to set the tone.

But his promising start came to a meek end when Bhurtel couldn't keep it down, giving a simple return catch to Will Jacks in the sixth over. Nepal's run-chase got a



much-needed impetus in the 14th over when skipper Paudel tore into the senior-most England bowler Rashid Khan, pulling a wrong-un into the stands for a six and driving down the next ball powerfully through covers for four.

Paudel then produced the 'shot of the match' when he executed the perfect switch-hit, middling the ball which went sailing over the fielder at deep square leg.

However, a drinks break broke the momentum which Airee and Paudel were attaining, with the former mis-hitting one off Sam Curran in the 15th over.

Soon after, Paudel departed when he swept one straight to Phil Salt at deep midwicket off Liam Dawson after playing a fine knock which raised Nepal's hopes.

Earlier, Jacob Bethell (55) and skipper Harry Brook (53) peeled off attacking fifties to power England to a formidable 184 for seven.

The young left-handed Bethell gave a fine example of himself on T20 World Cup debut in front of a partisan crowd with his rapid half-century -- off 35 balls -- with four sixes and as many fours, while skipper Brook got back among runs in his bid to change the narrative around him.

Brook fell after making a vital knock that came off 32 balls with four sixes and three fours, putting on a 71-run stand for the fourth

wicket with Bethell as Nepal bowlers presented a strong challenge on their part.

Sher Malla's joy knew no bounds when he had Phil Salt (1) caught on the first ball of his second over while Nandan Yadav got the key wicket of Jos Buttler (26), just when he was starting to rebuild with Bethell. Yadav pitched one outside off to have Buttler caught behind for Nepal's second wicket in the fifth over, and the third came in the seventh when spinner Sandeep Lamichhane had Tom Banton trapped leg-before while attempting to reverse sweep.

England made 45 runs in the final three overs with Will Jacks hammering four sixes and a four to make 39 not out off 18 balls.

Fans donning a different blue-coloured jersey mixed with red thronged the stadium and cheered every dot ball and every good effort produced by their players on the hallowed turf of this iconic ground. The sheer numbers of Nepal fans, who easily outnumbered that of England, showcased the passion for cricket in the Himalayan nation and their players did not disappoint them either.

Nepal fielders held on to their catches, while the pair of Airee (2/23) and Yadav (2/25) claimed a couple of wickets each. Also among the wickets were Malla and Lamichhane. (PTI)

South Africa aim to reverse recent form against Canada

AHMEDABAD, Feb 8: South Africa would need to raise their recent form to challenge for the title as they open their T20 World Cup campaign against Canada, a team short on match practice but looking to make a strong impression, here on Monday. South Africa have only managed to win 12 out of the 32 games they have played since losing the 2024 T20 World Cup final to India in June 2024.

However, they now do have the emboldened belief of winning a world title, having ended the trophy drought with the World Test Championships triumph last year.

Ryan Rickleton and Tristan Stubbs were not part of the original squad but have rightfully included following injuries to Donovan Ferreira and Tony de Zorzi.

Keshav Maharaj will lead the spin attack while the performance of pace spearhead Kagiso Rabada will be critical as ever on the batting friendly pitches in India and Sri Lanka. Quinton de Kock and Dewald Brevis will be the players to watch out for in the batting department. South African Aiden Markram said his team is not carrying the baggage of the previous edition where it went down against India after controlling the majority of the run chase in Barbados. (PTI)

BCB chief in Lahore as ICC, PCB hold talks over India match boycott

KARACHI, Feb 8: Bangladesh Cricket Board president Amin ul Islam has arrived in Lahore ahead of a virtual meeting involving the PCB and ICC, amid efforts to resolve the standoff over Pakistan's proposed boycott of its T20 World Cup match against India. A former Test cricketer, Amin ul Islam met Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Mohsin Naqvi in Lahore and is expected to be part of the virtual discussions aimed at persuading Pakistan to reconsider its decision not to play India in the World T20 Cup clash scheduled for February 15. Naqvi has not commented much on the instructions from the government to boycott the India match but a reliable source said the situation has changed after the Sri Lankan cricket board sent an email to the PCB, urging them to end the boycott. (PTI)

ICC deputy chair on way to Lahore for talks with PCB over India match boycott

KARACHI, Feb 8: Imran Khwaja, deputy chair of the International Cricket Council, has left for Lahore to meet PCB officials as efforts to resolve the standoff over Pakistan's proposed boycott of the high stakes T20 World Cup match against India gather pace.

Khwaja, who represents Singapore in the ICC, is an influential figure in the world governing body and has voting rights on the board as an associate member director.

A source close to the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) confirmed Khwaja has been nominated by the ICC board as a mediator on the controversial subject.

"He has been in talks with Mohsin Naqvi for a while now and

he is reaching Lahore today to first talk to the PCB chief and also the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) President, Aminul Islam before the virtual meeting this evening," the source said.

Aminul is already in Lahore and has met Naqvi on Sunday. Aminul is expected to be part of the discussions aimed at persuading Pakistan to reconsider its decision not to play India in Colombo on February 15. Naqvi has not commented much on the instructions from the government to boycott the India match but a reliable source said the situation has changed after the Sri Lankan cricket board sent an email to the PCB, urging them to end the boycott.

ICC CEO, Sanjog Gupta has also been to Colombo to meet with the President of the Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC), Shammi Silva who sent the email to Naqvi to play the India match in the World Cup.

The ICC has already sought an explanation from Pakistan on how the 'Force Majeure' clause can be invoked to justify the team's refusal to play the T20 World Cup match against India after the PCB tried to wriggle out of the situation by putting the onus on its government. But there is a glimmer of hope now as PCB has approached the ICC for deliberations, as per an ICC Director, who feels that the marquee clash will eventually take place. (PTI)

We as parents don't have any words for this excitement, says skipper's parents

Mhatre-led victorious India U-19 WC-winning team receives grand welcome on arrival

MUMBAI, Feb 8: The victorious U-19 World Cup-winning Indian team returned to a grand welcome with family members of the players and a large number of fans turning up to receive the young heroes here on Sunday.

India won a record-extending sixth title in Harare, Zimbabwe on Friday after defeating England by a massive 100 runs in the final.

Aby led by Ayush Mhatre, India posted a commanding 411/9, powered by a stellar 175 off 80 balls from 14-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, and then restricted England to 311 all out in 40.2 overs to record a massive win. India had earlier won the tournament in 2000, 2008, 2012, 2018 and 2022.

Skipper Mhatre and star opener Sooryavanshi stole the limelight at the Mumbai airport while wicket-



keeper Abhygam Kundu too grabbed some attention upon reaching here, with fans and family members waiting to welcome them. The entire family of Mhatre, including his parents, aunt and brother-in-law, was present at the airport. Mhatre had scored 53 off 51 balls in the final.

childhood and the hardwork he has put in since childhood has bore fruit today. We will celebrate after reaching home," added Mhatre's mother. With the ICC Men's T20 World Cup currently going on in India and Sri Lanka, the BCCI is expected to host a felicitation ceremony for the U-19 team sometime in the future.

As per sources, all the players will head to their respective homes from Mumbai and will reassemble for a felicitation ceremony as and when announced by the BCCI.

The highlight of India's outing was that they remained undefeated in the tournament with the BCCI announcing a cash reward of ₹7.5 crore for the squad. The squad, coached by Hrishikesh Kanitkar, also defeated arch-rivals Pakistan in the Super Six stage. (PTI)



Government of Assam
Department of Industries, Commerce & Public Enterprise



Empowering Youth Building Self-Reliance

Ceremonial Distribution of First Tranche **Chief Minister's Atmanirbhar Asom Abhijan (CMAAA) 2.0**

for **Bongaigaon | Dhubri | Goalpara | South Salmara Mankachar**

Chief Guest

Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister, Assam

August Presence

Shri Ranjeet Kumar Dass
Minister, P&RD, etc., Assam

10 February 2026

11 AM

North Bongaigaon Mini Stadium, Dolaigaon (Near Police Reserve)



General Category

₹2 lakh
per beneficiary
(50% Grant + 50% Interest-free Loan)

Professional Category

(Engineering, MBBS, BDS, and other professional courses)

₹5 lakh
per beneficiary
(50% Grant + 50% Interest-free Loan)

Additional Support

- Skill training
- Access to markets

Encouraging Entrepreneurship

District	Potential Entrepreneurs
Bongaigaon	▶ 1,767
Dhubri	▶ 2,949
Goalpara	▶ 2,352
South Salmara Mankachar	▶ 305
Total	7,373

Professional Category General Category



Documents to be carried along

- Original Photo Identity Proof** (any one of the following)
 - PAN Card / Aadhaar Card / Voter ID / Passport / Driving License / Ration Card with Photo
 - Certificate of address with photo from Govt. recognized educational institutions
 - Photo identity certificate issued by Village Panchayat Head or equivalent authority
 - Current passbook of Post Office or any scheduled bank with photo
- Printout of Application Form** from CMAAA Portal

Statewide Potential Entrepreneurs

General Category Professional Category

