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- Fire at Cuttack hospital ICU; PM announces ex gratia
- SC dismisses West Bengal govt's plea against HC order

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- Tax-free budget of ₹ 34,212.31 crore presented in Tripura Assembly with emphasis on infra, jobs
- NSF holds rally in Kohima against Centre's 'Vande Mataram' directive

BJP to announce names of candidates on March 18

● Safron party may field candidates in 90 seats

Himanta in Delhi to get leadership's seal on list

Staff Reporter

GUWAHATI, March 16: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will release its complete list of candidates for the upcoming Assam Assembly elections on March 18.

Speaking to reporters here, Sarma stated that the party will announce all its nominees in a single list, signalling that the BJP has largely finalised its strategy for the crucial polls.

"The BJP will release the list of all its candidates on March 18. The entire list will be declared together," Sarma said.

Sarma has travelled to New Delhi today to hold key discussions with the central leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regarding the finalisation of candidates for the upcoming Assembly



polls.

The parliamentary board of the BJP will sit on Tuesday to take a final call on the ticket aspirants for the upcoming assembly polls.

The chief minister also indicated that he will file his nomination for

the upcoming Assembly elections on March 20.

CM Sarma on Monday visited the Durga temple at Rani on the outskirts of Guwahati and offered prayers before leaving for New Delhi.

The chief minister sought blessings at the temple as political activities intensify ahead of the election.

The announcement comes hours after the Election Commission of India recently declared the schedule for the Assam Assembly elections.

Polling for the 126-member Assembly will be held in a single phase on April 9, while the counting of votes will take place on May 4.

With the poll schedule already announced, political activities have intensified across the state as parties gear up to select candidates and finalise campaign strategies.

The BJP, which currently leads the government in the state, will contest the polls in alliance with its partners—Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

EC transfers SSPs of 5 Assam districts

Five Assam DEOs transferred

GUWAHATI, March 16: The Election Commission on Monday transferred Senior Superintendents of Police (SSPs) of five districts of Assam, a day after the announcement of the assembly poll schedule.

The SSPs of Majuli, South Salmara, Sadiya, Chirang and Dhemaji districts have been transferred with immediate effect, an official notification said.

Majuli SSP Haren Tokbi was replaced by Somalin Shubhdarshini, while R Sheetal Kumar replaced Mrinal Kumar Deka of South Salmara.

Sadiya SSP Jagadish Das was replaced with Anchal Chauhan, Chirang's Dhruva Bora with Sudhakar Singh and Dhemaji's Swapnaneel Deka with Mohan Lal Meena.

ECI's Secretary Rajiv Ranjan, in a letter to Assam Chief Secretary Ravi Kota, said that the decision has been taken after the Commission has reviewed the poll preparedness for the assembly elections.

The Commission's directives must be implemented with immediate effect, and a compliance report regarding the officers joining their new posts must be sent by 11 am on Tuesday.

Further, the officers transferred out shall not be posted in any election-related posts till the completion of elections, the letter stated.

All five SSPs transferred out were Assam Police Service (APS) officials and have been replaced by Indian Police Service (IPS) officials.

Shubhdarshini is an IPS official of the 1991 batch, while Kumar and Chauhan belong to the 2020 batch. Singh is an official of the 2013 batch, and Meena of 2016.

In a separate press note issued by the EC, it was stated that Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, in his press conference on Sunday, had assured that elections in all states, including Assam, would be peaceful. In pursuance of this objective, ECI has posted/transferred senior police officers in (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

GUWAHATI, March 16: The Election Commission of India on Monday transferred five District Election Officers (DEOs) of Assam, a day after the announcement of the assembly poll schedule.

The DEOs of Kokrajhar, Majuli, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri have been transferred with immediate effect.

In a letter sent to Assam Chief Secretary Ravi Kota, the EC replaced DEO of Kokrajhar Pankaj Chakraborty with Dr P Uday Praveen, Majuli's Ratul Pathak with Srishti Singh and Baksa's Dhiraj Saud with Kinnei Changsan.

Chirang DEO Gakul Chandra Brahma has been replaced by Madhusudan Nath, and Udalguri's Pulak Patgiri by Jay Vikas.

The compliance report regarding the joining of the new officers should be (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Thadou Inpi Assam opposes inclusion under proposed Kuki Welfare Council

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 16: Thadou Inpi Assam has opposed the inclusion of Thadou villages and identity under the proposed Kuki Welfare and Development Council (KWDC), expressing concern that the move could compromise the distinct identity of the Thadou community.

In a press communiqué issued on Monday, the organisation said that while it welcomed the Memorandum of Settlement signed on March 15 between the Government of Assam and Kuki armed groups as a step towards ending militancy, it raised serious concerns about provisions that, according to it, subsume the Thadou identity under the broader "Kuki" umbrella.

The organisation asserted that the Thadou community is a separate ethnic entity and should not be grouped under the Kuki identity.

It alleged that the community has faced instances of coercion and intimidation from certain Kuki militant groups in the past.

Among the concerns cited were attempts to prevent Thadou people from participating in the Hun-Thadou Cultural Festival in Guwahati, the abduction and killing of the chairman of the Thadou Literature Society in 2025, and unresolved grievances related to cultural representation.

The organisation stressed that the Thadou language, cultural symbols and traditional attire must remain protected and should not be rebranded as part of Kuki cultural identity.

A key issue raised in the statement relates to the administrative jurisdiction of Thadou-inhabited areas.

The organisation maintained that Thadou villages fall under the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC).

It also claimed that several villages had been incorrectly identified as "Kuki" in the settlement document (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

State seeks 828 cos of central forces for polls

Improved infrastructure, security behind single-phase elections: Assam CEO

GUWAHATI, March 16: Improved infrastructure and better security arrangements are key factors behind the decision to hold the upcoming Assembly elections in Assam in a single phase, top officials said on Monday, a day after the Election Commission announced polling in the state for April 9.

They said the state's civil and police administrations are fully prepared to ensure smooth conduct of the elections in all 126 Assembly constituencies.

Addressing a press conference here, state chief electoral officer (CEO) Anurag Goel said, "Improved infrastructure, availability of more buildings, bridges, etc., has led to the confidence of holding the elections in the state in a single phase."

IGP (Law and Order) Akhilesh Kumar Singh, the nodal security officer for the polls, added, "Single-phase polling requires a lot of preparations and logistics, and maybe we are fully equipped now compared to earlier. Civil and police administrations are completely ready for holding the polls."

Improvement in the law and order situation, especially the withdrawal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act from most parts of the state, has also contributed to it, Singh added. He said the state has sought 828 companies of central armed police force (CAPF), of which 200 companies have already arrived.



Besides, over 74,000 Assam Police personnel of various ranks, including home guards, will also be engaged, the IGP added.

Inter-state and inter-district border monitoring have been ramped up, along with CCTV coverage at most vital points, Singh said.

A total of 134 border checkpoints are being put in place, with flying squads and static teams to be also positioned in these for round-the-clock surveillance. As far as international boundaries are concerned, Singh said these are guarded by different security agencies, and sealing of borders and other requisite election guidelines will be followed as per laid down norms. "Active area domination and confidence-building measures are being undertaken by the security agencies to ensure that no intimidation of voters takes place and no EC guidelines are violated," he added. The IGP said efforts are also being made to curb the flow of illicit items, including illegal liquor, during the election period. A special social media cell has been formed by the CID, with a dedicated phone number opened to receive complaints about circulation of fake news and AI-generated content that could disrupt peace. CEO Goel said the notification for the polls has been issued after approval from the governor, (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

CPI(Marxist) names candidates for 2 seats

GUWAHATI, March 16: The CPI(M), a part of the Congress-led opposition alliance in Assam, on Monday named candidates for two seats for the assembly polls in April, retaining incumbent MLA Manoranjan Talukdar among its nominees.

State CPI(M) secretary Suprakash Talukdar asserted that it was confident of winning both the seats in the elections scheduled for April 9.

"We have decided to contest in two seats - Bhawanipur-Sorbhog and Goreswar. Our nominees will be the united opposition's candidates in both constituencies," Talukdar said.

Manoranjan Talukdar, the MLA from Bhawanipur in the outgoing assembly, will be contesting from Bhawanipur-Sorbhog, after the constituency was renamed and redrawn during the delimitation process in 2023.

The party has named Bapu Ram Boro from the Goreswar constituency, which comes under the Bodoland Territorial Region.

"The CPI(M) has joined hands with secular forces to oust the BJP from power in Assam. We are confident of our candidates securing majority," Suprakash Talukdar said.

Besides the Congress and the CPI(M), other members of the opposition alliance are Assam Jatiya Parishad, All Party Hill Leaders Conference and CPI(ML) Liberation. In the outgoing 126-member assembly, the ruling BJP's strength is 64, while its allies AGP has nine MLAs, UPPL has seven and (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

EC appoints retired IAS officer Manjeet Singh as special observer

NEW DELHI, March 16: The Election Commission on Monday appointed former bureaucrat Manjeet Singh as the special observer for poll-bound Assam with a mandate to update the poll panel on election preparedness in the north-eastern state.

Polling in Assam will be on April 9, and the votes will be counted on May 4.

The poll panel reminded that during his press conference on Sunday, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar had assured that elections in all states, including Assam, would be held peacefully. As the special observer, retired IAS officer Singh will visit Assam regularly to observe the election preparedness, conduct of the (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

India, US trade deal to be signed once tariff architecture is in place: Official

NEW DELHI, March 16: The interim trade agreement between India and the US will be signed once the new global tariff architecture of America is in place, a senior government official said on Monday.

"Because at the end of it, each country is doing a deal as a part of a package where one is at comparative advantage...vis a vis competitors," the official said.

India and the US last month announced finalisation of a framework for the first phase of the bilateral trade agreement. According to that framework, the US had agreed to reduce tariffs on India to 18 per cent.

However, the tariff architecture in the US has changed following its Supreme Court ruling against Pres-

ident Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs. After that, the US President imposed 10 per cent tariffs on all countries for 150 days from February 24.

In view of these changes, the meeting of the chief negotiators of India and the US has been postponed. They were scheduled to meet last month to finalise the legal text of the pact, which was expected to be signed this month.

"The deal was to be signed in March. (But) When we said this, that time, the Supreme Court judgment on IEEPA (International Emergency Economic Powers Act) tariffs had not come. Now, with the Supreme Court judgment on IEEPA tariffs, the tariffs per se don't exist. "Now there are tariffs under Article 122, which is related

to the balance of payment crisis, which are for five months. And the tariff is around 10 per cent. So the deal that we finalise and sign has to be against the tariff structure or the comparative advantage that India gets in the US market," the official said.

The official added that the US is working to recreate a global tariff architecture.

"Once they are on that pathway, they are able to create that. I think at that juncture, it would be right to sign the deal," the official said.

The pact, the official said, has already been finalised and decided upon, and both teams are negotiating to iron out the finer details.

"But actual signing, to my mind, will be done when the new architecture of (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Indian oil tanker to arrive today after sailing from attacked UAE port



NEW DELHI, March 16: An Indian-flagged crude oil tanker that sailed safely from the UAE's Fujairah port despite an attack on the terminal is scheduled to reach India on Tuesday, a senior official said, emphasizing that New Delhi is working to ensure the safe passage of remaining Indian-flagged vessels in the region.

The vessel, Jag Laadki, carrying about 80,800

tonnes of Murban crude from the UAE, and all 22 Indian seafarers onboard are reported safe, said Rajesh Kumar Sinha, Special Secretary in Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways on Monday.

Jag Laadki is the fourth out of the 28 Indian ship that were stuck in the war-hit Strait of Hormuz for last two weeks.

Currently, 22 Indian-flagged vessels with 611 seafarers remain in the western Persian Gulf. Two LPG carriers started their journey on March 13 and crossed the Strait of Hormuz early on March 14.

The first ship, Shivalik reached Mundra Port in Gujarat where advance paper work and priority discharge was arranged, he said adding the other vessel, Nanda Devi is to reach Kandla port on Tuesday morning.

The two ships carry about 92,712 tonnes of LPG - equivalent to a day's requirement of cooking gas in the country. These were among the 24 ships stranded on the west side of the strait since the war broke out in the region.

Besides the 24 on the west side of the strait, four others were stranded on (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

'One Battle After Another' triumphs at 98th Academy Awards

LOS ANGELES, March 16: Paul Thomas Anderson's "One Battle After Another" was crowned best picture at the 98th Academy Awards, handing Hollywood's top honour to a comic, multi-generational American saga of political resistance.

The ceremony Sunday, which also saw Michael B Jordan win best actor and "Sinners" cinematographer Autumn Duralid Arkapaw make Oscar history as the first female director of photography to win the award, was a long-incoming coronation for Anderson, a San Fernando Valley native who made his first short at age 18 and has been one of America's most lionised filmmakers for decades. Before Sunday, Anderson had never won an Oscar.

But "One Battle After Another", the favourite coming in, won six Oscars, including best director and best adapted screenplay for Anderson, the Oscars' first trophy for best casting and best supporting actor for

an absent Sean Penn.

"I wrote this movie for my kids to say sorry for the housekeeping mess that we left in this world — we're handing off to them," said Anderson while accepting the screenplay trophy. "But also with the encouragement that they will be the generation that hopefully brings us some common sense and decency."

Ryan Coogler's Jim Crow-set, blues-soaked vampire tale "Sinners", which came in with a record 16 nominations, also landed some big and even historic wins.

Coogler, the widely loved filmmaker, won the first Oscar in an unblemished career that started out with Jordan in 2013's "Fruitvale Station".

Arkapaw was also the first Black person to win for best cinematography. Only the fourth female cinematographer ever nominated, her win was a long-incoming triumph for women behind the camera.

"I really want all the women in room to stand up," said Arkapaw.

"Because I don't feel like I get here without you guys."

And Jordan, one of Hollywood's most liked leading men, won best actor in one of the night's closest races. The Dolby Theatre rose to its feet in the most thunderous applause of the night.

"Yo, momma, what's up?" said Jordan after staggering to the stage.

The Oscar night belonged to Warner Bros, the studio of "One Battle After Another" and "Sinners", which scored a record-tying 11 wins. It was an oddly poignant note of triumph for the fabled studio, which weeks earlier agreed to a sale to Paramount Skydance, David Ellison's rapidly assembled media monolith.

The USD 111 billion deal, which awaits regulatory approval, has Hollywood bracing for more layoffs.

But "Sinners" and "One Battle After Another" — the much-acclaimed heavyweights of the season — were each Hollywood anomalies: big-budget originals born



from a personal vision. In a year where anxiety over studio contraction and the rise of artificial intelligence often consumed the industry, both films gave Hollywood fresh hope.

Jessie Buckley won best actress for her performance as Agnes Shakespeare in "Hamnet", making her the first Irish performer to ever

win in the category. At an Oscars where no other acting award seemed a sure thing, Buckley cruised into Sunday's Oscars at the Dolby Theatre as the overwhelming favourite.

"It's Mother's Day in the UK," said Buckley on the stage. "I would like to dedicated this to the beautiful chaos of a mother's heart."

From the start, when host Conan O'Brien sprinted through the year's nominees as Amy Madigan's character in the horror thriller "Weapons" in a pre-taped bit, Sunday's ceremony was quirky, a little clunky and preoccupied with the shifting place of movies in culture. There was, of all things, a tie for best live-action short film.

As expected, the Netflix sensation "KPop Demon Hunters", 2025's most-watched film, won best animated feature, as well as best song for "Golden". It was a big win for Netflix but a more qualified victory for the movie's producer, Sony Pictures. Though it developed and produced the film, Sony sold "KPop Demon Hunters" to the streaming giant instead of giving it a theatrical release.

On Netflix, "KPop Demon Hunters" became a cultural phenomenon and the streaming platform's biggest hit. It has more than 325 million views and counting.

"This is for Korea and Koreans

everywhere," said co-director Maggie Kang.

Another Netflix release, Guillermo del Toro's "Frankenstein" picked up three awards for its lavish craft, for costume design, makeup and hairstyling and for production design.

Amy Madigan won best supporting actress for her performance in the horror thriller "Weapons", a win that came 40 years after the 75-year-old actor was first nominated, in 1986, for "Twice in a Lifetime". Letting out a giant laugh as she hit the stage, Madigan exclaimed, "This is great!"

Hosting for the second time, O'Brien began the Dolby Theatre show alluding to "chaotic and frightening times." But he argued that the current geopolitical climate made the Oscars all the more resonant as a globally unifying force.

"We pay tribute tonight, not just to film, but to the ideals of global artistry, collaboration, patience, resilience and (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Reliance signs USD 3 bn 15-year green ammonia supply deal with Samsung C&T

NEW DELHI, March 16: Reliance Industries Ltd has signed a USD 3 billion deal to supply green ammonia to South Korea's Samsung C&T for 15 years, the firm said on Monday.

The agreement, one of the largest long-term green ammonia deals globally, positions India as an emerging exporter of green fuels produced through a fully indigenous value chain, including domestic manufacturing of critical clean-energy equipment. The supply is set to commence in the second half of fiscal 2029.

In a statement, Reliance said it "has entered into a binding long-term supply and purchase agreement (SPA) with Samsung C&T Corporation, South Korea, for the supply of Green Ammonia over a 15-year period commencing in the second half of FY2029."

"The SPA, valued at more than USD 3 billion, is one of the largest binding long-term green ammonia off-take agreements globally," it said.

Green ammonia is produced using renewable energy sources instead of fossil fuels, making it a carbon-free or low-carbon alternative. Unlike conventional ammonia, which is made using natural gas, green ammonia is produced by combining hydrogen from green hydrogen (obtained via electrolysis of water using renewable electricity) with nitrogen from the air.

It can be used as a fertiliser, in-



dustrial chemical, or fuel for power generation and shipping.

Reliance is developing a fully integrated new energy platform encompassing renewable energy, energy storage, green hydrogen, and downstream green fuels and chemicals, supported by in-house manufacturing of solar modules, battery energy storage systems (BESS), and electrolyser systems. The initiative aligns with India's National Green Hydrogen Mission and the government's push for self-reliance in critical clean-energy technologies.

"A central pillar of the company's new energy ecosystem is the indigenisation of critical clean energy technologies in India, including Solar modules, Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), and Elec-

trolyser systems, in line with the Government of India's vision for self-reliance and domestic manufacturing leadership," the statement said.

"By integrating these capabilities within a single ecosystem, RIL aims to deliver green energy solutions that are competitive, scalable, and reliable for global markets while strengthening India's industrial base."

The agreement with Samsung C&T is the first in a series of long-term offtake partnerships supporting the scale-up of RIL's New Energy platform.

Anant Ambani, Executive Director, Reliance, said the partnership with Samsung C&T will deliver cost-competitive and reliable green ammonia while helping scale the

company's green hydrogen ecosystem and gigafactories.

"This partnership marks an important step in India's clean-energy journey. Reliance's New Energy initiative aims not only to advance the energy transition but also to build a strong industrial platform for India by integrating India's renewable resources with the country's manufacturing leadership, world-class talent and innovation to produce value-added green fuels and chemicals at scale.

"At the heart of this vision is our commitment to indigenising the critical technologies of the energy transition - Solar, Battery Energy Storage Systems, and Electrolysers - under a strong Make-in-India framework. Partnerships such as this will help scale our green hydrogen ecosystem and gigafactories, while contributing to India's ambition of becoming a global hub for green hydrogen and its derivatives," he added.

Reliance's New Energy business is anchored by the Dhirubhai Ambani Green Energy Giga Complex in Jamnagar, a 5,000-acre hub integrating solar, storage, hydrogen and ammonia production with advanced manufacturing gigafactories. The company aims to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2035.

Samsung C&T, founded in 1938, operates a global network across 40 countries, trading industrial materials and developing renewable energy projects. (PTI)

Exports dip marginally in Feb; trade gap narrows

NEW DELHI, March 16: The country's merchandise exports dropped marginally by 0.81 per cent year-on-year to USD 36.61 billion in February, and the trade deficit narrowed to USD 27.1 billion compared to the previous month.

The impact of the West Asia crisis will be known in the data for the month of March, as the war began on February 28. The data will be released by mid-May.

Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agarwal said exports in March will see a "southward" trend due to the logistical challenges amidst geopolitical tensions.

The joint attack launched by the US and Israel on Iran has disrupted the movement of consignments in international waters. It has led to a significant jump in oil prices, due to which air and ocean freight have risen sharply.

Imports in February increased by 24.11 per cent to USD 63.71 billion due to a jump in gold and silver imports. Inbound shipments of gold rose 218.55 per cent to USD 7.44 billion, while silver imports were up by 285.23 per cent to USD 1.66 billion.

India mainly imports the yellow metal from Switzerland, from where the inbound shipments have climbed 719.3 per cent to USD 2.71 billion in February.

Oil imports were up 9 per cent to USD 12.97 billion during the month.

The trade deficit has narrowed when compared to the previous month, when it was USD 34.68 billion. However, the gap has widened year-on-year from USD 14.05 billion recorded in February 2025.

Briefing the media on the trade data, Agarwal said that the country's exports are doing well despite global economic challenges.

He said that the country's exports during the April-February period of FY26 went up 1.84 per cent to USD 402.93 billion. Imports rose 8.53 per cent to USD 713.53 billion during the period.

Merchandise trade deficit during the 11-month period of 2025-26 has increased to USD 310.60 billion as compared to USD 261.80 billion in the same month last year.

He added that the conflict will im-



impact the country's exports to West Asia.

"...there are logistical challenges. Movement of ships...even air cargo also must face certain challenges because of some disruption in flights. So, it will have some impact.

"Indian exports to that region will suffer, and their imports from India will also suffer because they are also dependent on India for multiple product categories," he said.

Agarwal said both sides are engaged to find solutions, which can address some of these challenges.

He informed that the government is regularly taking feedback from exporters and are looking at ways to resolve them.

On overall export numbers, he said, "definitely", there will be some impact.

"At least there will be some impact on the potential exports...Overall export numbers that you are seeing, we have been holding that combined goods and services, we will be around 860 billion dollars... I am sure we will remain in positive territory," he told reporters.

When asked about India's imports from Russia, the secretary said: "We are buying Russian oil also...there has been an increased buying from Russian oil also, in the current month also, because of challenges we are facing."

At the exports front, key sectors such as petroleum, plastics, textiles, leather goods, iron ore, spices, cashew, oil meals, oil seeds, and tea recorded negative growth in February.

JCI Guwahati Princess carries out community initiative 'Project Rakesh Ujaas'

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 16: JCI Guwahati Princess recently carried out a community welfare initiative titled "Project Rakesh Ujaas" at Mon Ashaneer Rehabilitation Centre and Ashaneer Home, institutions that provide care and support to children with disabilities.

The initiative was organised under the leadership of the organisation's president Asha Agarwalla and vice-president (Community Development) Dimple Bawari along with members of the team.

The programme was held in the presence of Rakesh T Nair, National Vice President of JCI India, Sumit Poddar, Zone President of Zone 25, Gunjan Harlalka, Rahul Verma, Protocol

Officer, and Priya G Tiwari, Zonal Vice President of Region D, among other dignitaries and members.

As part of the project, a garden space named "Rakesh Udyan" was developed at the centre to create a pleasant and refreshing environment for the children.

In addition, a sitting shed area was constructed to provide a shaded and comfortable space for parents who accompany their children to the centre for physical therapy and rehabilitation sessions.

The facility also offers a quiet place for children to sit and relax.

The initiative also included a donation drive under which cooked food was provided to children residing at the centre.



Contd. from Page 1...

Himanta in Delhi

and Bodoland People's Front (BPF). According to sources, the seat sharing formula among the coalition partners were finalised and the BJP will probably contest in 90 seats in 126-member assembly. The rest of the seats will be given to its allies—AGP and BPF.

EC transfers SSPs

Assam. In another letter to the chief secretary, the Commission asked him to provide the names of all IAS Officers from the 2010 to 2021 batches for consideration for deployment as District Election Officers (DEO) by Monday. Elections to 126 assembly constituencies in the state are scheduled to be held on April 9. (PTI)

Five Assam DEOs

sent to the EC by 3 pm on Tuesday. Further, the officers transferred out shall not be posted in any election-related posts till the completion of elections.

All five transferred District Electoral Officers (DEOs) were Assam Civil Service (ACS) officials and have been replaced by Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officials.

Dr P Uday Praveen is an IAS officer of the 2016 batch, while Srishti Singh and Jay Vikas are of the 2021 batch. Changan and Nath belong to the 2014 IAS batch.

The Election Commission had earlier in the day written to the chief secretary to furnish the names of all IAS officers from 2010 to 2021 batches. Officials said the poll authority is not happy with the performance of various DEOs and wants to appoint new officials. The elections to the 126-member Assam assembly will be held on April 9. Votes will be counted on May 4. (PTI)

CPI(Marxist) names

BPF has three members. In the opposition camp, the Congress has 26 MLAs, AIUDF has 15 members and CPI(M) has one MLA. There is one Independent legislator as well. (PTI)

State seeks 828

with the election process formally commencing. The total number of electors in the state as on March 15 was 2,50,21,413, which could be revised till the last date of filing of nominations. Since the publication of the final electoral rolls on February 10 following the special revision, there have been over 1.64 lakh additions and more than one lakh deletions, resulting in a net increase of about 64,000 voters, the CEO said.

The highest number of voters are in the 20-29 age group, numbering more than 66 lakh. The state has 2,482 centenarian voters and around one lakh electors above the age of 85 years.

The number of young voters aged 18-19 years is more than 6 lakh.

There will be 31,486 polling stations as of now, with the CEO's office requesting four more auxiliary stations, Goel said. Dalgao constituency has the highest number of voters with more than 3 lakh electors, while Amri has the least with a little more than one lakh voters.

Over 1.50 lakh civil polling personnel will be engaged in the process, besides micro-observers and sector officers. "For the first time, the EVM ballot papers will be in colour, and there will be 100 per cent webcasting and mobile phone deposit facility in all polling stations," the CEO added. (PTI)

Thadou Inpi Assam

and demanded their immediate exclusion from the proposed council.

These include villages such as Lower Bolsol, Upper Bolsol, Mongon, Lhanghoi, N. Leikul, Old Ngalsong and Molnom in Dima Hasao district, and Thadou Veng, Molkhang, Mongiang, Khaibung, Songjang, Vongjang, Hengbung, Salemphei, Mimbung, Leikot, Maokot, Kotlen, Bungjoi and Phailong in Karbi Anglong district.

The organisation cited the 1955 Kaka Kalelkar Commission report, which recommended that tribes in the hill areas of Assam and Manipur be identified by their distinct linguistic names rather than under generic groupings such as "Kuki" or "Naga".

The group urged the Assam government to recognise the Thadou community as a distinct Scheduled Tribe, similar to the recognition provided in Manipur, instead of categorising it under "Any Kuki tribes".

To ensure long-term stability and avoid ethnic friction, the organisation proposed a formal agreement between the Thadou and Kuki communities recognising their respective identities and traditional areas.

It also called for the continuation of the All India Radio Thadou language programme without renaming and reiterated that the Thadou tribe should not be brought under the KWDC.

The statement was jointly signed by Haosei Thadou, president of Thadou Inpi Assam, and Sehchon Thadou, secretary of the organisation.

EC appoints retired

Assembly elections, and give inputs to the poll body wherever necessary.

"As the eyes and ears of the Commission, the special observer will further bolster the conduct of elections in a free, peaceful, impartial and transparent manner in Assam," the Election Commission said. (PTI)

India, US trade

tariff globally will be in place," the official added. In case of any change in the 18 per cent tariffs on India, the official said, these are all subject to what it happens and how the global architecture pans out.

"If the global architecture is exactly the way the IEEPA tariffs were there, then it may remain so also. If it is different, then it may also change. So we will have to wait to see how it goes," another official said.

When India finalised the deal, it was at a comparative advantage as compared to its competitor countries.

"So whenever we are ready, the US side is ready with that architecture. I think that will be the opportune time to sign it," the official said, adding, "There is nothing that there is a standoff. There is nothing that the deal is not there." The trade deal is about comparative and preferential market access to each other. The 18 per cent tariff on India was the lowest among its competitors, including China, Vietnam and Thailand.

In case under the new tariff architecture of the US, other countries will be "at 19 or 20 or 21 or 22 per cent, then maybe India will remain at 18 per cent. But if others come down, then India will also come down. So it will depend on how the new architecture comes out. And that is something for US to take a call," the official said, adding that as of now, the deal was on 18 per cent.

Meanwhile, as per reports, Malaysia has stated that the country is not going ahead with its trade deal with the US. There are two sets of countries that have finalised pacts with America - one that have announced the framework deal but have signed the legal agreement, and the other that have not signed the legal pact.

When asked about the two investigations started by the US under Section 301, the official said the ministry is examining its legal impact. "These investigations take time. My sense is whenever a (trade) deal is finalised and signed in the future, this will take care of these investigations," the official added.

On March 12, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) launched a Section 301 probe, covering 60 economies, including India and China. The investigations will determine whether acts, policies, and practices of each of these economies related to the failure to impose and effectively enforce a ban on the importation of goods produced with forced labour are unreasonable or discriminatory, and burden or restrict US commerce.

On March 11, the USTR launched a Section 301 trade investigation targeting policies and industrial practices of 16 economies, including India and China. About the trade deal, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agarwal said that "India remains engaged with the US side for a mutually beneficial trade agreement".

India is discussing details with the US, as there are many elements of the deal.

"There are certain non-tariff barriers which need to be ironed out. There are certain other details under the 232 tariffs also, which need to be worked out. So I think we are using this time constructively to see that we are able to iron out these things so that these things don't take time whenever the time is right for signing the deal," the official said. (PTI)

Indian oil tanker

the east side. One of the four on the east side, an India-flagged oil tanker, Jag Prakash, carrying gasoline from Oman to Africa, crossed the war-hit strait on Friday, Jag Prakash loaded gasoline from Sohar port in Oman and is now headed to Tanga in Tanzania. It is due to reach Tanga on March 21.

Besides Jag Prakash, Jag Laadki was the second tanker on the east coast that managed to move to safety, he said adding Jag Laadki is scheduled to reach Mundra on Tuesday.

As of now, there are 22 Indian ships on the east side of the Strait of Hormuz and 2 on the west side, he said adding efforts are on to secure safe passage for them. Since activation of the DG Shipping Control Room, over 3,000 calls and 5,400 emails from seafarers, families, and maritime stakeholders have been handled, while 286 Indian seafarers have been safely repatriated, including 33 in the past four hours.

Major ports are closely monitoring vessel movements and facilitating cargo operations, offering concessions on anchorage, berth hire, storage charges, and temporary transshipment storage at Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA), which has also granted rebates on reefer container plug-in charges, Sinha said.

Export-bound containers at JNPA have fallen from 5,600 to 3,900, with no reported congestion, he said adding an inter-ministerial group under DG Shipping continues to coordinate with Customs, ports, and other stakeholders to ensure the safety and welfare of Indian seafarers while maintaining continuity of maritime trade. On March 14, 2026, while the Indian-flag vessel Jag Laadki was loading crude oil at the Fujairah Single Point Mooring, the Fujairah oil terminal was attacked. The vessel sailed safely from Fujairah at 1030 hrs IST on Sunday carrying about 80,800 tonnes of Murban crude oil and is bound for India. The vessel and all Indian seafarers onboard are safe. (PTI)

'One Battle After

that rarest of qualities today — optimism," O'Brien said. "We're going to celebrate. Not because we think all is well, but because we work, and hope, for better."

Throughout the show, O'Brien hit a number of targets, like Timothee Chalamet — who again missed out on winning his first Oscar, this time for "Marty Supreme" — for his diss of opera and ballet. But the ceremony seldom wasn't shadowed by politics, whether in references to changes under US President Donald Trump or the recently launched war in Iran. Joachim Trier, whose Norwegian family drama "Sentimental Value" won best international film, quoted James Baldwin in his acceptance speech: "All adults are responsible for all children," he said. "Let's not vote for politicians that don't take this seriously into account." Presenter Jimmy Kimmel, whose late-night show last year was suspended after comments he made about Charlie Kirk's killing, was among the most blunt.

"There are some countries that don't support free speech," said Kimmel. "I'm not at liberty to say which. Let's just leave it at North Korea and CBS." Shortly after, "Mr. Nobody Against Putin", a film about a Russian primary schoolteacher who documents his students' indoctrination to support Russia's war with Ukraine, won best documentary. "Mr. Nobody Against Putin" is about how you lose your country," co-director said. "And what we saw when working with this footage is that you lose it through countless, small, little acts of complicity." (AP)

ENGINEERING WORKS AT LUMDING DIVISION
E-Tender Notice No. LMG/Engg/20 of 2026; Dated: 11-03-2026 E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following work: **SN. 1. Brief Description of Item:** Provision of Limited height sub way (RUB) at KM. 146.852 at Hojai station yard towards Lumding end for elimination of L.C. gate No. ST-41 under Jurisdiction of Sr. DEN//Lumding. **Tender Value:** ₹6,00,31,463.88; **Bid Security:** ₹4,50,200.00; E-tenders will be closed at 15:00 hrs. on 07-04-2026 and opened at 15:00 hrs. on 08-04-2026. The complete information with tender documents of above e-tender will be available upto 15:00 hrs. of 07-04-2026 in website <http://www.lreps.gov.in>. **DRM/Works, Lumding**
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
Serving Customers with a smile!

AFFIDAVIT

I, Smt. Binola Basumatary C/O Mrinal Khakhlary a resident of Jamin Gaon, P.O., Langhin Tiniali and P.S., Dokmoka, district Karbi Anglong, Assam, declare that my actual name is Smt. Binola Basumatary, as per my Aadhar Card No-5226 21897338, PAN Card No. E5VPB 8781G and Voter ID Card No. HyG147191. But in my bank passbook of AGB Account No. 74/8010051076 my name is found as Binola Khakhlary. I declare that Smt. Binola Basumatary and Binola Khakhlary are my names and the same person. This statement was made by an affidavit in the Court of CIM, Diphu on 11/03/2026.

Assam gears up for Assembly polls

28 companies of security forces to be deployed in Nagaon

HT Correspondents

JORHAT/ TEZPUR/ NAGAON, March 16: The district administration of Jorhat has begun extensive preparations for the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026 to ensure smooth and peaceful conduct of polling in the four constituencies of Jorhat, Mariani, Teok and Titabor.

Addressing mediapersons at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's office, Deputy Commissioner Jay Shivani said that 30 polling stations in the district have been identified as critical and adequate security personnel will be deployed to ensure peaceful polling.

The DC also informed that Returning Officers for the four constituencies will function from designated rooms within the District Commissioner's office complex.

The Returning Officer for the Jorhat constituency will operate from Room No 1 of the DC's conference hall, while the Mariani RO will function from Room No 12 of the main building.

The Titabor RO will operate from Room No 1 of the Old Treasury office located within the DC office campus, and the Teok RO will sit in Room No 27 of the DC office main building.

A 24-hour control room has been set up to receive complaints related to violation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) or election expenditure.

In this regard, the toll-free number 18003453996 and the national election helpline 1950 have been activated.

Voters can also lodge complaints through the eVIGIL mobile application

by uploading geo-tagged photographs, upon which action is expected to be taken within 100 minutes.

Shivani said the Election Commission of India has introduced several new initiatives for the upcoming polls.

These include the provision of mobile phone deposit facilities at polling stations for voters who carry phones for emergency purposes.

Each pouch will have space for up to ten mobile phones, although voters have been advised not to carry phones to polling booths unless necessary.

Another new provision allows political parties to set up help desks or booths at a distance of 100 metres from polling stations, instead of the earlier limit of 200 metres.

The presiding officer at each polling station will also provide voting data in real time through a mobile application every two hours, enabling election officials to monitor polling trends.

Earlier, the Deputy Commissioner chaired a meeting with representatives of recognised national and state political parties to discuss implementation of the Model Code of Conduct following the announcement of the election schedule.

During the meeting, party representatives were briefed on campaign regulations, expenditure limits and other guidelines that must be followed during the election period.

The DC urged political parties to strictly adhere to the code and avoid statements that could incite violence or involve provocative or personal attacks.

Officials added that the district admin-



istration, police, election expenditure monitoring teams and flying squads will remain active throughout the election period.

Static Surveillance Teams (SST) and Flying Surveillance Teams (FST) have already begun checking operations in different parts of the constituency following enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct.

Our Tezpur correspondent adds: The district election administration in Sonitpur has intensified preparations for the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026, with extensive training programmes being conducted for officials engaged in election duties.

The initiatives are being carried out under the supervision of District Election Officer Ananda Kumar Das to ensure smooth and peaceful conduct of polling

in the five Assembly constituencies of the district.

According to officials, training programmes for election personnel began on March 10, even before the formal notification of the elections.

On March 10, around 40 photographers and videographers were trained by the nodal officer of the EEM Cell at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's office in Tezpur.

Subsequently, on March 13, master trainers conducted the first round of training for about 1,500 first polling officers at Tezpur College.

The first round of training for around 1,500 presiding officers was also completed at the same venue on Sunday.

On Monday, another training session was organised at Tezpur College for nearly 1,500 second polling officers and

1,500 third polling officers.

Officials said additional training programmes have been scheduled in the coming days.

On March 20, around 50 officials associated with the Model Code of Conduct will undergo training at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's office.

This will be followed by a training programme for about 450 officials involved in EVM commissioning at the auditorium of Tezpur College on March 23.

Further, 180 zonal and sector officers connected with election management will receive training on March 25 at the District Commissioner's conference hall.

The second round of training for presiding officers and first polling officers will again be held at Tezpur College on March 26, officials said.

Our Nagaon correspondent adds: The district administration has stepped up preparations for the forthcoming Assam Assembly elections scheduled to be held on April 9, with elaborate arrangements being made to ensure free, fair and transparent polling.

Addressing a press conference at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's office, Nagaon Deputy Commissioner Debashish Sarma said a total of 15,51,530 voters in seven Assembly constituencies of the district will exercise their franchise in the upcoming polls.

Of the total voters, 7,78,208 are male and 7,73,270 female, he said, adding that polling will be conducted in 1,868 polling stations across the district, of which 154 have been iden-

tified as critical.

The Deputy Commissioner said the district administration has decided to set up centres for the distribution and collection of election materials as well as strong rooms at three government educational institutions—Nagaon Government Boys' HS School, Nagaon Girls' HS School and Nagaon Dawson HS and Multipurpose School.

According to Sarma, counting of votes for the Samaguri, Rupahi and Dhing Assembly constituencies will be carried out at Nagaon Dawson HS and Multipurpose School.

Counting for Nagaon, Batadroba and Raha constituencies will take place at Nagaon Government Boys' HS School, while votes for Barhampur and Kaliabor constituencies will be counted at Nagaon Girls' HS School.

He further said that 200 polling stations will be managed entirely by women polling officials and CCTV cameras will be installed at all polling stations in the district.

To ensure security and smooth conduct of the elections, a total of 28 companies of security forces comprising around 2,800 police and paramilitary personnel will be deployed across polling stations, he added.

Sarma also informed that 64 flying squad teams have been deployed in the district as part of the election monitoring mechanism.

The press briefing was also attended by Election Officer Shekhar Phukan and District Information and Public Relations Officer Bikash Sarma.

Maternity operation theatre becomes operational

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, March 16: The maternity operation theatre at the Mother and Child Health Wing of Morigaon Civil Hospital became operational on Monday, marking a significant step towards strengthening maternal healthcare services in the district. The facility began functioning with the successful conduct of its first caesarean section surgery by the hospital's medical team.

To mark the occasion, Morigaon Deputy Commissioner Anamika Tewari and Additional Deputy Commissioner (Health) Nitisha Bora visited the hospital and interacted with doctors and nursing staff.

They were accompanied by In-charge Joint Director of Health Services Sailendra Bardhan Bora and hospital superintendent Jitendra Kr Nath. Officials said the newly operational theatre is expected to significantly enhance safe delivery services and strengthen maternal and child healthcare facilities for the people of the district. Deputy Commissioner Anamika Tewari congratulated the medical team for successfully conducting the first caesarean section in the new operation theatre and appreciated their efforts in improving healthcare services in the district.

Cachar administration notifies venues for filing Assembly poll nominations

HT Correspondent

SILCHAR, March 16: The district administration of Cachar has notified designated venues for receiving and scrutinising nomination papers for the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026 in respect of seven Assembly constituencies in the district.

According to a notification issued by the Office of the District Election Officer, nomination papers for the constituencies of Lakhipur, Udharbond, Katigorah, Borkhola, Silchar, Sonai and Dholai (SC) will be received in the chambers of the respective Returning Officers located within the premises of the District Commissioner's office in Silchar.

For the 114-Lakhipur Legislative Assembly constituency, Returning Officer Dhruvajyoti Pathak, Co-District Commissioner of Lakhipur, will receive nomination papers at Room No 114 on the

Kokrajhar admin reviews flood preparedness ahead of monsoon

Departments advised to stock up essentials



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 16: The District Disaster Management Authority, Kokrajhar convened a meeting on Monday to review flood preparedness in the district ahead of the upcoming monsoon season.

The meeting, held at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's office, was chaired by Kokrajhar Deputy Commissioner Pankaj Chakravarty and attended by heads of various line departments.

During the meeting, Chakravarty urged all departments to remain alert and proactive in preparing for natural disasters.

He asked officials to identify critical infrastructure that could be vulnerable during disasters and take necessary preventive measures.

Circle Officers were instructed to identify vulnerable villages and flood-prone areas based on past flood data and ensure sector-wise coordination during emergency

situations. Officials also discussed the identification of relief camps and raised platforms for affected people and livestock.

Departments were directed to ensure preparedness of essential services, including roads, embankments, power supply, food distribution, health services and drinking water facilities.

The Deputy Commissioner further instructed departments to maintain adequate stocks of essential commodities, organise mobile medical teams, strengthen weak embankments and inspect roads, bridges and culverts ahead of the monsoon.

Emphasising early preparedness and effective inter-departmental coordination, Chakravarty asked all departments to complete the required preparatory measures well in advance of the monsoon to ensure timely response and minimise potential loss of life and property during floods.

Although the identity of the deceased has not yet been officially confirmed, villagers have expressed concern that the body might be that of Dilip Nath, a married resident of Rongkut Block No. 3 who has reportedly been missing for the past few days. Police reached the spot and recovered the body, which has been sent to the Diphu Medical College & Hospital for post-mortem examination.

Gayatri Devidas Hyalinge assumes charge as DC of Dima Hasao



HT Correspondent

HAFLONG, March 16: Gayatri Devidas Hyalinge, IAS (RR-2019), on Monday assumed charge as the new District Commissioner of Dima Hasao district.

Hyalinge took over the charge from outgoing District Commissioner Munindra Nath Ngatey, who has been posted as Additional Secretary to the Government of Assam in the Assam Health & Family Welfare Department.

Prior to her posting as DC of Dima Hasao, Hyalinge served as Junior Secretary to the Government

Unidentified body recovered from pond in KA village

HT Correspondent

HOWRAGHAT, March 15: Tension gripped Sabai Kro village in Rongkut under the jurisdiction of the North Borbil Police Outpost after the body of an unidentified man was recovered from a shallow pond on Monday.

According to reports, the body was discovered when a local couple went to the pond to catch fish. They noticed a portion of the body protruding from the mud and immediately alerted other villagers, who later informed the police. Local residents said the victim's face was tied with a cloth, raising suspicion that the incident could be a case of murder.

Although the identity of the deceased has not yet been officially confirmed, villagers have expressed concern that the body might be that of Dilip Nath, a married resident of Rongkut Block No. 3 who has reportedly been missing for the past few days. Police reached the spot and recovered the body, which has been sent to the Diphu Medical College & Hospital for post-mortem examination.

Authorities said an investigation will be carried out to ascertain the identity of the deceased and determine the circumstances surrounding the death.

Hailstorm damages 76 houses in Umrangso area of Dima Hasao

HT correspondent

HAFLONG, March 16: A severe hailstorm that struck the Umrangso area of Dima Hasao district on March 12 caused significant damage to residential properties, affecting 76 houses across three villages.

According to officials, the villages of Puralangso, Chirilangso and Boro Larpheng were the worst affected by the hailstorm.

Soon after the incident, teams conducted field visits and carried out damage assessments in the affected villages to evaluate the extent of losses.

As part of immediate relief measures, tarpaulins were distributed among the affected families.

A total of 79 tarpaulins were provided in the villages on March 13 to help residents temporarily cover and protect their damaged houses.

Further assistance was extended on March 15 at the District Commissioner's office in Haflong, where 672 GI roofing sheets were distributed to 42 severely affected households to support repair and restoration work.

The distribution programme was carried out in the presence of officials from the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), including the Additional District Commissioner and Chief Executive Officer of DDMA, along with the District Project Officer, field officers of DDMA, members of the District Disaster Response Force (DDRF), CQRT members and Gaon Burahs of the affected villages.

Officials said the district administration will continue to extend necessary support to the affected families and is taking steps to assist residents in recovering from the damage caused by the hailstorm.

Two arrested, illegal weapons seized in Kokrajhar

HT correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 16: Two persons were apprehended and illegal weapons recovered during a joint operation conducted by the Sashstra Seema Bal (SSB) and the police near Choudhury Ghat under Gossaigaon subdivision in Kokrajhar district on Monday.

According to officials, the operation was carried out by personnel of the Border Out Post Jamdwar of the 31st Battalion SSB in coordination with police from the Saraibil Police Out Post under Gossaigaon Police Station, following confidential intelligence inputs.

During the search operation, two persons identified as Raban Soren and Outal Islahari were found engaged in suspicious activities and were subsequently apprehended.

Officials said two country-made firearms, two spears and arrows, along with other objectionable items, were recovered from their possession.

The seized weapons have been taken into custody following due legal procedures.

The joint operation was conducted under the guidance of Second-in-Command and Officiating Commandant Jeet Singh and led by Deputy Commandant Pranava Shukla of the 31st Battalion SSB.

Assistant Commandant Navneet Prabhakar, Inspector (General Duty) Arjun Ekka and other SSB personnel also took part in the operation. From the police side, Sub-Divisional Police Officer (SDPO), Gossaigaon, Mantu Ram Bora and Officer-in-Charge of Saraibil Police Out Post Ripun Hazarika, along with other police personnel, assisted in the operation.

The arrested individuals have been handed over to the local police for further legal action, while investigation into the matter is underway.

Officials said such joint operations will continue to maintain law and order and strengthen border security in the region.

Farewell ceremony held for outgoing Hojai DC Bidyut Bikash Bhagwati

HT Correspondent

HOJAI, March 16: The district administration of Hojai on Monday organised a farewell ceremony for outgoing District Commissioner Bidyut Bikash Bhagwati, who has been transferred as Secretary in the Revenue and Disaster Management Department, Government of Assam.

The programme was held at the conference hall of the District Commissioner's office and was attended by the newly appointed District Commissioner Deva Prasad Mishra, along with officers and staff from various administrative departments.

Speakers at the event recalled Bhagwati's contributions to the development of the district, highlighting his role in promoting administrative transparency and strengthening public service delivery during his tenure.

Officials also praised his sense of responsibility, dedication and cooperative approach.

Addressing the gathering, Bhagwati thanked the officers and staff of the district administration for their cooperation and support, stating that the successful completion of various administrative tasks during his tenure was made possible through their collective efforts.

He also expressed gratitude to the people of Hojai for their continued support.

As a mark of respect, the district administration honoured him with a phulam gamocha, a shawl and a memento before bidding him farewell and wishing him success in his new assignment.

Young snake rescuer from Tezpur draws attention

Raj Borkotoky has been learning rescue techniques under his guidance

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 16: A young boy from Sonitpur district has begun drawing attention for his courage and enthusiasm in snake rescue and conservation.

Raj Sourav Borkotoky, a Junior KG student from Tezpur, has reportedly been assisting in snake rescue operations despite his tender age, gradually emerging as one of the youngest snake rescuers in the country.

At present, Swayam Majumdar, a 15-year-old from Assam who started rescuing snakes at the age of 12, is widely regarded as the youngest snake rescuer in India, having rescued more than a hundred snakes and participated in conservation awareness campaigns.

However, Raj Sourav has reportedly

been assisting in rescue activities at the age of just five. Neighbours said the young boy does not panic on seeing snakes and instead tries to rescue them carefully before releasing them back into their natural habitat.

They added that he has also been spreading awareness among people to dispel common misconceptions about snakes.

Raj's father, Sourabh Borkotoky, is a well-known snake expert, and the young boy has been learning rescue techniques under his guidance.

The father-son duo is often seen carrying out rescue operations in various parts of the district, including Dhekiajuli, Tezpur and Barchala.

Their work recently drew attention after Raj rescued a non-venomous Indian Rat

Snake (Ptyas mucosa) from a Christian hotel at Kumar Gaon on March 12.

The species, locally known as Mochoa Gom, Holonga Gom, Bairakh or Hulaboriya, is harmless to humans. After rescuing the snake, the boy released it safely into a natural habitat.

Raj also encourages people to learn about snakes and understand the difference between venomous and non-venomous species, while advising the public not to attempt snake rescue without proper training.

Speaking to The Hills Times, Sourabh Borkotoky said he has been teaching his son about snakes, wildlife and plants since the age of four to help him develop a deeper understanding of nature and contribute to wildlife conservation awareness.



QUOTE OF THE DAY

The true art of memory is the art of attention -Samuel Johnson

EU bid to keep Strait of Hormuz open

The European Union said on Monday it will consider how to help keep the Strait of Hormuz open as energy and commodity prices rise in the third week of war between Iran, Israel and the United States. "It is in our interest to keep the Strait of Hormuz open, and that's why we are also discussing what we can do in this regard from the European side," said Kaja Kallas, the EU's foreign policy chief, ahead of a meeting of the 27-nation bloc's foreign ministers in Brussels. US President Donald Trump has asked allies - including France, China, Japan, South Korea and Britain - to help secure the strait for global shipping. The war in Iran, sparked on Feb. 28, airstrikes by Israel and the US, has driven up energy prices worldwide, with Brent crude up more than 40 per cent. But the conflict has also disrupted the wider global supply chain beyond oil, affecting everything from pharmaceuticals from India, semiconductors from Asia and oil-derived products like fertilisers that come from the Middle East. Cargo ships are stuck in the Gulf or making a much longer detour around the southern tip of Africa. Planes carrying air cargo out of the Middle East are grounded. And the longer the war drags on, the more likely it is that there will be shortages and price increases on a wide range of goods.

The Strait of Hormuz — a narrow, almost absurdly strategic chokepoint between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula — carries nearly one-fifth of the world's oil every single day. Every barrel that heats European homes, fuels Asian factories, and fills American SUVs has to squeeze through that corridor. Iran has all but shut it down. Tankers are anchored offshore, paralyzed. Shipping insurers are walking away. Oil prices have blown past \$100 a barrel and analysts are already muttering about the 1970s oil crisis. The International Energy Agency has unlocked emergency reserves in a scramble to calm markets that are anything but calm. Tehran didn't need to win a dogfight in the sky. It just needed to make the world feel the cost of this war in their wallets.

European governments are doing what European governments do in uncomfortable situations: issuing statements carefully calibrated to mean as little as possible while protecting their economic interests. The reason is nakedly obvious. Europe has spent two years trying to unshackle itself from Russian energy dependency after Ukraine. It cannot absorb another prolonged Middle Eastern oil shock without serious political consequences at home. No serious strategist is suggesting that. Iran will not surrender easily. Not because its military is invincible. Not because its government commands popular love. But because nations with five thousand years of memory do not fold in two weeks. The bombs are falling. The costs are rising. And the hardest battle is yet to begin.

The Consumer's Voice - Making a Difference

By: Dr Vinod Chandrashekhhar Dixit

We celebrated World Consumer Rights Day on March 15 to promote consumer awareness and rights worldwide. The 2026 theme is "Safe Products, Confident Consumers," focusing on product safety in physical and digital marketplaces. Consumer rights are now an integral part of our lives like a consumerist way of life. As a consumer, one should know how market products are constantly under-weight, of inferior quality and do not prescribe to quality standards specified by quality-control agencies. Today the consumer choice is influenced by mass advertising and other promotional devices which make people want things which neither they really need nor they can afford. Consumers not only do not get value for their money but also often have to suffer losses and inconvenience due to market manipulations. The Consumer protection law applies to the goods and services we buy every day, from grocery items and whitegoods, to vehicle repairs and hairdressing services. Consumers are legally entitled to a refund, repair, replacement or repeat service if there is a problem with any goods or services they buy. In our country, buyers have a very weak bargaining power and cannot assert their right being heard. Consequently, manufacturers and traders are tempted to follow diverse practices which turn out to be unfair to consumers.



Consumers therefore have an important role to play in persuading food companies and butchers to make the changes that are needed to stop the global public health threat for prudent use of antibiotics and protect the drugs for the future. Mahatma Gandhi said that "A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work - he is the purpose of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us the opportunity to serve him." India is one of the few countries in the world, which has exclusive courts for consumer redressal and is known for the rapid development of its consumers' movement. World Consumer Rights Day (WCRD) is a fantastic annual celebration that unites consumers around the world. In fact the original Consumer Protection Act, 1986, was meant to ensure that the consumers themselves argue their cases in a friendly atmosphere but the experience has been different. One must remember that businesses can't refuse to help, nor simply refer consumers to the manufacturer. There are many businesses do, as a matter of goodwill, give refunds and exchanges even when legally they don't have to, so consumers should make a habit of checking a store's refund policy before purchasing. "The law helps those who help themselves." Hence consumerism is necessary. Self-regulation by business will minimize the need for extensive government intervention. In order to check the onslaught on consumers, a host of legislations are implemented by the government. These include Sale of Goods Act, 1930; Essential Commodities Act, 1955; Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954; Prevention of Black Marketing and Maintenance of Supplies of Essential Commodities Act, 1980; Standards of Weights and Measures Act, 1956; Agricultural Products and Grading and Marketing Act (AGMARK), 1937; Indian Standards Bureau Certification Act, 1952; MRTP Act, 1969 etc.

Despite the various check and balances put in place by various institutions, we still have crimes. The only way to stem the cases arising from newer forms of technology is through consumer education. Consumers need to understand the new technology.

The uncertain future of the global economy

The global economy today has arrived at an unprecedented and extremely complex crossroads, where at every step new uncertainties continue to emerge. Over the past few years, the economic challenges that the world has faced are not limited to any single cause; rather, they are the combined result of several significant global developments. Before the world could fully recover from the economic stagnation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war and now the military conflicts arising in sensitive regions such as the Middle East have repeatedly shaken the global market. The strict monetary policies and high interest-rate strategies adopted by central banks around the world to control inflation have not only reduced the purchasing power of ordinary people but have also stalled the investment plans of large industries. In today's world, economics and geopolitics are so deeply intertwined that even a minor change in one place can have a major impact on supply chains on the other side of the globe. The weaknesses in global supply chains that were exposed during the pandemic have now taken on an even more severe form due to current military and political instability. No country today can claim to be completely secure or self-sufficient, because the network of international trade has become so dense that if a rupture occurs in one place, the entire network ceases to function effectively. This situation has pushed the future of the global economy into a kind of fog where finding a path to progress is becoming increasingly difficult with each passing day.

In the context of the recent war in the Middle East and the tensions arising from it, one of the major crises confronting the global economy is the impact on fuel and energy resources. The Middle East is the principal source of the world's crude oil and natural gas, and therefore even the slightest instability in the region can create a surge in global energy markets. If the conflict that began between Israel and Hamas expands to powerful countries such as Lebanon or Iran, it will not remain merely a regional war but could turn into a global economic catastrophe. Particularly if crucial maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz or the Red Sea become disrupted due to military reasons, a large portion of global trade could come to a complete standstill. Already, drone and missile attacks on ships in the Red Sea have forced major shipping companies to alter their routes, causing long-term delays in the delivery of goods and significantly increasing shipping charges as well as insurance costs. As a result, not only would the prices of petrol and diesel rise, but the cost of everything—from food commodities to raw materials for industries—could soar dramatically. Such uncertainty creates fear among investors, leading to volatility in stock markets and a shortage of capital required for establishing new enterprises. If disruptions in oil supply persist for a prolonged period, the global economy may move toward a deep recession or "stagflation," where inflation rises even as economic growth declines sharply.

Another extremely significant and complex aspect of the uncertain future of the global economy is the growing commercial cold war and the increasing trend of protectionism among major world powers. For nearly three decades the world spoke of globalization and dreamed of an integrated global market, yet that concept is now facing a profound crisis. The economic rivalry between



the United States and China is gradually pushing the world toward two clear poles. The struggle for dominance in technology—particularly semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and renewable energy—has erected enormous barriers to the free flow of international trade. Countries are no longer thinking solely about commercial profits but are increasingly prioritizing national and economic security, leading to a competition to raise import tariffs and impose restrictions on technology exports. Consequently, many electronic goods and mechanical components that were once available at affordable prices are now becoming scarce and significantly more expensive. Such economic division has reduced global production capacity and created obstacles for innovation on an international scale. If this geopolitical polarization continues, the integrated structure of global trade could collapse entirely, and a substantial portion of the world's gross domestic product could permanently disappear. In this complicated environment of economic uncertainty, no country can prosper alone; unfortunately, current political circumstances are fueling conflict rather than encouraging international cooperation.

Inflation and the policies pursued by central banks across the world have also become a major factor contributing to the current economic uncertainty. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world injected enormous amounts of money into markets to keep their economies alive. As a result, a massive wave of inflation has swept across the globe—one that has not been seen in the past forty years. To control this rise in prices, central banks from the United States Federal Reserve to the European Central Bank have been forced to rapidly increase interest rates. Higher interest rates mean that the cost of borrowing increases significantly, making it extremely difficult to start new businesses or expand existing ones. The most severe impact has fallen on middle-class and lower-income families, who are struggling to meet monthly budgets while repaying housing loans and other personal debts. Moreover, when interest rates rise in developed countries, foreign investments and capital flow rapidly out of developing economies, weakening their local currencies and making imported goods more expensive. Many countries around the world are now so deeply burdened by public debt that launching new economic recovery programs has become nearly impossible. If high interest rates persist for a long time, they

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himanshu Ranjan Bhuyan

could create a major liquidity crisis in the global banking sector, potentially destabilizing the entire financial system.

Rapid technological change, particularly the rise of artificial intelligence, has also placed a major question mark over the future of the global economy. Although technology offers opportunities to increase productivity and open new possibilities, it has also created unprecedented uncertainty in global labor markets. The fear that many traditional jobs and professions may disappear has generated psychological pressure and economic insecurity among large sections of society. Countries that fail to adapt to this rapid technological transformation may fall far behind for many years,

widening the gap between rich and poor even more dramatically. Furthermore, the increasing frequency of natural disasters caused by climate change has inflicted significant damage on global agriculture and industrial sectors, making it nearly impossible to accurately estimate the economic costs involved. The transition to a green economy or carbon-free production systems requires enormous new investments, which have become a heavy economic burden for a world already drowning in debt. Governments are being forced to spend huge amounts of money to combat climate change, leaving fewer resources available for public welfare programs. All these factors combined have trapped the global economy in an extremely complex crisis from which there appears to be no easy or simple escape.

A closer analysis of this dark future of the global economy reveals that the world is actually passing through a "polycrisis," where multiple crises occur simultaneously and reinforce one another. The issue here is not merely about GDP or economic indicators; the most serious problem lies in the severe lack of mutual trust and economic cooperation among nations. As long as wars and narrow geopolitical interests receive greater priority than global economic stability, uncertainty will continue to dominate international markets. If the military conflict in the Middle East does not subside quickly, unpredictable increases in energy prices could push the global economy into an unbearable stage where meeting the basic needs of ordinary people becomes a major challenge. It must always be remembered that the economies of all countries today are interconnected in such a way that no nation can isolate itself from disasters occurring on the other side of the world. Overcoming this

crisis requires a new form of international economic goodwill and strategy—one that prioritizes global stability and collective interests rather than individual profit. Otherwise, humanity may be heading toward a chaotic economic era in which uncertainty becomes the defining feature of life. The current situation repeatedly reminds us that the economy is not merely a game of numbers on paper; it is the foundation of the lives and security of billions of people, and safeguarding it demands extraordinary restraint, patience, and foresight from global leadership.

The ongoing trend of economic uncertainty is not only altering the balance of global power but is also exerting deep pressure on the international monetary system. For a long time the United States dollar functioned as the most reliable currency for global trade, yet many countries have now begun searching for alternatives. China, Russia, and even several strong economies are increasingly conducting trade transactions in their local currencies—a process known in economic terms as "de-dollarization." Although this process will not immediately end the dominance of the dollar, it has already introduced a certain level of division and instability in international financial markets. If global trade becomes fragmented across multiple currencies, transaction costs could rise and calculating future profits and losses may become far more complex for investors. Moreover, countries of the Global South are beginning to demand structural changes in international financial institutions. According to them, organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund primarily protect the interests of Western nations while pushing developing countries deeper into debt. Such disagreements have created a major fracture in global economic governance, which could hinder the ability to confront any major economic crisis in the future. Until international financial institutions ensure fairness and transparency for all, economic stability will remain an elusive dream.

Another factor intensifying the complexity of the global economic situation is the growing imbalance in population structures around the world. Developed countries are experiencing rapidly aging populations and a shrinking workforce, while developing countries are facing a massive youth population struggling with unemployment. The shortage of labor in developed economies has increased production costs and placed heavy pressure on their social security systems. Meanwhile, if countries with large youth populations fail to create sufficient employment opportunities, it could lead to social unrest and large-scale migration. The issue

of migration is already encouraging right-wing and protectionist ideologies in developed countries, further poisoning the environment for global cooperation. This uneven distribution and utilization of human resources prevents the world economy from reaching its full potential. Safeguarding the future of the global economy requires not only capital investment but also a balanced and equitable system for skilled labor across the world. If countries remain confined within their geographical boundaries and ignore the needs of the global labor market, economic stagnation could grip the entire world for a prolonged period.

Overall, the global economy stands at a moment when old rules are losing their relevance while new rules have yet to fully emerge. Whether it is the war in the Middle East or the trade conflicts among powerful nations, these developments demonstrate that the current economic system is extremely fragile and could collapse at any moment. The dark cloud of uncertainty is likely to have a profound impact on the lives of citizens across the world in the coming decade. Rising inflation, employment insecurity, and energy shortages together form a triangular crisis from which escape will be the greatest challenge for global leadership. Successfully confronting this challenge will require a broad economic vision that prioritizes the future of humanity rather than narrow political gains. Humanity now stands at a time when every economic decision must be guided by a deep sense of responsibility and the courage to view the entire world as one family. Otherwise, societies may continue calculating economic numbers while the real standard of living for ordinary people keeps declining. Ensuring a secure future for the global economy has become the responsibility of every nation and every international institution.

The entire environment of the global economy is not confined to theoretical concepts or mathematical equations; it is deeply connected with the dreams and existence of billions of people in their daily lives. During the past few decades humanity climbed remarkable heights of economic progress, yet that progress has now slowed considerably because of deep flaws within prevailing economic models. Excessive emphasis was placed on profit and production, while the stability of supply chains and the economic inequalities between different parts of the world were largely ignored. Those very inequalities and weaknesses have now emerged before us in the form of severe uncertainty. When even a small explosion in a region such as the Middle East can affect the livelihood of a poor farmer on the other side of the world, it becomes clear how fragile and dangerously interconnected the current global system has become. Escaping this uncertainty requires redefining the very meaning of development. The primary goal of an economy should not be merely increasing the wealth of large capitalists; rather, it should be building a resilient and just system capable of confronting any global or regional crisis. Without such transformation, no amount of new technology or adjustments in interest rates will remove the uncertainty overshadowing the global economy. The greatest need of our time, therefore, is a new global economic agreement that places not only markets but also humanity and the protection of the planet at its center. (The author is the recipient of the 'Yuba Lekhak Sanman - 2025' from the Government of Assam)

Petro products prices in import-dependent India may surge further Oil, Gas & Fertiliser prices are shooting up across the world

By: Nantoo Banerjee

Notwithstanding the assurance given in Parliament last week by Union Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri on India's 'robust' energy supplies, fuel and gas prices in the country are expected to shoot up soon in keeping with the global trend. The minister's statement appears to be substantially political having little connection with reality. It may have more to do with the ensuing elections in four of India's highly politically-sensitive states - West Bengal, Kerala, Assam and Tamil Nadu - than the on-ground situation. Barring Assam, three other states are governed by political parties strongly opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party, which rules the national government. A domestic oil price surge may be temporarily suppressed but it is bound to spike in due course as the country is 90 per cent import dependent for oil and gas. India is also a major importer of fertiliser. Fuel and fertiliser prices and their availability are a big concern for India.

Even import from Russia is going to be costly. Thanks to the worldwide oil and fertiliser supply disruptions due to the US-Israel led war against Iran, Russian oil prices are also shooting up. Just over the last fortnight, Russian crude oil prices have experienced a sharp increase, with the flagship Urals grade spiking from around \$45 to over \$76 per barrel. This has caused Russian oil to trade at a premium to global benchmarks in certain markets, reversing the heavy discounts seen earlier in the year. However, it is still cheaper than the generally recorded prices of crude oil sold by suppliers from the other parts of the world surpassing \$100 per barrel due to escalating tensions in

West Asia as Iran continues to pound bombs, ballistic missiles and drone strikes on the US-protected Arab nations and Israel. The Iran-Israel war has effectively shut the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow shipping lane between Iran and Oman through which around a fifth of the world's daily oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) supply passes. The world is currently fixating on the Strait of Hormuz as one of the most strategic choke points on Earth, and on what is being described as one of the most serious disruptions to global energy supply ever experienced.

The depleting liquefied natural gas availability has already become a big concern among Indian consumers despite the government assurance that LNG and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) supplies for domestic household use are protected and prioritized, in spite of significant import disruptions. There have been constant media reports of shortages in commercial LPG although the government has maintained that household supplies are stable. The government has invoked the Essential Commodities Act, making domestic piped natural gas (PNG) and household LPG the top priority to ensure uninterrupted supply. To counter the disruption of shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, India is sourcing additional LNG from alternative suppliers, including the US and Russia. The supply constraints have already hit commercial LPG users such as restaurants and hotels. They have been urged to switch to alternative fuels or piped natural gas where available.

Qatar, the world's second largest exporter of LNG behind the USA and India's key supply

source, has stopped production, following the massive Iranian attacks on its facilities. LNG tankers are also being diverted away from the region. A disruption in LNG supplies is bound to jack up natural gas prices and hit consumers in India, industrial and domestic, hard. LNG prices are moving up across the world. The news of Qatar's state-run energy company, QatarEnergy's shutdown of operating facilities, with the firm providing no timetable for output resumption, led to skyrocketing natural gas futures in Europe and other parts of the world. Several Indian companies, particularly in the fertilizer and industrial sectors, have been forced to shut down production or drastically reduce operations due to a severe LNG shortage.

Gujarat-based Indian Farmers Fertiliser Co-operative (IFFCO), India's largest urea producer, and Kribhco Fertilizers have reported shutting down plants or bringing forward annual maintenance due to the scarcity of LNG, which is the primary feedstock for urea. ONGC Petro Additions has been operating its Dahej gas cracker at a "drastically" lower capacity. Small steel producers and other manufacturing units in Gujarat and Maharashtra have experienced significant production cuts. In Chhattrapati Sambhajinagar (Aurangabad), industries including the Sanjeev Auto Group and companies supplying components to major automobile manufacturers reported that they might have to temporarily shut down due to LNG supply shortage.

Hindalco Industries, part of the Aditya Birla group, has halted production of extruded aluminium products due to a critical shortage of

natural gas, stemming from supply disruptions. Adani Total Gas Ltd (ATGL) reported receiving upstream gas curtailments, leading to near-tripling of industrial gas prices to around Rs 119/scm, forcing companies to seek alternatives. Major suppliers such as GAIL and Indian Oil Corp (IOC) informed customers of 10 to 30 per cent cuts in natural gas allocations. The scarcity has forced suppliers to look for costly spot purchases to bridge the gap. Restoration of normal production facilities by the affected industrial units could take a month or so even after normal LNG supplies are restored, posing a significant risk of inflation and production shortages for fertilisers, steel, and manufactured goods.

The domestic concerns for shrinking availability of oil and gas and rising prices are real due India's near total dependence on foreign supplies. High energy costs are bound to impact the country's economy and growth. The inflation rate is moving up. The trade gap may expand substantially unless the government severely cuts the imports of non-essential items. Import tax may need to be rejigged, especially for gold, the country's second largest item of import after petroleum. Both the central and state governments must sit together to reduce taxes and levies on petro-fuel, which now works to be around 50 per cent of the retail prices. High government taxes will further raise the prices of fuel. Some countries such as Serbia and Portugal have cut domestic fuel tax. The situation is grave. The energy minister's assurance of India's robust energy supplies appears to be vague if not incredible. (IPA Service)

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Artificial intelligence and the living spirit of education

By: Satyabrata Borah

Education has always stood as one of the most powerful forces shaping human civilization. Through education societies pass knowledge, values, culture, and wisdom from one generation to the next. It influences how people think, how they interact with the world, and how communities develop over time. Every era has seen changes in the methods of teaching and learning. In ancient times knowledge traveled through oral traditions where elders and teachers passed lessons through stories and conversations. Later the invention of writing allowed knowledge to be recorded and preserved. The arrival of the printing press made books widely available and opened the doors of learning to a larger section of society. The rise of the internet transformed the landscape of education once again by making information accessible from almost any corner of the world. In the present age another powerful transformation is taking place. Artificial intelligence has begun to enter classrooms and learning systems, changing how education is delivered and experienced.

Artificial intelligence refers to technology designed to perform tasks that normally require human thinking. Computers and digital systems equipped with artificial intelligence can analyze information, recognize patterns, make predictions, and assist in decision making. Over the past few decades rapid progress in science and computing has made artificial intelligence an important part of many fields. It supports doctors in diagnosing illnesses, assists scientists in research, guides spacecraft in space exploration, and helps businesses understand complex data. Education has also started to experience the influence of this technology. Many institutions around the world are exploring ways to integrate artificial intelligence into teaching and learning.

One of the most visible changes brought by artificial intelligence in education is the rise of digital learning platforms. Students today can access lessons through online courses, educational apps, and virtual classrooms. Learning is no longer limited to a physical classroom or a fixed schedule. A student can watch a lecture, read study material, or practice exercises from home using a computer or a mobile phone. Artificial intelligence systems can track how students learn and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Through this process the system can recommend lessons suited to each learner's needs. A student who struggles with mathematics can receive simpler explanations or extra practice exercises.

Another student who learns quickly can move ahead to more advanced topics. This form of personalized learning has attracted attention from educators because it attempts to adapt education to individual differences. Traditional classrooms often face the challenge of teaching many students at once. Every learner has a different pace of understanding. Some grasp concepts quickly while others require more time and guidance. Artificial intelligence systems attempt to respond to these differences. When a student answers a question incorrectly the system can an-



alyze the mistake and provide hints or explanations. The learner gains a chance to correct the error and understand the concept more clearly. This immediate feedback can help students build confidence in their learning journey. Artificial intelligence also offers practical support to teachers. Many routine tasks in education consume a large amount of time. Teachers often spend hours grading assignments, preparing reports, organizing records, and managing administrative duties. Automated systems can perform several of these tasks quickly and accurately.

Online platforms can check multiple choice tests within seconds and record the results in digital databases. Attendance systems can track student participation automatically. Data analysis tools can show teachers how students are performing in different subjects. When technology handles these routine responsibilities teachers can devote more energy to guiding students, planning creative lessons, and engaging in meaningful discussions.

Another interesting use of artificial intelligence appears in interactive learning environments. Educational software can present information through simulations, visual models, and virtual experiences. Students studying history might explore a digital reconstruction of an ancient city. Science learners can observe the behavior of molecules through computer simulations. Geography lessons can include interactive maps that allow students to explore different regions of the world. Such experiences can make learning more engaging and memorable. Instead of simply reading about a concept students can see it unfold visually and interact with it.

Artificial intelligence also has the potential to make education more accessible. In many parts of the world students live in remote areas where educational resources are limited. Online learning platforms supported by arti-

ficial intelligence can bring lessons to these regions. Students can attend virtual classes, access educational videos, and communicate with teachers through digital networks. This possibility can help reduce gaps in educational opportunities. Learners with disabilities can also benefit from assistive technologies. Speech recognition software can convert spoken words into text for students with hearing difficulties. Screen readers can help visually impaired learners access digital material. Language translation tools can assist students who study in a language different from their native one.

While the advantages of artificial intelligence are impressive, the presence of technology in education has also raised thoughtful discussions among educators and scholars. Many experts believe that education involves far more than the transfer of information. Learning is deeply connected with human relationships. A classroom is not only a place where facts are shared. It is a social space where students develop confidence, curiosity, and empathy. The bond between a teacher and a student carries emotional meaning that cannot be easily reproduced by a machine. A teacher plays many roles in a student's life. Teachers guide, encourage, and inspire learners to explore the world with curiosity. They notice when a student feels confused, anxious, or discouraged. A supportive word from a teacher can restore a student's motivation. When a learner faces personal challenges teachers often become trusted listeners who provide comfort and advice. Artificial intelligence can analyze data and respond to programmed patterns, but it cannot genuinely feel compassion or understand the emotional experiences of a young mind.

Human relationships in education help shape character and values. Students observe how teachers communicate, solve problems, and treat others with respect. These everyday interac-

tions influence how young people learn to behave in society. Through classroom conversations students learn to listen to different viewpoints and express their ideas respectfully. Group activities encourage cooperation and shared responsibility. Friendships formed in school teach lessons about trust and teamwork. These experiences play an important role in shaping responsible and thoughtful individuals.

Another concern discussed by educators relates to the development of independent thinking. When information becomes easily available through digital tools students may rely heavily on automated systems for answers. A question typed into a search engine can produce an immediate response. Artificial intelligence systems can generate explanations, summaries, or solutions to problems.

Such convenience can be helpful in many ways. At the same time students must learn how to analyse information carefully. Critical thinking involves questioning ideas, comparing evidence, and forming reasoned conclusions. Education should encourage learners to think deeply and ask meaningful questions rather than simply accepting ready made answers.

Ethical considerations also arise in the use of artificial intelligence in education. Digital learning platforms collect large amounts of data about students. Information about learning habits, performance levels, and personal preferences is stored in databases. Protecting this data becomes an important responsibility. Schools and technology developers must ensure that student information remains secure and is used responsibly.

Transparency about how data is collected and analysed is essential for maintaining trust. Fairness is another issue that deserves attention. Artificial intelligence systems learn from existing data. If the data contains biases or incomplete information the system may produce biased results. For in-

stance an automated evaluation system might unintentionally favor certain learning styles while overlooking others. Careful design and regular monitoring are required to reduce such risks. Educational technology should aim to support all students equally and avoid reinforcing social inequalities.

Some observers express concern that increasing use of technology might reduce the importance of teachers. This fear often arises when new tools appear in any field. Historical experience shows that technology usually changes the nature of work rather than removing the human role entirely. In education artificial intelligence is more likely to become a supportive partner for teachers rather than a replacement. Technology can manage large volumes of information and perform repetitive tasks efficiently. Teachers bring creativity, emotional understanding, and moral guidance to the learning process.

Imagine a classroom where teachers and artificial intelligence work together harmoniously. The digital system provides insights into how students are progressing in their studies. Teachers use this information to design lessons that address the needs of the class. Students receive personalized exercises through learning software while also participating in lively discussions guided by their teacher. Technology supplies resources and analysis while human educators nurture curiosity and character. Such cooperation can create a balanced learning environment.

The importance of human presence becomes particularly clear in moments of inspiration. Many people remember a teacher who sparked their interest in a subject or encouraged them to pursue a dream. A passionate teacher can transform an ordinary lesson into an exciting exploration of ideas. When students see enthusiasm in their teacher's voice and expression they often feel motivated to learn. Artificial intelligence can provide explanations and examples, though the emotional spark that inspires young minds arises from genuine human interaction.

Education also involves the cultivation of moral values. Schools guide students in understanding concepts such as honesty, responsibility, kindness, and social justice. These lessons grow through stories, discussions, and lived experiences within a community. Teachers serve as role models who demonstrate ethical behavior in daily interactions. Artificial intelligence systems do not possess moral awareness. They follow algorithms created by programmers. Human educators remain essential for guiding students toward thoughtful and ethical choices.

The social environment of a school contributes greatly to learning. Students interact with classmates from different backgrounds and perspectives. They learn to cooperate in group projects, participate in debates, and respect diversity of opinion. Cultural events, sports activities, and community service programs enrich the educational experience. Such interactions develop communication skills and emotional intelligence. Digital learning platforms can connect students virtually, though physical presence and shared experiences carry a special depth that technology cannot fully recreate.

A thoughtful approach to the future of education recognizes the value of

both innovation and human connection. Artificial intelligence offers powerful tools that can enhance learning efficiency and expand educational opportunities. Personalized instruction, data driven insights, and interactive simulations can help students understand complex subjects more effectively. At the same time the heart of education lies in relationships that nurture curiosity, empathy, and moral awareness.

Many educational thinkers around the world suggest a balanced model in which technology supports the human elements of teaching. Artificial intelligence can assist in organizing knowledge and identifying learning patterns. Teachers can focus on guiding discussions, encouraging creativity, and building supportive classroom communities. Students can benefit from digital resources while still engaging in meaningful interactions with mentors and peers.

The expansion of artificial intelligence in education also invites continuous reflection. Policymakers, educators, parents, and students must participate in conversations about how technology should be used in schools. Thoughtful policies can ensure that digital tools serve educational goals rather than overshadowing them. Training programs can help teachers understand how to integrate technology effectively into their teaching methods. Investment in infrastructure can provide equal access to digital learning opportunities. Education has always evolved with the changing needs of society. The arrival of artificial intelligence represents another stage in this ongoing journey.

Each generation faces the task of shaping educational systems that prepare young people for the future while preserving essential human values. Knowledge, creativity, empathy, and responsibility remain central to this mission. Artificial intelligence can assist students in exploring vast fields of knowledge. It can open doors to information and provide new ways of understanding complex ideas. At the same time the warmth of human interaction continues to define meaningful learning experiences. A teacher who listens carefully, encourages curiosity, and believes in a student's potential leaves a lasting impression that technology cannot replace.

The future of education will likely unfold through cooperation between intelligent machines and compassionate human educators. Artificial intelligence can analyze patterns in data and offer helpful insights. Teachers can transform those insights into thoughtful guidance that supports the growth of each learner. Students will gain knowledge through digital resources while also learning the values of empathy, cooperation, and responsibility from the people around them.

Education is not only about acquiring information. It is about becoming a thoughtful and responsible member of society. Artificial intelligence may assist in many tasks, but the human spirit that drives curiosity, compassion, and moral awareness remains essential. When technology and human connection work together in harmony, education can reach its fullest potential and continue to guide future generations toward a more thoughtful and understanding world.

Diplomats globally are looking for India to play active role in ending west Asian War

By: T.N Ashok

On the 17th day of one of the most dangerous conflicts to erupt in the Middle East since the Gulf War, the world's attention has fixed on missiles, supertankers, and a coral island barely a third the size of Manhattan. But the most consequential move may not come from a warplane or a warship. It may come from a phone. And that phone may ring from New Delhi.

As the Iran-Israel-US war enters a precarious, explosive phase — with Kharg Island, the beating heart of Iran's oil economy, now struck by American aircraft but its terminals still standing — diplomatic back-channels are buzzing with a single name: Narendra Modi. According to officials familiar with the discussions, India has been quietly in contact with both Tehran and Jerusalem, exploring whether a Modi intervention could pull the conflict back from the edge.

The question is not whether India wants to intervene. The question is whether any other country can. The answer, examined soberly, is almost certainly no.

Diplomacy runs on trust, and trust is earned over decades of consistent engagement. Look at the map of relationships in this conflict, and India sits at a unique intersection that no other major power — not China, not Russia, not the European Union — can claim. India and Iran share a civilisational relationship stretching back millennia. New Delhi has maintained trade and diplomatic ties with Tehran through every round of Western sanctions, investing in the Chabahar port on Iran's southeastern coast as a strategic gateway to Central Asia. Iran does not view India as an instrument of Washington. That distinction matters enormously when you are a country surrounded by what you perceive as enemies.

At the same time, India-Israel relations have deepened into one of the most substantive bilateral partnerships of the 21st century. Defence cooperation, intelligence-sharing, agricultural technology transfers — the two countries have built an architecture of trust that goes far beyond symbolism. Israel views India not as a neutral bystander but as a democratic partner that genuinely understands the security pressures it faces.

And then there is Washington. India is now central to America's Indo-Pacific strategy, a valued Quad partner, and one of the few countries with which the Trump administration has maintained functional and expanding ties. The US needs India. That gives New Delhi leverage it rarely exercises openly — but leverage nonetheless.

Tehran trusts India. Jerusalem respects India. Washington needs India. No other country on earth can say all three things simultaneously. This is not an accident.

It is the accumulated dividend of decades of strategic autonomy — a foreign policy often misunderstood in the West as fence-sitting, but which, in a moment precisely like this one, reveals itself as positioning of the highest order.

If India's intervention were purely altruistic, one might question whether New Delhi would risk its relationships to step into another region's war. But India's motivations here are ruthlessly self-interested — which is precisely what makes them credible.

India is among the world's largest importers of crude oil. The Persian Gulf is not a distant abstraction for Indian policymakers. It is the artery through which approximately 60 percent of India's energy needs flow. Iran has been a significant supplier, and the broader Gulf region — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq — is indispensable to India's economic functioning.

Kharg Island processes nearly 90 percent of Iran's crude exports. If those terminals burn, Iran's export capacity collapses. If Iran retaliates against Gulf energy infrastructure — as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has explicitly threatened — the resulting shock to global oil markets would be devastating. And for an economy growing at India's pace, an oil price spiral is not an inconvenience. It is a crisis. There is also the human dimension. Nearly nine million Indians live and work in the Gulf states. Any regional escalation that destabilizes the UAE, Bahrain or Saudi Arabia puts those communities — and the remittances they send home — directly at risk.

India's strategic calculus, then, is straightforward: every day this war continues is a day India's energy security, economic growth, and diaspora are exposed to catastrophic risk. A Modi-brokered de-escalation is not charity. It is national interest, pursued through the one instrument India has built patiently over decades — relationships that span the warring parties.

There is a particular dimension to India's potential role that has been underappreciated: its ability to bring the United States along.

The Trump administration has clear objectives — dismantle Iran's capacity to threaten Israel and disrupt global shipping. But it also has clear constraints — no appetite for a protracted ground war, no desire to own a regional energy catastrophe, and an economy that would not welcome a sustained oil price surge heading into a political cycle.

India can speak to Washington in a language the administration understands: interests, not values. New Delhi can offer a framework in which Iran steps back from the Strait of Hormuz in exchange for a pause in strikes on its oil infrastructure — a deal that allows Washington to declare strategic success without having to destroy the global energy system to achieve it.

India has something else to offer the US: a face-saving off-ramp. Ceasefires brokered by hostile powers are politically toxic. A ceasefire shaped, even partially, through dialogue with India — a trusted partner — is something Washington can accept without appearing to capitulate.

Diplomats familiar with the back-channel discussions suggest that any Indian mediation would focus on three concrete near-term objectives.

First, restoring safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's disruption of maritime traffic is the most immediately destabilizing element of the conflict, triggering energy market volatility and threatening global shipping insurance. A commitment to safe passage — even informal and temporary — would begin to release pressure from the system.

Second, a mutual freeze on attacks targeting energy infrastructure. Kharg Island's terminals remain intact — barely. The US has struck military installations on the island while deliberately sparing the oil facilities. That restraint is a signal. Iran has not yet followed through on its threats to ignite the Gulf's broader energy infrastructure. There is a narrow window in which both sides could step back from the precipice of full economic warfare. That window will not remain open indefinitely.

Third, the opening of a channel toward a temporary ceasefire. Not a resolution — the underlying conflict between Iran and Israel is decades deep and will not be resolved by a phone call. But a pause, a reduction in intensity, a moment in which diplomacy can breathe.

None of these outcomes require India to take sides. They require India to be what it already is: a country with a foot in every camp, trusted by parties.

India's strategic autonomy has occasionally frustrated its partners. Washington has wanted India to choose more firmly. Moscow has wanted India to align more explicitly. Beijing has resented India's refusal to follow its lead. Tehran and Jerusalem have each, at different moments, wished India would lean harder in their direction.

The Persian Gulf cannot afford to burn. Iran's economy cannot survive the destruction of Kharg Island. The United States cannot afford a regional energy war. Israel needs the conflict contained. And India needs all of them to step back. Rarely does a country's national interest align so precisely with the world's interest.

The phone call, if it comes, will be complex, delicate and far from guaranteed to succeed. But it may be the only call that has any chance of being answered — by Tehran, by Jerusalem, and by Washington alike. That is what two decades of strategic patience look like when they finally matter. (IPA Service)

10 patients killed, 11 staffers injured Fire at Cuttack hospital ICU; PM announces ex gratia

BHUBANESWAR, March 16: At least ten patients were killed after a major fire erupted in an ICU in Odisha government-run SCB Medical College and Hospital here early on Monday, Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi said.

Majhi, who rushed to the hospital, said that around 11 hospital staff members suffered burn injuries while rescuing patients to safety.

He said that the fire probably originated from a short circuit.

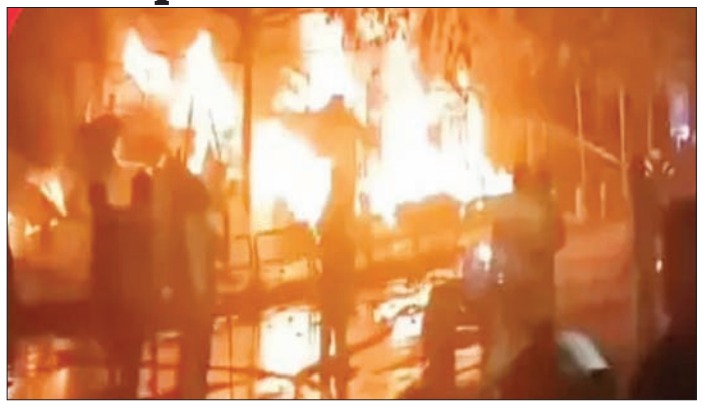
The fire broke out between 2.30 am and 3 am. Fire service personnel rushed to the hospital and doused the flames, an official said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi condoled the death of patients in the fire incident and announced that ex gratia of ₹ 2 lakh from the PMNRF would be given to the next of kin of each deceased.

"The mishap at a hospital in Cuttack, Odisha, is deeply painful. Condolences to those who have lost their loved ones. I pray for the speedy recovery of the injured. An ex gratia of ₹ 2 lakh from PMNRF would be given to the next of kin of each deceased. The injured would be given ₹ 50,000," the Prime Minister's Office said on X.

The PM also spoke to Majhi over the phone and took stock of the situation.

"Honourable Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji spoke with me over the telephone regarding the



tragic incident that occurred at SCB Medical College in Cuttack and held a detailed discussion," the chief minister said on X.

Majhi said he has apprised the PM of the emergency measures, rescue operation and the specialised medical services being provided to the injured persons.

The CM also told the Prime Minister about the judicial inquiry ordered by the state government into the fire incident.

"At this sensitive time, I am grateful to the PM for his sympathetic concern and assurance of necessary assistance," he stated.

The CM also announced Rs 25 lakh ex gratia for the next of kin of each deceased person.

President Droupadi Murmu and Vice President C P Radhakrishnan condoled the loss of lives in the

incident at the hospital and prayed for a speedy recovery of the injured.

Noting that there were 23 patients at the Trauma Care ICU and an adjacent ICU and ward, the chief minister said seven patients died in the fire, while three others succumbed to burns or suffocation during evacuation. He said the fire erupted at the ICU of the Trauma Care department of the hospital, where critically ill patients were being treated.

Majhi also announced a judicial probe into the incident and asked the DG, Fire Service, to inquire into the matter and report to him immediately.

"I direct the Fire Service DG to personally visit SCB Medical College and Hospital and ensure fire compliance," Majhi said.

If anyone is found guilty in the incident after the judicial probe,

strong action will be taken, the chief minister said.

The fire service officials, along with hospital staff, police and patients' attendants, rescued the patients undergoing treatment at the ICU and shifted them to other departments of the SCB hospital.

Majhi, along with Health Minister Mukesh Mahaling, visited the state-run health facility and reviewed the situation.

"I have directed the concerned officers for proper treatment of the injured patients and staff," he said.

Majhi said that 11 medical officials joined the rescue operation, risking their lives, and they are now under treatment in a ward in the hospital. He asserted that his government has made provision of ₹ 720 crore in the budgets for 2025-26 and 2026-27 for this purpose. Work is underway on a war footing to install fire-fighting equipment in the government-run medical facilities, he added.

According to an eyewitness, the power supply was cut twice, and then the fire broke out, and the entire ICU was filled with thick smoke.

"I have called the fire brigade personnel, and they arrived around 20 minutes later. Meanwhile, the relatives and attendants of patients joined hands with the medical staff to rescue the patients," the eyewitness said. (PTI)

SC dismisses West Bengal govt's plea against HC order Murshidabad violence

NEW DELHI, March 16: The Supreme Court on Monday dismissed a plea of the West Bengal government against a Calcutta High Court order that had refused to stay an NIA probe into incidents of violence in Murshidabad district in January.

A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joyymalya Bagchi said the high court had taken a "balanced view".

The top court was hearing a plea filed by the state against the February 26 order of the high court that refused to stay the NIA probe in the case.

During the hearing, the top court referred to its February 11 order on a separate plea of the state government.

The apex court had then asked the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to file a report in a sealed cover before the high court, justifying the invocation of a UAPA provision pertaining to terror acts in a case related to repeated incidents of violence and unrest in Murshidabad.

Disposing of the state's appeal, the bench had asked the government to approach the high court with its grievances against the NIA probe.

The top court had said the high court could also examine the state government's challenge to the Centre's decision to order an NIA probe in the case.

The bench had asked the NIA what was the basis for invoking the provision of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) to justify its probe into the violence at Murshidabad's Beldanga.

The NIA, which was handed over the probe by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on January 28, has invoked section 15(1)(a) of the UAPA in the case.

The provision deals with terrorist acts and can be slapped on whoever indulges in any act with an intent to threaten the unity, integrity, security, economic security or sovereignty of India or with an



intent to strike terror.

The provision is attracted if "bombs, dynamite or other explosive substances or inflammable substances or firearms or other lethal weapons or poisonous or noxious gases" are used in terror acts.

The top court had asked the NIA to file a report in a sealed cover on this aspect in the high court.

Appearing in the court for the NIA, Additional Solicitor General S V Raju had defended the agency's decision, citing the use of deadly weapons and the proximity of the area (Beldanga) to the Bangladesh border.

On January 20, the high court expressed concern about repeated incidents of violence and unrest in Murshidabad, and directed police and the administration to ensure peace in the district.

On January 16, protesters blocked National Highway-12 over the death of a Beldanga resident working as a migrant worker in Jharkhand.

On January 17, similar blockades took place over the alleged heckling of a Murshidabad resident working as a migrant worker in Bihar. (PTI)

Rally in Leh, shutdown in Kargil two days after Wangchuk's release



LEH, March 16: Hundreds of people took part in a rally in Leh town amid tight security while Kargil observed a shutdown on Monday on a call given by Leh Apex Body (LAB) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) in support of their demands for statehood and extension of the Sixth Schedule to Ladakh.

It was the first major rally by LAB since violence erupted during protests in September, prompting a clampdown by authorities, and comes two days after climate activist Sonam Wangchuk was released by the Centre after nearly six months in detention under the National Security Act (NSA).

The Director General of Police of Ladakh, Mukesh Singh, visited the rally site at Singay Namgyal

Chowk in Leh to take stock of the security arrangements, with additional police and security personnel deployed across the town to maintain law and order.

Led by LAB co-chairman Chering Dorjay, the protesters started from the Singay Namgyal chowk and marched to Leh polo ground with participants, including a sizable number of women, chanting slogans in support of the demands for statehood and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule.

Some of the participants were also seen carrying pictures of the four persons who were killed in firing after a LAB-sponsored protest rally turned violent in September last year.

Kargil and adjoining Drass observed a complete shutdown in response to the joint call given by

LAB and KDA, the two groups that are spearheading the agitation over the issues of statehood and Sixth Schedule over the past five years.

No untoward incident was reported from anywhere, officials said.

Talking to reporters in Leh, Dorjay thanked the people for turning up in large numbers for the rally despite the barricading of roads and imposition of restrictions by the administration.

"I would like to congratulate the people of Ladakh for maintaining complete peace despite strong provocation," the LAB leader said, terming the rally a "big success".

He said there are some people who try to claim that the Apex Body has no public support. "Today, the people of Ladakh have demonstrated that the public stands with the Apex Body and the KDA," he said.

Wangchuk, a prominent leader of the agitation, was detained under the NSA in September for allegedly instigating violence during the protests.

The Centre on Saturday announced that it was revoking the detention of Wangchuk to "facilitate constructive and meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders." (PTI)

Modi diminishing BRICS+ presidency value to appease Trump, Netanyahu: Congress

NEW DELHI, March 16: The Congress on Monday lashed out at the government for not releasing a collective statement on the West Asia conflict as the BRICS+ chair, saying Prime Minister Narendra Modi is "diminishing" the standing of the grouping's presidency in his desire to "appease" US President Donald Trump and maintain his "cozy relationship" with Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh recalled that Brazil was the President of BRICS+ in 2025 and it got the 11 member countries to issue a joint statement in June 2025 on the US and Israel air assaults on Iran.

"India is boasting of being the President of BRICS+ in 2026. But till now it has not summoned up the inclination or the courage to put out a collective statement on the US-Israeli air offensives on and targeted assassinations in Iran, as well as on Iran's subsequent attacks on non-military targets in the GCC countries, and the shocking action of the US Navy in the Indian Ocean close to both Sri Lanka and India," Ramesh said on X.

"In his desire to appease President Trump and maintain his cozy relationship with Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, Mr. Modi is diminishing the value and standing of the BRICS+ Presidency," the Congress leader said. The Congress last week had at-



tacked the Modi government for its "silence" on the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and said "a compromised prime minister no doubt wants to avoid antagonising his American and Israeli friend".

Ramesh said India has rightly condemned Iran's attacks on Gulf states but its "completely quiet" on the US-Israeli assault on Iran in the first place.

The Congress has said the Opposition is demanding a discussion in both Houses of Parliament on the situation in West Asia and its impact on India, but the Modi government is "adamantly refusing" to allow such a debate as it is "afraid".

The opposition party also claimed that the government's for-

eign policy "already stands brutally exposed".

The Congress had staged a walkout in the Rajya Sabha and protested in the Lok Sabha on being dissatisfied with the statement of External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in both Houses of Parliament last Monday.

The party termed as "vapid" Jaishankar's statement on the West Asia situation in Parliament and alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy "(mis)adventurism", coupled with the government's "undermining" of the Indian Foreign Service, is pushing India into "vassalage".

The US and Israel launched a major military attack on Iran on February 28, killing Khamenei.

Making a suo-motu statement in Parliament, Jaishankar had said New Delhi stood for maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states in the region. He defended allowing the Iranian ship to dock at an Indian port as the right decision taken on humanitarian grounds.

He said the Indian government had been constantly monitoring the evolving situation in the region at the highest level and had already brought back 67,000 stranded Indians from the conflict zone.

Jaishankar said the safety of Indian nationals and national interests, such as energy security and trade, remain the topmost priority for the government. (PTI)

EC scraps contract of Bengal poll webcam vendor after 'irregularities'

KOLKATA, March 16: The Election Commission (EC) scrapped the contract of the agency that supplied web cameras during the 2021 West Bengal assembly and 2024 Lok Sabha elections after detecting major irregularities in footage, and has selected three new vendors for supply of equipment, a senior official said on Monday.

The decision to change the vendor was taken after serious discrepancies were found while examining recordings from cameras used in previous elections, the official said.

Three companies from outside the state have now been selected through fresh tenders to supply the equipment, he said.

"The Commission has made it clear that there should be no lapse in the conduct of polling. If violence or disturbance takes place at a booth, the poll will be stopped and re-conducted. Repolling will be held as many times as required," an EC official said.

"When the recordings from the 2021 assembly and 2024 Lok Sabha elections were examined, about 30 per cent of the cameras had no recording at all. In another 30 per cent, only about half an hour of footage at the start and end of polling was found, while the rest was blank," another source in the EC said.

Most of these cameras had been installed at sensitive booths where incidents of violence had been reported on polling day, the source added.

Officials said the absence of proper recordings also meant that the poll panel could not submit web camera footage in court in cases related to post-poll violence.

The issue came to light during checks conducted during the Kaliganj assembly by-election, following which the earlier agency's contract was cancelled and a new vendor was brought in through a fresh tender process, they said.

Under the new plan, web cameras will be installed both inside and outside polling booths, particularly in sensitive or violence-prone areas.

"In sensitive locations, two cameras will be installed at each booth. Observers will decide the number of such booths based on law-and-order reports," another official said. (PTI)

5 MLAs of BJD, Cong vote in favour of BJP-backed Independent in Odisha RS polls

BHUBANESWAR, March 16: At least five MLAs of the opposition BJD and Congress on Monday reportedly voted in favour of the BJP-supported Independent nominee Dilip Ray in the Rajya Sabha elections in Odisha, for which voting is underway.

The polling for the RS polls is being held in the state after a gap of 12 years, as this time, five candidates are in the fray for four seats, which will fall vacant on April 2.

Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee president Bhakta Charan Das told reporters that three of its MLAs - Ramesh Jena, Dasarathi Gomango and Sofia Firdous - have "voted in favour of the BJP".

BJD's Banki MLA Devi Ranjan Tripathy also announced that he voted in favour of the BJP-backed Independent candidate.

"I oppose our party's decision to join hands with the Congress. My decision to vote for the BJP-supported Independent candidate is in line with the legacy of Biju Patnaik, who had all along fought against the Congress," Tripathy said.

Another BJD MLA Souvic Biswal's wife Dr Ananya Priyadarshini claimed that her husband voted in favour of Ray.

"My husband has voted against the party line, as my father-in-law Pravat Biswal was expelled from the BJD recently. He was humiliated within the party. My husband is observing 'Maun Vrat' and has toiled for the BJD, but he has been neglected," Biswal's wife told reporters on the assembly premises.

BJD president Naveen Patnaik said, "I have spoken that the BJP and its allies would indulge in 'horse trading'. Those opposition members who voted in favour of the BJP have criminal records and were sent to jail."

Two candidates of the BJP are its state unit president Manmohan Samal, and sitting Rajya Sabha MP Sujet Kumar. Former Union minister Dilip Ray is also contesting as an Independent and has the support of the saffron party.

The BJD nominees are party leader Sanrupt Misra and eminent urologist Dr Dattaswar Hota, whom the Congress and the CPI(M) are supporting.

There is a possibility of cross-voting as neither the ruling BJP nor the opposition BJD has the required numbers to win the fourth seat.

In the 147-member Odisha assembly, the BJP has 79 MLAs and the support of three Independents, while the BJD has 48 members after the suspension of two of its legislators on January 15. The Congress has 14 MLAs and one member of CPI(M).

According to the Rajya Sabha arithmetic in Odisha, one candidate requires 30 first preference votes to win a seat. As the BJP has the support of 82 members, it will have 22 surplus votes after electing its two candidates. Similarly, the BJD will have 18 surplus votes after electing its one candidate. (PTI)

Bengal transfers in line with CEC's assurance for peaceful polls: EC officials

NEW DELHI, March 16: Election Commission officials on Monday said the top-level shake-up in the West Bengal civil and police administration was in line with Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar's assurance to hold violence-free polls in the state.

EC has removed the state chief secretary, police chief, Kolkata police commissioner and others, and has appointed new officials as their replacements.

EC has also told the state government that the shunted-out officers should not be given any election-related assignment.

The assembly polls will be held in the state on April 23 and 29, and votes will be counted on May 4.

In his press conference on Sunday, CEC Kumar assured that the elections in West Ben-



gal would be violence-free and peaceful. In line with the objective, EC appoints and transfers

senior police officials including the DGP and Kolkata CP," a functionary said.

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) called the EC's reshuffle of senior administrative and police officials a "panic reaction by a party that realises it cannot win elections through democratic means", while the opposition BJP and CPI(M) hailed the rejig as a "step towards free and fair polls".

After the announcement of the poll schedule for West Bengal, EC removed Chief Secretary Nandini Chakravorty, Home Secretary Jagdish Prasad Meena, DGP Peeyush Pandey and Kolkata Police Commissioner Supratim Sarkar.

It said the removed officials would not be given poll-related assignments. The poll panel said the decision was taken following a review of the poll preparedness of the state. (PTI)

Navtej Sarna in English, Mamta Kalia in Hindi among 24 authors to receive Sahitya Akademi Award

NEW DELHI, March 16: English author and former ambassador Navtej Sarna and Hindi writer Mamta Kalia are among the 24 authors in as many languages who will receive the Sahitya Akademi Award for 2025, the National Academy of Letters announced on Monday. The announcement has come months after the academy cancelled a scheduled press conference in December 2025 to declare the awards.

"Sahitya Akademi is happy to announce today its annual Sahitya Akademi Awards in 24 Indian languages recognised by it. 8 books of poetry, 4 novels, 6 books of short stories, 2 essays, 1 literary criticism, 1 autobiography and 2 memoirs have won the Sahitya Akademi Awards 2025," it said in a statement.

Sarna has been named the recipient for his novel "Crimson Spring" while Kalia will receive the award for her memoir "Jeete Jee



Allahabad".

The awardees will receive a casket containing an engraved copper plaque, a shawl and an amount of ₹ 1 lakh at a ceremony on



March 31, the academy said.

Other awardees include Prasun Bandyopadhyay for "Shrestha Kabita" in Bengali, Yogesh Vaidya for "Bhatkhadaki" in Gu-

jarati, Amresh Nugadoni for "Dada Seerisu Tande" in Kannada, N Prabhakaran for "Maayamanushyar" in Malayalam, Raju Baviskar for "Kalyaniya Resha" in Marathi, Jinder for "Safety Kit" in Punjabi, Jitender Kumar Soni for "Bharkhama" in Rajasthani and Sa Tamilselvan for "Thamiz Sirukathaiyin Thadagal" in Tamil.

Pritpal Singh Betab for "Safar Jari Hai" in Urdu, Nandini Sidha Reddy for "Animesha" in Telugu, Bhagwan Atlani for "Waghoo" in Sindhi, Sumitra Soren for "Mid Birna Chenna Saon Inag Sagai" in Santali, Mahamahopadhyay Sahu Bhadrashdas for "Prasthanacatustaye Brahmaghosah" in Sanskrit, Girijakumar Baliyar Singh for "Padapurana" in Odia, Prakash Bhattarai for "Nepali Paramparik Sanskriti Ra Sahityata Ko Dukuti" in Nepali and Haobam Nalini for "Kanglamdriba Eephut" in Manipuri are also among the recipients of the award. (PTI)

TRIPURA BUDGET SESSION 2026

Tax-free budget of ₹ 34,212.31 crore presented in Tripura Assembly with emphasis on infra, jobs

AGARTALA, March 16: Tripura Finance Minister Pranajit Singha Roy on Monday presented a tax-free deficit budget of ₹ 34,212.31 crore for the financial year 2026-27, emphasising infrastructure, digital transformation and rural employment.

The budget reflects a 5.52 per cent growth compared to the previous year's budget estimate of ₹ 32,423 crore.

In spite of the hike in the overall outlay, the budget anticipates a deficit of ₹ 240.72 crore during the year. To push for infrastructure development, the minister proposed capital expenditure of ₹ 8945.92 crore, which is 13.19 per cent more than that of last year's outlay.

Roy said this year's budget laid a strong foundation for sustain-



able economic growth, placing emphasis on infrastructure, digital transformation, rural employment and development of connectivity to achieve 'Viksit Tripura' by 2047.

Claiming that the budget is in-

penditure of ₹ 8945.92 crore, which is 13.19 per cent more than that of last year's outlay that will generate extra employment in the state," he said.

Roy said, "Strengthening infrastructure, promoting investment, creating employment, and developing health and tourism sectors are a few of the proactive measures that the government continues for all-around socio-economic development."

The minister said that the government will establish a technical university, a medical varsity and a women's university to boost the higher education sector.

"The government is committed to ensure welfare of indigenous people living in the state. Out of the total proposed budget of ₹ 34,212.31 crore, around

₹ 15,000 crore has been earmarked for tribal development," he said.

Roy added that the government has increased the size of the budget substantially, from ₹ 15,000 crore in 2017-18 FY to ₹ 34,212.31 crore in 2026-27, without imposing any new tax, reflecting the commitment to relief to the common people.

Hailing the budget, Chief Minister Manik Saha said the government has given focus to boost the economy by spending more on capital expenditure.

"The budget tabled by our Finance Minister Pranajit Singha Roy in the Assembly is a balanced one. Apart from other sectors, the budget lays emphasis on capital expenditure to boost the state's economy," he told reporters. (PTI)

Power supply disrupted in parts of Sikkim due to severe thunderstorm

GANGTOK, March 16: Power supply was disrupted in parts of Sikkim due to a severe thunderstorm, which led to tripping of several 66 kV transmission lines, an official statement said. Due to the thunderstorm on Sunday evening, a conductor of the 66 kV Rorathang-Rongli transmission line snapped near Amba area in Pakyong district, affecting power supply to Rongli and Rhenock areas, the power department statement said.

In Gangtok district, sparks along with a loud noise were reported near Namli area in the 66 kV Marchak-Macleods transmission line, affecting supply to Nimtar, Topakhani, Singtam and the Khamdong belt.

Additionally, the 66 kV LLHP-Sichey transmission line could not be sustained during trial charging.

In Mangan district, during trial charging of the 66 kV Peribang-Phodong transmission line, heavy sparks and noise were observed near the G B Pant Wildlife Sanctuary area, resulting in disruption of supply across the district.

The power department has deployed its teams for patrolling of the affected lines and rectification works. All efforts are being made to restore normal power supply at the earliest. There may also be temporary outages in other districts as well, it added. (PTI)

Term of Garo Hills ADC extended

SHILLONG, March 16: The Meghalaya government has announced its decision to extend the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council's current term by six months following violent protests against non-tribal participation in the election process.

The decision was approved by the state Cabinet virtually chaired by Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma on Monday.

Addressing media persons after the meeting, deputy chief minister in charge of Home and District Council Affairs Prestone Tynsong said the Cabinet met with a single agenda relating to the extension of the term of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council.

After detailed deliberation and discussion, the Cabinet decided to extend the term of the current House for a period of six months with effect from April 18 to October 18, 2026.

The decision came hours after Albinus R Marak resigned as chief executive member amid a no confidence push by 21 members of the district council.

By the afternoon, the House elected D Ch Sangma as the new chief executive member and formed a fresh executive committee.

Tynsong said he was happy to inform that in the afternoon today the House elected D Ch Sangma as the new chief executive member.

On the council's Scheduled Tribe certificate directive for candidates, Tynsong said the matter now rests with the new executive committee. He said the new executive committee would take a call on the issue of Scheduled Tribe certificates and on the participation of both tribal and non tribal candidates in the GHADC elections.

The decision also came days after the government revoked and postponed the GHADC polls scheduled for April 10 with counting on



April 14 following unrest in Garo Hills over the issue of non-tribal participation in the polls.

Tynsong said the six month extension would create space for dialogue.

He said the new executive committee and the new chief executive member would take responsibility while the government would also invite all stakeholders for discussions under the chairmanship of the chief minister and at the level of the GHADC chief executive member.

The aim is to carry everyone along and meet the aspirations of the people.

Terming the Cabinet's decision a landmark move, Tynsong said the government postponed the election due to the law and order situation, which arose from the aspirations of the people who are against non-tribal participation in the GHADC polls.

He added that the decision taken today

should make all residents of Garo Hills happy.

Rejecting opposition suggestions that the extension was meant to benefit the ruling National People's Party, Tynsong said there was no political agenda behind the decision.

He said the government was not focusing on any political party but wanted to ensure that the aspirations of the people are met.

The government and the new executive committee will consult stakeholders over the next six months on candidate eligibility rules and related amendments.

Tynsong said stakeholders would get the opportunity to raise their concerns before the new executive committee and the chief executive member, and within six months the government would have time to accommodate or make necessary amendments arising from the discussions. (NNN)

Arunachal Governor urges entrepreneurs to create productive assets



ITANAGAR, March 16: Arunachal Pradesh Governor K T Parnaik on Monday called upon entrepreneurs to create productive assets in areas that contribute to the state's development.

Launching the 'Business Transformation Programme' for MSMEs in Itanagar, he highlighted opportunities in sectors like tourism, waste management, coaching for competitive examinations, preservation of local languages, and community information and service kiosks, an official statement said.

He said that while access to finance and infrastructure is important, the growth of enterprises also depends on strengthening

the capabilities of entrepreneurs.

"Skills in business planning, financial management, marketing strategies, and the adoption of modern technologies are essential for enterprises to

grow, innovate, and access wider markets," the governor said.

He also welcomed the CII's proposal to establish a Multi Skill Training Institute (MSTI) in the state to provide industry-aligned training opportunities for the youth.

In Arunachal Pradesh, MSMEs are steadily expanding, with nearly 50,000 enterprises registered across sectors such as food processing, tourism and hospitality, retail services, handloom and handicrafts, construction services, and small-scale manufacturing, Parnaik said.

"These enterprises play a vital role in strengthening local economies across the districts," he said.

Parnaik said over the past four years, the Arunachal Pradesh Innovation and Investment Park has incubated 106 startups, of which 38 per cent are led by women. (PTI)

Tripura CM declares 5 pc DA hike for govt employees

AGARTALA, March 16: Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Monday declared a 5 per cent hike in dearness allowance for state government employees, taking the total DA to 41 per cent. Shortly after Finance Minister Pranajit Singha Roy ended his budget speech, Saha announced that the hike will be applicable from April 1 for government employees and pensioners. The chief minister said 1,02,563 regular employees and 81,019 pensioners will get the DA benefits.

"The government will spend an additional ₹ 500 crore annually to provide 5 per cent DA to the government workforce. We are continuously trying to increase the DA for the employees to narrow the gap with their central government counterparts," he said. At present, the Centre provides 58 per cent DA to government employees.

Meanwhile, senior Congress MLA Sudip Roy Barman criticised the CM for announcing the DA hike after the finance minister's budget speech.

"We are happy that the government declared a 5 per cent hike in DA for employees, but the way the chief minister made the announcement is against the spirit of assembly proceedings. The finance minister could have mentioned it in his budget speech," he said. Responding to a question, Pranajit Singha Roy said around ₹ 15,000 crore will be spent to meet salaries and pension out of a total budget of ₹ 34,212.31 crore for 2026-27. (PTI)

ANSAM opposes directive on singing of 'Vande Mataram' in institutions

IMPHAL, March 16: The All Naga Students' Association, Manipur (ANSAM), the apex student body of the Nagas in Manipur, has expressed its "most profound concern and categorical opposition" to the recent directive issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India, mandating the compulsory observance and singing of the Indian National Anthem, Jana Gana Mana, during official ceremonies and within educational institutions.

"Such an instruction, formulated and promulgated without due cognisance of the historical and political sensitivities of the Naga people, represents an ill-conceived attempt to impose symbolic conformity upon a society whose identity and historical consciousness are both distinct and deeply rooted," said the ANSAM in a statement on Monday.

It also said the Nagas are not merely a demographic constituency within an administrative arrangement; they are a people with a unique political history, cultural inheritance and collective consciousness which must be approached with wisdom, sensitivity and respect.

While the ANSAM "remains fully aware" of the constitutional framework of the Indian Union, including the obligations enshrined under Article 51A(a), it must be unequivocally emphasised that constitutional provisions cannot be interpreted as instruments of coercion, the Naga student body stated.

"The compulsion of symbolic observances, particularly within institutions of learning, undermines the very democratic ethos that the Constitution purports to uphold," the Naga student body also said.

The directive suggesting that the academic day in schools commence with the community singing of Vande Mataram, coupled with instructions to "popularise" the National Anthem, is deeply disquieting, it further said.

"Educational institutions must re-

main citadels of intellectual liberty, moral discernment and critical inquiry. They cannot, and must not be reduced to arenas for the enforcement of symbolic allegiance through administrative decree," the ANSAM added.

The Naga student body, therefore, said it "places on record its firm caution" to all administrative authorities, educational boards and institutional heads operating within the "Naga areas in Manipur" to refrain from implementing any measure that compels the singing or observance of Vande Mataram in contravention of the sentiments and historical realities of the Naga people.

"Any unilateral attempt to enforce such directives will inevitably be regarded as a disregard for the collective dignity and sovereign rights of the Nagas," it also said.

The ANSAM further directed all constituent units and subordinate units under its jurisdiction to maintain vigilant oversight within their respective institutions and jurisdictions.

"Instances of coercion, administrative excess or forced compliance must be meticulously documented and brought to the attention of the association without delay," it further added.

At this delicate juncture, the ANSAM called upon the Government of India and all concerned authorities to exercise political prudence, administrative restraint and statesmanship.

"Measures that disregard the historical experiences and cultural sensitivities of the Naga people will only erode the fragile architecture of mutual respect and coexistence".

"The ANSAM then reiterated "with utmost clarity" that the dignity, identity, political and historical rights of the Naga people are neither matters of administrative convenience nor subjects of symbolic compulsion.

"These principles remain inviolable and shall be defended with unwavering determination in unison without fear and without reproach", the ANSAM asserted. (NNN)

NSF holds rally in Kohima against Centre's 'Vande Mataram' directive



KOHIAMA, March 16: Thousands of students and citizens under the banner of the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) on Monday staged a rally here opposing the Centre's directive to the state government mandating the singing of Vande Mataram during official functions and in educational institutions.

Carrying placards reading "MHA's January 28 directive is an assault to secularism", "Naga rights are non-negotiable", "Stop forced policies", and "The directive is a direct attack on our faith," the rallyists marched from Kohima Town to Lok Bhavan.

The protesters submitted a memorandum addressed to President Droupadi Murmu through the Governor of Nagaland.

In the memorandum, the NSF expressed its strongest opposition to the directive mandating the playing or singing of Vande Mataram during official functions and directing its compulsory observance in educational institutions.

The NSF stated that while the Naga people respect the national symbols and cultural expressions of all communities, the imposition of any symbolic expression with religious connotations raises serious concerns regarding freedom of conscience.

The memorandum stated that the revised version of Vande Mataram contains devotional imagery associated with the worship of a particular deity, which the federation said conflicts with the religious and cultural sensitivities of the Naga people.

It maintained that educational institutions should remain spaces for intellectual freedom and democratic values rather than platforms for "enforcing symbolic compliance or ideological uniformity."

Citing international legal frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights, the federation asserted that freedom of thought, conscience and religion must be upheld.

It also referred to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, stating that indigenous communities have the right to maintain their cultural institutions and traditions without external imposition.

Addressing the gathering, NSF president Mteisuding Heraang said the rally was a collective assertion that the identity and beliefs of the Naga people cannot be dictated by administrative directives.

He maintained that the protest was not directed against any nation or community but against the principle of imposing symbolic practices that conflict with the conscience of the people.

Heraang further stated that respect for diversity and coexistence has always been a hallmark of the Naga society, where different faiths and communities have lived side by side peacefully.

However, he said the compulsory observance of Vande Mataram raises fundamental concerns related to secularism and freedom of belief.

Speakers from the Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Nagaland Joint Christian Forum (NJCF), Nagaland Christian Revival Churches and the Catholic Association of Nagaland also addressed the gathering, expressing support for the protest and stressing the need to safeguard the cultural and religious sensitivities of the Naga people.

The NSF urged the President to withdraw the directive mandating the singing or playing of Vande Mataram during official functions and within educational institutions in the Naga homeland, and called for dialogue and consultation with representatives of the Naga people before implementing policies that may affect the cultural and social fabric of the region. (PTI)

Monasteries must serve as centres of education, intellectual enquiry: Khandu

ITANAGAR, March 16: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Monday said monasteries should evolve beyond places of worship, and serve as vibrant centres of education and intellectual enquiry.

Khandu was speaking after the inauguration of key educational facilities at Guru Tenpai Dronme Vidyalaya in West Kameng district.

"His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, has often emphasised that monasteries should not remain only places of worship, but serve as vibrant centres of education and intellectual inquiry for society," he said.

In this spirit, Padma Shri Guru Tulku Rinpoche has developed Guru Tenpai Dronme Vidyalaya at Labau, envisioning it as a place where spiritual wisdom and mod-



ern education grow together, the chief minister said.

He said it was an honour to inaugurate the Kelsang Donyoe Tenzing Library and the Sambhota

Auditorium and administrative block at the institution.

"It was an honour... to lay the foundation stone for the hostel and additional classrooms to further

strengthen the learning environment for students," Khandu said in a post on X.

"May such initiatives continue to nurture wisdom, learning and character among the younger generation," he said.

In another post, Khandu said he also unveiled the Dud-Dul Tharpa Ling Lhakang at Jamiri, describing it as a sacred place dedicated to prayer and reflection.

"The name translating to 'Place of Liberation that Subdues Negative Forces' carries a powerful resonance of spiritual protection and clarity," he said.

"May this Lhakang serve as a centre of devotion, wisdom, and compassion, guiding devotees on the path of peace and enlightenment for generations to come," Khandu added. (PTI)

Would love to play Test but T20 mein 'haath set hai', says skipper Surya

NEW DELHI, March 16: World Cup-winning skipper Suryakumar Yadav says he yearns to play Test cricket, finds ODI not his cup of tea, but ultimately his forte is T20 because "usney apna haath set ho gaya hai."

In an exclusive podcast interview with PTI, Suryakumar occasionally slipped into charming Mumbaii Hindi, such as the "haath set ho gaya hai" phrase which has no decent English equivalent. Roughly translated, he meant to say he is now a master of the shortest format of cricket and is comfortable playing that.

Relaxed throughout the hour-long conversation, clearly on cloud nine after leading India to a hugely successful World Cup campaign, Suryakumar opened up about his disappointment at not playing Test cricket.

He was reminded that he played one Test against Australia. "One inning!" he corrected the interviewer with his typically unabashed smile. "...what is written in your life, you get that only. I started with red-ball cricket itself, played Ranji Trophy for 10-12 years. I played a lot of red-ball cricket in Bombay because if you grow up in Bombay, you start with red ball itself, so everything is around red ball," he said.

"But gradually, when we started playing white ball cricket, the inclination shifted a bit towards that.

U-19 WC final knock was special: Sooryavanshi

JAIPUR, March 16: India's teenage cricket sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi on Monday described his match-defining century against England in the Under-19 World Cup final as one of the most "special" knocks of his budding career, a memorable innings that played a decisive role in India lifting the title.

Sooryavanshi smashed a stunning 175 off just 80 balls to power India to a record-extending sixth U-19 World Cup title.

"My personal favourite is the final knock in the U-19 World Cup (in Harare). I could only play one U-19 World Cup. It was a proud moment for me to score a hundred in the final," he said.

"What I contributed for the team in the final was special," he said on the sidelines of an event to unveil the new jersey of Rajasthan Royals and announce the franchise's partnership with JK Lakshmi Cement as the principal sponsor for the upcoming edition of the IPL.

Asked about his goal in this year's IPL, Sooryavanshi said he is just focusing on his process and not thinking about other things.

"I try to focus on winning. I just focus on my work."

The 14-year-old has attracted considerable media attention for his explosive power-hitting, but by his own admission, Sooryavanshi prefers to keep things simple. "I just try to focus on my work. In any field if you do well, you are bound to get attention. But I am not focusing on that attention. I just want to concentrate on my job," Sooryavanshi said.

The event was also attended by veteran all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja, who is returning to RR fold after 17 years, and leg-spinner Yash Raj Punja. (PTI)



And after that, I came to this format (T20). I also tried a lot in One-Day cricket to play well in it, but nothing happened there," he said.

"T20 mein jaisa chal raha tha, usme apna haath set ho gaya hai, aisa bol sakte hain" (The way T20 was working out for me, I had become good at it; you can say that)," he said.

Given an opportunity, would he want to play Test cricket? Without hesitation he replied: "I would love to, because, as I mentioned, I played red ball cricket from 2010-11 to 2020. So, 10 years is a long time to play red ball, and I was in love with that format. But yeah, obviously, given an opportunity, who wouldn't want to play Test?" he said.

Still, at 35 years of age it is virtu-

ally impossible for Suryakumar to get into the Test team. His only experience in Test was in 2023 against Australia in Nagpur when he scored 8 runs in one inning.

The same year he appeared in the ODI World Cup final against Australia when he scored 18 off 28 balls. India lost the final and Suryakumar has not played in that format ever since.

Asked if ODI has a future given that T20 provides immense excitement to fans in a short time while Test gives them old-fashioned satisfaction, Suryakumar remained diplomatic, giving the format its due without being too dismissive.

The dwindling number of bilateral in the format seems to be indi-

cating a decline that might eventually end with ODI becoming obsolete.

"I feel that as much as I have experienced ODI cricket closely and I have seen it, it is a format where you have to bat in three different ways. Sometimes if you go in early, if wickets fall quickly, then you have to bat like Test cricket.

"Then you have to bat with a good strike rate like a One Day and then later at the end of the innings, you have to bat like (you do in) T20 format. So, that is one format that I never understood. I tried my best to play it. But then it's a challenging format," he said.

India's spin great R Ashwin believes ODIs are dying a "slow death, Pakistan's Wasim Akram once advised the ICC to scrap them altogether and England's Kevin Pietersen perceives 50-over cricket to be under most threat amid the ever-expanding T20 universe.

Suryakumar also recalled the emotion that the format managed to stir during the 2023 World Cup.

"...when I was with the team for the 2023 ODI World Cup and I played, then that vibe, the whole atmosphere of that format, the build-up going into the final. That was completely different than what we played in 2026 and 2024 T20 World Cup.

"So, it's charm is different. ODI cricket also has a different charm, T20 has a different one," he explained. (PTI)

KASAFc girls gear up for Indian Women's League 2

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 16: The women footballers of Karbi Anglong Sports Association Football Club (KASAFc) have been undergoing intensive training for the past two weeks at the KASA Stadium in preparation for the upcoming Indian Women's League 2 (IWL-2). The tournament is scheduled to begin on March 20 and will be held at two venues in Thiruvananthapuram and Bengaluru in Karnataka.

This will be the third season of the second tier of the Indian women's football league system.

Altogether 14 teams will compete in the tournament, divided into three groups — two groups of five teams each and one group of four teams.

The group stage matches will be played in a single round-robin format at the two centralised venues from March 20 to 29. The top two teams from each group will qualify for the final round of IWL-2, and the top two teams in the final stage will secure promotion to the 2026-27 edition of the Indian Women's League.

KASAFc earned qualification for the national competition after emerging champions in the Assam State Women's League last year. The club is the only team from Karbi Anglong representing Assam in the competition.

KASAFc has been placed in Group B alongside Kerala United FC (hosts), HOPS FC, DKR Football Academy and Krida Prabodhini Pune.

Group A, which will play at the Padukone-Dravid



Centre for Sports Excellence, includes Roots FC (hosts), Odisha FC, Mumbai Knights FC, DFA Raisen and Juba Sangha FC. Group C comprises Kemp FC (hosts), MGM Ambush FC, FC Imphal and Suruchi Sangha FC. Speaking to reporters during the training session at KASA Stadium, head coach Horen Engti Kathar said the team has intensified preparations with only a few days remaining before the tournament begins.

He noted that the team had qualified for the competition after winning the Assam Women's League last year and the players are training hard to perform well in the national tournament.

Kathar said the players will be representing both Karbi Anglong and Assam on the national stage and expressed hope of securing promotion to the top tier of women's football in the country.

Team manager Kabonmili Tisso and assistant coach Rustom Engti will accompany the squad, while team physio Dr Ruptalin Beypi will also join the team.

Ayush, Tanvi to lead Indian challenge at Orleans Masters; injured Prannoy pulls out

ORLEANS (FRANCE), March 16: Youngsters Ayush Shetty and Tanvi Sharma will lead India's challenge at the USD 250,000 Orleans Masters Super 300 badminton tournament beginning here on Tuesday after senior shuttler HS Prannoy pulled out due to a shoulder injury.

Prannoy, who was originally slated to face top seed Chou Tien Chen of Chinese Taipei in the opening round, was forced to withdraw after experiencing shoulder pain during the Swiss Open in Basel last week.

While the cause of his discomfort was unclear initially, the Indian had decided to pull out of his match against Japan's Koki Watanabe to avoid aggravating the injury.

"The shoulder pain developed after travelling to the Swiss Open. We didn't know the reason then, so I decided to withdraw and fly back," Prannoy told PTI.

"After a scan it showed a slight tear. It is a minor thing and hopefully I should be okay soon," added the seasoned pro, who is targeting a return at the Asian Championships to be held from April 7 to 12 in Ningbo, China.

While Prannoy will miss the event, the rest of the Indian contingent will look to make a deep run in the tournament. (PTI)

Picked Ishan for World Cup on gut feeling, sensed his X-factor, says skipper Surya

NEW DELHI, March 16: India skipper Suryakumar Yadav says he brought power-hitter Ishan Kishan into the T20 World Cup winning team purely on gut feeling, because he felt the Bihar batsman had the X-factor that could turn around matches.

In a podcast interview with PTI Videos on Sunday, Suryakumar was asked if he is a data-driven captain or gut-feel skipper, and what made him pick Kishan over Jitesh Sharma.

"It was completely on gut, little bit on data. It (the decision) was very harsh on Jitesh Sharma at that time because he was playing with the team for over an year. And he was playing, had he not been playing then the story would have been different," he said.

Suryakumar, who led India to the T20 World Cup victory on March 8, spoke at length about his career, the future of Indian cricket, and his relationship with head coach Gautam Gambhir

Iranian women's soccer team to depart Malaysia for Oman after asylum reversal



KUALA LUMPUR, March 16:

The Iranian women's soccer team is set to leave Malaysia on Monday night, ending days of uncertainty after most of the seven squad members who sparked a diplomatic furor by seeking asylum in Australia reversed their decisions and rejoined the team in Kuala Lumpur.

The Asian Football Confederation general secretary Windsor John told The Associated Press that the team's departure Monday night was arranged by the Iranian embassy. He said the AFC, which is supporting the Iranian team in Kuala Lumpur, was told they are flying to Oman but that isn't their final destination. He said he wasn't aware of their full travel plans.

Asked if confederation is satisfied that the women will be safe back in Iran, Windsor said that both the AFC and FIFA will check up on them regularly with the Iranian football federation "as they are our girls as well."

Requests for asylum, and changes of heart

The squad flew from Sydney to Kuala Lumpur on March 10 after being knocked out of the Women's Asian Cup in Australia, initially leaving behind six players and a support staff member who had accepted protection visas.

Four players and the staffer have since rejoined the team in Kuala Lumpur, the latest flying in on Monday. No reasons have been given for the changes of heart. The Iranian diaspora in Australia blames pressure from Tehran.

Windsor said at a news conference earlier that his confederation had not received any direct complaints from players about returning home, despite media reports that families in Iran could face retaliation for the team failing to sing their national anthem before the opening match.

The silence during the anthem was variously reported as an act of resistance or a show of mourning. The team didn't clarify, and it sang at the opening of a later match. "We couldn't verify anything. We asked them and they said, No, it's ok," he said. "They are actually in high spirits... they didn't look afraid."

Two players remain in Australia

Iranian authorities have welcomed the women's decisions to reject asylum as a victory against Australia and U.S. President Donald Trump.

Iran's squad had arrived in Australia for the tournament shortly before the war in the Middle East began on Feb. 28, complicating travel arrangements.

Assistant Immigration Minister Matt Thistlethwaite described the women's plight in Australia as a "very complex situation."

"These are deeply personal decisions, and the government respects the decisions of those that have chosen to return. And we continue to offer support to the two that are remaining," Thistlethwaite said.

Those who stayed in Australia have been moved to an undisclosed safe location and are receiving

assistance from the government and the Iranian diaspora community, he said.

A propaganda war

Kylie Moore-Gilbert, a political scientist at Sydney's Macquarie University who spent more than two years in Iranian prisons on spying charges from 2018 to 2020, said "winning the propaganda war" had overshadowed the women's welfare.

"The high stakes made the Iranian regime sit up and pay attention and try to force their hand in response, in my view," Moore-Gilbert said.

"I do think in this case, had these women quietly sought asylum without that publicity around them, it's possible that the Islamic Republic officials might have, as they have in the cases of other Iranian sports people in the past who've defected... simply allowed that to happen," she added.

Iran's Tasnim News Agency said the players who left Australia were "returning to the warm embrace of their family and homeland," describing their return as a failure of what it called an American-Australian political effort.

Concerns about the team's safety in Iran heightened when the players didn't sing the Iranian national anthem.

The Australian government was urged to help the women by Iranian groups in Australia and by Trump.

The embassy in the national capital Canberra remains staffed, despite the Australian government expelling the ambassador last year.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese cut off diplomatic relations with Iran in August after announcing that intelligence officials had concluded that the Revolutionary Guard had directed arson attacks on a Sydney kosher food company and Melbourne's Adass Israel Synagogue in 2024.

Australian-Iranian Society of Victoria vice president Kambiz Razmara said the women who accepted asylum had been under pressure from the Tehran regime.

"They've had to make decisions at the spur of the moment with very little information and they've had to react to the circumstance," Razmara said. "I'm surprised that they've decided to go, but I'm actually not surprised because I appreciate the pressures that they're experiencing." (AP)

For the longest time, I wanted Indian cricket to dominate and time has come: Mithali

NEW DELHI, March 16: Mithali Raj said her dream of seeing Indian cricket dominate the global stage is finally becoming a reality with the men's, women's and junior teams winning major world titles in recent years.

In the past couple of years, the Indian men's side ended over a decade-long title drought by winning the 2024 T20 World Cup while the women's team followed it up by clinching their maiden ICC trophy—the ODI World Cup crown last year.

India's dominance extended to the junior circuit as well, with the under-19 teams also lifting world titles in recent years, reinforcing the country's status as the powerhouse.

"For the longest time, I wanted Indian cricket to dominate and the time has come," Mithali said at the BCCI Naman awards.

"The last two-three years, Indian cricket - men, women and the under-19 girls or boys, they've been doing immensely well. It's a proud moment as a former cricketer to see the growth of Indian cricket."

Mithali, along with former players Rahul Dravid and Roger Binny, was honoured with the Col CK Nayudu Lifetime Achievement Award during the BCCI's annual function on



Sunday. She credited former BCCI secretary and current ICC Chief Jay Shah for playing a key role in the transformation of Indian cricket, particularly the women's game.

"I have seen the evolution of women's cricket and I need to acknowledge the support of BCCI and Jay sir. In the last four-five years, there has been a huge transformation

of the Indian women's cricket team and that is because of that one person.

"His vision and commitment towards it...globally also he has put in so much effort to enhance and promote women's cricket's profile. It shows that he is a visionary and committed to the cause," she said.

Shah's tenure at the BCCI saw the introduction of equal match fee for men and women cricketers and the launch of the fully professional Women's Premier League.

A trailblazer of the women's game, Mithali also acknowledged the inspiration she drew from legendary male cricketers like Sachin Tendulkar and Dravid during her career.

"Women's cricket had its own journey, so did men's cricket. But we've taken a lot of inspiration from the men cricketers."

"I've taken inspiration from Rahul and Sachin because whenever I've bumped into them, they've always had a lot to chat about, about batting and the advice and suggestions really worked for me when I was playing."

She said such interactions are important as women cricketers look up to their male counterparts who have achieved so much success.

"This interaction between the men and women, I think, helps the women cricketers greatly because we're always trying to catch up with the standards of men's cricket. In that context, both of them have been doing well."

Former BCCI President and 1983 World Cup winning team member Binny, reflected on his journey over the years first as player and coach and then as an administrator.

"I was fortunate to be one of the players to play for India. Coming from a country whose population is so big, not many of us get a chance to represent the country. So, for me, representing the country was the biggest goal I achieved in cricket."

"When I finished playing, the first thing I did was take a break from the game. Then, I realised that I could contribute a lot more to the game."

"That's why I got into the coaching scene, first from my home state, Karnataka. Then, I did the Indian U19s and the Junior India, the U21s. That was a big boost because I was able to pass on a lot of information to the younger generation of cricketers," he said. (PTI)

English clubs aim to avoid Champions League wipeout with Bodo/Glimt on brink of quarterfinals

LONDON, March 16: English teams are playing this week to avoid a wipeout in the Champions League round of 16, with the reputation of the Premier League at stake.

All six English clubs — a record entry for any country in the competition — failed to win a first-leg game last week and only Premier League leader Arsenal is now clearly favored to advance. Arsenal hosts Bayer Leverkusen on Tuesday with the teams tied 1-1 and shapes as the most likely to represent Europe's richest league in the quarterfinals.

A hat trick of three-goal losses — albeit all on the road against high-class opponents — had many commentators using a famous saying credited to Michel Platini about the tiring English season.

English soccer is "lions in the winter, lambs by the spring," Platini said while UEFA president from 2007-15, quoting a phrase that seems to have come from the former Yugoslavia decades ago.

On Tuesday, Manchester City will start 3-0 down at home to Real Madrid and Chelsea faces a 5-2 deficit against defending champion Paris Saint-Germain.

Tottenham trails 5-2 at home to Atletico Madrid on Wednesday, when Liverpool will hope the aura of its Anfield home can help overcome a 1-0 loss in the first leg at Galatasaray. Newcastle goes to Barcelona tied at 1-1. In the two games without an English team, the remarkable Norwegian underdog Bodo/Glimt takes a 3-0 lead to Sporting Lisbon on Tuesday and Bayern Munich is up 6-1 hosting Atalanta on Wednesday. (AP)

