



- '₹ 1000 EPF pension a joke': Cong slams govt after Parliamentary panel report
- Cong high command will decide by-poll candidates: CM Siddaramaiah
- Sikkim governor inaugurates Prerna Sthal, recalls soldiers' sacrifices
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*I was facing humiliation in the party and was sidelined after I had supported Shashi Tharoor's candidature: Nagaon MP*

## Pradyut Bordoloi quits Cong, turns saffron



**NEW DELHI/GUWAHATI, March 18:** In yet another jolt to the Congress ahead of the April 9 Assam Assembly polls, its senior leader and Lok Sabha member Pradyut Bordoloi joined the BJP on Wednesday.

A Congress member for more than five decades and the chairman of the manifesto committee for the Assembly polls, Bordoloi claimed that he resigned on Tuesday as he was facing humiliation in the party and was sidelined after he supported Shashi Tharoor's candidature for

the party president's post.

A two-term MP from Nagaon and a former four-time MLA, Bordoloi was inducted into the BJP in the presence of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and other party leaders in the national capital, weeks after former Assam Congress chief Bhupen Kumar Borah switched to the ruling party.

The Congress termed his decision as "unfortunate", while the BJP claimed it reflected the opposition party's weakening base, with Sarma

### Pradyut meets Shah before joining BJP

Staff Reporter

**GUWAHATI, March 18:** Within hours after joining the BJP, former Congress leader Pradyut Bordoloi on Wednesday met Union Home Minister Amit Shah at latter's residence in the national capital, marking a significant political development ahead of the upcoming elections in Assam.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma accompanied Bordoloi to the office of the Union Home Minister, where the two leaders held discussions.

The meeting is being seen as an indication of the BJP leadership's growing focus on strengthening its position in the state by inducting key political figures in the state.

saying that "no self-respecting individual" can remain in the Congress.

"BJP national president Nitin Nabin approved sitting Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi's joining on Tuesday. Our state president Dilip Saikia has welcomed him to the party," Sarma told reporters in Delhi after a brief ceremony where Saikia presented Bordoloi with a stole and party cap. A Congressman since 1975, Bordoloi's joining will strengthen the BJP and help translate into (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Pradyut exit: Gaurav rules out political impact

*Gaurav Gogoi terms Pradyut Bordoloi's BJP switch 'personal choice', says polls about ending 'mafia raj'*



Staff Reporter

**GUWAHATI, March 18:** Reacting to senior leader Pradyut Bordoloi's decision to join the BJP, Lok Sabha MP and state Congress president Gaurav Gogoi on Wednesday termed the move a "personal choice" and asserted that the upcoming Assam Assembly elections are not about individuals but about "freeing the state from fear and mafia raj".

Speaking to reporters in Dibrugarh, Gogoi said that Bordoloi had

been given significant opportunities by the Congress in recent years. "Two years ago, he was given the chance to represent the Nagaon Lok Sabha seat and he is currently a Member of Parliament. This time, even a member of his family was given a ticket to contest the Assembly polls," Gogoi noted.

"Despite this, he chose to join the BJP. That is his personal decision," he added.

Gogoi, however, downplayed the political impact of Bordoloi's

### Pradyut slammed for betraying trust of Cong workers

HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, March 18:** Assam Pradesh Mahila Congress president and senior leader Mira Borthakur on Wednesday launched a sharp attack on former party colleague Pradyut Bordoloi following his resignation from the Congress, alleging that his decision to quit the party was driven by "selfish interests" rather than ideological differences. Speaking to reporters, Borthakur claimed (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

exit, emphasising that the electoral battle in Assam transcends individual leaders. "This election is not about any one individual. It is about freeing Assam from the clutches of Himanta Biswa Sarma and ending the mafia raj that has taken root under his leadership," he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Curfew in Meghalaya dist extended

**TURA, March 18:** Curfew in Meghalaya's West Garo Hills district has been extended for another day, with authorities also enforcing prohibitory orders banning public meetings, rallies and unlawful assemblies to prevent further escalation of violence, officials said on Wednesday.

An order issued by district magistrate and deputy commissioner Vibhor Agarwal said the curfew will remain in force from 6 am on March 19 till 6 am on March 20, with a 12-hour relaxation from 6 am to 6 pm on Thursday to facilitate normal activities.

During the relaxation period, educational institutions, offices, banks and other establishments will function normally, the order said, adding that movement of people will remain strictly prohibited

during curfew hours.

The curfew was first imposed on March 17 under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita following incidents of violence and disturbance of public peace in various parts of the district, which posed a threat to human life, public safety and property.

The situation turned tense after protests erupted over the issue of issuance of a notification barring non-tribals from participating in a tribal council election process, leading to the deaths of 2 persons in clashes, vandalism and damage to property in Tura and adjoining areas. Police have arrested several persons in connection with the violence, while security has been intensified in sensitive locations to prevent further incidents. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## NIA chargesheets 3 PLA cadres Killing of Assam Rifles personnel in Manipur in 2025

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Wednesday chargesheeted three cadres of the proscribed People's Liberation Army (PLA) terrorist organisation in the Assam Rifles truck ambush case, in which two personnel of the paramilitary force were killed in Manipur last year.

The trio, identified as Thongram Sadananda Singh alias Ngachik, Khundongbam Oji Meitei alias Keilal and Irengbam Jugindra Meitei alias Jugin Meitei, all residents of Manipur, were earlier arrested by law enforcement agencies, officials said.

The charge sheet was filed before the NIA special court at Imphal, Manipur, they said.

The attack on the 33 Assam Rifles truck took place at Nambol Sabal Leikai in Bishnupur area of the northeastern state in September 2025.

"It was perpetrated by the PLA in furtherance of their conspiracy to create terror in the minds of the people and wage war against the Government of India with the intent of destabilising the country," a statement issued by the probe agency said.

NIA investigations have revealed that on the day of



the attack, PLA cadres, armed with prohibited firearms and explosive substances, had gathered at the Nambol Sabal Leikai crossing and ambushed the truck. The truck was damaged in the ambush, which led to the death of two Assam Rifles personnel and grievous injuries to five others. (PTI)

## Want to bring 'good' Cong leaders to BJP: Himanta

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday took a swipe at the Congress, saying no person with self-respect will stay in the Opposition party and he wants to bring all its "good" leaders in Assam into the BJP for a brighter future of the state.

Himanta's remarks came after Congress Lok Sabha MP Pradyut Bordoloi joined the BJP here.

Asked about the Congress alleging that the BJP is inducting its leader because it doesn't have good leaders in the party, the Assam chief minister told reporters, "Let the Congress say what it wants. But, it is our goal to bring all good leaders of Congress into the BJP fold."

"We have to brighten the future of the BJP and Assam both. That's why I want to gradually bring into the BJP fold all those Congress leaders who are assets, not a liability," Sarma said, adding, "We started it (the move) in 2016 and we have achieved 99 per cent success in it."

He claimed that no "self-respecting individual" can remain with the Congress, particularly in Assam, given the condition of the party and the kind of ideology that it has been following today.

"A few days ago, Bhupen Borah (former Assam Congress president) joined the BJP. I think in the coming days, more Congress leaders will join the BJP," he said. Asked why leaders from the opposition camp are joining the BJP in Assam, Sarma said it's happening because the party is doing good work in the state. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Rajya Sabha bids farewell to 59 members; PM lauds contribution, says no full stop in politics

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** The Rajya Sabha on Wednesday bid farewell to 59 of its retiring members, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi urging them to remain active in the service of the nation and its people while noting that there is no full stop in politics.

The Prime Minister lauded the contribution of the members, whose tenures will end between April and July, and called Parliament an "open university" that offers an opportunity to gain insight into intricate nuances of life.

Among those retiring are former prime minister H D Deve Gowda, Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge and veteran politician Sharad Pawar, who have been in active politics for over five decades. Pawar has already been re-elected to the Upper House. One-third of the Rajya Sabha members retire every two years. Modi reserved special praise for the three senior leaders, calling them stalwarts who have spent more than half their lives in parliamentary proceedings.

"The manner in which they continue to attend the

House with such dedication -- a spirit from which all new parliamentarians ought to learn -- is truly exemplary," he said. "Such a long tenure is no small feat -- it is a matter of immense significance."

Addressing the Upper House on the occasion of the farewell, Modi said such moments naturally dissolve partisan divides. "When an occasion such as this arises -- naturally and spontaneously -- we rise above partisan differences, and a shared sentiment emerges within us all," he said.

To members who do not plan to return, the Prime Minister offered reassurance. "In politics, there is no such thing as a full stop. The future awaits you as well, and your experience and contributions will forever remain an enduring part of our national life," he said.

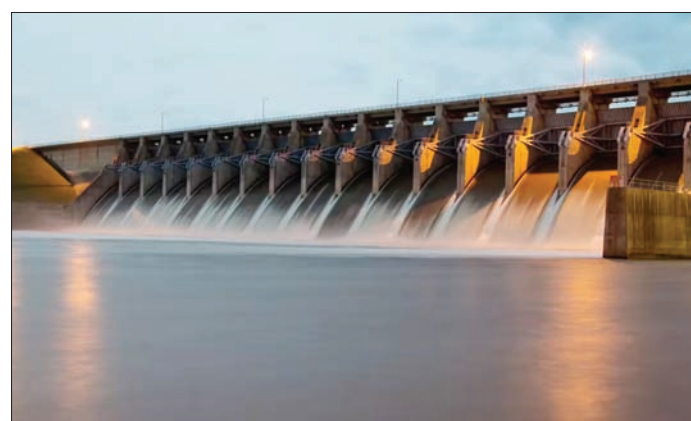
The Prime Minister also paid tribute to outgoing Deputy Chairman Hariwansh, saying he is "gentle and soft-spoken" yet "a man of rigorous action, constantly working for the betterment of every corner of India". In a lighter vein, the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Cabinet nod to small hydro power development scheme will boost rural economy in Arunachal: CM

**ITANAGAR, March 18:** Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Wednesday hailed the Union Cabinet's decision to approve the small hydro power development scheme for 2026-31, saying the move would provide a major boost to clean energy generation and rural economic development in the northeast.

Khandu said the initiative would help unlock the state's vast hydropower potential and accelerate sustainable development in remote and border regions.

"A very welcome decision by the Union Cabinet led by Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji approving the Small Hydro



Power (SHP) Development Scheme for 2026-31," the CM said in a post on X.

Khandu said the scheme would particularly benefit hilly and frontier states (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## 25 lakh personnel to be deployed for 5 assembly polls: EC

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** As many as 25 lakh personnel, including 8.5 lakh security personnel, will be deployed for the five assembly polls to be held next month, the Election Commission said on Wednesday.

As many as 17.4 crore electors are eligible to vote in the elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and Puducherry.

The EC noted that Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, while announcing the schedule of the elections, had asserted that the officials have been directed to act with complete impartiality to ensure that the elections are (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

*'Majority of child deaths are preventable or treatable and India's scaling up of interventions'*

## India's efforts driving sharp decline in child mortality: UN Report

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** India has emerged as a key contributor to global progress in reducing child mortality, according to the latest United Nations report.

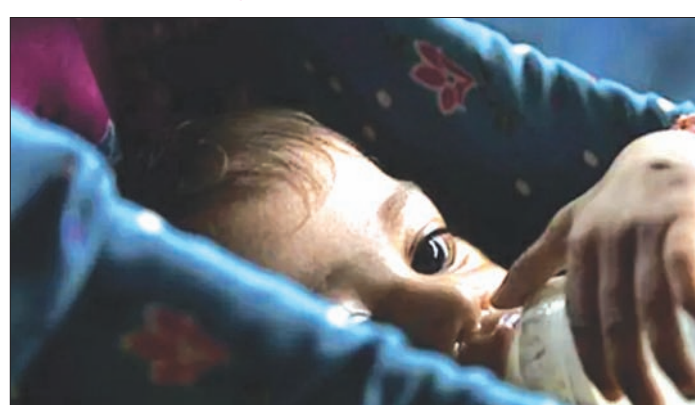
The UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UNIGME) Report 2025 highlighted India's sustained and large-scale efforts in improving child survival outcomes, particularly across neonatal and under-five mortality indicators. Over the last two decades, India has played a pivotal role in reducing child mortality in the South Asia region, which witnessed a 76 per cent decline in under-five deaths since 1990 and a 68 per cent drop since 2000.

The under-five mortality rate in the region has fallen significantly -

from 92 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2000 to nearly 32 in 2024 -- reflecting sustained progress in child health outcomes.

This sharp reduction is largely driven by countries like India through targeted public health interventions, improved institutional delivery systems, and expanded immunisation coverage.

"India is among the countries demonstrating steady progress in reducing child mortality through sustained public health efforts. This reflects the strength of a coordinated, standards-driven approach led by the Government of India in collaboration with states, with a clear focus on translating national priorities into improved outcomes for children," UNICEF India said



in a press statement. This progress is anchored in a continuum-of-care strategy that integrates strengthening of the health system with targeted, demand-driven initiatives

such as Janani Suraksha Yojana and Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram, the statement said.

At the same time, the expansion of newborn care infrastructure --

including Special Newborn Care Units and digital innovations such as Tele-SNCU -- highlights how strategic investments and coordinated implementation are contributing to improved child survival outcomes across diverse settings, it said. The report underscored that a majority of child deaths are preventable or treatable, and India's scaling up of interventions such as the Universal Immunisation Programme, facility-based newborn care, and Integrated Management of Neonatal and Childhood Illnesses has significantly improved survival rates.

India's improvements in neonatal care systems have been particularly impactful. Across South Asia, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## NTPC Bongaigaon achieved 93 pc declared capacity in FY'26: Official

**GUWAHATI, March 18:** The NTPC Bongaigaon in Assam achieved over 93 per cent declared capacity during the 2025-26 fiscal, indicating a high level of operational performance, a top company official said on Wednesday.

The plant load factor stood at around 65 per cent, he said.

"NTPC Bongaigaon continues to play a significant role in meeting the energy requirements of Assam and other northeastern states with its installed capacity of 750 MW (3x250 MW)."

"During 2025-26, the station generated around 4,110 million units (MU) of electricity till date, ensuring reliable power supply and contributing to grid stability," said Arnab Maitra, Head of Project, NTPC Bongaigaon.

Operational performance remained a key focus area, with the station achieving a declared capacity of 93.72 per cent, reflecting

"improved plant availability and maintenance practices", he said.

The plant load factor was around 65.43 per cent, aligned with grid demand and dispatch schedules, the company said. A "major milestone" during the year has been the continuous operation of Unit-1 for 433 days, indicating "strong operational discipline and equipment reliability", Maitra said.

Maitra also said that NTPC Bongaigaon has been focusing on education, healthcare, skill development, infrastructure, sports and cultural promotion CSR initiatives across the northeast.

These initiatives have impacted over 10 lakh people in the region so far, he said.

"Safety continues to remain the highest priority across all operations, while maintaining a balanced focus on operational excellence, environmental sustainability and meaningful (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Stock markets extend winning run to 3<sup>rd</sup> day; Sensex, Nifty climb nearly 1 pc

MUMBAI, March 18: Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty ended nearly 1 per cent higher on Wednesday, extending their winning run to the third day in a row amid a slight drop in crude oil prices and a firm trend in global peers.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 633.29 points or 0.83 per cent to settle at 76,704.13. During the day, it soared 929.38 points or 1.22 per cent to 77,000.22.

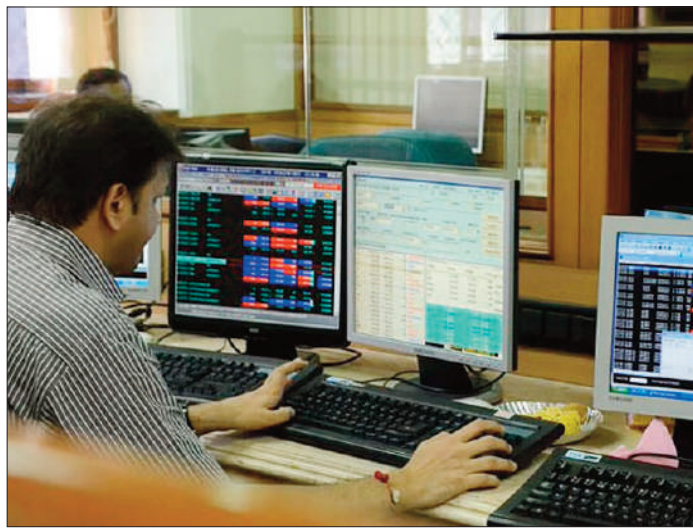
The 50-share NSE Nifty surged 196.65 points or 0.83 per cent to end at 23,777.80.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Eternal, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, Mahindra & Mahindra, HCL Tech, Adani Ports, Tata Consultancy Services and Axis Bank were among the major gainers.

NTPC, Hindustan Unilever, Sun Pharma and HDFC Bank were among the laggards.

"Domestic markets extended their recovery, supported by opportunistic buying after the recent sell-off. The rebound was broad-based, driven by a combination of short covering and value buying, with leadership from IT, realty, and auto sectors, alongside strength in mid and smallcap stocks," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

"Markets extended their recovery for the third consecutive session on Wednesday, supported by stable global cues, although



volatility persisted. The Nifty opened on a firm note and maintained a positive bias for most of the session; however, profit booking in the final hours trimmed some of the gains," Ajit Mishra - SVP, Research, Religare Broking, said.

The sharp rebound in the IT pack was a key highlight and played a critical role in driving today's recovery, he said.

The BSE MidCap Select index jumped 2.39 per cent and SmallCap Select index climbed 1.59 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, BSE Focused IT surged 2.95 per cent, followed by IT (2.82 per cent), re-

ality (2.67 per cent), BSE MidSmall Private Banks Quality Tilt (2.48 per cent), services (2.45 per cent), telecommunication (2.44 per cent) and consumer discretionary (2.08 per cent).

Metal emerged as the only laggard. A total of 3,202 stocks advanced, while 1,088 declined and 142 remained unchanged on the BSE.

Analysts said lingering geopolitical tensions, weakness in the rupee, and the possibility of renewed volatility in crude oil prices continue to keep market participants cautious.

"From a strong three-day rebound, due to supportive global

cues, markets are expected to remain cautious as investor sentiment may carry on to be sensitive to developments in West Asia, movements in crude oil prices and continued FIIs activity.

"While a near-term relief rally may persist, its sustainability will depend on de-escalation in geopolitical tensions and moderation in energy prices," Siddhartha Khemka - Head of Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, dipped 0.10 per cent to USD 103.3 per barrel.

In Asian markets, South Korea's benchmark Kospi jumped 5 per cent and Japan's Nikkei 225 index climbed 2.87 per cent. Shanghai's SSE Composite index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index also ended higher.

Markets in Europe were trading in positive territory. The US market ended higher on Tuesday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 4,741.22 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data. Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs), however, bought stocks worth ₹ 5,225.32 crore.

On Tuesday, the Sensex jumped 567.99 points, or 0.75 per cent, to settle at 76,070.84. The Nifty climbed 172.35 points, or 0.74 per cent, to end at 23,581.15. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Pradyut Bordoloi quits Cong

reality Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a 'Viksit Bharat, Viksit Assam', he said. Bordoloi, who is also a former Assam cabinet minister, had sent his resignation letter to AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday evening. State Congress chief Gaurav Gogoi and AICC general secretary in-charge of Assam Jitendra Singh had rushed to meet Bordoloi the same evening, but apparently could not convince him to reverse his decision. Bordoloi's son Prateek is a Congress nominee from Margherita constituency for the state polls.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who is the chairperson of the Screening Committee for candidates for Assam polls, said that Bordoloi's resignation was unfortunate and added that differences over ticket allocation may have led to the decision.

"I think he was upset over ticket allocation, and I wish we had a chance to have a conversation; it is unfortunate," Vadra told reporters inside the Parliament House complex.

Former state Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah had resigned and joined the BJP in February. Bordoloi, speaking to reporters, said, "The chief minister's vision to work for Assam and his positive thinking to take the state forward have drawn me to join the BJP."

"For the last two years, I have been facing humiliation and feeling isolated within the Congress. While joining the BJP, I have made it clear that I will continue to work with my head held high for the sake of the Assamese people," he added. Sarma said another senior Congress leader, Nabajyoti Talukdar, will also join the BJP along with "lots of people" in Guwahati in "two or three days".

Talukdar, a close aide of Bordoloi, had also resigned from the Congress on Tuesday. (PTI)

## Pradyut exit: Gaurav rules

Alleging a climate of fear in the state, the Congress leader claimed that ordinary Assamese citizens are seeking change. "Himanta Biswa Sarma has created a situation of fear among the people. There is a strong desire among the public to get rid of this atmosphere," Gogoi said, expressing confidence in his party's prospects.

"We are receiving tremendous support across Assam, and I am confident that the Congress will form the next government," he asserted.

Dismissing speculation that Bordoloi's resignation was triggered by differences over candidate selection for a particular Assembly seat, Gogoi said such claims were unfounded. "It cannot happen over a single seat. In every political party, there are differences and strong opinions, but that alone cannot be the reason for snapping ties and joining a rival party," he said. Bordoloi's exit is seen as a setback for the Congress ahead of the Assembly polls, even as the party leadership seeks to project unity and confidence.

## Pradyut slammed for betraying

that Bordoloi had amassed significant assets and properties during his tenure as a minister in Assam under the Congress regime. She further alleged that there could be "undisclosed factors" behind his sudden shift in political allegiance, hinting that pressure or "certain files" with Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma might have influenced his decision.

"Pradyut Bordoloi has accumulated huge wealth over the years while serving in power. Now, he has chosen to abandon the Congress at a crucial time. This raises serious questions about his intentions," Borthakur said, without providing documentary evidence to substantiate the claims. The Congress leader also accused Bordoloi of betraying the trust of party workers, stating that lakhs of grassroots supporters who stood by him feel let down. "He has left the party merely over disagreements regarding the selection of a candidate for an Assembly seat. This shows how personal ambition has overtaken commitment to party ideology," she added.

Borthakur maintained that the Congress remains united despite such exits and asserted that leaders driven by personal gain would not be able to weaken the party's base.

Meanwhile, Bordoloi has not yet publicly responded to the allegations.

Congress MP Rakibul Hussain also alleged that Pradyut Bordoloi was maintaining a secret tie-up with Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and the latest development has exposed the true nature of former Nagaon Lok Sabha MP.

## Curfew in Meghalaya dist extended

Meanwhile, the district administration has also enforced a separate prohibitory order under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, read with relevant provisions of the Meghalaya Maintenance of Public Order (Autonomous District) Act, 1953.

The order prohibits any public meetings, processions, rallies or assemblies without prior permission and bans unlawful gatherings of five or more persons intending to protest or disrupt normal life.

It also restricts the use of loudspeakers and public address systems without permission, and prohibits the carrying of weapons or objects that could cause injury or damage in public places.

Authorities have warned that any violation of the orders will attract strict penal action, including criminal prosecution and liability for damages.

Officials said the measures were necessitated based on intelligence inputs suggesting the possibility of further disturbances, and were aimed at maintaining public order and restoring normalcy in the district. (PTI)

## Want to bring 'good' Cong

"Assam is such a state where we have to take a very big fight for existence. After the Census, our fight to secure Assamese people will intensify," he said.

"So, I don't want any right-thinking Assamese people to be on the other side of the fence. That is why we are deliberately doing this outreach under the guidance of our Home Minister Amit Shah," the Assam chief minister added. (PTI)

## Cabinet nod to small hydro power

like Arunachal Pradesh, where several rivers remain untapped for energy generation. "This is a big boost for the north east, especially Arunachal Pradesh, where our rivers hold immense untapped potential. The enhanced financial support for hilly and border areas will help unlock clean, decentralised energy in remote regions," he said. Khandu also noted that small hydropower projects could play a vital role in improving livelihoods and strengthening infrastructure in rural areas, without causing large-scale displacement.

"Small hydro projects are not just about power. They bring local employment, sustainable development, and strengthen infrastructure in frontier areas without large-scale displacement," he said.

"With the right planning and execution, this scheme can transform rural economies, empower local communities, and position our region as a leader in sustainable hydropower," he added. (PTI)

## 25 lakh personnel to be

violence-free and inducement-free so that each elector votes without fear or favour.

The personnel deployed include nearly 15 lakh polling officials, 8.5 lakh security personnel, 40,000 counting personnel, 49,000 micro observers, 21,000 sector officers and 15,000 micro observers for counting, amongst others. Assembly elections will be held in Assam on a single day on April 9, alongside Kerala and Puducherry, while Tamil Nadu will vote on April 23 and West Bengal will go to the polls in two phases on April 23 and April 29, the Election Commission announced on Sunday.

The counting of votes for all the elections will be on May 4. (PTI)

## India's efforts driving sharp

neonatal deaths declined by nearly 60 per cent since 2000 and mortality in children aged 1 to 59 months declined by over 75 per cent. While South Asia still accounts for nearly 25 per cent of global under-five deaths, the region has made one of the fastest reductions globally, positioning India as a leader among high-burden countries. India's success demonstrates that targeted, large-scale, and equity-driven interventions can deliver rapid results, even in populous and diverse settings, health ministry sources said.

India is among the first few countries to set targets and release operational guidelines on Stillbirth Surveillance and response, the report said. This surveillance will strengthen systematic reporting to enable corrective actions in the public health system.

"India's experience shows that sustained leadership, strategic investments and strong collaboration with committed stakeholders have enabled a robust, scalable and effective implementation framework targeted towards the achievement of the SDGs," the report said.

According to the UNIGME report, the under-five mortality rate in India reduced to 26.6 in 2024 from 127 in 1990, registering a sharp 79 per cent decline.

Infant mortality fell to 23.3 per 1000 live births, while the neonatal mortality rate recorded a 70 per cent decline from 1990. That year, India had a neonatal mortality rate of 57, which had fallen to 17 in 2024. (PTI)

## NTPC Bongaigaon achieved 93 pc

community development initiatives in the region," Maitra said. He said the Girl Empowerment Mission (GEM) continues to be a flagship initiative of NTPC Bongaigaon, focusing on the holistic development of young girls through education, personality development and exposure.

In 2026, NTPC Bongaigaon is set to enrol 50 girls under the programme, marking an increase of 10 participants compared to the previous year, the senior company official added. (PTI)

## Rajya Sabha bids farewell to 59

Prime Minister singled out Union Minister Ramdas Athawale. Lamenting that wit and humour in the House had declined in the age of round-the-clock media -- "everyone has become extremely self-conscious", he said. "While members come and go, our Athawale-ji is truly evergreen. He is departing, yet I am confident that no one here will feel a void; he will continue to serve and contribute tirelessly," Modi quipped.

Reflecting on the bicameral structure of Parliament, Modi said it is akin to seeking a "second opinion" -- a practice that strengthened democratic decision-making.

Modi also noted that some outgoing members had the rare distinction of having served in both the old and new Parliament buildings. He described a six-year Rajya Sabha term as a transformative experience.

"The House serves as an open university. It offers the opportunity to gain insight into the intricate nuances of national life. In a sense, one receives both formal education and initiation here," he said.

"The experience gained in Parliament is truly expansive." Chairman C P Radhakrishnan opened the House proceedings by noting that a total of 59 members from 20 states, including nine women members, will retire.

The Chairman described Deve Gowda as "a distinguished leader whose presence has added great stature to the House," and said Kharge "has been an important voice in the democratic functioning of this House" across a long career spanning both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

On Harivansh, Radhakrishnan said he "presided over this House with dignity, impartiality and a deep sense of responsibility". (PTI)

## Samsung Strengthens data privacy with maintenance mode

GURUGRAM, March 18: India's largest consumer electronics brand, has highlighted its privacy-first Maintenance Mode feature, designed to protect personal information when Galaxy devices are handed over for repair. This feature is designed to eliminate data-related anxieties by ensuring personal information remains completely inaccessible when Galaxy devices are handed over for professional servicing.

As smartphones evolve into hubs for sensitive financial and personal data, Samsung is prioritizing transparency and control. Maintenance Mode creates a secure, sandboxed environment, allowing techni-

cians to perform diagnostics without accessing the user's private ecosystem.

Maintenance Mode creates a separate operating environment on the device, allowing service technicians to carry out diagnostics and repairs without exposure to user data. Once activated, access is limited strictly to essential system functions, keeping personal information securely locked.

Users can exit Maintenance Mode using device authentication, instantly restoring their data and settings without any changes. This was stated in a press release.

## Centre promise 10 pc more LPG to states that expedite piped gas rollout

NEW DELHI, March 18: As the LPG supply squeeze extends into the third week, the central government on Wednesday promised to increase supplies of commercial LPG to states that fast-track the rollout of piped gas networks in a bid to ease pressure on the cooking fuel availability.

As the war in West Asia blocked India's access to almost 60 per cent of its LPG, the government prioritised supplies to domestic household kitchens. Supplies to commercial establishments, such as hotels, were initially cut off, but later gave a fifth of their requirement. Now, the central government has offered to raise commercial LPG supplies to 30 per cent in states that expedite the rollout of piped natural gas - an easier alternative to LPG for household kitchens and commercial establishments.

Briefing reporters, Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, said that while LPG supplies are constrained, piped natural gas (PNG) supplies to households and industries continue unabated.

"LPG users should shift to PNG wherever there is a city gas distribution (CGD) network nearby," she said, adding that her ministry has written to states, offering 10 per cent more commercial LPG if they grant deemed permissions to all old applications, and the same after 24 hours of new application for laying

pipelines, cut annual rental/lease charges and allow dig and restore schemes.

"Onus is on states and UTs to take this reform forward and expedite approvals," she said.

On the LPG supply situation, she said there was no dry out anywhere in the country.

"Situation, however, continues to be worrisome" primarily because the imports have been blocked, she said.

Online bookings have increased to 93 per cent, but consumers continue to queue up at dealerships.

"LPG consumers are requested to wait after doing online booking. Cylinders will be delivered to their homes," she said. "There is no need for panic booking or going to LPG distributors." To ease pressure on LPG, the government is promoting commercial and household LPG users to switch to piped natural gas. City gas companies are offering incentives and faster connections.

On Wednesday, Oil Secretary Neeraj Mittal wrote to all state governments and UTs stating that city gas operators have complained about high charges for right of use (ROU) for laying and digging as well as lease rent being levied, which has "dampened the CGD investment climate".

"It is known that excessive taxes on a fledgling business could have a strangulating effect on other consequential economic activities of that business," he wrote.

### PRESS NOTE

West Karbi Anglong

Dated: 18-03-2026

It is for general information that the Election Commission of India, New Delhi has deputed Shri. Hamanshu Khurana, IAS, as the General Observer and Shri. Gaurav Singh, IDAS as the expenditure Observer for 111 - Rongkhang (ST) LAC and 112 - Amri (ST) LAC for the ensuing General Election to Assam Legislative Assembly 2026,

They will be available to meet representatives of political parties, contesting candidates, and public in connection with election-related matters on all days as per the time and details mentioned below

Name of Observers	Office details	Contact no.	Time
Shri. Hamanshu Khurana, IAS	Room No. 9 O/o the District Commissioner, West Karbi Anglong, Hamren	9181654862	10.00 AM to 11.00 AM
Shri. Gaurav Singh, IDAS	Room No. 7 O/o the District Commissioner, West Karbi Anglong, Hamren	9181514862	10.00 AM to 11.00 AM

Issued by:  
Office of the District Election Officer,  
West Karbi Anglong, Assam

**BALANCE WORKS IN TINSUKIA DIVISION**

Tender Notice No.: TSK/Engg/09 of 2026, Dated: 16-03-2026.

E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work:

Item No. 1: Brief Description of Item : At Tinsukia Division-Balance work for Provision of drinking water with storage facilities and other miscellaneous works at way-side stations, colonies and LC gates under the jurisdiction of ADEM/Simalguri Jn. Tender Value: ₹ 5,27,85,044/-; Earnest Money: ₹ 4,13,900/-.

Date & time of closing of above tenders at 15:00 hrs. and opening at 16:00 hrs. on 08-04-2026. For complete information alongwith the tender document of above e-tender will be available up to 15:00 hrs. on 08-04-2026 in the website www.ireps.gov.in

DRM (W), Tinsukia  
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY  
Serving Customers With A Smile

### AFFIDAVIT

I want to state that my actual name is Rebetri Nayak and accordingly it is correctly recorded in my (1) PAN Card, bearing No. BYSPN0910P, (2) Aadhaar Card, bearing No.- 9146 8434 7734, (3) Voter I.D. Card, bearing EPIC No.- HLF2162530 and my husband's actual name is Mang Galu Nayak and accordingly it is also correctly recorded in my aforesaid Aadhaar Card and Voter I.D. Card; but is incorrectly recorded as Mrs. Reboti Nayak instead of Rebetri Nayak and my husband's name has also been recorded as Manglu Nayak instead of Mang Galu Nayak in my Saving Bank Passbook of the Assam Gramin Vikash Bank (Now), Beltola (W) Branch, bearing Account No.- 7437010100116.

Therefore, Rebetri Nayak and Mrs. Reboti Nayak are the same and one person who is myself and also Mang Galu Nayak and Manglu Nayak are the same and one person who is my husband.

That, I intend to correct my name as Rebetri Nayak in place of Mrs. Reboti Nayak and also my husband's name as Mang Galu Nayak in place of Manglu Nayak in my aforesaid Saving Bank Passbook by the authority concerned for my conveniently using it in future.

Rebetri Nayak,  
W/o:- Mang Galu Nayak,  
Vill.: Beltola (Agrakuchi),  
P.O.- Nellie,  
P.S.- Jagiroad,  
Dist.: Morigaon, Assam

# Pradyut Bordoloi joins BJP, jolts Assam Congress

Internal rifts prompt veteran MP to resign from Congress

**GUWAHATI, March 18:** Assam Cong MP Pradyut Bordoloi resigns ahead of polls; party leaders claim 'all within family'.

In a jolt to the opposition Congress, Assam's Lok Sabha MP Pradyut Bordoloi on Tuesday resigned from the party, barely 20 days ahead of assembly elections in the state.

Bordoloi has sent his resignation letter to AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge, state media department chairman Bedabrata Bora told PTI in Guwahati.

AICC general secretary in-charge of Assam Jitendra Singh and state party chief Gaurav Gogoi, who met the MP in Delhi, claimed that it was a matter of "differences within the family" and "part of an attempt orchestrated by the CM (Himanta Biswa Sarma) through the media to malign Bordoloi politically".

A former state cabinet minister and two-time MP from Nagaon constituency, Bordoloi's son Prateek is a Congress candidate from Margherita seat for the state polls due on April 9.

In the one-line resignation letter addressed to Kharge, the MP said, "With an overwhelming sense of sadness today, I hereby tender my resignation from all posts, privileges and the primary membership of the Indian National Congress."



A copy of the letter is available with PTI.

Bora said state party chief Gaurav Gogoi and AICC general secretary in-charge of Assam Jitendra Singh talked to Bordoloi over the issue at the national capital.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, Singh said, "The Congress blood runs in the veins of Bordoloi. We are members of one family and will remain so."

He claimed that Bordoloi has no offer to join the BJP that he was aware of and said, "No person will go to the BJP. Bhupen Borah recently went and now he is running to secure a party ticket. No one even greets or invites to share the dais."

The AICC leader was referring

to former state Congress president Borah quitting in February and joining the ruling saffron party. Singh, who had called on Borah along with top state leaders immediately after his resignation had made similar claims of the leader not leaving the Congress.

Gogoi, also talking to reporters, said, "I condemn such news (of Bordoloi's resignation). The chief minister, through the media, has been trying to malign him politically."

He said that during the meeting with Bordoloi, they discussed after party strategy to reach out to the people for the ensuing polls.

Bordoloi was the chairman of the manifesto committee for the Assembly polls.

A Cotton College (now univer-

sity) and Jawaharlal Nehru University alumnus, the Nagaon MP has been a four-time MLA from Margherita constituency till 2016, being associated with the state NSUI since his student days.

The Congress has three Lok Sabha MPs from Assam -- state president Gogoi (from Jorhat), Bordoloi and Rakibul Hussain (Dhubri).

Another senior Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) leader and a close aide of Bordoloi, Nabajyoti Talukdar, also resigned from the party earlier on Tuesday.

A ticket contender from the Guwahati Central seat, Talukdar resigned after another member was named for the seat, a party source said.

Bordoloi had recently sent a letter to Jitendra Singh, stating that he could resign from the party if incumbent Lahorighat MLA Asif Mohammad Nazar was renominated for the Assembly polls.

The MP said in the letter that Nazar's close aide Emdadul Islam was involved in an attack on Bordoloi and other party leaders in April 2025 and was also charge-sheeted by the police in the case.

He also claimed that Gogoi had personally met Islam earlier this year at his residence. Lahorighat comes under the Nagaon Lok Sabha constituency. (PTI)

## Eco-social agripreneurship training begins at KKHSOU

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 18:** A three-day Training Programme on Eco-Social Agripreneurship commenced on Wednesday at the Rani campus of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU). The programme has been organised by the Vocational and Skill Development Centre under the Guru Prasad School of Interdisciplinary and Vocational Studies (GPDSOIVS). The training programme holds considerable importance in the contemporary context of sustainable development, rural livelihoods and skill-based education.

The event was graced by the Vice-Chancellor of KKHSOU, Prof Rajendra Prasad Das,

along with distinguished dignitaries including Loken Das, Chief General Manager of NABARD; Prof Pranab Saikia, Registrar of KKHSOU and Dr GobindaDeka, Director of GPDSOIVS, KKHSOU. Renowned farmer Samir Bordoloi, serving as Professor of Practice at the University was the key resource person for the programme. The inaugural session was coordinated by Dr Sarmistha Rani Baruah Assistant Professor, KKHSOU.

Participants from across the North Eastern region of India are actively taking part in the training programme, reflecting a growing interest in sustainable agricultural practices and entrepreneurship.

Samir Bordoloi elaborated on the context and objectives of the programme, highlighting the vision of creating "green commandos" or eco-social entrepreneurs.

Prof Pranab Saikia, Registrar of KKHSOU, provided insights into the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) ecosystem and its role in facilitating such skill-based programmes.

Loken Das acknowledged the importance of fostering innovation and sustainability in the agricultural sector.

This initiative reflects KKHSOU's continued commitment to promoting sustainable agriculture, entrepreneurship and skill development in the region.

## EVM randomisation process held in Nagaon

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, March 18:** As part of the preparation for the state assembly elections, an important process was carried out at the office of Nagaon District Commissioner on Wednesday. The randomisation of EVMs and VVPAT machines was successfully completed for the seven assembly constituencies in the district. To ensure the transparency and fairness of the election procedures, the process was carried out in presence of attendees or representatives of various political parties so that nobody could suspect anything regarding the distribution of voting machines so far. The programme was chaired by DC Debashish Sarma.

Along with the representatives of various political parties, Shekharan Phukan, election officer, Tezash Agnihotri, additional assistant commissioner were also present in the programme, an official press note added here.

## Officials to monitor expenditure, polling and complaints for free and fair elections

### Election observers deployed for Assam polls

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, March 18:** In order to ensure a free, fair and transparent electoral process for the ensuing Assam Assembly Elections 2026, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has deputed General, Expenditure and Police Observers for Kokrajhar District covering 5 LACs, namely, 1-Gossaigaon, 2-Dotma (ST), 3-Kokrajhar (ST), 4-Baokhungri and 5-Parbatthora Assembly Constituencies. Pardeshi Siddhartha Komal, IAS has been appointed as General Observer for 3-Kokrajhar (ST), 4-Baokhungri and 5-Parbatthora LACs, while Krishan Kumar Singh, IAS will oversee 1-Gossaigaon and 2-Dotma (ST) LACs as General Observer. Chan Basha M, IRS, has been deputed as Expenditure Observer for 1-Gossaigaon and 5-Parbatthora LACs and Vinay Kumar Kantheti, IRS, as Expenditure Observer for 2-Dotma (ST), 3-Kokrajhar (ST) and 4-Baokhungri LACs. Further, Kime Kaming, IPS has been appointed as the Police Observer for the entire Kokrajhar District. The observers will be available for meeting with the general public and representatives of political parties from 9:00 AM to 10:00 AM on working days at Circuit House, Kokrajhar. Pardeshi Siddhartha Komal, IAS will be available at Room No 2, Circuit House, Kokrajhar (Contact No 9395380039), Krishan Kumar Singh, IAS at Room No 5, Circuit House, Kokrajhar (Contact No 8822383113), Chan Basha M, IRS at Room No 3, Circuit House, Kokrajhar (Contact No 6000655399), Vinay Kumar Kantheti, IRS at Room No 4, Circuit House, Kokrajhar (Contact No 8822679780) and Kime Kaming, IPS at Champa Room, Circuit House, Kokrajhar (Contact No 9181613311). Members of the public as well as representatives of political parties may meet the observers during the specified hours to submit complaints, grievances or any information relating to the conduct of elections.

**Our Morigaon Correspondent adds:** The Election Expenditure Observer appointed for the three Legislative Assembly Constituencies under the Morigaon Election District — 52 No Jagiroad (SC), 53 No Laharighat and 54 No Morigaon — R L Arun Prasad, an officer of the Indian Revenue Service (Customs & Central Excise), arrived in Morigaon on Wednesday to review election preparedness. He visited the Office of the District Commissioner & District Election Of-



ficer and took stock of the ongoing election arrangements. Later, he held a review meeting with the Election Expenditure Monitoring Cell at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's Office. During the meeting, the Observer reviewed the functioning of the Static Surveillance Teams, Video Surveillance Teams, Flying Squads and Video Viewing Teams engaged in monitoring candidates' election expenditure. He directed all officials to strictly adhere to the guidelines of the Election Commission of India and emphasised the need for meticulous monitoring of candidates' expenses. Field-level teams were instructed to remain vigilant and ensure that no discrepancies occur in expenditure accounts.

He also held discussions with the Media Certification and Monitoring Cell and instructed members to maintain close watch on election campaigning in the media, particularly across social media platforms, to ensure compliance with election norms. District Commissioner Anamika Tewari briefed the Observer on the overall election preparations in the district. The meeting was attended by Senior Superintendent of Police Prakash Sonowal, Additional District Commissioner (Election) Anusuya Sharma, Additional District Commissioners Rakesh Deka and Nitisha Bora, Co-District Commissioner Shilpika Kalita, along with other concerned officials. Any complaints related to election expenditure in the district may be reported via mobile number 9181915299 or by email at observercellmorigaon5@gmail.com.

## 10-year-old Dimple Saikia launches poetry collection



**HT Correspondent**

**HOWRAGHAT, March 18:** In a heartwarming celebration of young literary talent, a poetry collection titled 'Kunhi' (The Bud), authored by 10-year-old Dimple Saikia was officially released.

The launch took place during a prestigious poetry festival organised by the Akashiganga Kobi Sanmilan of Parkhowa in association with the Sodou Asom Kobi Sanmilan (All Assam Poets' Conference).

Dimple Saikia, a Class 4 student at Howraghat Sankardev Vidya Niketan has garnered attention for her creative depth at such a tender age. The book, published by Asha Prakashan was formally inaugurated by Rajumoni Bezbaruah, president of the Sodou Asom Kobi Sanmilan.

The collection was edited by the esteemed poet, litterateur and retired educator Kalpana Borah, who helped shape the young girl's raw emotions into a published work.

The event saw a significant turnout of literary figures and well-wishers, including Syed Parvej Hussain, secretary of Sodou Asom Kobi Sanmilan and prominent poets Narahari Chutia, Manik Saikia, Nabin Kaman, Bhaben Nath, Suchandra Bayan, Aruni Deka and Krishna Daimary.

Dimple's parents, Kamal Saikia and Munmi Laskar were also present, expressing immense pride in their daughter's achievement.

"It is rare to see such creative maturity in a fourth-grade student. Dimple represents the bright future of Assamese literature," an attendee at the festival said.

The successful launch of 'Kunhi' serves as an inspiration for young students across the region to pursue the arts and creative writing.

## Demow student wins gold in national youth festival debate

**HT Correspondent**

**DEMOW, March 18:** Abhinav Borgohain, who hails from Demow but is presently studying as a student of Political Science at Ramjas College of the Delhi University, got first position with a gold medal in the English Debate category of the 39th Association of Indian Universities Inter University National Youth Festival, which was organised at Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology in Chennai, Tamil Nadu from

March 9 to March 14, 2026. He represents Delhi University in the English Debate category of the 39th Association of Indian Universities Inter University National Youth Festival. Abhinav Borgohain brought laurels to the State as well as to his hometown, Demow. After the news spread, everybody congratulated Abhinav Borgohain.

Abhinav Borgohain in his social media, through video expressed happiness.

## Toll free 1077 launched for public grievance on LPG supply

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, March 18:** Amidst the global oil crisis triggered by the Middle East conflict, the Nagaon district administration has taken swift action to monitor the supply of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) cylinders.

To ensure uninterrupted LPG supply, the administration has announced a toll-free number, 1077, for citizens to report any grievances related to LPG supply.

According to the District Information and Public Relations Officer, residents of Nagaon can report any complaints or issues with LPG supply on this number. The district administration, led by Commissioner Debashish Sarma has already launched a crackdown on illegal hoarding and black-marketing of LPG cylinders.

The move aims to address the challenges posed by the current situation and maintain a steady supply of LPG cylinders to households in the district. Citizens are encouraged to report any irregularities or difficulties in accessing LPG cylinders on the designated toll-free number.

## UPPL declares 4 more candidates

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, March 18:** The United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) has declared names of four candidates in its second list on Wednesday for upcoming assembly elections. UPPL general secretary Raju Kumar Narzary announced the names of the candidates at a press conference held at UPPL central office in Kokrajhar. The names included Rakesh Brahma (Baksa LAC), Nityananda Basumatary (Gohpur) Manoj Basumatary (Boko Chaygaon) and Baburam Basumatary (Borchala LAC). With the declaration of second list, UPPL's contesting constituency toll goes to 11 in the assembly elections.

Narzary told that the UPPL party is contesting in all 15 constituencies in Bodoland Territorial Region and several LACs outside of the BTR.

He said that UPPL party is fully committed to work for all round development and welfare of the society in the region. He said that the UPPL party is getting majority supports across the communities in the assembly elections.

## ICAI Guwahati EICASA hosts seminar series



**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, March 18:** The Guwahati Branch of EICASA of The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India successfully organised the "Empowerment & Excellence Symposium - A Women's Month Special Programme" at ICAI Bhawan for CA students.

In her address, EICASA Chairperson CA Nitika Bagaria highlighted that the seminar marked the grand culmination of a month-long initiative held on 9th, 10th, 12th and 17th March, dedicated to celebrating and promoting women speakers across the state in honour of International Women's Day.

The initiative featured a series of enriching sessions, beginning with CA Nidhi Jalan on 9th March, followed by CA Muskan Agarwal on 10th March and CA Chetna Chokhani on 12th March. The programme concluded on 17th March with a full-day seminar featuring CA Apoorva Baradia and CA Shweta Agarwal.

CA Nitika Bagaria also apprised the participants of upcoming initiatives, including specialised technical workshops and student talent search programmes scheduled for the next quarter. The programme was initiated by Bidita Halder, secretary of EICASA, concluded with a vote of thanks by vice chairman Eshan Bagaria.

## Gate shed inaugurated at Amkata LP School

**HT Correspondent**

**MORIGAON, March 18:** An entrance gate shed was formally inaugurated by social worker Niru Devi on Wednesday. In memory of Aditya Sarma who was the founder head teacher of Amkata LP school was established in 1957 under Mayong education block, the entrance gate shed was donated by the family members of him. Late Aditya Sarma was the inhabitant of Kumoi Kacharigaon. A memorial service was organised on the occasion of the inaugural ceremony. In the programme, a few alumni of the school recalled their experiences that how the head teacher had built an educational environment by diverting the minds of parents of the students towards education at Amkata, a ST and SC dominated village where education was a distant dream for them even after ten years have passed since India independence. The endeavour of the head teacher towards upliftment of the locality had changed the life standards of the inhabitants.

It is also known that how Aditya Sarma became popular as 'Aditya Master' in the greater Amkata area. In the solemn atmosphere, writer Akon Devi delivered a speech on late Aditya Sarma's achievement how he built life of students at length. The programme was also attended by the head teacher of the school Mintu Kr Barthakur, Dipali Devi, Kushal Bordoloi, Jugal Bordoloi, his sons Rituparna Sarma, Biju Sarma, Kalpana Devi, AP's member, GP's president Bipul Medhi, Dhiren Das, Laksheswar Das and the president of the school managing committee Pradeep Das. Earlier retired employee of sericulture department Menaka Devi offered floral tribute at the portrait of the late Aditya Sarma.

## CSIR-NEIST marks 66<sup>th</sup> Foundation Day

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, March 18:** The CSIR-North East Institute of Science and Technology (CSIR-NEIST), Jorhat celebrated its 66th Foundation Day with great enthusiasm and active participation from invited guests, former scientists and staff, students, teachers and distinguished individuals. The institute has completed 65 years of dedicated service towards scientific excellence and industrial development of the nation, particularly in the North-East region of India.

On this occasion, a ceremony was held in the morning at the Dr JN Baruah Auditorium of the institute. The event began with a Saraswati Vandana performed by research scholar Sudipta Baruah.

At the outset, the Director of CSIR-NEIST, Dr Virendra M Tiwari, welcomed everyone and highlighted the institute's contributions to innovation, research and entrepreneurship in the North-East region. He mentioned that during 2005-26, the institute published more than 200 research papers in reputed national and international journals.

The event was graced by former Director of NEIST, Dr PG Rao, as the Chief Guest, while former Directors Dr D Ramaiah and Dr G Narahari Sastry attended as Guests of Honour.



During the programme, MoUs were signed between CSIR-NEIST and 19 academic and research institutions, universities and state science and technology organisations of North-East India under the RICH-NEI initiative. These agreements aim to promote collaboration in scientific education, research and development, sharing of scientific infrastructure and expertise, innovation, incuba-

tion, technology commercialisation, capacity building, training programmes, industry-academia linkages and student-faculty exchange.

Dr D Ramaiah expressed his joy at being part of the celebration and praised CSIR-NEIST as one of the leading scientific institutions in the country. He stressed maintaining the legacy of scientific research

through dedication and perseverance.

Dr G Narahari Sastry, in his speech highlighted the rich cultural and biodiversity heritage of the North-East and acknowledged its ecological importance. He also commended the institute's contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic and encouraged the continued pursuit of excellence.

Delivering the keynote address, Dr PG Rao mentioned the prestigious FICCI awards received twice by the institute and several globally recognised technologies developed by it. On the occasion, the "Highlights" publication showcasing the institute's achievements for 2025-26 was unveiled. Certificates of appreciation were awarded to scientists, researchers and staff for their valuable contributions during the current financial year. Additionally, the newly developed NEIST website was officially launched.

The vote of thanks was delivered by Senior Principal Scientist Dr Kalyani Medhi. The programme concluded with the national song and the national anthem. The event was anchored by research scholar Kimleena Gogoi.

It is worth mentioning that, as part of the Foundation Day celebrations, the institute remained open to the general public from 11:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*A truly happy person is one who can enjoy the scenery while on a detour.- Anonymous*

## Job creation remains elusive

Decent job creation in India will remain elusive, because Union Government has no plan to modify EPFO schemes for now, though it plans to roll out full implementation of the new labour codes from April 1, 2026. The Social Security Code 2020 has a clause repealing the EPF Act, but that repeal clause has not yet been notified. It has resulted into EPF is still being administered under the old EPF Act while the new code framework exists simultaneously since November 21, 2025. It has overlapping impact and that will continue. The issue of EPFO is important because this is the only scheme in India, coverage under which is considered as a decent job outside the realm of the government jobs. The Code on Social Security 2020 has either replaced or merged several labour laws related to social security benefits which included the Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952. The purported aim of the Code on Social Security was to streamline social security provision and expand coverage. As of now, the continuation of the old EPF and the new labour code frameworks are being implemented simultaneously, creating a dual system.

The new labour code framework has kept the threshold of applicability of EPF and 20 workers, as it was in the old framework. That is why there is limited scope of coverage of EPF. Data from the Sixth Economic Census and MSME studies show that India has about 6.34 crore MSMEs, and around 6.3 crore enterprises employ fewer than 20 workers. According to the Niti Aayog data, only about 12.8 lakh enterprises have 20 or more workers, which are covered by EPF. About 95.5 per cent of establishments employ fewer than 6 workers and only about 1.37 per cent of establishments employ 10 or more workers. These data show that India's firm structure is dominated by very small enterprises, and therefore the 20-worker threshold is already very high. Only about 1-2 per cent of firms fall under EPF regulation.

In this backdrop, and substantial increase in decent jobs will depend on two things – First, the growth in formal employment under EPFO payroll, and secondly, growth in establishments registering with EPFO. The number of new companies entering the EPF system is actually growing slowly. Recent estimates show that around 52,309 establishments registered for the first time in FY2024-25, which is slightly lower than the previous year. Moreover, only about 45,000-50,000 establishments are added annually in recent years. It is a matter of serious concern that most formal job growth occurs inside existing EPF covered companies, and not because many small firms are crossing the threshold.

## What makes Mamata Banerjee so confident of winning 226 seats?

By: Dr Gyan Pathak

There is mockery of election in West Bengal, that has begun in the right earnest after its announcement by the Election Commission of India (ECI) on March 15. The election will be held on a very faulty and incomplete electoral roll as the foundation of the election, and hence nobody sees it free and fair. Electoral roll is under preparation, and 732 judges are still doing the work of adjudication while time is running out. They have reportedly decided on over one-third of the names of over 60 lakh people whose names were put under logical discrepancy. Time is running out and they are supposed to complete their work by the last date of filing of nominations on April 6.

Just before the election was announced, Trinamool Congress supremo and chief minister Mamata Banerjee announced several welfare schemes in the state. TMC is contesting the election in alliance with Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM). By declaring their candidates for 291 and three seats respectively, they have taken the initial lead. TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee claimed while releasing the list of party's candidates that they her party will win 226 seats this time, which is more than 215 seats the party had won in 2021 assembly polls.

However, the question is what makes Mamata so confident of winning 226, even more than her party won in 2021? The question has acquired importance because PM Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah are leaving no stone unturned to dislodge Mamata from power. Central investigating agencies have become very active against her, that had raided her political consultant I-PAC on January 8. Mamata had intervened because her party's election related secret data was with I-PAC, which she took away during the ED raid. Both the ED and State administration had registered FIR against each other. The case was heard in the Supreme Court on March 18, where Supreme Court did not allow more time to the state government to respond to the affidavit of the ED. In brief, the Centre led by PM Narendra Modi has created such a situation, in which it is very difficult for Mamata to give full attention to election campaign. Her very speech contains the factors which are basis of her confidence of winning 226 seats. She said, "We will win 226 seats in 2026. Boycott for BJP. Vote Bangla... vote for jorahool (TMC's election symbol), BJP will see shorshephul (that is severe problem)."

She gave other hints when she said, "They are harassing voters by making them stand in queue. Lakhs and lakhs names have been deleted in the name of SIR. Two hundred souls are crying. There is a queue for Aadhaar. They have closed the supply of gas and made people panic. They made people stand in line for demonetisation, too. You will be be-line. Delhi kaladood will never win... they have snatched all power. But haven't been able to snatch manpower." After the announcement of the election, the ECI has changed several top level officers of the state, and central forces are being deputed. On this Mamata said, "They think they are superpower. They have clamped super emergency. They have occupied state government." She also said that some people from RSS have come. I respect the old guard of RSS. These people are now 10th star RSS. They have got people from Haryana. Can't control Haryana. They have got someone called Tonsil, it is his nickname. He is deciding chief secretary. He should tend to his tonsils. This has been done to distribute cash, to bring arms and drugs."

She said, "If everyone goes on central deputation who will oversee water, power... what if loadshedding happens... if anything happens, please don't blame me... strangle BJP - politically strangle, I mean." She targeted Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and said, "He should be BJP candidate. That is the only thing that remains." On deletion of voters by ECI, she said, "Matuas deleted. Rajbangshi deleted. Minorities deleted. Fifty per cent Hindus who have died, their votes are also deleted. Gujarati vote deleted. Marwari, Bihari voters deleted. After destroying everyone, will you last?"

It is worth noting that Mamata gave clear hints that many BJP supporters are also aggrieved by the act of deletion of their names from the electoral rolls. Mamata hopes that it would also impact the fate of the BJP candidates. BJP has declared names for 144 constituencies out of 294 in the state. The Party is contesting on its own and have claimed that they will throw Mamata out of power this time. They won 77 seats in 2021 assembly polls. Despite their claim, they seem not in a position to win enough number of seats to come to power. CPI(M) led Left Front is contesting on all seats, but they are also not in a position to challenge the dominance of the TMC. (IPA Service)

## The role of the Tea Tribe in Assam elections

Upon observing the dynamics and demographic structure of Assam's electoral politics, the role of the Tea Tribe emerges as an indispensable and decisive force. Descendants of laborers brought from various parts of Central India during the British colonial era for economic expansion, they have today established a distinct identity in the social and political sky of Assam. The electoral behavior of this vast population does not depend solely on loyalty to a particular political party; rather, it is backed by a complex social background, economic uncertainty, and a long-standing struggle for identity. In approximately 80 to 100 assembly constituencies in Assam, the influence of this community's voters is extremely powerful, and in many of these seats, winning is nearly impossible for any political party without their support. The rise of political awareness among the Tea Tribe today is not limited to wage hikes or land rights; it is a dynamic and strategic effort to ensure their representation at the policymaking level of the state. During elections, the tea gardens turn into political battlefields where the traditional concept of a "vote bank" is gradually changing, giving birth to a rational class of voters who have begun to cast their mandates in exchange for their due rights and dignity. This transformation has ushered in a new chapter in the electoral history of Assam, where every step taken by the Tea Tribe holds the power to change the equations of government formation.

Historically, the Tea Tribe voters were loyal to a specific political ideology, but in recent times, a widespread polarization in their electoral stance has been observed. The primary reasons for this shift are the delays in resolving various long-standing fundamental issues and the analytical perspective created by the spread of education among the new generation. The daily struggles of tea workers, the issue of minimum wages, and the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status have always received priority in electoral manifestos, but the slow pace of implementation on the ground has created deep dissatisfaction among voters. Contrary to the old mentality of using the Tea Tribe merely as a numerical strength in electoral politics, the educated youth of the community today have become more conscious of their rights. They realize that their votes can form governments, and therefore, they are now keeping a keen eye on everything from candidate selection in their constituencies to the proper implementation of government schemes. This conscious role of the Tea Tribe in determining election results in the districts of Upper and Central Assam has forced political parties to reconsider their strategies. Their political preference is no longer just emotional; it is now entirely based on effective development and social security.

The economic inequality and low wage issues within the Tea Tribe manifest as both emotional and rational questions during elections. For tea garden workers, an in-

crease in daily wages is not just a number; it is the sole means for a better standard of living. Whenever elections approach, various political parties intensify their campaigns inside the tea gardens with promises of wage hikes. However, a constant debate persists within the worker community regarding what percentage of these promises are actually realized. This debate plays a crucial role in the electoral war of words, as tea workers are no longer swayed by mere promises; they demand an account of the work done in the past. The relationship between tea garden management and the government, along with the government's role in protecting workers' interests, becomes a key election issue. This economic context helps unite the Tea Tribe voters, and their collective voice exerts a powerful influence on electoral outcomes. Particularly in the tea-rich districts of Assam, these economic demands of the tea workers serve as a key to crossing the electoral hurdle.

The election results of districts like Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Jorhat, and Golaghat in the Brahmaputra Valley largely turn on the opinion of the Tea Tribe. The various sub-groups and linguistic diversity within this community make the electoral equation more complex. Political parties are forced to understand this diversity and give equal importance to the emotions and needs of every sub-group. Social organizations and labor unions within the Tea Tribe act as powerful mediators during elections, presenting the demands of ordinary workers to political parties. However, in recent years, some have questioned the traditional authority of these organizations, pushing for collective interests over personal gains. This process has created healthy competition in electoral politics and made the role of the Tea Tribe more serious and responsible. Their united strength has now become the core foundation of electoral strategy.

Another dimension of the growing political awareness among the Tea Tribe is the question of land ownership and social status. In the electoral context of Assam, land is a very sensitive issue, and for the workers living in tea gardens, it is a matter of life and death. When these people, who have lived in garden residential areas for a long time, receive promises of land 'pattas' (allotment) or permanent settlement during elections, it influences their electoral decisions. However, depending on the realistic results of these promises, disillusionment also occurs, which aids in electoral polarization. Furthermore, the availability of education and healthcare services has given birth to a new middle class within the Tea Tribe—a class that is not satisfied solely with the development of the tea gardens but seeks a partnership in the overall development of Assam. This mental shift has established the Tea Tribe not just as a specific labor class, but as an integral and active citizenry of Assam. Their firm stance and clear

demands during elections are helping to strengthen the foundations of democracy, as they are now moving toward electing representatives based on logic and assessment of gains and losses rather than emotion. Consequently, the pressure of accountability on political parties has also increased.

In contemporary electoral politics, the question of representation for the Tea Tribe has gained a new dimension. Previously, only a few specific leaders from the Tea Tribe received tickets from political parties, but this scope has now expanded. Every major political party is now compelled to field qualified and educated candidates from the Tea Tribe to gain the community's trust. This representation is not just for winning elections but is crucial for echoing the voice of the Tea Tribe in the implementation of government policies and schemes. During election campaigns targeted at securing Tea Tribe votes, it is seen that local issues along with national issues find a place. People of the Tea Tribe feel proud to be a part of Assamese society, and thus, issues regarding the protection of Assam's language, culture, and identity also influence their electoral decisions. A beautiful balance is observed between their nationalist thoughts and their ethnic rights, which is a positive signal for a multilingual and multi-ethnic state like Assam. This expansion of their representation has made Assam's parliamentary democracy stronger and more inclusive.

Another very relevant aspect is the long-standing demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. This issue gains specific heat before elections and touches the emotions of the voters. It has become inevitable for every political party to include the struggle of various communities within the Tea Tribe for their constitutional identity and rights in their election manifestos. This demand for ST status is not just for government benefits or reservations; it is a struggle for social status and the establishment of self-identity. When this topic is discussed during elections, Tea Tribe voters very consciously monitor the stance of every party. They understand that this is a policy decision that will determine the future of their next generation. Therefore, during voting, this issue acts as a decisive factor. Realizing the importance of this demand, political parties have given various assurances at different times, though its effective implementation remains a challenge. This process has provided a new dimension to the political activism of the Tea Tribe and given them the opportunity to assert their influence in state and central politics.

The infrastructural development of tea gardens and the availability of healthcare services also hold a significant place in electoral reviews. During elections, there is extensive discussion on how government schemes have impacted the standard of living of the Tea Tribe. Voters form their opinions based on how pure drinking water,

improved road connectivity, and better hospital facilities have changed their daily lives. In today's digital age, due to the rapid spread of information, people in even the remotest areas of the tea gardens are aware of the use of government funds and the success of schemes. As a result, instead of mere rhetoric, actual developmental work comes into focus during election campaigns. Tea Tribe voters now go to the polling stations only after taking stock of the development in their region. This awareness has forced political parties to undertake more developmental work in garden areas. The reflection of this developmental work is clearly visible in election results, proving that the mandate of the Tea Tribe is now guided by healthy and progressive thinking. Their rational outlook has brought a positive change to the electoral culture of Assam.

To understand the role of the Tea Tribe in Assam elections more deeply, one must mention the spread of education and the resulting conscious youth society. The environment of tea gardens is no longer solely labor-centric as it was before. The educated new generation is no longer confined to garden work; they are engaged in various professions and are coming forward to control the political direction of their society. These young people express their opinions through social media and play an active role in determining which way the political wind blows. They explain the policies and schemes of political parties to their parents and elders, resulting in an intellectual shift in the voting process of the entire community. During elections, these educated youths of the Tea Tribe clearly raise their demands on various political platforms and question the candidates. This proves that the political role of the Tea Tribe is no longer based just on numbers, but on a superior quality of political ideology. Their participation has made Assam's democracy more transparent and powerful.

In conclusion, it can be said that the role of the Tea Tribe in Assam elections is not limited to the number of votes cast; rather, it is a reflection of a deep social and political transformation. This community is no longer just a follower of someone's commands; instead, they have learned to control their political destiny with their own judgment. The resolution of their long-standing problems, economic self-reliance, and the demand for social recognition will remain the centerpiece of elections. No matter which party forms the government, achieving stability without the support of the Tea Tribe is difficult. Therefore, to keep the future politics and developmental flow of Assam intact, it is essential to rationally respect the aspirations and needs of this large and influential community. It can be hoped that this active participation and decisive role of the Tea Tribe will make the democratic system of Assam more inclusive and vibrant, ensuring equal rights and dignity for people of every class. (The author is the recipient of the 'Yuba Lekhak Sanman - 2025' from the Government of Assam)

## DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

## A silent health crisis growing inside India's overcrowded prisons

By: Satyabrata Borah

India's prisons are often hidden from public view, both physically and emotionally. Tall walls, iron gates, and layers of security create a sense of distance between those inside and those outside. That distance also shapes how society thinks about prisoners. Many people see prisons only as places of punishment, not as spaces where human lives continue to unfold every single day. Inside those walls are people who fall sick, who suffer, who hope to recover, and who rely entirely on the system for care. When that system fails, the consequences are not quiet or small. They grow into serious public health crises that affect not only inmates but also the wider society.

The recent outbreak of herpes simplex virus in the Jalpaiguri Central Correctional Home brings this issue into sharp focus. The infection of dozens of inmates and the deaths that followed are not isolated events. They are part of a pattern that has existed for many years. Indian prisons have long struggled with overcrowding, poor sanitation, limited medical staff, and delayed treatment. These conditions create an environment where diseases can spread quickly and where small health problems can turn into life-threatening situations. A prison is not meant to be a place where people lose their basic rights. Courts in India have repeatedly stated that prisoners retain their right to life and health. This principle sounds strong on paper. It reflects the values of dignity and humanity that a democratic country claims to uphold. Still, the reality inside many jails tells a different story. The gap between what is promised and what is delivered remains wide, and it is this gap that leads to repeated health emergencies.

Overcrowding is one of the biggest reasons for the crisis. Many prisons in India house far more inmates than they were designed for. Cells meant for a few individuals often hold double or triple that number. People sleep in close proximity, share limited bathroom facilities, and live in spaces where fresh air is scarce. In such conditions, maintaining hygiene becomes very difficult. Diseases that spread through contact or air find a perfect environment to grow. When too many people live in a small space, even simple infections can spread rapidly. Skin diseases, respiratory infections, and viral illnesses move from one person to another without much resistance. In the Jalpaiguri case, the presence of herpes simplex virus among inmates highlights how quickly such infections can take hold. While this virus is common in the general population, it becomes far more dangerous in places where individuals are already weakened or where medical attention is delayed.

Another issue lies in the condition of prison infrastructure. Many jails in India were built decades ago and have not been updated to meet modern health standards. Poor ventilation is common, and sunlight often fails to reach certain parts of the facility. Damp walls, overcrowded barracks, and inadequate sanitation create an unhealthy environment. These factors weaken the body's ability to fight infections and make recovery slower. Access to clean water and proper sanitation facilities is also uneven. In some prisons, inmates must share a limited number of toilets and bathing areas. This increases the risk of infections, especially skin diseases and gastrointestinal problems. The lack of personal space adds to the difficulty. When people cannot maintain basic hygiene, they are left exposed to conditions that would not be acceptable anywhere else.

Medical care inside prisons often falls short of what is needed. Many correctional facilities do not have enough doctors, nurses, or trained health workers. In some places, a single doctor is responsible for hundreds or even thousands of inmates. This makes regular check ups almost impossible. Minor symptoms may go unnoticed or untreated until they become severe. By the time a patient receives proper care, the disease may have already progressed.

Delays in treatment are a common problem. Inmates may have to wait for days or weeks before seeing a medical professional. In cases where outside hospital care is required, administrative procedures can slow down the process. Security concerns, paperwork, and lack of transportation all contribute to delays. These delays can turn manageable conditions into serious health emergencies.

The spread of tuberculosis in Indian prisons is another example of how the system struggles to handle infectious diseases. Studies have shown that prisoners are far more likely to develop TB than people in the general population. The reasons are clear. Overcrowding, poor ventilation, and weak immunity create ideal conditions for the bacteria to spread. Once TB enters a prison, it can move quickly from one inmate to another. COVID 19 provided a stark reminder of how vulnerable prisons are during a health crisis. Several central jails reported large outbreaks during the pandemic. Social distancing was almost impossible to maintain. Isolation facilities were limited, and testing resources were stretched. The experience showed that prisons are not separate from society. When a disease spreads inside, it can also affect staff, visitors, and eventually the community outside.

The issue of mental health is closely linked to physical health. Life in prison can be stressful and isolating. Many inmates experience anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. When mental health is neglected, it can weaken the body's ability to cope with illness. A person who is mentally unwell may ignore symptoms or delay seeking help. This adds another layer to the health crisis.

Another important aspect is the large number of undertrial prisoners in India. Many individuals remain in jail for long periods while their cases are still pending. These people have not been convicted of any crime, but they live under the same conditions as convicted prisoners. Long stays in overcrowded prisons increase their exposure to health risks. Their prolonged presence also contributes to the problem of overcrowding.

The presence of foreign national inmates adds complexity to the situation. Language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of family support can make it harder for them to access medical care or communicate their needs. Their isolation within an already challenging environment can worsen both physical and mental health conditions.

Public health experts often point out that prisons should be seen as part of the broader health system. Diseases do not remain confined within prison walls. Staff members go home to their families. Inmates are released back into society. Visitors come and go. If a disease spreads inside a prison, it can easily move outside. Ignoring prison health is not only a moral issue but also a public health concern for the entire country.

The response to these challenges has been slow and uneven. There have been efforts to conduct health screening camps and improve facilities, but these measures are often temporary. Long term solutions require consistent invest-

ment, planning, and monitoring. Building new prisons, improving existing infrastructure, and increasing medical staff are necessary steps.

Reducing overcrowding is one of the most effective ways to improve prison health. This can be achieved through faster trials, use of bail for minor offences, and alternative forms of punishment such as community service. When fewer people are held in prisons, it becomes easier to maintain hygiene and provide proper care.

Regular health check ups and early detection of diseases are also important. Screening programs for tuberculosis and other infections can help identify cases before they spread. Vaccination campaigns and awareness programs can further reduce risks. Providing inmates with basic information about hygiene and health can empower them to take better care of themselves.

Training prison staff in basic healthcare practices can make a significant difference. Guards and administrators are often the first point of contact for inmates who feel unwell. If they are trained to recognize symptoms and respond quickly, many problems can be addressed at an early stage. This requires a shift in mindset where health is seen as a priority rather than an afterthought.

Improving sanitation and access to clean water is another essential step. Simple measures such as regular cleaning, proper waste disposal, and availability of soap and hygiene products can reduce the spread of infections. These changes may seem basic, but they have a powerful impact on overall health. Mental health support should not be ignored. Counseling services, recreational activities, and opportunities for social interaction can improve emotional well being. When inmates feel supported, they are more likely to report health issues and seek help. This creates a healthier environment for everyone.

The role of accountability cannot be overlooked. Authorities must be held responsible for the conditions inside prisons. Regular inspections, transparent reporting, and involvement of independent bodies can ensure that standards are maintained. Public awareness also plays a role. When society pays attention to prison conditions, there is greater pressure on authorities to act.

The story of the Jalpaiguri outbreak is a reminder that health crises in prisons are not sudden events. They are the result of long standing issues that have been ignored or underestimated. Each outbreak, each death, tells a story of missed opportunities to prevent suffering. It shows that neglecting prison health has real human consequences. Every prisoner is a human being with a life, a family, and a future. Their time in prison is meant to be a period of correction, not a sentence to illness or death. Ensuring their health is not an act of kindness but a duty of the state. It reflects the values of fairness and humanity that a society claims to uphold. There is a need for a more compassionate and practical approach to prison management. Health should be treated as a fundamental part of the system, not as an optional service. When prisons are healthier, they become safer for inmates, staff, and the community.

The crisis in India's prisons may not always make headlines, but it continues to affect thousands of lives every day. Addressing it requires attention, resources, and a willingness to see prisoners as people who deserve care and dignity. Change may take time, but it begins with recognizing that the health of those inside prison walls matters just as much as the health of those outside.

# Four-way segregation, landfill restrictions: Will India's new solid waste rules bring about change?

By: Jyotsnika Tiwari

India's environment ministry notified the new solid waste management rules of 2026 on January 27, superseding the 2016 rules. The new rules signal a shift towards a more systematic compliance architecture, with a clearer outline of duties for waste generators, a revised definition of Bulk Waste Generators, and higher landfill user fees for mixed waste to encourage segregation.

Well-intentioned as the new rules are, experts caution against gaps in implementation that have dogged solid waste management in India for decades.

Illustrating this are the towering landfills in New Delhi – Bhalaswa, Ghazipur and Okhla – symbols of the city's historical failure to segregate waste at source. Delhi leads all Indian cities, generating approximately 600 grams of waste per person per day.

Nearly 64% of the collected waste is processed, according to the Central Pollution Control Bureau, while the remaining 36% or 4,241 tonnes, find its way to unsanitary landfills, or dumpsites everyday.

These landfills and dumpsites are silent contributors to air pollution through the year as well as to greenhouse gas emissions and heat stress during the summers. Biomass and waste burning are the second largest contributors to particulate matter emissions in Delhi, contributing 23% to PM10 and 24% to PM2.5, according to

one source apportionment study.

When biodegradable waste accumulates and is left to rot, it produces methane, which has a warming potential 80 times greater than that of carbon dioxide, over a 20-year-period, and is the second-largest contributor to global warming. According to another study, higher temperature zones within the Ghazipur landfill are widening and reaching the surface, which is unsuitable.

"There are not many provisions in the new rules that directly address air pollution or heat stress, despite the clear link between waste burning, emissions and air quality," says Shrotrik Bose, Research Associate, Solid Waste Management and Circular Economy, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

## What the new rules say

The new rules, which come into effect on April 1, mandate four-way segregation of waste, marking a shift away from the three-way segregation system, which divided waste into dry, wet, and domestic hazardous waste. Now, waste must be segregated into dry, wet, sanitary and special care waste, which includes medicines, paint cans, bulbs, and mercury thermometers, among others.

Extended Bulk Waste Generator Responsibility is also introduced, to put a stricter focus on generators who produce more than 100 kg of waste or occupy more than 20,000 square meters of area, or consume more than 40,000 litres of water per day. Bulk waste generators make up 30% of total solid



waste generation and must either treat wet waste on-site, or send it to an appropriate facility and obtain an Extended Bulk Waste Generator Responsibility certificate as proof instead. Restrictions on landfills are strengthened, with only non-recyclable, non-energy recoverable waste and inert material being allowed and higher landfill fees prescribed for local bodies sending unsegregated waste to sanitary landfills.

Further, the rules mandate mapping and assessment of all legacy waste

dumpsites and provide for time-bound biomining and bioremediation. These are microorganism-based technologies – the former extracts metals from the waste and the latter helps break down toxic contaminants.

"I think the 2026 rules have addressed several gaps from the 2016 framework. The move to four-way segregation is a step up – it shows higher ambition, and that's always good to have. Overall, there is greater clarity now about who is responsible for what. The document has absorbed many lessons from the past decade. But ultimately, the real test will be implementation," says Lakshmi P, Head of Impact, Cleanhub, an environmental technology company focused on plastic waste collection.

A centralised online portal is being developed to track all stages of solid waste management, including waste generation, collection, transportation, processing at Material Recovery Facilities, and disposal. Urban local bodies are central to these operations.

According to Bose, whether the new framework and portal will improve the functioning of ULBs is unclear. "The real challenge lies in rewriting old agreements with waste processing facilities, registering them on the portal, and managing compliance at that scale," he says.

## Waste-to-energy plants

The new rules encourage circularity by restricting landfill dumping, but they still reinforce waste-to-energy plants as a permissible processing pathway for waste, despite longstanding concerns of their contribution to air pollution. An inspection by the Central

Pollution Control Board in response to the National Green Tribunal found the Okhla waste-to-energy incinerator releasing dioxins and furans, highly toxic carcinogens at levels almost 900% above permissible limits.

"In India, waste really has calorific value only after proper segregation. But once you segregate, the recycling industry is strong enough to absorb most of that material. The truly non-recyclable fraction is actually very small – maybe 5% to 10% by weight. At the same time, Extended Producer Responsibility and better product design are supposed to reduce non-recyclable plastics. So waste-to-energy, EPR, and recycling all end up attacking the same waste," says Lakshmi.

She adds, "WtE plants need to run for many years to become economically viable, which creates pressure to keep feeding them waste – often mixed waste. These plants operate at relatively low temperatures, meaning toxins such as dioxins and heavy metals are not effectively broken down. When located within or near cities, this can pose significant environmental and public health risks."

"It's a common misconception that technology can fix this," says Dr Ruby Makhija, an ophthalmologist and founder of the Why Waste Wednesdays Foundation that has been working to scale a zero waste to landfills model across Delhi-NCR. "No matter how advanced or expensive the machinery, it will fail if waste is not segregated at source. Nearly 70% of effective waste management depends on segregation, but this is not treated as an investment priority."

The new rules require waste-to-en-

ergy and cement plants to increase their Refuse Derived Fuel sources from 5% to 15% over a period of six years. RDF has been defined in the new rules as "Fuel produced by shredding and dehydrating municipal solid waste with high calorific value, primarily consisting of non-recyclable plastic, paper and textiles."

Health and waste management Despite mandates on paper, thousands of tonnes of mixed waste continue to reach landfills in Delhi due to weak enforcement, waiver of fines, and limited Resident Welfare Association budgets.

"In cities like Indore which have succeeded in mainstreaming segregation, it's because the state itself was involved in going door to door and creating awareness. Non profits are treated like partners. With the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, NGOs are not seen as partners but as dispensable actors," said Bharati Chaturvedi, founder and director of the Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, a Delhi-based advocacy group working on circularity and waste.

According to Makhija, closing the environmental and health gap in waste management requires less reliance on technological fixes and more on restoring accountability in the system. "If a person is being asked to segregate waste at home and they do it properly, there must be assurance that the system beyond them is already in place. What happens too often is that if residents segregate, when the collector arrives and mixes everything again, all that effort goes to waste. That completely erodes trust. At the same time, Urban Local Bodies collect user fees for waste management – but how many residents actually pay them?"

The consequences of mounting mixed waste is tangible. An accidental fire in Bhalaswa landfill in 2022 led concentrations of PM2.5 to increase by 45%-55%, while PM 10 rose by 40%-50% in the vicinity. Toxic nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, and sulphur dioxide levels rose between 25 and 100% too, illustrating how waste burning can trigger abrupt localised air pollution that rivals some of the city's worst smog events.

Until segregation and decentralised processing are backed by both institutional enforcement and individual responsibility, the fight against toxic air and rising heat will remain incomplete, says Makhija. "Waste does not disappear once it leaves the doorstep; it returns through the air people breathe, the water they drink, and the food grown in contaminated soil," she says. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)



## Billions for climate, but where is the justice? Cleaner Air in war zones? Is clean Air becoming a luxury in India?

By: Prachi Malik

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) was created in 2010 during the 16th Conference of Parties (CoP) of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to operationalise climate finance under the UNFCCC and now serves the Paris Agreement under Article 9. As the largest dedicated multilateral climate fund, it sits at the centre of global efforts to translate the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities into practice. However, the real question is not whether the GCF exists, but whether it is delivering climate justice. When assessed against criteria such as additionality, adequacy, balance between adaptation and mitigation, predictability, and broader climate justice dimensions, the record appears mixed. Several justice pillars shape climate finance. Distributive justice concerns fair allocation of climate costs based on equity, need, capacity, and responsibility. Procedural justice emphasises inclusive decision-making. Reparative justice addresses who should bear climate-related losses. Recognition justice values diverse affected communities. Intergenerational justice holds present generations accountable to future ones.

There have been several contestations with respect to how much climate finance has already been mobilised. This is where the controversy surrounding the \$100 billion target becomes relevant. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that the annual \$100 billion climate finance target was met in 2022. However, this claim has been widely contested. A substantial share of reported finance consists of loans. Loan-heavy finance shifts financial risk onto developing countries, burdening them further. Starting with Additionality. Climate finance was never meant to be a rebranded form of development assistance. It is grounded in historical responsibility and ecological debts. From a reparative justice perspective, climate finance should be new, in addition to existing aid commitments. If it simply replaces development assistance or is provided primarily through loans, its moral foundation weakens.

The Green Climate Fund performs better than many bilateral channels by providing a mix of grants and concessional finance, with a strong grant component for vulnerable countries. It maintains a balance between adaptation and mitigation funding, prioritises Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States, and strengthens country ownership through readiness support and direct access for national institutions. However, it does not operate in isolation from the broader political economy of climate finance. Ambiguities surrounding what constitutes ad-

ditional finance persist. If climate finance is indistinguishable from development assistance, accountability for historical emissions becomes blurred. In principle, the GCF supports additionality. In practice, however, its ability to fully realise reparative justice is constrained by the contribution patterns of donor states and systemic limitations in global finance.

The scale of climate needs far exceeds available finance, with estimates suggesting that around USD 1.3 trillion per year may be required by 2035 to adequately support mitigation and adaptation in developing countries. GCF prioritises least developed countries, small island developing states, and African states, directing a substantial share of resources toward Africa and the Asia-Pacific. This reflects an effort to address differentiated vulnerability and advance distributive and recognition justice. However, justice is not only about distribution; it is also about volume. The GCF relies on voluntary contributions and periodic replenishments. Even the most carefully designed allocation framework cannot compensate for insufficient total

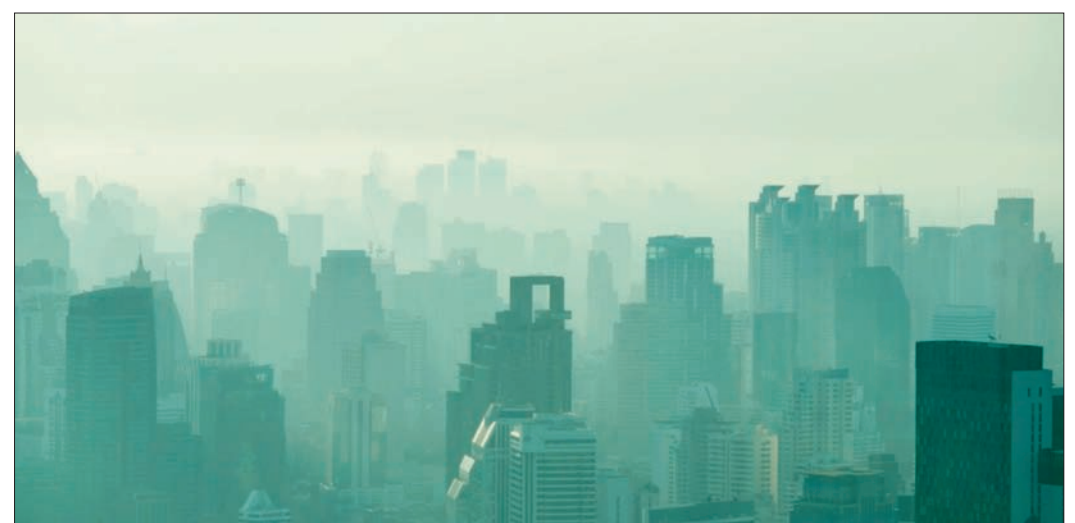


finance. The inadequacy of the \$100 billion goal became evident in negotiations leading to the New Quantified Goal (NQG) agreed at COP29 of UNFCCC. It calls for mobilising at least \$300 billion annually, within a broader ambition of scaling finance to \$1.3 trillion per year by 2035. This shift recognises that the previous target was materially inadequate. Yet it remains politically negotiated rather than legally binding. Without stronger accountability, transparent reporting, and a greater emphasis on grant-based finance, the structural weaknesses exposed under the \$100 billion regime may simply be carried forward. The balance between adaptation and mitigation is one area where the GCF is trying to promote a clearer justice orientation. The Fund is mandated to allocate 50 per cent of its resources to adaptation and 50 per cent to mitigation, with half of adaptation finance directed to particularly vulnerable countries. This structure acknowledges both present vulnerability and future risk. Adaptation finance advances distributive and recognition justice by supporting communities already facing climate impacts. Mitigation finance advances intergenerational justice by limiting harm to future generations. Further,

there has been limited participation by local communities in the decision making or if it is its mere tokenism. However, proportional balance alone does not guarantee justice. Adaptation needs in vulnerable regions often exceed available funding, and projects may remain incremental rather than transformative. According to scholars working in the domain of climate finance the funds disbursed are mostly generic in nature and are not tailor made for specific country realities. They are also not in proportion to the scale of vulnerability and are concentrated in few countries. If adaptation finance fails to match vulnerability levels, distributive justice is weakened. Similarly, global mitigation ambition remains insufficient, threatening intergenerational equity regardless of the GCF's internal allocation ratios. The justice implications of balance, therefore, depend on adequacy and effectiveness.

Developing countries require reliable and stable financial flows to plan long-term climate strategies and have stable climate investment planning. Predictable finance strengthens procedural justice by enabling sustained participation and country-driven planning. Although the GCF has expanded its portfolio, reliance on voluntary replenishments introduces uncertainty. Delays in pledges and disbursements affect implementation timelines and strategic planning. When finance is unpredictable, national climate programs fragment and long term adaptation planning suffers. This also weakens recognition and distributive justice by failing to respond consistently to urgent needs. The GCF represents a serious institutional attempt to embed justice principles within climate finance governance. Its country-driven model and adaptation-mitigation mandate reflect deliberate normative commitments. However, institutional design cannot compensate for structural political constraints. Ambiguities around additionality, insufficient overall finance, reliance on voluntary contributions, governance dominance by donors and limited predictability restrict its capacity to operationalise reparative, distributive, recognition, and intergenerational justice. Further limited participation of local communities continues to limit its effectiveness. The move toward a New Quantified Goal signals the acknowledgement that climate finance must be scaled up. Whether this acknowledgement translates into substantial implementation is something to be observed. The GCF advances climate justice in principle and partial practice. Whether it can fulfil that promise ultimately depends on political will and whether historical responsibility is treated not as rhetoric but as a binding obligation within the global climate finance regime. (Courtesy: The Pri-ner)

## Cleaner Air in war zones? Is clean Air becoming a luxury in India?



By: Anagha Krishnan

With escalating geopolitical tensions and situations in the world, we as Indians feel reassured and secured with the neutral stance of our country in international conflicts. We are happy that our motherland is not actively taking part in the war and geographical distance from active war zone created a perception of safety and security among the citizens.

However, the absence of war does not necessarily guarantee a high quality of life. Secured and good quality of life largely depends on access to basic necessities of clean air, safe drinking water and adequate food. Among these, clean air remains one of the most fundamental yet threatened resource.

Air quality is commonly measured through a tool called Air Quality Index (AQI) which shows how safe or unsafe our surrounding air is. The index categorizes air quality into six colour-coded levels based on concentration of pollution in the environment: Green (good, 0-50), Yellow (moderate, 51-100), Orange (sensitive/unhealthy, 101-150), Red (Unhealthy, 151-200), Purple (very unhealthy, 201-300) and Maroon (hazardous, 301 and above).

As of march 15th 2025, Tehran, capital of Iran, recorded an Air Quality Index (AQI) of 71. In contrast, New Delhi, Capital of India, recorded an AQI of 97. Despite being a developing country and currently going through a war situation, Iran still manages to have better air quality compared to India. Similar patterns can be observed when we look at other war-affected countries or regions affected by geopolitical conflicts. Jerusalem in Israel recorded an AQI of 89, while Kyiv in Ukraine reported an AQI of just 38.

Additionally, there are two important pollutants that heavily influence AQI levels, PM 2.5 and PM 10. PM 2.5 refers to particulate matter with a diameter of 2.5 micrometres. These extremely fine particles arise usually from combustion of fuels and wood. Because of their tiny size, they can penetrate

into lungs and enter bloodstream easily, thereby causing cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.

On the other hand, PM 10 is the particulate matter with diameter of 10 micrometres, which are generally produced from dust of soil, construction activities etc. Even though these particles are larger and often filtered by nose or throat, they still can cause respiratory issues. As of 15th march, 2025, Tehran recorded PM2.5 level of 22 µg/m³ and PM 10 at 41.

Jerusalem recorded PM 2.5 at 31 µg/m³ and PM 10 at 83. Kyiv, despite recent disruptions recorded PM 2.5 level at just 11 µg/m³ and PM 10 at 15. In contrast, New Delhi recorded PM 2.5 level at 34 µg/m³ and PM 10 at 41. This comparison of India's air quality indicators with countries that are affected by war raises an uncomfortable question about how we define safety and development.

These comparisons reveal a troubling paradox. Even though some of these regions are affected by recent wars or geopolitical tensions, their air quality indicators remain better than India. India may be shielded from the direct destruction of war, while millions of its citizens continue to breathe unhealthy polluted air every day.

Therefore, environmental degradation is a persistent threat to public health. This raises a deeper concern: has clean air become a luxury in India rather than a basic right? Air quality should not be a privilege available only to a certain geographical location or income group. It is a fundamental necessity for survival and well-being.

To address this challenge, a robust regulatory body should be established to foresee environmental governance and protection. The government must reinforce regulations, promote civic responsibility among citizens and strengthen institutional mechanisms that monitor and enforce environmental standards. A regulatory body dedicated to environmental protection and sustainability could play a crucial role in guiding India towards a healthier and more sustainable future. (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

# ₹ 1000 EPF pension a joke': Congress slams govt after Parliamentary panel report

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** The Congress on Wednesday attacked the government after a Parliamentary panel recommended an urgent review of the ₹ 1,000 minimum monthly pension under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995, and demanded that it must take concrete steps for redressal.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh, alleged that over the nearly 12-year tenure of the Modi government, many social security schemes have gradually weakened or have been deliberately undermined.

Even a basic facility like a pension has remained virtually unchanged for a long time, despite the rising inflation, he said in his post in Hindi.

"This has directly impacted the elderly and economically weaker pensioners, who are considered the most vulnerable sections of society. In the current era, when inflation has reached extreme levels due to the government's poor policies, healthcare costs and the prices of everyday essentials have skyrocketed, making the minimum EPF pension of 1000 rupees essentially a joke," Ramesh said.

He pointed out that the Parliament's Standing Committee has clearly stated in its report that the ₹ 1000 monthly pension provided under the 1995 pension scheme is completely inadequate in today's



context. The committee has recommended that the minimum pension be increased to a level that is appropriate for a livelihood and dignified living, he said.

"This is an issue connected to the social security and dignified life of millions of retired workers. It is hoped that following this report from the Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles, and Skill Development - chaired by a BJP Lok Sabha MP - the government will wake up and take concrete steps on this matter," Ramesh said.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, in its 15th report on 'Demands for Grants (2026-27)' of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, recommended an urgent, comprehensive

review of the ₹ 1,000 minimum monthly pension under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995, to raise it to a more realistic and dignified level.

This assumes significance in view of the pensioners' demand to raise the pension to ₹ 7,500 per month, as ₹ 1,000 is not sufficient to make both ends meet.

Pensioners under the Employees' Pension Scheme 1995 (EPS-95), run by the retirement fund body EPFO, had also staged a three-day protest at Jantar Mantar from March 9, for increasing the minimum monthly pension to ₹ 7,500.

The committee noted that the minimum pension of ₹ 1,000 per month under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995, has remained unchanged for a considerable pe-

riod of time despite the rising cost of living.

During the course of evidence, the committee observed that numerous representations have been received from pensioners seeking an upward revision of the minimum pension, particularly considering the financial hardships faced by elderly and economically vulnerable beneficiaries.

The committee further took note of the submission of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, stating that the Government of India is already extending financial support towards the scheme, including the contribution of 1.16 per cent for currently serving members of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation and the budgetary support provided for ensuring the minimum pension of ₹ 1,000 per month.

However, the committee stated that it is of the considered view that the existing minimum pension amount is inadequate to meet even the basic needs of pensioners, particularly in the present economic scenario marked by inflation and rising health care and living expenses.

The committee, therefore, recommend that the ministry undertake an urgent and comprehensive review of the minimum pension under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995, with a view to enhancing it to a more realistic and dignified level. (PTI)

# Cabinet clears ₹ 33,660-cr BHAVYA scheme to accelerate industrial development

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** In order to boost manufacturing, the government on Wednesday approved ₹ 33,660 crore Bharat Audyogik Vikas Yojna (BHAVYA) to develop 100 plug-and-play industrial parks across the country.

The scheme aims to develop world-class industrial infrastructure, unlocking manufacturing potential and driving India's growth story, Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said while briefing reporters on Cabinet decisions.

The Cabinet meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the BHAVYA scheme, which is expected to generate about 15 lakh direct jobs.

Under the scheme, industrial parks ranging from 100 to 1,000 acres will be taken up for the development with financial support of up to ₹ 1 crore per acre.

These parks will have core infrastructure like internal roads, underground utilities, drainage, common treatment facilities, ICT and administrative systems.

Besides, there would be value-added infrastructure like ready-built factory sheds, built-to-suit units, testing labs, warehousing and social infrastructure, including houses for workers and other amenities.

Moreover, he said, support for external infrastructure will also be provided up to 25 per cent of the project cost, ensuring seamless connectivity and integration with existing networks.



Project selection will be undertaken through a challenge mode, ensuring that only high-quality, reform-oriented and investment-ready proposals are taken forward.

Building on the success of Industrial Smart Cities developed under the National Industrial Corridor Development Programme (NICDP) framework, Vaishnaw said BHAVYA will be implemented in partnership with states and private sector players.

At the heart of BHAVYA lies a strong push for deregulation and ease of doing business, with streamlined approvals, effective single-window systems, and investor-friendly reforms led by states.

The scheme will deliver plug-and-play industrial ecosystems, enabling industries to move from intent to production with speed and certainty, he said.

With pre-approved land, ready infrastructure, and integrated services, BHAVYA will significantly reduce entry barriers for investors,

he added. The proposed industrial parks will be developed as future-ready and sustainable ecosystems. They will be aligned with the PM GatiShakti principles to ensure seamless multimodal connectivity and efficient last-mile access.

The parks will promote green energy and sustainable resource utilisation, supported by integrated underground utility corridors that enable a 'no-dig' environment.

This will facilitate efficient maintenance and ensure uninterrupted industrial operations.

Overall, these parks aim to set new benchmarks in industrial infrastructure by enhancing reliability, reducing inefficiencies, and boosting productivity across sectors.

The BHAVYA scheme is expected to generate large-scale employment, creating significant direct and indirect job opportunities across manufacturing, logistics, and services while attracting substantial investments.

The initiative will be implemented across all states and Union Territories, generating lakhs of employment opportunities nationwide and accelerating industrial growth.

By promoting cluster-based development and enabling the co-location of industries, suppliers, and service providers, BHAVYA will strengthen domestic supply chains, encourage regional industrialisation, and open up new opportunities for millions. (PTI)

## Expelled TMC leader Humayun Kabir's party to contest 182 seats

**KOLKATA, March 18:** Former TMC leader Humayun Kabir on Wednesday announced the first list of 15 candidates of his newly floated Am Janata Unnayan Party, declaring that the outfit will contest 182 seats in the West Bengal assembly elections and field a Muslim candidate against Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in the high-profile Bhabanipur constituency.

Kabir, who was expelled from the TMC last year, has remained in the spotlight in recent months over his plan to construct a mosque modelled on the Babri Masjid in Murshidabad district, a move that had triggered sharp political reactions in the state.

Addressing a press conference, Kabir said, "We are giving candidates in 182 seats. Today, we are announcing nominees for Malda and Murshidabad. The full list will be announced on Sunday around 1 pm."

The former TMC leader also indicated that the AIMIM, in coordination with his party, is likely to contest a few seats.

In a move likely to add another dimension to the already crowded Bhabanipur contest, Kabir said his party would field Poonam Begum, a non-Bengali Muslim candidate, against Banerjee in the south Kolkata seat.

The constituency is expected to witness one of the fiercest battles of the election, with Banerjee facing Leader of Opposition Suvendu Adhikari of the BJP, reviving the political rivalry that defined the 2021 assembly polls.

The contest has quickly acquired the character of a prestige battle, not merely for a seat in the Assembly but for political supremacy in a state where the rivalry between the two leaders has come to symbolise the broader TMC-BJP confrontation. (PTI)

## Cong high command will decide by-poll candidates: CM Siddaramaiah

**BENGALURU, March 18:** Amid hectic lobbying, Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday said the selection of candidates for the April 9 assembly bypolls to Bagalkote and Davanagere Assembly constituencies will be decided by the Congress high command, with consultations underway based on ground reports.

He said a team has already visited both constituencies and a final call will be taken after discussions with senior leaders, including Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar and Congress general secretary and Karnataka in-charge Randeep Singh Surjewala.

"Whether it is Bagalkote or Davanagere, that is a decision to be taken by the high command. Randeep Singh Surjewala is coming to Karnataka on Friday... A team visited Davanagere yesterday and also went to Bagalkote. They will submit a report. Based on that report, I will discuss with Shivakumar and speak to Surjewala before sending my recommendation," Siddaramaiah told reporters.

Addressing the internal contest for tickets, particularly in Bagalkote, the CM said multiple aspirants from the Meti family have been asked to remain united.



"Three members from the Meti family had sought the ticket—Mallikarjun, Umesh, and Mahadevi. I have told all three of them that whoever is given the ticket, all of you must work together in unity," he said, adding that they have agreed to the proposal.

On reports of possible rebellion by one of the aspirants, Siddaramaiah downplayed the claims, saying, "I don't know about that... They have agreed with me," while clarifying that he

had not asked them to hold any joint press conference.

Meanwhile, Shivakumar, who is also the Congress Karnataka unit president, indicated that consultations are ongoing and a report has been submitted to the party leadership. Referring to the situation in Davanagere, he said several aspirants, including family members, have staked claim.

"I have submitted a report. I have discussed with the Chief Minister... Around 80 family members were called for discussions today. Various aspirants have met me... I will submit my report to the high command, and a decision will be taken within a couple of days," he told reporters in Delhi, noting that time is short with elections scheduled on April 9.

The bypolls were necessitated following the deaths of sitting Congress MLAs Shannur Shivashankarappa and H Y Meti, which resulted in vacancies in the Davanagere South and Bagalkote Assembly segments respectively.

The bypolls are likely to witness a keen contest, with the ruling Congress aiming to retain both constituencies while opposition parties prepare to mount a strong challenge. (PTI)

## 'Legal profession tainted by hooliganism': SC slams lawyers in UP toll plaza case

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** The Supreme Court has come down heavily on members of the Barabanki District Bar Association in Uttar Pradesh for vandalising a toll plaza and ransacking a fellow advocate's office after he appeared for the toll employees, saying that legal profession is now tainted by such acts of "hooliganism".

On January 14, five persons allegedly assaulted advocate Ratnesh Shukla, a resident of Pratapgarh, during a dispute over the passage of a car at the toll plaza in Haidergarh tehsil.

The incident triggered protests, with a large number of advocates gathering at the toll plaza on the Lucknow-Sultanpur stretch of National Highway 731 and forcing a shutdown of operations.

Later, a resolution was passed and circulated within the local Bar to the effect that no advocate would represent the accused persons.

Despite the resolution, advocate Manoj Shukla filed a bail application on behalf of the accused and thereafter, the members of the Bar resorted to unruly behaviour and the office furniture of the said advocate was set on fire, and his effigy was also burnt. The accused then filed a petition before the top court seeking bail as no lawyer was ready to represent them in the trial court and also sought transfer of trial.

A bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta condemned the role of the members of the Bar at Barabanki, who indulged into "hooliganism" by damaging the furniture etc. of the advocate, who had filed the bail application on behalf of the petitioners. "The facts noted reveal a very sorry state of affairs. The legal profession, which was once regarded as a noble profession, has clearly been tainted and tarnished by the acts of hooliganism perpetrated pursuant to the fracas which took place at the toll plaza on January 14, 2026. "We can understand the sentiment of fraternity amongst the lawyers but that, by no means, can justify the acts of violence and lawlessness which ensued when a brave lawyer came forward to defend the accused. These deplorable acts of hooliganism deserve to be deprecated. The disciplinary body, i.e., the Bar Council of India is expected to take appropriate steps in this regard," the bench said. (PTI)

## Cabinet approves ₹ 2,585 cr scheme for small hydro projects, to offer up to ₹ 3.6 cr/MW aid

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** The Centre on Wednesday decided to provide up to 30 per cent of the project cost, or up to ₹ 3.6 crore per MW, in aid for small hydro projects under a new ₹ 2,585 crore scheme for the development of about 1,500 MW clean energy capacity.

The Union Cabinet, in its meeting on Wednesday, cleared the Small Hydro Power Development Scheme with an outlay of ₹ 2,585 crore for five years from 2026-27 to 2030-31, an official statement said.

The scheme is expected to attract about ₹ 15,000 crore in investment in small hydro projects of up to 25 MW capacity.

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the 'Small Hydro Power (SHP) Development Scheme for period FY 2026-27 to FY 2030-31' with an outlay of ₹ 2,584.60 crore for installation of SHP projects of an approximate capacity of 1500 MW, the statement said.

The scheme will support small hydro projects (between 1-25 MW capacity) to come up in different states and will especially benefit hilly and North Eastern states with high potential for such projects.

In North Eastern States and in districts with international border, central financial assistance to the tune of ₹ 3.6 crore per MW or 30 per cent of the project cost,

whichever is lower, with an upper limit of ₹ 30 crore per project will be available, it stated.

In other states, ₹ 2.4 crore per MW or 20 per cent of project cost, whichever is lower, with a cap of ₹ 20 crore per project, would be available.

This will help in tapping the small hydro potential in remote and difficult-to-reach locations.

An amount of ₹ 2,532 crore has been earmarked for such projects.

This is likely to bring in ₹ 15,000 crore of investment in the small hydro sector giving a boost to the clean energy initiative, investment in remote and rural areas and creating significant employment opportunities, it stated. (PTI)

## Massive vacancy, backlog of over 5L consumer cases impacting grievance redressal: Study

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** Massive vacancy and mounting case backlog of more than five lakh are undermining the effectiveness of the consumer grievance redressal system in the country, a first-of-its-kind report based on assessment of functioning of consumer courts from 2021 to 2025 said.

More than half the posts of presidents and members in the state consumer disputes redressal commissions (SCDRC) remain vacant, the Consumer Justice Report prepared by the India Justice Report (IJR) said.

The report said that between 2020 and 2024, the pendency of cases increased by 21 per cent, from 87,545 to 5.15 lakh.

While the Consumer Protection Act mandates cases to be resolved "as expeditiously as possible" within a timeline of 3-5 months, the report found that more than one-third of cases remained unresolved for over three years, far exceeding the mandated timeline.

In Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir and Jharkhand, more than two in three cases (70 to 80 per cent) were pending for more than three years, it said.

Releasing the report, former Supreme Court judge Justice S K Kaul lamented the massive vacancy crisis and mounting case pendency, and said these are eroding

the confidence of consumers in the redressal mechanism.

"The will of Parliament is reflected in legislation, but if the legislation is made non-functional, the will is also defeated. The Consumer Protection Act, 2019, was expected to improve consumer protection capacity in the country.

"But it is concerning to find that more than half of the president and member positions in state commissions are vacant, and not all districts have formed district commissions... It erodes the confidence of consumers in grievance redressal in the consumer commissions," he said.

According to the report, consumers are mostly hassled and aggrieved about the deficiency in service, especially in insurance, housing and banking sectors.

The report, based on public data obtained through Right to Information and parliamentary replies, found that as of 2025, about half of the state commissions and one-third of the district commissions lacked a sitting president, while nearly 40 per cent of the 159 sanctioned member posts were vacant.

Seven SCDRCs - Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Arunachal Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh - had more than 60 per cent vacancy among member positions, it said.



Notably, Arunachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh had recorded no members in their SCDRCs, it said.

Out of data provided by 20 SCDRCs, only 10 - Haryana, Kerala, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Delhi - had a president throughout the last five years, the report said.

There is a rising trend with regard to vacant president posts in the state commissions, which increased from only two SCDRCs functioning without a president in 2021 to 10 in 2025, it said.

## Memorial honours soldiers lost in 2023 glacial flood and past operations Sikkim governor inaugurates Prerna Sthal, recalls soldiers' sacrifices



**GANGTOK, March 18:** Sikkim Prerna Sthal, a memorial honouring 22 Indian Army personnel who lost their lives in the Glacial Lake Outburst Flood in October 2023, was inaugurated by Governor Om Prakash Mathur at Bardang, around 29 km from Gangtok, on Wednesday.

The memorial was conceptu-

alised by the governor's secretary and executed by the Indian Army in collaboration with the state government and with CSR support from the Cello Foundation.

The site also bears the names of 294 fallen soldiers from 13 operations along Sikkim's borders and is part of the Centre's 'Rannbhoomi Darshan' initiative aimed at pro-

moting battlefield tourism, including locations such as Dokala and Cho La tourist viewpoints.

Addressing the gathering, Mathur said that while people are largely aware of the 1962 Indo-China war, many are unaware of the sacrifices made by Indian soldiers during the 1967 clashes.

"With this tribute to our brave

fallen, we will let the world know how much blood was spilt on the borders of Nathula, Cho La and Dokala," he said.

He said, "Today is a great day not only for Sikkim, but the entire nation, as it is the day when we pay respect to the fallen who fought wars on Sikkim's borders with grit and determination and did not even give a single inch of land to the Chinese. Today, we salute those brave souls."

General Officer Commanding (GOC), Black Cat Division, Major General MS Rathore said the inauguration symbolised courage, camaraderie and patriotism.

"This memorial is a testament to the lives lost for the unity and security of the country. All those who pass through Bardang will feel the spirit of national integration and remember the sacrifices of our brave soldiers," he said.

The memorial complex includes a holistic healing park, an audiovisual hall showcasing Sikkim's military history, a cafeteria and other public facilities.

DGP Akshay Sachdeva and family members of the fallen soldiers were among those present at the event. (PTI)

## UNC questions NIA probe in Ukhrul incident

Naga body alleges selective approach by Manipur government

**IMPHAL, March 18:** The United Naga Council (UNC), the apex Naga body in Manipur, said that, whilst discouraging all forms of killings and ethnic confrontations, it was deeply concerned and constrained to question the motive behind the Government of Manipur's decision to transfer the case of Thawai, Ukhrul, incident, involving the death of two individuals, whose identity are in questioned to the National Investigation Agency (NIA). "This move appears selective and biased, given the numerous incidents of violence and murder cases which have not been transferred to NIA ever since the outbreak of mayhem from May 3, 2023 till date", said the UNC.

In a statement made available to Newmai News Network late tonight, the UNC said, "The selective approach raises serious concerns about the government's intentions and motives".

The Naga body then asked, "Does it imply that the state machinery is unable to investigate these cases impartially?" adding, "If so, all pending cases related to ethnic conflicts or any criminal



cases in the state should be transferred to NIA, not just selective ones. It's unjust to cherry-pick cases, undermining the principles of fairness and justice".

The UNC then said the Naga people have been playing a pivotal role in supporting the present government's efforts to restore peace and stability amidst the conflict, despite threats and challenges. "Yet, Nagas are given step-motherly treatment by the present government in reciprocity to their sincere support and efforts", it added.

The UNC also said, "If the Government of Manipur misconstrues our sincere support and understanding as weakness, Nagas can also play otherwise too" and urged the government to reconsider its decision and ensure impartial investigations into all cases without discrimination and prejudice.

The UNC then warned that "any threat to one Naga individual or a village on the issue of land and identity shall be considered as a threat to all Nagas". (NNN)

## Nagaland village councils asked to select new members by April 15

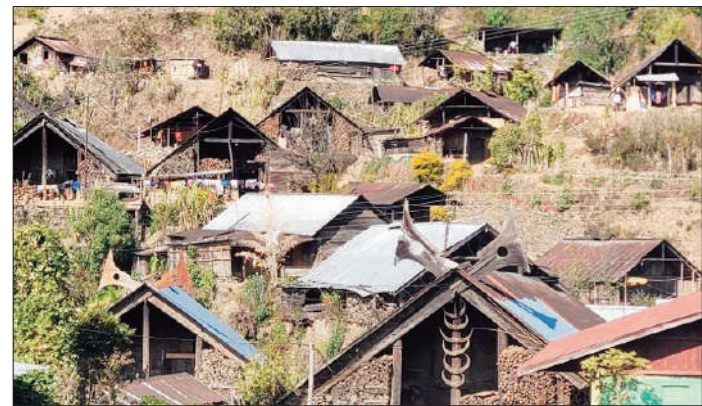
HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, March 18:** The district administrations of Nagaland have directed the village councils to initiate the process for the selection of their new members for the tenure 2026-2031.

A notification issued in this regard follows directives from the Nagaland government, including a communication from the commissioner dated March 10 and a separate notification from the home department (general administration branch-I) dated March 9.

According to the notification, the entire process must be completed before April 15, and the proposed list of members must be submitted to the office of the respective DCs through the respective area administrative officers.

The Dimapur DC's office said the selection process is to be carried out in accordance with the provisions of the Nagaland Village and Tribal Councils Act, 1978 and the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Rules, 1979, while adher-



ing to prevailing customary practices of the respective villages.

All concerned villages have been asked to ensure that the selection process is conducted strictly as per the prescribed rules and regulations. The proposed list of newly selected village council members is to be submitted on or before April 15, 2026, in the prescribed format.

The prescribed format for submission requires details such as the name of the village, date of the vil-

lage meeting, and a list of selected members along with their personal details, signatures, or thumb impressions.

Villages are also required to enclose documents, including meeting proceedings and attendance records, along with certification by the head gaon burah (village head) confirming that the selection was conducted in accordance with customary practices and legal provisions.

**SHILLONG, March 18:** Seven activists based in Meghalaya have sought the intervention of Meghalaya Governor CH Vijayashankar for tightening constitutional safeguards for the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC), proposing that only Garo Scheduled Tribe members contest council polls and that electoral rolls and land rules be revised to keep control with indigenous residents.

In a memorandum submitted on Tuesday, Greneth M Sangma, Shiva Sangma, Flaming Marak, Emanuel Ch Marak, Cherian Momin, Brown M Marak, and Nilbert Ch Marak argued that the participation of non-tribal persons in elections in Garo Hills, their inclusion on electoral rolls and the potential alienation of tribal land through transfer of pattas threaten the Sixth Schedule framework.

"This legal memorandum is respectfully submitted seeking the kind intervention of your Excellency to protect the constitutional safeguards granted to the indigenous tribal communities of Garo Hills under Article 244(2) and the Sixth Schedule," they wrote, noting the Governor's supervisory authority.

They cited *Samatha v. Andhra Pradesh* (1997) and *Orissa Mining Corporation* (2013) for the principle that tribal land and governance rights must be shielded from erosion.

Their proposed safeguards include restricting council candidature to Garo tribals, requiring candidates to be bona fide citizens of Meghalaya or persons born within the state, ordering



a Special Intensive Revision of GHADC rolls, deleting non-tribal names where inclusion "undermines the constitutional intent", barring the transfer of pattas held by non-tribals except by inheritance and prohibiting the sale of tribal land to non-tribals in plains belt areas.

"The Sixth Schedule represents a unique constitutional experiment aimed at protecting the identity, land and governance systems of tribal

communities," the memorandum said.

"Your Excellency's timely intervention will greatly strengthen the constitutional safeguards protecting the indigenous Garo people and preserve the foundational objectives of the Sixth Schedule." The activists requested the Governor to consider the memorandum and take "appropriate constitutional and administrative action." (NNN)

## NU scholar, faculty receive with Best Paper awards at intl meet



HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, March 18:** A research scholar and a faculty member of Nagaland University received recognition at the XIX annual conference of the East Himalayan Society for Spermatophyte Taxonomy (EHSST) and the international seminar on "Taxonomy, Biodiversity Conservation, Traditional Knowledge and Sustainable Utilisation of Plant Resources" at the University of Calcutta recently, a varsity release said on Wednesday.

Imnajungla, a research scholar in the department of botany, Nagaland University, under the supervision of Dr Viheno Iralu, was awarded the Best Paper Presentation on the theme "Ethnobotany and Evaluation of Traditional Knowledge" for her paper titled "Biocultural Conservation of Indigenous Wild Fruit Trees: Tradi-

tional Knowledge and Folk Narratives in Rangangk Community Forest, Nagaland".

Dr Imtilila Jing, faculty member in the same department, also received the Best Paper Presentation award under the theme "Biodiversity Assessment, Conservation and Application" for her study on "Phenology of Three Selected Species of Genus *Rhododendron* L. (Ericaceae) of Nagaland."

These achievements gave a boost to research on biodiversity conservation and traditional knowledge systems, academic engagement and collaboration to promote ecological sustainability and community-based bioresource conservation in Nagaland.

The University of Calcutta organised the two seminars in collaboration with Mushroom Biotech and the Botanical Survey of India (BSI).

## Storms, rain cause damage to houses, infrastructure in parts of Nagaland

**KOHIMA, March 18:** Storms accompanied with rain wreaked havoc in parts of Nagaland, affecting at least 46 families and causing damage to infrastructure, an official said on Wednesday.

A damage report released by the Nagaland State Disaster Management Authority (NSDMA) on Wednesday said at least 31 families in Chumoukedima district and 15 families in Peren district have been affected by strong winds and rain in the last few days.

Damage to multiple houses and electric poles have also been reported, it said.

In Mon district, a government school at Totok Chingha suffered significant damage, including disruption of the mid-day meal programme, the NSDMA said.

The NSDMA had earlier issued an advisory, warning of thunderstorms, lightning and strong winds across Nagaland from March 17-21.

While no fatalities have been reported so far, authorities said damage assessments are ongoing and additional reports are awaited from various districts. (PTI)



## Mizoram govt asks deputy commissioners to be on alert amid forecast of rain, hailstorms

**AIZAWL, March 18:** The Department of Disaster Management and Rehabilitation in Mizoram has issued an advisory, asking all deputy commissioners to be on alert, after hailstorms and heavy rain lashed several parts of the state in the last few days.

The department mandated the immediate activation of all District Emergency Operation Centres (DEOCs) to coordinate rapid response efforts.

According to the weather office, light to moderate rainfall accompanied by thunderstorms, lightning and gusty winds is likely to occur over the northeast during March 13-19.

The prevailing weather system may result in intermittent rainfall, thunderstorms and hailstorms at isolated to scattered locations across Mizoram over the coming days, it said.

The advisory asked all deputy commissioners "to enter a state of heightened preparedness".

"Residents and commuters should prepare for localised waterlogging, slippery roads and potential traffic gridlock," it said. Officials have also been instructed to extend immediate financial aid to families affected by the recent hailstorms. (PTI)



## MoU signed to strengthen drone ecosystem in Nagaland NGISRSC, Droneverse partner for training and innovation

HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, March 18:** The Nagaland GIS & Remote Sensing Centre (NGISRSC) and Droneverse Aviation Pvt Ltd have signed an MoU to strengthen the drone ecosystem in Nagaland.

During the signing of the agreement in Kohima on Tuesday, Pawan Khatri, CEO, Droneverse Aviation Pvt Ltd, said this strategic partnership marks a significant milestone in strengthening and advancing the drone ecosystem in Nagaland.

The collaboration underscores a shared commitment to capacity building, innovation, and the promotion of emerging technologies in the state, an official statement said on Wednesday.

Under the MoU, NGISRSC and Droneverse Aviation Pvt Ltd will jointly implement both DGCA-compliant and

non-DGCA drone training programmes.

These programmes will be delivered through certified instructors from both organisations, ensuring high-quality training aligned with national standards and industry requirements.

The collaboration will also focus on knowledge exchange, expert engagement and joint Research & development initiatives, including advanced and AI-enabled drone applications.

Droneverse Aviation Pvt Ltd will serve as the key industry partner, bringing in strong industry linkage, technical expertise and placement support for trained candidates.

The agreement is expected to enhance employment opportunities and foster entrepreneurship among the youth of Nagaland.



# India drawn with defending champions China in Thomas and Uber Cups

**NEW DELHI, March 18:** The Indian men's and women's teams were handed a challenging draw alongside defending champions China on Wednesday for the 2026 Thomas and Uber Cup, to be held in Horsens, Denmark, from April 24 to May 3.

Both the Indian teams are seeded eighth in the tournament based on their individual players world rankings. The draw was announced by Badminton World Federation (BWF) on Wednesday.

The 2022 Thomas Cup champions India will be favourites to claim one of the two quarterfinals spots from Group A that also comprises Pan Am champions Canada and Oceania champions Australia.

The women's team, however, has a slightly tricky road to the knockout stages as it is clubbed with European team champions runners up Denmark and bronze medallists Ukraine besides 16-time champions China.

"We have got a decent draw and a chance to reach the quarterfinals in both the Thomas Cup and Uber Cup competition. We have a strong team that has proved that they can beat any top team on their day and after reaching the quarterfinals anything is possible," said Badminton Association of India (BAI) secretary general Sanjay Mishra while responding to the draw for the prestigious team championships.



While the Indian men created history by winning the 2022 edition of the Thomas Cup, the women's squad has won the bronze medal in 2014 and 2016 editions.

India lost to China in the quarterfinals of the last edition in 2024.

The Indian women bowed out in the quarterfinals after losing to Japan in the previous edition. China boast of a formidable men's line-up with Shi Yu Qi (world No. 2) and Li Shi Feng (No. 7), Weng Hong Yang (No. 17) and Lu Guang Zu (No. 18) in their ranks.

India however, will draw confidence from Lakshya Sen's recent form as the Paris

terfinals after losing to Japan in the previous edition. China boast of a formidable men's line-up with Shi Yu Qi (world No. 2) and Li Shi Feng (No. 7), Weng Hong Yang (No. 17) and Lu Guang Zu (No. 18) in their ranks.

India however, will draw confidence from Lakshya Sen's recent form as the Paris

Olympic semi-finalist stunned Feng en route to a runner-up finish at the All-England Championships earlier this month.

India created history in 2022 by winning their maiden Thomas Cup title in Bangkok, becoming only the sixth nation to lift the trophy after a 3-0 win over 14-time champions Indonesia in the final.

India qualified for the 2026 Thomas Cup through their position in the BWF men's team rankings following the Badminton Asia Team Championships.

The women's team also secured their Uber Cup berth via the world rankings.

A total of 16 teams -- divided into four groups of four -- will play round robin league with each tie consisting of five matches (three singles and two doubles).

The top two teams from each group will make the quarter-finals.

**Thomas Cup Draw**

**Group A:** China, India, Canada, Australia; **Group B:** Japan, Malaysia, England, Finland; **Group C:** Chinese Taipei, Denmark, Korea, Sweden; **Group D:** Indonesia, France, Thailand, Algeria.

**Uber Cup Draw**

**Group A:** China, India, Denmark, Ukraine; **Group B:** Japan, Malaysia, Turkey, South Africa; **Group C:** Chinese Taipei, Indonesia, Canada, Australia; **Group D:** Korea, Thailand, Bulgaria, Spain. (PTI)

# KASA FC leaves for Kerala for IWF-2



**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, March 18:** The Karbi Anglong Sports Association Football Club (KASAF) women's team held its final practice session on Wednesday at KASA Stadium ahead of the upcoming Indian Women's League 2 (IWL-2), organised by the All India Football Federation (AIFF), which begins on March 20 in Thrissur, Kerala.

The team will depart for Kerala on Wednesday night and is scheduled to play its opening match against HOPS FC, Delhi, on March 22. KASAF is led by manager Kabonmili Tissopi, head coach Horen Engti Kathar and assisted coach Rustom Engti, with Dr Ruptalin Beipi serving as team physiotherapist.

Placed in Group B, KASAF will compete alongside Kerala United FC (hosts), HOPS FC, DKR Football Academy and Krida Prabodhini Pune. This marks the third edition of the second tier of the Indian women's football league system, to be held from March 20 to 29 across two centralised venues in Kerala and Karnataka.

A total of 14 teams are participating, divided into three groups—two groups of five teams each and one group of four. The top two teams from each group will advance to the final round, with the top two overall teams earning promotion to the 2026-27 Indian Women's League.

Group A matches will be held at the Padukone-Dravid Centre for Sports Excellence in Bengaluru and feature Roots FC (hosts), Odisha FC, Mumbai Knights FC, DFA Raisen and Juba Sangha FC. Group C includes Kemp FC (hosts), MGM Ambush FC, FC Imphal and Suruchi Sangha FC. Speaking during the practice

session, head coach Kathar said the team is representing not only Assam but the entire Northeast and sought public support. "The last 20 days of intense practice have built confidence among the players. I am hopeful the team will perform well in the league," he said. He added that most players are from Karbi Anglong, with others from different districts, as well as recruits from West Bengal, Sikkim and Meghalaya.

Team captain Sonia Marak expressed confidence in the squad's preparedness, stating that the players are ready to give their best performance. Pronita Limbu from Sikkim described the training as rigorous and highlighted the strong team spirit, while West Bengal player Milu Tirki said she had adapted well to the environment and team dynamics.

KASA general secretary Dr Pankaj Teron extended his best wishes to the team, calling their participation a proud moment for Assam and the Northeast. He noted that KASAF qualified for IWL-2 as champions of the Assam Women's League and expressed hope for a strong showing in the tournament. He also thanked Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) Chief Executive Member and KASA president Dr Tuliram Ronghang for his continued support in promoting sports in the region.

The team's official jersey for IWL-2 was also unveiled by Dr Teron in the presence of coaching staff and KASA officials.

KASAF will play its second match on March 26 against Krida Prabodhini Pune, followed by fixtures against DKR Football Academy on March 28 and hosts Kerala United FC on March 30.

## Teen Indian footballer Joya finally allays mother's concerns



**NEW DELHI, March 18:** When 14-year-old Joya's volley hit the net deep in stoppage time to seal India U-17 Women's dramatic 3-2 comeback win against Myanmar in Yangon on March 14, it marked a moment she will remember for a long time.

Coming off the bench in only her second international appearance for the U17 women's national team, the young striker delivered the decisive goal and celebrated by immediately calling the person who had supported her the most -- her mother.

For Joya, the journey to that moment began in the narrow streets of her village. Growing up in Phagwara, Punjab, she first picked up football while watching boys play in the neighbourhood.

"My mother was a bit worried at first. Football was not something many girls played back then. But she was later very supportive once she understood how passionate I am towards the game," said Joya.

"I need to thank my coaches Hardeep Singh, who helped me take my first step towards football in Phagwara, and Sandeep Singh, who trained me at the Shaheed Bhagat Singh Academy in Hoshiarpur. Without their early guidance, I would not have made it here."

Her first real exposure to competitive football came in 2024 when she participated in the U15 Khelo India Women's Football League. "That was my first experience of playing competitive matches at that level," she recalled.

The tournament opened a new world for the young forward.

Soon after, Joya's performances helped her earn a call-up to the national camp in Bengaluru earlier this year. Training alongside some of the country's best young players under head coach Pamela Conti was a transformative experience.

"It was my first time in the national camp, and the training was at a very high level. Playing under an experienced coach (Conti) who has both played and coached in World Cups, and sharing the dressing room with players from around the country gave me a lot of exposure to how international football works and how players prepare," she said.

The preparation paid off in Yangon. When she was sent on as a substitute late in the match, Joya focused on the instructions given by the coaching staff and seized her moment. Scoring the winning goal made the occasion even more special.

The hosts led at the end of the first half through Hnin Wint War Kyaw (12') and Min Htone May Zitar (45'), who netted on either side of Alva Devi Senjam's (33') equaliser.

Deep in the second half, India's substitutes Anushka Kumari (88') and Joya (90+1') scored to complete a remarkable comeback win. (PTI)

## PSG's Kvaratskhelia and Barcola punish Chelsea again in Champions League

**LONDON, March 18:** Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Bradley Barcola punished Chelsea again in the last 16 of the Champions League.

They both scored in a 3-0 away win that sent defending champion Paris Saint-Germain into the quarterfinals with an 8-2 aggregate win.

And PSG's victory was sealed with a clinical goal from 19-year-old Senny Mayulu, highlighting the strength of PSG's youth academy. He scored the fifth goal in the 5-0 rout of Inter Milan in the Champions League final last year.

"We did almost everything well, we defended well and attacked with the abilities we have," PSG coach Luis Enrique said. "We controlled the game (and) I think we counter-attacked very well."

After scoring two late goals in the first leg, Kvaratskhelia put PSG ahead in the sixth minute following a blunder from Chelsea center back Mamadou Sarr.

The 20-year-old Senegal international failed to deal with a routine long pass and Kvaratskhelia took the ball off him before beating goalkeeper Robert Sánchez with a low shot.

"It was amazing. To score three goals away to Chelsea is very good," Kvaratskhelia said.

"The important (thing) is that we continue to play very good." Barcola, who scored the opener in the first leg against Chelsea, kept his place in attack despite Kvaratskhelia's return to the starting lineup.

Luis Enrique made a strong call in dropping Désiré Doué — who starred with two goals and an assist when PSG routed Inter.

Barcola made it 2-0 in the 15th minute at Stamford Bridge with a brilliant improvised finish. He collected a pass from right back Achraf Hakimi on the edge of the penalty and curled the ball into the top left corner with the outside of his right foot.

Barcola could have scored again late in the first half when he made a blistering run from deep but saw his shot saved by Sánchez.

Mayulu beat Sánchez with a superb first-time finish from the edge of the penalty area in the 62nd.

PSG's attacking performance was so strong that Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembélé could afford to have a quiet game by his standards. He was taken off midway through the second half.



Kvaratskhelia is now PSG's top scorer in the competition this season with seven goals.

But the Georgia star dismissed the idea that he is a big-game player who saves his best for the Champions League.

"No, I don't think like this," he said. PSG faces either six-time champion Liverpool or Galatasaray in the quarterfinals next month. (AP)

## Can't play all your life so education is important: Sindhu

**GURUGRAM, March 18:** Two-time Olympic medal-winning Indian badminton ace P V Sindhu on Wednesday stressed on the need for aspiring athletes to have good education, warning that it is too "risky" to ignore academics and focus solely on a sporting career that can end with a single injury.

The former world champion made these remarks in a fireside conversation at DPS International, while speaking to educationist Devyani Jaipuria.

The Hyderabad touched upon several aspects of her own journey to drive home the point, including the self-doubt that she battled before the 2016 Olympics after being laid low by a stress fracture of the left foot.

"I have been playing for so many years. At some point of time you have to retire, right? And that's the truth. You can't be playing sport when you're 45 or 50 or 60 at the highest level.

"And you have to accept that fact, whereas education will always be lifelong with you, and that will always stay with you," she said, echoing a sentiment expressed by national

coach Pullela Gopichand, who has urged parents of aspiring athletes to prioritise education.

"Nobody is born with a golden spoon and you have to work hard, whether it is in studies or sports... Studies and sports are equally important. I have done my MBA. So, I know, like, it's not easy... you go to training in the morning, come back, study, and then you go for evening sessions.

"Because at the end of the day, that is the truth, where sports is a very small thing, right? Life-long, you know, you will always have an education by your side. Sport is also important, but not that, you know, completely stop your studies," she asserted.

The 30-year-old is on a break after being stranded in Dubai due to closure of air space for some days in the middle of the American and Israeli bombing of Iran. She said sporting injuries can be hard to comeback from and that's why she would urge budding athletes to always have academic backup. (PTI)



## Guardiola says 'everybody wants to fire me' after Man City's CL loss to Real Madrid

**MANCHESTER, March 18:** Pep Guardiola wore a lumberjack-style shirt and Real Madrid chopped Manchester City down in the Champions League once again.

Who knows how many more chances Guardiola will get to win European club soccer's greatest prize with just one season remaining on his contract and increasing speculation he could walk away at the end of this campaign.

"Everybody wants to fire me," Guardiola said when questioned about his future following the 2-1 loss at the Etihad Stadium on Tuesday.

"One day I will come out here and say 'bye, bye guys!'"

Guardiola's position is the subject of much debate after 10 years at City, which is already by far the longest he has stayed at any club as a manager.

He has repeatedly referred to the remaining time on his contract when questioned, but doubts remain.

"The future will be bright and next season we will be back," he said following the 5-1 aggregate loss in the round-

of-16 tie.

Was that a clue as to his immediate plans?

"When I've retired in 10 years I will always be City. In the Champions League, I will say I will be back because I am part of them."

It is difficult to second-guess Guardiola. There has often been speculation about him walking away, but he has repeatedly signed new contracts. He never ended a contract early in his time as coach of Barcelona and Bayern Munich.

But that has not quelled rumors that it will be different this time, with City looking likely to go two years without the Premier League title for the first time since he was appointed in 2016.

If this was his final tilt at the Champions League with City, he was giving little away.

At the final whistle he magnanimously shook hands with all the Madrid players after yet another loss at the hands of the record 15-time European champion.

No team has done more to curb his ambi-

tions in this competition than Madrid.

This was the fourth time in five years that the Spanish giant has eliminated City from the Champions League. The one exception over that period coming in 2023 when City went on to win the trophy for the first and only time.

Given City's dominance in England and the billions of dollars spent to assemble one of the most expensive squads in history, one Champions League in 10 years under Guardiola may feel like an underachievement.

If not for Madrid, it could have been a different story. So often it has cursed City's ambitions.

"I should win six Champions Leagues," Guardiola said mockingly when questioned about his record. He has won the trophy three times in total — twice with Barcelona.

He said it was considered a "failure" if he couldn't match the treble of trophies he won in his first season at Barcelona — the Spanish title, Cup and Champions League. (AP)

## After a 'Champions of the World' banner, PSG's surge sinks Chelsea at Stamford Bridge

**LONDON, March 18:** So much for being champions of the world. Chelsea played more like also-rans than world beaters on Tuesday night, losing 3-0 at home to Paris Saint-Germain in the return leg of their Champions League last-16 game for a staggering 8-2 defeat on aggregate.

Chelsea fans proudly displayed a banner reading "Champions of the World" before kickoff on Tuesday at Stamford Bridge. The stark reality painted a different picture.

Chelsea collapsed with late goals last week in a 5-2 loss and imploded with early goals this time, trailing 2-0 inside 15 minutes.

That banner referred to Chelsea's victory in the Club World Cup final last July, when Chelsea beat PSG 3-0.

Some of the home fans started booing during the first half of Tuesday's loss and ironically cheered their players when they completed a pass.

The defeat could have been worse, but some Chelsea fans had already seen enough and started to leave after PSG's third goal in the 62nd minute.

Chelsea coach Liam Rosenior looked on perplexed, chewing his pen or biting his nails as PSG passed his side off the field at will. The Englishman only joined Chelsea in January after leaving French club Strasbourg.

"In the Champions League you don't deserve better if you mistakes against a very good team," he said. "The first goal is a mistake from us ... (It's) impossible to concede so many goals."



Chelsea hired him after parting company with Enzo Maresca, who won Conference League and Club World Cup trophies.

**Rosenior's choices**  
Last week, Rosenior surprisingly selected goal-

keeper Filip Jörgensen ahead of Robert Sánchez and it was Jörgensen's error that led to PSG's third goal in the 74th minute of that game.

On Tuesday, he reinstated Sánchez and dropped central defender Wesley Fofana, replacing Fofana

with 20-year-old center back Mamadou Sarr.

That didn't work, either, as it was Sarr's sloppy defending that allowed Khvicha Kvaratskhelia to score PSG's first goal after six minutes.

This was a third straight defeat for Rosenior, whose team is sixth in the Premier League with eight games left. There is still a trophy on offer, however, with Chelsea into the FA Cup quarterfinals.

**Chalobah injured**  
Chelsea right back Trevoh Chalobah was stretched off late on with an ankle injury.

Rosenior said it was too early to determine how bad the injury was.

**Huddle together**  
Chelsea's players performed their pre-match huddle just inside PSG's half. PSG's players did not seem to mind as they jogged casually past Chelsea's players moments before the start.

Under Rosenior, Chelsea's players have made a habit of gathering in a circle around the ball on the halfway line in the moments before the first and second halves begin in a display of unity.

Before the Premier League match against Newcastle last Saturday, the huddle took on a new dimension. When referee Paul Tierney took hold of the ball next to the center circle he soon found himself surrounded by the Chelsea team.

Rosenior said there was nothing about it which was "disrespectful to the opposition" and PSG coach Luis Enrique said he did not have an issue with it. (AP)