

6 WORLD

- Iran intensifies attacks on oil, gas facilities in Gulf after Israeli strike on key gas field
- Concern, anger and hope simmer in Cuba after Trump calls for 'imminent action' against govt

8 NATION

- Bengal polls: BJP eyes breakthrough amid polarisation, anti-incumbency
- 'Will fight Bengal assembly polls from Baharampur if Cong high command permits'

BJP campaign to start from March 24: Himanta

GUWAHATI, March 19: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said national BJP leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and party president Nitin Nabin will spearhead the assembly poll campaign that will start from March 24, a day after the completion of the nomination filing process.

Union ministers Sarbananda Sonowal, Pabitra Margherita, BJP state president Dilip Saikia and party management committee convenor Pradan Baruah will also participate in the campaign in Assam, Sarma told reporters at the party headquarters here.

The campaign will continue till 5 pm on April 7.

The elections to the 126-member Assam assembly will be held on April 9, and votes will be counted on May 4.

The BJP on Thursday released its first list of 88 candidates for the Assam assembly polls. Sarma said several (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

BJP releases first list of 88 candidates: Nandita Garlosa, Numal Momin denied tickets • Niso Terangpi to contest from Diphu

Tuliram Ronghang joins the fray from Rongkhang

GUWAHATI/NEW DELHI, March 19: The BJP on Thursday released its first list of 88 candidates for Assam Assembly polls, fielding Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma from Jalukbari seat.

Sarma will contest from Jalukbari constituency in a bid to retain it for the sixth consecutive term.

Sitting BJP MP Hitendra Nath Goswami has been fielded against state Congress chief Gaurav Gogoi from Jorhat.

Congress leaders Pradyut Bordoloi and Bhupen Borah, who recently joined the BJP, will contest from Dispur and Bihpuria, respectively.

Among other recent entrants from the Congress, Sashi Kanta Das has been fielded from Raha (SC), while Kamalakhya Purkayastha has been shifted from Karimganj (North) to Katigorah. Former AGP MLA Bhupen Roy,



who recently joined the BJP, will contest from Abhayapuri.

Cabinet ministers who will contest from their current seats are Ajanta Neog from Golaghat, Education minister Ranju Pegu from Dhemaji (ST), Rupesh Gowala from Doomdooma, Binal Borah from Tingkhon, Pijush Hazarika from Jagiroad (SC), Jayanta Malla Baruah from Nalbari, Ashok Singhal from Dhekiajuli, Krishendu Paul from Patharkandi and Kaushik Rai from Lakhipur.

Among those whose constituencies have been changed are

Speaker Biswajit Daimary, shifted from Panery to Tamulpur (ST), and ministers Chandramohan Patowary (Dharmapur to Tihu) and Ranjeet Kumar Dass (Pathacharkuchi to Bhowanipur-Sorbhog).

Sports minister Nandita Garlosa, representing Haflong (ST), has been replaced by Rupali Langhasa, while Deputy speaker Numal Momin, representing Bokajan (ST), has been replaced by Surjya Rongphar.

Former Union minister Rameshwar Teli will contest from Duliajan, a seat currently represented by Terash Gowala, who has been elected to the Rajya Sabha.

The Mahmorat seat, represented by minister Jogen Mohan, also recently elected to the Rajya Sabha, has been given to Suruj Dihingia.

Former minister and state BJP president Bhabesh Kalita will contest (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Zubeen case: Gauhati HC appoints fast-track court

Baksa district judge Sharmila Bhuyan to head fast-track court



GUWAHATI, March 19: The Gauhati High Court has appointed an exclusive fast-track sessions court for conducting day-to-day trial proceedings in the Zubeen Garg death case, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Thursday.

Baksa district judge Sharmila Bhuyan will head the fast-track court, formed exactly six months after the popular singer's death in Singapore.

Till the exclusive court becomes operational, the current additional district and sessions court here, hearing the case, will take it up on a daily basis, Sarma said.

"Today marks a significant milestone in our collective pursuit of justice in the Zubeen Garg murder case," Sarma said in a post on X.

"The Hon'ble Chief Justice of the Gauhati High Court has been pleased to nominate Smt. Sharmila Bhuyan, presently serving as District Judge, Baksa, to preside over an exclusive fast-track sessions court for conducting day-to-day trial proceedings in this matter," he added.

The 52-year-old singer died while swimming in the sea on September 19 last year in Singapore, where he had gone to attend the fourth North East India Festival

(NEIF).

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) of Assam Police's CID had probed the death and filed its charge sheet before a local court here, naming seven accused.

The state cabinet had last month decided to request the Gauhati High Court for a fast-track court to take forward the hearing.

Sarma said appointment of the fast-track court "will greatly expedite the judicial process and it reinforces our commitment to ensuring timely justice".

"I express my deep appreciation and heartfelt gratitude to Justice Ashutosh Kumar, Honble Chief Justice, Gauhati High Court for accepting our request and for his unwavering support in strengthening the cause of justice," the CM added.

Speaking to reporters later, Sarma said he received the chief justice's letter, dated March 16, on Thursday morning.

"The honourable chief justice has asked the state government to provide the logistical support for setting up the exclusive fast-track court. Till the new court becomes operational, the current additional district and sessions court number 3, which is hearing the case, will take it up on a daily basis," he added. (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Assam-Meghalaya authorities conduct joint inspection of Langpih area

SHILLONG, March 19: District authorities from Assam's Kamrup and Meghalaya's West Khasi Hills on Thursday conducted a joint inspection of Langpih border area to assess readiness for the forthcoming Assam Assembly elections, an official said.

Langpih or Lumpi is one of the six areas of differences where both Meghalaya and Assam claim administrative control over the area pending a final resolution on the same.

The inspection was carried out by Kamrup Deputy Commissioner Deba Kumar Mishra and West Khasi Hills Deputy Commissioner Hema Nayak, along with senior police and civil officials from both sides.

Among those present were Kamrup Superintendent of Police Subhashish Baruah, West Khasi Hills Superintendent of Police Herbert

Pyniaid Kharkongor, the Chief Executive Officer of Kamrup Zila Parishad and other officials.

A joint meeting was also held at Lower Lumpi with local residents to ensure that polling in the border village is conducted in a free, fair and peaceful manner.

"The border areas of Kamrup district share proximity with Ri-Bhoi and West Khasi Hills districts, making inter-state coordination crucial for the smooth conduct of elections," Mishra said.

"There are around 15 polling stations in the border areas, including Lumpi, Gamerimura and Ukiam, which fall under the Boko-Chaygaon and Palashbari Assembly constituencies," he added.

Nayak said the meeting was aimed at ensuring all necessary arrangements are in place.

"The meeting at Lumpi was organised (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

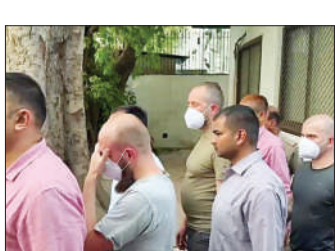
Phones of foreigners, 'involved' in conspiracy against India, sent for data analysis

Delhi court remands all 7 to NIA custody

NEW DELHI, March 19: Security agencies have sent mobile phones of seven arrested foreigners, including a self-styled US mercenary, for data extraction to unearth a larger conspiracy of using Indian ethnic groups to hamper national security, officials said on Thursday.

Besides, social media accounts of the accused, six of them Ukrainian nationals, are also being scanned to find out source of funding, mastermind of the conspiracy and their unknown accomplices, they said.

Acting on a specific tip-off last week, the Bureau of Immigration detained these seven persons while they were attempting to move through major Indian transit hubs. They were later arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA). According to an FIR filed by the



NIA, 14 Ukrainians had entered India on tourist visa on separate dates and flew to Guwahati (Assam) and then to Mizoram without requisite Restricted Area Permit (RAP)/Protected Area Permit (PAP).

The group then entered Myanmar "illegally" to conduct a pre-scheduled training for Myanmar-based Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs), known to support terrorist organisations operating in India in the domain of drone warfare and jamming technology, it said.

"These EAGs are also known to be supporting some proscribed Indian insurgent groups by way of supplying weapons and other terrorist hardware and training them, thus affecting national security and interest of India," the FIR stated.

The seven arrested include Matthew Aaron VanDyke, a US citizen and international security analyst, who was detained at Kolkata airport. He is the founder of 'Sons of Liberty International (SOLI)' and a self-described veteran of the 'Libyan Revolution'.

Six Ukrainian nationals, identified as Hurba Petro, Slyviak Taras, Ivan Sukmanovskyi, Stefankiv Marian, (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

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BJP renominates HN Goswami; sets up high-stakes Jorhat contest

HT Correspondent JORHAT, March 19: The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has re-nominated sitting MLA Hitendra Nath Goswami from the Jorhat Legislative Assembly Constituency, setting the stage for a high-profile contest against Gaurav Gogoi of the Congress in the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026.

The announcement puts an end to speculation over the BJP candidate for the seat, with Goswami, a five-time MLA from Jorhat, set to contest the Assembly election for the seventh time.

Goswami, who served as Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly during the tenure of former Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and earlier as a minister during the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, will face a strong challenge from Gaurav Gogoi,

president of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee and a three-time Member of Parliament.

Gogoi, who currently represents Jorhat in the Lok Sabha and has earlier been elected twice from Kaliabor, will be contesting an Assembly election in Assam for the first time.

Political observers expect an intense contest, with Goswami's long-standing electoral record in Jorhat pitted against Gogoi's growing political prominence in the state.

Goswami had won three consecutive terms from Jorhat on an AGP ticket starting in 1991 and later secured victories in 2016 and 2021 after joining the BJP.

Following the announcement, BJP workers and supporters gathered at Goswami's residence in Rowrah and celebrated his candidature, raising slogans in support of the party leadership.

Thanking the party for reposing faith in him, Goswami said that significant development had taken place in Jorhat under the BJP-led government and expressed confidence that voters would support the party again.

He added that providing arsenic-free drinking water and improving healthcare infrastructure would be among his key priorities if re-elected.

In neighbouring constituencies, the BJP has re-nominated Rupjyoti Kurmi from Mariani, a five-time MLA, while Dhiraj Gowala, former president of the Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association, has been fielded from Titabar.

The Congress is yet to announce candidates for Mariani and Titabar, while Rajgor Dal has nominated Dr Gyanashree Bora from Mariani.

Polling for the Assembly elections will be held on April 9.

Leaders of NDA allies BJP, AGP switch sides to secure nomination for Assam polls

GUWAHATI, March 19: An 'exchange' of probable candidates for the Assam Assembly elections has been going on between NDA constituents BJP and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), with leaders quitting one party to join the other for the sake of party nomination.

Two leaders of the BJP and one of the AGP have joined the other party in the run-up to the April 9 assembly election to strengthen the chance of being nominated as candidates.

The latest such case involves Bhupen Roy, whom the saffron party named as the candidate for Abhayapuri constituency, days after he defected from the AGP.

While the BJP will field candidates in 89 seats, the AGP in 26, and the third partner of the coalition, the Bodoland People's Front, will nominate in 11.

With the allies contesting the polls under a seat-sharing arrangement, it had become known that the BJP would contest in Abhayapuri after the AGP refused to leave the bordering Bongaigaon seat.

Bongaigaon is currently represented by AGP's Diptimayee Choudhury, who was elected in the 2024 bye-election after the incumbent MLA and

her husband Phani Bhusan Choudhury won the Lok Sabha polls from Barpeta constituency as an NDA candidate.

Phani Bhusan had been defeated from Bongaigaon since 1983, making him the longest-serving MLA in the state so far.

Roy decided to switch sides to the other NDA ally in order to ensure that he became the ruling alliance's candidate in the constituency.

Meanwhile, at least two BJP leaders have joined the AGP with the hope of securing the alliance's nomination for the state polls.

Basanta Das of Naoboicha joined the regional outfit on Thursday, while Prakash Das had entered the AGP fold earlier this week, seeking to secure nomination from the Hajo-Sualkuchi seat.

Both these constituencies have been left for the AGP under the seat-sharing arrangement.

The chief executive councillor of Kamatapur Autonomous Council, Jibesh Roy, also joined the AGP on Thursday. He is viewed as a ticket contender for the Bilasipara constituency.

A former Congress leader from Binnakandi, Sahabuddin Majumdar, also entered the AGP fold, with the hope of securing nomination from the seat. The AGP and (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

Won't contest on Cong ticket: Prateek Bordoloi

GUWAHATI, March 19: After Assam MP Pradyut Bordoloi quit the Congress to join the BJP, his son Prateek has decided not to contest as a nominee of the grand old party from Margherita assembly constituency in the upcoming assembly polls.

In a letter to Congress president and chairman of the Central Election Committee Mallikarjun Kharge on Wednesday, Prateek said he would continue to remain a party member.

Prateek was named by the Congress as its candidate for Margherita, a seat his father had represented in the assembly for four terms, in its first list released earlier this month.

Prateek, in the letter that was shared with reporters on Thursday, said that after his father's decision to join another party, it would not be appropriate (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

'India must become self-reliant in drone manufacturing'

Rajnath cites global conflicts

NEW DELHI, March 19: India must develop a robust ecosystem for drone manufacturing to enhance its defence preparedness, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on Thursday, highlighting lessons from the Russia-Ukraine and Iran-Israel conflicts.

In an address at an event, Singh asserted that the two conflicts prove that drones and counter-drone technologies will play a "pivotal role" in future warfare.

The defence minister said India must work in mission mode to emerge as a global hub for indigenous drone manufacturing in the next few years to ensure strategic autonomy and boost military prowess.

"As the entire world watches the ongoing conflict involving Russia and Ukraine, along with Iran-Israel,



we can clearly see the extremely significant role of drones and counter-drone technologies in future warfare," he said.

"Today, there is a need to build such a drone manufacturing ecosystem in India, in which we are com-

pletely self-reliant," he said.

Singh was speaking at the National Defence Industries conclave, which was attended by top executives of leading domestic defence manufacturing firms as well as officials of defence public sector undertakings.

"For India's defence preparedness and strategic autonomy, it is essential that India becomes fully self-reliant in drone manufacturing," he said.

"From the drone's moulds to its software, engines, batteries and everything must be manufactured in India. This is no easy task," he said.

"In most countries where drones are manufactured, a significant number of critical components are currently imported from China," he added.

The defence minister also touched upon growing significance of artificial intelligence, robotics and other new and critical technologies.

"In today's era, innovations such as automation, artificial intelligence, and (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

now representing the tea-tribes. Local tribal people in Assam also consider him a strong personality who can take up their cause and fight against injustice."

Soren has been visiting Assam and raising the tribal issues in the northeastern state since the JMM won the Jharkhand assembly polls in 2024, another party leader said, and added that the CM is likely to go there in a day or two.

Soren, on the concluding day of the Jharkhand assembly's budget session on Wednesday, claimed that deprived communities from across the nation are looking at Jharkhand for raising their issues.

"We will definitely become the voice of those tribals facing atrocities elsewhere, whether it is in Assam, Manipur or any corner of the country," Soren said.

The Jharkhand government had, in November 2024, approved the formation of a panel to study the plight of the "marginalised" tea tribes in Assam.

The decision, taken in the first cabinet meeting of the Hemant Soren government, came against the backdrop of the poll battle between the JMM-led coalition and the NDA, in which Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma repeatedly raised the issue of the "predicament" of Jharkhand's tribal community due to alleged large-scale infiltration (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

JMM to contest Assam polls in bid to expand footprint

RANCHI, March 19: The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, which is keen to shed its image as a regional party and emerge as a national political outfit, is eyeing to contest over 30 seats in the upcoming elections to the 126-member Assam assembly, a party functionary said.

The party is aiming to woo about 70 lakh tea-tribe people, many of whose ancestors migrated from Jharkhand long ago.

"The party has decided to contest 31 seats in the upcoming assembly elections in Assam after a detailed deliberation. However, a final decision on this will be taken soon," a JMM leader told PTI.

The leader, who did not wish to be quoted, claimed that Assam's sizeable tribal population, including a large number of tea garden workers with their roots in Jharkhand's Chhotanagpur region, presents fertile ground for the party's expansion.

These communities, the JMM believes, have social and economic concerns that "have not been adequately addressed" and are seeking stronger political representation, he said.

JMM general secretary Vinod Pandey said, "Hemant Soren has emerged as a popular leader in the nationwide fight for the rights of tribals. He has earned the faith of the tribal community, which migrated to Assam and is

now representing the tea-tribes. Local tribal people in Assam also consider him a strong personality who can take up their cause and fight against injustice."

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Guidelines issued for printing election materials

West Karbi Anglong administration mandates strict compliance under RP Act



HT Correspondent
HAMREN, March 19: In view of the forthcoming General Election to the Assam Legislative Assembly, 2026, the District Election Officer and District Commissioner, West Karbi Anglong has informed that strict guidelines have been put in place regarding the printing of election-related materials.

As per Section 127A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, no person shall print or pub-

Youth Leadership Camp concludes at RTU
HT Correspondent
NAGAON, March 19: The three-day Youth Leadership Training Camp, organised by the My Bharat Centre, Hojai in collaboration with the NSS unit of Rabindranath Tagore University, Hojai was successfully concluded on Thursday after being held from 17 March at the Anandaram Borooah Campus of Rabindranath Tagore University, located at Jugijan, Hojai.

The valedictory session was conducted by Dr Akshay Jyoti Sarma, NSS Coordinator and Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science. The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Manabendra Dutta Choudhury, attended the session as the Chief Guest and delivered an inspiring speech, emphasising the importance of youth leadership, social responsibility and the role of young minds in nation-building. He encouraged the participants to apply the knowledge gained during the camp in real-life situations and to work actively for the betterment of society. The vote of thanks was delivered by Accounts Officer Dhananjay Talukdar and prizes along with certificates of participation were distributed among the trainees.

Grand welcome for BJP candidate Bhaskar Sharma
HT Correspondent
MARGHERITA, March 19: For the third time, Bhaskar Sharma has been given the BJP ticket from the 83rd Margherita Legislative Assembly Constituency in Tinsukia district, creating an uproarious atmosphere at Dibrugarh Airport on his arrival on Thursday afternoon.

Amid political excitement, the arrival of BJP's candidate, created a festive-like environment. Arriving from Delhi at Dibrugarh Airport, he was welcomed with immense enthusiasm by party workers and supporters. From Powai railway gate to North Margherita Rangamancha, Bhaskar Sharma, riding in a flower-decorated vehicle, was accompanied by senior BJP leaders and welcomed by thousands of party leaders, workers and well-wishers. He then proceeded to North Margherita Namdang to seek blessings.

Appeals for nationwide outreach programmes, cultural milestones and organisation restructure
RSS urges 100% voter turnout, calls for prioritising national interest

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 19: With reference to the upcoming Assam and other state Legislative Assembly elections, the Uttar Assam Prant of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has called upon citizens to ensure 100% voter participation, placing national interest above all. Addressing a press conference, RSS Assam Kshetra's Kshetra Prachar Pramukh Dr Sunil Mohanty appealed to voters to actively participate in the democratic process and contribute to national reconstruction.

He said the year marks key cultural milestones, including the 150th anniversary of Vande Mataram, the 350th martyrdom year of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, and the 650th birth anniversary of Sant Ravidas Ji, with programmes planned to promote social and cultural awareness. Uttar Assam Prant Prachar Pramukh Kishor Shivam and Prant

lish, or cause to be printed or published, any election pamphlet or poster unless it clearly bears the names and addresses of the printer and the publisher. Further, no such material shall be printed unless a declaration identifying the publisher, duly signed and attested by two persons known to him is submitted to the printer in duplicate.

It is also mandatory that, within a reasonable time after printing, one copy of the declaration along

HT Correspondent
DHUBRI, March 19: As the 2026 Assam Assembly elections approach, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is banking on veteran leader Uttam Prasad as its key candidate for the 8 No Dhubri LAC.

Known for strong grassroots connectivity and a secular image, Prasad is seen as capable of reshaping traditional political equations. While rooted in the Sanatan Hindu community, he is also said to enjoy notable support among minority communities, giving the BJP a strategic advantage in the constituency. Popularly known as "Uttam Da," he has built a strong rural base through consistent public outreach and social service. Political observers believe his broad appeal and clean image make him a crucial asset for the BJP in Dhubri.

HT Correspondent
HOJAI, March 19: On the auspicious occasion of the Hindu New Year, the BJP chose former MLA Shiladitya Dev as its candidate for Hojai in the Assam Legislative Assembly elections-2026. Current MLA Ramkrishna Ghosh has been denied a ticket.

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, March 19: In view of the forthcoming Assam Legislative Assembly elections, the Office of the District Magistrate, Sonitpur has issued a comprehensive directive outlining strict guidelines for Ministers, government officials and the use of official vehicles to ensure adherence to the Election Commission of India's Model Code of Conduct (MCC).

The order emphasises that Ministers must not misuse their official position for campaign purposes. They have been expressly prohibited from combining official visits with electioneering activities or using government machinery and personnel during such engagements. Ministers have also been advised against visiting their home constituencies after the an-

nouncement of elections, except in emergency situations such as natural calamities or serious law and order issues, duly certified by competent authorities. Additionally, they are barred from staying in government guest houses during election tours.

On security arrangements, the administration has directed strict compliance with prescribed norms. The use of bulletproof vehicles is permitted only if recommended by security agencies. However, excessive escort vehicles, beacon lights, sirens and pilot vehicles meant to highlight the presence of political leaders during campaigning are strictly prohibited. Expenditure on security during campaigning is to be borne by the individual concerned, except where specific protocols apply.

HT Correspondent
CHARIALI, March 19: After a long pending suspense, the Bharatiya Janata Party declared the list of contesting candidates for the forthcoming state assembly election on Thursday. Pallab Lochan Das, former cabinet minister, former MP of Tezpur HPC has been declared as BJP candidate for the Biswanath LAC for the upcoming state assembly election. It is to be mentioned here that the name of sitting MLA of Biswanath LAC Pramod Borthakur has been dropped this time. Borthakur, the two times MLA from Biswanath LAC was one amongst the ticket aspirants from Biswanath LAC. On the other hand, Diganta Ghatowal; sitting MLA of Behali, Bhaskar Hazarika, Anjan Bora (Khonti) were the ticket aspirants from Biswanath LAC. Both the sitting MLAs Pramod Borthakur and Diganta Ghatowal have been deprived from getting the party tickets this time.



Karyavah Khagen Saikia shared details from the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha held from March 13 to 15 in Haryana, attended by 1,438 representatives. They highlighted Sangh activities under the centenary year, in-

cluding over 62,000 Vijaydashami events and nationwide outreach to over 100 million people. In Uttar Assam, outreach covered over 11 lakh families across 13,061 villages. The Sangh also reported thou-

UPPL names 5 more candidates in list

HT Correspondent
KOKRAJHAR, March 19: The opposition United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) has released five more candidate's names in its third list to contest the upcoming assembly elections.

The list included Ranjit Basumatary for Sidli LAC, Pratibha Brahma for Baokhungri LAC, Ayub Hussain Mondal for Parbatjhora, Pabitra Baro for Goreswar LAC and Rabindra Basumatary for Mazbat LAC.

With the declaration of third list of the candidates from the UPPL party, the toll of contesting constituency goes to 16 to contest the ensuing assembly elections.

UPPL general secretary Raju Kumar Nazary announced the names of the candidates who are representing the UPPL party. He informed that the UPPL party is contesting in all 15 constituencies in Bodoland region and putting candidates also in several constituencies outside of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) as UPPL party has expanded its based among the citizens. He said UPPL party has so far declared names of the candidates for Boko-Chaygaon LAC, Barchala LAC and Gohpur LAC. He said that people cutting across the communities are com-



ing forward to extend support and voting in favour of UPPL party across the contesting constituencies respectively.

He has opined that the UPPL has been rendering its services towards the uplift and development of all communities across the region. He said Melas, gamblings became a regular phenomenon while the BPF comes to power. He said the illicit gamblings had been unabated since after the BPF returns to power while the UPPL regime laid emphasis on quality education, conservation of mother nature and establishment of peace along with giving self employment avenues to youths. He also said illegal mining at Sonkosh River and other Rivers without a system will pose a serious threat to nature. He appealed the people to vote for the UPPL candidates.

Nazary said they had commitment to stay in NDA from 2020 to 2026 but after the latest political development has changed after the BPF decided to field candidates in 15 constituencies. He also said there had been no credential meaning to stay in NDA which is maintaining dual standard and so the UPPL will stand alone.

Sushanta Borgohain contest from Demow

HT Correspondent
DEMOW, March 19: The Central Election Committee of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Thursday announced 88 candidates for the upcoming Assam Assembly elections, including Sushanta Borgohain for the 95 No Demow constituency.

Borgohain, a former MLA of the constituency (earlier 107 No Thowra), has received a positive response from his supporters following the announcement. He was also seen campaigning in the constituency on Thursday. Reacting to his nomination, Borgohain thanked Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, State BJP president Dilip Saikia and the party's national leadership. He expressed confidence that the BJP will win the seat and said the Demow constituency will continue on the path of development, highlighting the government's work for the people over the past five years.

Helpline launched for election grievances

HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 19: In a proactive move to ensure a smooth and transparent electoral process, the District Administration of Karbi Anglong has officially launched a Complaints Redressal and Voter Helpline. The initiative is designed to provide citizens with a direct channel to voice concerns and seek information regarding the upcoming Assembly Election-2026.

The helpline aims to streamline the management of election-related grievances across the Karbi Anglong Election District. By establishing this centralised system, the administration intends to ensure timely disposal of complaints, ranging from voter registration issues to violations of the Model Code of Conduct.

Members of the public are encouraged to use the dedicated line for any queries or to report irregularities: Helpline Number: 03671-1950, for the purpose of complaint redressal, voter assistance and election-related inquiries within the Karbi Anglong Election District. "The establishment of this helpline is a key step in our commitment to conducting a fair and inclusive election. We urge the public to utilise this resource to ensure their voices are heard and any issues are resolved promptly," the District Election Officer stated. The District Administration has emphasised that all calls will be monitored to ensure accountability and a swift response from the relevant electoral officers. As the 2026 Assembly Elections approach, this facility stands as a vital tool for maintaining the integrity of the democratic process in the hill district.

EVM, VVPAT randomisation completed in Karbi Anglong

HT Bureau
DIPHU, March 19: As the momentum builds for the upcoming Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2026, the Karbi Anglong Election District reached a critical milestone on Wednesday with the completion of the first randomisation of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs).

Overseen by the District Election Officer, the randomisation ensures a transparent and unbiased allocation of polling equipment across various constituencies. The allocation was carried out using the EVM Management System (EMS), a specialised software developed by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to maintain the integrity of the electoral process. The randomisation successfully assigned EVMs and VVPATs to the following Legislative Assembly Constituencies (LACs) within the district: 108 - Bokajan; 109 - Howraghat; and 110 - Diphu (ST).

Following the randomisation, comprehensive lists of the serial numbers for the allocated units were shared with all political party representatives at the district headquarters. The next logistical operation includes handing over the machines to the respective Returning Officers (ROs) and Assistant Returning Officers (AROs). All randomised units will be moved to designated Assembly Strong Rooms, where they will be stored under tight security in the presence of political party observers. Once the final list of contesting candidates is published, the specific details of these randomised units will be shared with all candidates to ensure continued trust in the system.

Mascot 'Amulya' unveiled to promote higher voter turnout

HT Correspondent
MORIGAON, March 19: In a vibrant initiative to inspire greater electoral participation, the Election Branch of Morigaon with support from the SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) Cell, organised an engaging voter awareness programme on Thursday at Motiram Bora Udyan in Morigaon town. The event aimed to motivate citizens and enhance voter turnout through creative public outreach.

A major highlight of the programme was the unveiling of a voter awareness mascot titled "Amulya", designed using the EVM symbol to emphasise the value of every vote. On the occasion, the campaign slogan "Amar Vote Amulya Vote" was also launched, along with the event logo and a theme song, adding colour and energy to the drive. The programme was anchored by Mayong Revenue Circle Officer and Nodal Officer, SVEEP Cell, Priyanka Gogoi. Addressing the gathering, District Commissioner Anamika Tewari urged citizens to actively participate in the democratic process, stressing that voting is both a constitutional right and a responsibility. She also appealed to first-time voters to come forward and help shape the nation's future through responsible voting.

She further informed that coloured photographs of contesting candidates will be displayed on Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) for the first time, making candidate identification easier for voters. The programme was attended by District Development Commissioner Orpah Baglari, Additional District Commissioner (Election) Anusuya Sharma, Additional District Commissioner Rakesh Deka, officials of the district administration and a large gathering of citizens.

Gaurisagar Samannay Grantha Utsav from tomorrow

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, March 19: Dr Rita Chowdhury will inaugurate the 5-day long Gaurisagar Samannay Grantha Utsav to be held at Zubeen Garg Kshetra, Gaurisagar from March 21 to March 25.

In the inaugural function, Mridul Yadav, District Commissioner, Sivasagar and Dr Bhula Gogoi, prominent writer, Dr Jyoti Prasad Saikia, Vice-Chancellor, Jorhat Jagannath Barua University, Dr Bidyandana Borkakoti, principal of SMD college, Charing and prominent columnist Hridayananda Mahanta will grace the occasion. Samiron Phukan, General Secretary, AASU will inaugurate the cultural programme on the first day. Thereafter closing ceremony and prize distribution programme will be attended by Dr Basanta Kumar Goswami, president, Asom Sahitya Sabha as the chief guest. On all the days various cultural and educational programs will be held for school children - Rajiv Dutta, media coordinator, informed.

Two-day workshop on quantum mechanics held at Biswanath College

HT Correspondent
BISWANATH CHARIALI, March 19: A two-day workshop on "Fundamentals and Applications of Quantum Mechanics" was jointly organised by the Departments of Physics and Department of Chemistry of Biswanath College under the aegis of the DBT Star College Scheme in association with IQAC, Biswanath College on March 18 and 19. The workshop was inaugurated by the Principal of Biswanath College, Dr Chinta Mani Sharma, who encouraged students and participants to actively engage in such academic programmes to enhance their conceptual understanding and research aptitude.

The workshop was convened by Dr Pratiksha Bezbaruah and Dr Rituparna Borah with Dr Debashis Sarmah serving as the Coordinator. The programme witnessed the participation of around 60 students, along with faculty members and invited resource persons from reputed institutions. The resource persons for the workshop included Dr Nishant Shukla from Kaziranga University and Dr Parag Bhattacharya from Rangapara College (Autonomous) attended the event. Dr Nishant Shukla delivered an insightful lecture on the basics and applications of quantum mechanics, while Dr Parag Bhattacharya conducted a hands-on training session on Python programming, providing participants with practical exposure to computational techniques. The workshop provided a valuable platform for interdisciplinary learning and fostered collaboration between the Departments of Physics and Chemistry.

Former MP Pallab Lochan Das gets party ticket in Biswanath LAC

HT Correspondent
BISWANATH CHARIALI, March 19: After a long pending suspense, the Bharatiya Janata Party declared the list of contesting candidates for the forthcoming state assembly election on Thursday. Pallab Lochan Das, former cabinet minister, former MP of Tezpur HPC has been declared as BJP candidate for the Biswanath LAC for the upcoming state assembly election. It is to be mentioned here that the name of sitting MLA of Biswanath LAC Pramod Borthakur has been dropped this time. Borthakur, the two times MLA from Biswanath LAC was one amongst the ticket aspirants from Biswanath LAC. On the other hand, Diganta Ghatowal; sitting MLA of Behali, Bhaskar Hazarika, Anjan Bora (Khonti) were the ticket aspirants from Biswanath LAC. Both the sitting MLAs Pramod Borthakur and Diganta Ghatowal have been deprived from getting the party tickets this time.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

If you want light to come into your life, you need to stand where it is shining.— Guy Finley

Defeat of impeachment motion

The role of the Lok Sabha Speaker in promoting parliamentary stability and Independence is incredibly important and deserves recognition. On March 11, 2026, the Opposition's impeachment motion against Speaker Om Birla was defeated by a voice vote, nearly four decades after the last attempt. With 119 MPs signing the notice, the Opposition highlighted the perceived bias in the Speaker's conduct. Removing a Speaker requires at least 272 votes in the 543-member House, and historically, no Speaker has ever been removed. The Speaker is back in his chair. The repeated challenges to the speakers underscore political tensions in the legislature, raising questions about power balance and mutual respect among legislators. Thus, the Speaker's role is essential to both legislative procedures and the fostering of trust in parliamentary democracy. Following the unsuccessful impeachment motion, Speaker Birla reiterated his impartiality, asserting that the rules apply equally to all members, including the Prime Minister. He addressed the House to refute allegations of bias. He clarified that there is no mechanism to mute the Speaker's microphone. He emphasised, "This House is not a fair or a festival. We must follow the rules, and no one has the right to speak outside of them, regardless of their position."

Union Home Minister Amit Shah criticised the Opposition for their unruly performance in Parliament, highlighting Rahul Gandhi's low attendance—51% in the 17th Lok Sabha and 52% in the 16th Lok Sabha, compared to averages of 66% and 80%, respectively. The Opposition protested by chanting "Mafi maango," demanding an apology from the Home Minister. The impeachment motion underscored the ruling party's substantial majority and reinforced the importance of parliamentary procedures. It highlighted the respect that the House warrants for its legislative processes. Jagadambika Pal, a member of the BJP panel who presided over the session, called upon the Opposition to resume their seats to facilitate voting. Nevertheless, amid ongoing protests, he chose to conduct a voice vote in the House, which led to the resolution's rejection. The House was subsequently adjourned for the day. Impeachment motions are infrequent occurrences in the history of India's parliamentary system. The attempt to remove Speaker Birla marks the fourth such effort, underscoring the inherent challenges of this vital office. The Speaker's position is safeguarded by the House itself rather than the President, and removal can occur only by a majority vote.

The Speaker's authority underscores the importance of their impartiality and the challenges posed during contentious moments, such as impeachment debates, helping the audience grasp the office's significance to parliamentary stability. Narendra Modi, at the end of the impeachment, commended Om Birla for conducting Lok Sabha proceedings with 'dedication, patience and impartiality'. Now that the House defeated the impeachment motion. Even if the Lok Sabha is dissolved, Speaker Om Birla remains in office until the new House meets and elects a new Speaker.

Political equations are changing fast in NDA ruled Assam and Puducherry

By: Dr Gyan Pathak

Out of the election bound four states and one UT – Assam and Puducherry – are the only two, that are ruled by NDA, where BJP is very active in making the alliance stronger by trying to induct other political parties or their leaders into the alliance or into the BJP. Many from the opposition rank joined NDA and BJP that make them stronger, but some significant desertions have also created new troubles for BJP leadership both in Assam and Puducherry, going to poll on April 9.

In a significant development, UPPL has left NDA, on March 17 over seat sharing dispute and has announced to contest election alone, and is going to field its candidates across Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and beyond. The importance of this desertion is important because Bodoland is considered a kingmaker region and the political wind blowing in the region also impacts the electoral momentum across Assam.

UPPL has been BJP's key partner in the NDA since 2020, and had won 6 seats in 2021 election, making the total tally of NDA to 75 in a Vidhan Sabha of 126 seats. BJP has tried to compensate it by taking Bodoland People's Front (BPF) into NDA fold. It is worth mentioning that BPF was part of Mahajot, which is INDIA bloc at the national level.

The party had lost 8 seats in the 2021 election and could win only 4 seats. It is believed that BPF, with its declining support base, has joined NDA to revive itself, and it is still doubtful how much this will adversely impact the INDIA bloc, or how much it could help the BJP. NDA has now three political parties – BJP, AGP, and BPF.

In November 2025, Asom Sonmilito Morcha (ASM) was revived when 8 political parties joined hands to form the alliance against the BJP and NDA. Recently in the current month itself, another party called Rajjor Dal left the ASM, that is INDIA bloc. Thus, the ASM has now six political parties – Congress, Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP), CPI(M), All Party Hill Leaders Conference, CPI(ML)L and JMM.

Other political parties in the fray are AIUDF, TMC, CPI, AAP, and NPP. It should be noted that AAP has shown rise in the urban areas, and after the AAP leadership were discharged in the Delhi Liquor Scam Case by CBI Special Court, the morale of party's rank and file in Assam has been boosted up. AAP has declared to contest 20 seats so far. AIUDF has also very strong base in certain pockets, and it has declared to contest 21 seats so far.

Major gain for the BJP is defection from other political parties. A senior Congress leader Pradyut Bordoloi has deserted Congress and joined BJP, and the BJP has also given him ticket. Former Assam Congress President Bhupen Kumar Borah has also quit Congress and joined BJP, which is considered by many a seismic shift in state politics.

Earlier this month, three sitting or suspended congress MLAs have joined BJP. It does suggest structural weakening of the Congress. Signals of further defections are there from other parties too, such as from AIUDF to BJP. Recently during, Rajya Sabha election, three AIUDF MLAs has supported NDA candidate contesting from UPPL, that has now deserted NDA. AIUDF has suspended its two MLAs supporting NDA candidate. Some present or former BJP leaders have also shifted their loyalties and joined Congress in earlier phases of changing parties. However, the scale is much lower than the Congress politicians joining BJP.

As for the UT Puducherry, the Chief Minister N Rangaswamy's All India NR Congress is giving signs of going out of the NDA. NR Congress had won 10 seats out of 30 in 2021 elections while the BJP had won 6 seats. BJP has now decided to take newly floated Latchiya Jananayaga Katchi (LJK) led by Jose Charles Martin into NDA, which CM Rangaswamy is resisting.

If BJP does not drop LJK from NDA, NR Congress is most likely to desert the NDA. It should be noted that Jose Charles Marti in the eldest son of the lottery king Santiago Marti. It was only on March 17, CM Rangaswamy had boycotted a meeting of NDA convened by BJP on seat sharing. He also announced a candidate of his party without waiting for seat sharing deal with BJP. (IPA Service)

The quality of education in rural Assam

A close and careful observation of the current state of the educational system in rural Assam reveals a picture where a large and evident gap exists between infrastructural development and the actual standard of education. In recent times, the state government has spent a considerable amount of funds to transform the external appearance of schools in rural areas. Through the construction of new concrete buildings, provision of proper seating arrangements for students, access to drinking water, and clean sanitation facilities, schools have become quite attractive in their outward appearance. However, the true standard of educational exchange that takes place inside a classroom can never be determined by concrete walls or new furniture alone. Behind this infrastructural development, a deep educational void remains hidden. No matter how polished the exterior of rural schools may appear, the continuous process of intellectual development that should occur within classrooms has, in reality, failed severely. The primary objective of education is to develop students' thinking ability, enhance problem-solving skills, and provide deep subject-based knowledge. Yet, this fundamental objective has been completely neglected in the current system. Government statistics and reports proudly highlight how many new schools have been built or how many free textbooks have been distributed, but there is no reliable or objective system to assess how much of that knowledge students have actually acquired. While infrastructural development may temporarily attract students to school, the healthy academic environment required to retain them and provide quality education is largely absent in most rural schools. This tendency to measure the success of government schemes solely through physical progress has overshadowed the real educational problems. As a result, students from poor and underprivileged rural families, who depend entirely on government schools, are being deprived of the essential knowledge needed to survive in today's competitive world, and their entire education system has become limited to merely obtaining certificates.

One of the primary reasons that has crippled the rural education system of Assam is the short-sighted government policy of continuously assigning teachers with non-academic duties. The core responsibility of a teacher is to conduct classroom teaching, identify the academic weaknesses of students, and apply innovative teaching methods to address them. However, in reality, teachers in rural areas of the state spend a large portion of their working hours engaged in various administrative and data collection tasks assigned by the government. From performing duties at polling stations during elections, collecting census data, and updating voter lists, to maintaining daily records of mid-day meals and uploading students' bank details on government portals, teachers are constantly burdened with numerous responsibilities. In the name of the digital era, the frequent instructions from the education department to upload data on new applications and websites have mentally exhausted teachers. Due to this excessive administrative workload, teachers do not get sufficient time to prepare lessons or interact meaningfully with students. When a teacher is forced to spend half the day filling registers or entering data on mobile devices, expecting quality teaching from them becomes completely unreasonable and unrealistic. The government has reduced teachers to the level of clerks or data collectors, thereby undermining their core profession. The immediate and most severe impact of this falls upon the innocent students. Due to the lack of attention from teachers in classrooms, the syllabus is never completed on time, and students'



nearby institutions. Although this decision may appear administratively logical at first glance, it completely ignores the geographical and social realities of rural areas. For many young students in villages, the closure of nearby familiar schools and the need to attend distant and unfamiliar ones has become a major challenge. In areas where proper transportation facilities are lacking, children are forced to walk several kilometers through muddy and waterlogged paths during the rainy season, leading many to drop out of school altogether. Furthermore, when two or three schools are merged, the number of students in the receiving school increases abnormally, but the number of classrooms and teachers does not increase accordingly. As a result, overcrowded classrooms create a chaotic and noisy environment, making it impossible for teachers to give individual attention to students. A school is not just a place of learning; it is an integral part of the social life of a village. When a school is closed, the educational environment and the community connection associated with it are permanently lost. In the process of amalgamation, the government's financial interests appear to take precedence over the academic and psychological interests of students. This mechanical, top-down policy, implemented in the name of improving quality, has in reality made the rural education system more complex, sensitive, and directionless.

The 'Gunotsav' program, initiated to assess and improve the quality of education in the state, has now degenerated into a platform for unhealthy competition and artificial display in rural schools. The original objective of Gunotsav was to conduct an impartial evaluation of students' actual learning levels, identify weaknesses, and formulate corrective measures. However, the entire process has now lost its direction. Schools have turned Gunotsav into a desperate struggle to secure an 'A Plus' grade rather than a genuine assessment of students' academic abilities. As the event approaches, a war-like and unnatural atmosphere prevails in schools. Regular subject teaching is completely halted, and students are made to memorize specific answers likely to be asked during evaluation. Excessive emphasis is placed on painting school walls, decorating gardens, and rehearsing cultural programs to impress external evaluators. In many cases, teachers even resort to unethical practices such as providing answers to students during assessments to ensure better results. This entire process mocks the very foundation of education. A system that was meant to reveal the true level of learning has instead become a cover for false statistics and artificial success. The government's practice of rewarding or penalizing teachers based on Gunotsav grades has further fueled this un-

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

The recent policy of school amalgamation adopted by the education department has created a new and highly complex problem in the rural educational environment. Under the pretext of administrative convenience and cost reduction, the government has intensified the process of merging schools with low student enrollment into

basic concepts remain unclear. Although senior officials in the education department are well aware of this alarming situation, there is no visible intention to reform the system fundamentally. Unless teachers are completely freed from non-academic duties, any government slogan about improving the quality of education in rural areas will remain nothing more than a deception and a political spectacle.

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healthy competition. Instead of objectively assessing what students have truly learned, the evaluation now depends on how well the school is presented through documents and technology. This system, rather than improving education, merely creates a temporary illusion of success while hiding the real problems.

Another crucial reason behind the rapid decline in the quality of education in rural areas is the extreme indifference and lack of awareness among parents. Due to poor socio-economic conditions, most rural families remain focused solely on securing daily sustenance. In such circumstances, they lack both the mindset and the time to prioritize their children's education. The majority of students studying in government schools do not have a supportive learning environment at home. Parents often view schools merely as centers for receiving free textbooks, uniforms, and mid-day meals. They rarely show interest in what their children learn, whether they study at home, or in discussing academic progress with teachers. Even in important meetings of School Management Committees, parental participation is minimal. Those who attend tend to focus more on issues related to food supplies or infrastructure funds rather than academic development. Due to the absence of parental guidance and supervision, students gradually lose interest in studies and drift toward an undisciplined lifestyle. The basic awareness that education can build a secure and independent future is still lacking in rural society. On the other hand, teachers, facing no accountability or questioning from parents, gradually become less responsible toward their duties. A healthy educational environment requires a strong relationship and mutual understanding among teachers, students, and parents, which is completely absent in rural areas. This parental negligence has turned the entire education system into a lifeless process where acquiring knowledge becomes secondary and attending school is merely a formality.

A deep and emotionless analysis of all these factors makes it abundantly clear that the rural education system in Assam is currently passing through a severe crisis. Amidst the glitter of infrastructural development and impressive government statistics, the essence of real education is gradually disappearing. Unless the government and administration treat education not as a mere administrative process but as a true intellectual pursuit, no meaningful change can occur. Without freeing teachers from all non-academic responsibilities and allowing them to focus solely on teaching, improving educational quality remains an unrealistic and illogical idea. Ensuring the prompt appointment of adequate and qualified teachers for every class and subject is absolutely essential. Sensitive policies like school amalgamation must be implemented with caution, based on local needs and geographical realities rather than through mechanical decisions made in offices. Similarly, large-scale assessment systems like Gunotsav should be used as genuine corrective tools rather than instruments of unhealthy competition. At the same time, widespread initiatives are needed to make rural parents aware of the true value of education and their social responsibilities. Without addressing these deep-rooted structural and policy flaws, spending enormous sums on building school infrastructure alone will never ensure real learning for rural students. The roots of these problems lie deep within society and administration, and their lasting solution requires a firm, rational, and education-centered political will rather than emotional slogans. Ignoring this harsh reality would mean pushing millions of innocent rural students toward a future of darkness.

The Blueprint for a Balanced Frontier

Assam's Infrastructure and Ecological Integrity

By: Dipak Kurmi

The recent two day visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Assam has served as a pivotal moment in the developmental trajectory of the Northeast, marked by the inauguration and foundation laying of multiple projects valued at over Rs 47,600 crore. These initiatives, spanning the districts of Kokrajhar, Guwahati, and Silchar, represent a massive infrastructure push that targets the core pillars of regional growth: energy security, transportation, and connectivity. In Kokrajhar and Guwahati, the focus on energy security is designed to fortify the entire region's power grid, while the road and railway projects aim to dissolve the geographical isolation that has historically hindered the state. Meanwhile, the projects in Silchar are strategically directed toward strengthening physical connectivity and boosting the agricultural education ecosystem, ensuring that the primary sector remains a beneficiary of modern technological integration. This substantial capital infusion is a clear reflection of the Central Government's vision to position Assam as a key component in India's on-going technological and economic transformation.

However, the influx of massive infrastructure upgrades in recent years necessitates a matching proactive stance from the state government to ensure these Centrally-aided initiatives translate into long term prosperity. Physical infrastructure such as highways and power plants provide the skeletal framework for growth, but the muscle of a modern economy resides in its human capital. There is an urgent need to equip the youth of Assam with the specialized skills and technical expertise required to make bold forays into the global world of innovation and entrepreneurship. While the physical landscape of the state is changing rapidly, the education sector has exhibited a palpable sense of stagnancy that stands in sharp contrast to the global tide of technological advancement. For development to be truly sustainable and inclusive, the state must move beyond the rhetoric of progress and invest heavily in human resource development, ensuring that the local population is not merely a spectator to growth but an active driver of it.

The global context for this transformation is increasingly competitive, as evidenced by the strategic maneuvers of neighbouring China. China has established itself as a top-

tier global AI powerhouse, aggressively challenging the dominance of the United States through a state-driven approach that prioritizes efficiency, rapid adoption, and the integration of physical and digital systems. Intriguingly, for the year 2026, China has even lowered its GDP growth target to a range of 4.5% to 5%, its lowest in decades, to prioritize structural reforms and technological self-reliance over simple high-speed expansion. This shift indicates a sophisticated understanding that future leadership, particularly China's aim for global AI leadership by 2030, depends on the quality and depth of innovation rather than just raw economic volume. For a region like the Northeast, which possesses immense untapped potential, there is much to learn from this focus on specialized technological intervention and structural resilience as it strives to become an engine of economic growth for India.

Despite this push for modernization, a one-size-fits-all approach from the Centre toward the development of the Northeast would be both foolhardy and self-defeating. The region is characterized by a mind-blowing biodiversity that is not only an environmental treasure but a fundamental part of the local economy and identity. Of late, the pursuit of development has led to the large-scale destruction of mature trees across Assam, particularly to facilitate road construction and widening. This loss is often unnecessary, as it is entirely possible to save many of these ancient trees by effecting minor yet thoughtful alterations in road design. In an era where a global climatic crisis looms over every policy decision, the protection of existing green cover should be a non-negotiable aspect of any engineering feat. The environmental cost of development must be calculated with the same precision as the financial cost to prevent a scenario where the "Smart City" or "Developed State" becomes an ecological wasteland.

Furthermore, the developmental model must be sensitive to the sociological fabric of the region, particularly in sparsely populated, tribal-inhabited areas such as Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong. These districts represent a unique cultural heritage that is vulnerable to the pressures of unbridled industrialization and rapid demographic shifts. There is a legitimate concern that the drive for infrastructure might inadvertently lead to the dilution of indigenous cultures and identities. Development in these sensitive zones



must be participatory and culturally conscious, ensuring that the benefits of progress do not come at the expense of the social integrity of the local tribes. By fostering a model that respects both the ecological constraints and the cultural nuances of the Northeast, the government can ensure that the current wave of investment leads to a future that is as diverse and resilient as the land itself.

Ultimately, the goal of transforming Guwahati into a regional hub and Assam into a top five state requires a synthesis of hard infrastructure and soft capital. The success of the Rs 47,600 crore investment will not be measured solely by the kilometers of bitumen laid or the megawatts generated, but by the number of local startups that emerge and the preservation of the natural streams feeding sites like Deepor Beel. The state must bridge the gap between its ambitious taglines and the ground reality of its civic amenities. As the world pivots toward AI and sustainable technology, Assam has the opportunity to leapfrog traditional developmental hurdles, provided it protects its natural endowments and fosters a culture of true innovation. The roadmap is clear: infrastructure must be the foundation, education the engine, and environmental stewardship the compass that guides the state toward a future of genuine, balanced prosperity. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmi@rediffmail.com)

On 20th day Iran war has entered its crucial phase with Trump set to destroy Oil Infra

By: Ashok Nilakantan Avers

The Iran war enters its third brutal phase, with top leaders assassinated by bombings including its intel chief by U.S.-Israel combo, thus fracturing its leadership and central command while citizens flee the country in panic creating an existential crisis for a nation that stands on pride over its 5,000 year old civilisation as against a superior power that's only 250 years old. The former prides itself on its civilizational strength, the latter on its military prowess.

Already the contours of a far larger crisis are becoming visible. What began on February 28 as a coordinated campaign by the United States and Israel to degrade Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure has metastasized into a regional conflict with global consequences—economic, political, and humanitarian.

More than 1,400 people are dead. Oil prices have surged past \$100 a barrel. The Strait of Hormuz—the world's most vital energy artery—has been partially choked. And inside Iran, a slow-burning humanitarian disaster is edging toward a full-blown refugee catastrophe.

Yet beneath the smoke of airstrikes and the rhetoric of retaliation lies a more complex story: of competing endgames, collapsing leadership structures, weaponized narratives, and a region bracing for shockwaves that could rival the Syrian crisis in scale. For all the violence unleashed, the central paradox of this war is stark: no side has articulated a clear, achievable endgame. Washington's objectives remain fluid, even contradictory. At times, President Donald Trump has framed the war as a mission to dismantle Iran's nuclear program. At others, it has taken on the language of regime change—an ambition

that history has repeatedly shown to be far more elusive. Behind the scenes, American strategists appear to be aiming for a weakened Iran that can no longer project power through proxies or threaten global energy flows.

But that middle ground—crippling a regime without collapsing it—has proven difficult to engineer. Israel's goals, by contrast, are more sharply defined and more ruthless in execution. Israeli war planners are focused on destroying Iran's missile stockpiles, crippling its command-and-control systems, and targeting strategic energy infrastructure, including the critical export hub at Kharg Island. The logic is simple: even if Iran survives politically, it must emerge militarily diminished and economically constrained.

Iran's objectives are both defensive and strategic. The regime wants the war to end—but not at the cost of surrender. Survival itself is victory. Tehran believes it can outlast Trump politically, absorb military punishment, and emerge with its core power structures intact. In the meantime, it has turned to its most potent leverage: geography.

By threatening and partially disrupting the Strait of Hormuz—through which roughly 20% of global oil flows—Iran has transformed itself from a target into a systemic risk to the global economy. The Gulf states, meanwhile, find themselves in a position of profound frustration. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait did not back the war. Yet they are now absorbing Iranian retaliation—waves of drones and missiles targeting oil facilities and urban centres. Their endgame is the simplest of all: immediate de-escalation and a restoration of stability. But they have little control over the trajectory of the conflict.

Its rumoured their envoys in Washington have told the Trump

administration to finish the war fast and not oppose the US, as they are all crude allies of American leadership with each kingdom raking millions of a friendship that supplies oil in exchange for military bases to protect them—the very lifeline that is being attacked.

If there is a single choke point defining this war, it is the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's strategy has been to turn the narrow waterway into a pressure valve on the global economy. By harassing shipping, deploying naval assets, and leveraging proxy forces, Tehran has created a situation where even limited disruption sends shockwaves through energy markets.

For President Trump, reopening the strait has become both a strategic necessity and a political trap. Efforts to assemble a multinational naval coalition have met with hesitation, particularly from European allies wary of being drawn into a war they did not support. Escorting tankers through contested waters risks escalation. Not doing so risks economic fallout at home.

The result is a familiar pattern: American pressure, allied reluctance, and a creeping sense of strategic drift. Iran understands this dynamic well. It does not need to permanently close Hormuz. It only needs to make it unpredictable.

As Israeli aircraft strike deep into Iran's infrastructure, Tehran has expanded the battlefield outward. Missile and drone attacks on energy facilities in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have become a near-daily occurrence. Even when intercepted, they serve their purpose: raising insurance costs, disrupting supply chains, and injecting fear into global markets.

The Gulf monarchies, long accustomed to managing tensions with Iran through diplomacy and deterrence, now face a new real-



ity. Neutrality is no longer a shield. For Israel, the calculus is equally stark. The campaign against Iran's oil infrastructure—particularly Kharg Island—is designed to cut off revenue streams that sustain the regime. But every strike risks provoking broader retaliation, pulling more actors into the conflict. This is no longer a contained war. It is a networked one.

Inside Iran, the war has triggered a slow-motion collapse at the top. The killing of senior figures—including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and, more recently, key strategist Ali Larijani—has hollowed out the regime's decision-making core. What remains is a system increasingly dominated by military actors, particularly the Revolutionary Guard. This shift carries profound risks.

Without experienced political intermediaries, decision-making becomes faster but less calibrated. Retaliation becomes more instinctive. Escalation thresholds blur. The emergence of Mojtaba Khamenei as a shadowy successor underscores the

uncertainty. Power is consolidating, but legitimacy is not.

At the same time, domestic unrest—already simmering before the war—has intensified. Economic hardship, infrastructure damage, and mass casualties have created conditions ripe for instability. And yet, the regime endures.

Inside Iran, the war is being fought on another front: information. State media has crafted a carefully calibrated narrative—one that blends truth with distortion. Civilian suffering is highlighted. Calls for retaliation are amplified. Military setbacks are downplayed or ignored.

At times, the line between propaganda and fabrication blurs entirely. AI-generated images, inflated casualty figures, and selective reporting have become tools of wartime messaging. But the strategy is not simply deception. It is cohesion. The regime understands that perception is survival. As long as it can maintain the image of *مستو اقم*—resistance—it can sustain internal support, or at least suppress dissent.

For ordinary Iranians, the real-

ity is more complex. Access to independent information is limited. Internet blackouts and censorship create an informational vacuum. In that vacuum, rumour and fear flourish.

Perhaps the most underreported dimension of the war is its human fallout. Already, an estimated 3.2 million people have been displaced *مروم* Iran. Entire neighbourhoods in Tehran, Shiraz, and Isfahan have been damaged or destroyed. Critical infrastructure—schools, hospitals, water systems—has been hit. For now, most displacement is internal. But that could change rapidly. Iran is a nation of 90 million people—more than four times the population of Syria at the start of its civil war. If even a fraction of that population is forced to flee, the consequences would be staggering.

Neighbouring countries are bracing. Turkey, already hosting millions of Syrian refugees, is fortifying its border and preparing contingency plans. Iraq, sharing a 1,600-kilometer frontier, faces both refugee inflows and its own security vulnerabilities. Pakistan and Afghanistan, already strained by refugee movements and economic instability, could be overwhelmed.

The situation is further complicated by the millions of Afghan refugees already *مروم* Iran. A mass exodus would not only push Iranians outward but could trigger secondary displacement of existing refugee populations. This is not just a humanitarian crisis in the making. It is a multiplier of instability across an already fragile region.

Watching from the sidelines is Europe—deeply affected, yet largely inert. Iranian attacks have struck European-linked assets. Energy disruptions threaten already fragile economies. The closure of Hormuz and potential disruption of the Bab el-Mandeb strait could sever critical trade

routes.

And yet, European governments have hesitated to act decisively. Part of this is political. Reluctance to align with Washington—particularly under Trump—has shaped policy choices. Part of it is strategic ambiguity: uncertainty over end goals, risks, and consequences. The result is a widening gap between interest and action. Europe is not neutral in this war. It is exposed.

A Conflict Without Contours: What makes this war particularly dangerous is not just its intensity, but its lack of boundaries. It is a war fought across domains: Airstrikes over Tehran; Naval manoeuvres in Hormuz; Drone attacks in Riyadh and Doha; Cyber operations and information warfare online; and Political battles in Washington and European capitals.

And increasingly, it is a war without clear off-ramps. For the United States, escalation risks entanglement. For Iran, de-escalation risks appearing weak. For Israel, anything short of decisive degradation feels insufficient. For the Gulf, survival demands restraint—but restraint offers no guarantees. History offers a warning. Conflicts that begin as targeted military campaigns often evolve into systemic crises when economic disruption, political instability, and humanitarian fallout intersect.

That convergence is now visible in Iran. An energy shock is rippling through global markets. A leadership vacuum is emerging in Tehran. A refugee crisis is gathering at the borders. And a regional war is inching toward something larger.

The question is no longer whether the war will reshape the Middle East. It is how far beyond it the consequences will reach. And whether anyone still has the leverage—or the will—to stop it. (IPA Service)

Experiential science education and India's young innovators

By: Lalit Nath

The Government of India's Department of Science and Technology has been implementing an important initiative called the INSPIRE programme with the aim of attracting the country's young generation towards science and technology and nurturing their innovative abilities. In today's rapidly evolving world driven by science and technology, the education system is undergoing significant changes to prepare the new generation of the country for future challenges.

In the earlier education system, rote learning received greater emphasis. However, in recent times, there has been a shift away from this approach, giving greater importance to experiential learning and creative thinking. Students are no longer confined to traditional methods of memorizing textbooks, instead, they are encouraged to engage in hands-on experiments, think independently and explore solutions to real-world problems. Such initiatives have the potential to inspire millions of young minds in India to develop a deeper interest in science and unlock their innovative potential, thereby helping the country secure a leading position among the nations of the world.

A major force behind these educational reforms is the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes creativity, curiosity and practical learning in education. The policy highlights the importance of experiential learning and STEM education, aiming to move beyond theoretical knowledge and enable students to understand real-life challenges and develop practical solutions.

Experiential learning encourages students to learn through experimentation, project development and technological innovation. As a result, India's youth can become better prepared for the competitive global future. For many years, however, science education in numerous Indian schools remained largely theoretical and examination-oriented.

Students often memorized formulas, definitions and theories to secure good marks in examinations, but had limited opportunities to apply that knowledge in real-life situations. In today's rapidly changing world, such traditional approaches are no longer sufficient. The modern era demands creative thinking, critical analysis and the ability to innovate new solutions. Experiential learning aims to bridge this gap by allowing students to acquire knowledge through practical engagement, experiments and self-driven exploration.

This approach connects science education with everyday life and prepares students to face future

challenges with confidence. A clear example of this new educational approach can be seen in the growing number of school science fairs, innovation festivals and science carnivals organized across the country. These events provide an important platform for students to showcase their innovative ideas and scientific projects.

Through models, experiments and technological demonstrations, students present ideas related to renewable energy, environmental protection, robotics, artificial intelligence and sustainable development. Under the INSPIRE-MANAK scheme, science exhibitions and project competitions are held at district, state and national levels, where millions of students present their original ideas.

Such initiatives not only boost students' confidence but also make science education more engaging and practical. They encourage students to think creatively about solving societal problems and stimulate scientific curiosity. When a student successfully builds a model or completes an experiment with their own hands, science no longer appears as merely a textbook subject but as a living, tangible and creative field of knowledge.

These experiences also enhance teamwork skills, communication abilities and problem-solving capabilities among students.

Among the government initiatives, Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL) stand out as a remarkable effort. Established under the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), thousands of such innovation labs have been set up in schools across the country. As of October 2025, nearly 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs are active, reaching more than 11 million students. The government has also announced plans to establish an additional 50,000 such labs over the next five years, particularly in government schools.

These labs are equipped with modern tools such as robotics kits, sensors and 3D printers. Through these resources, students gain practical exposure to emerging technologies and get opportunities to develop their own innovative ideas. Such labs transform schools from mere centers of instruction into hubs of creativity and innovation, helping India's youth become future innovators.

Another significant initiative is the INSPIRE-MANAK programme, which encourages students from Class VI to Class XII to develop scientific ideas and innovations. The programme aims to generate around one million original ideas every year. From these, one hundred thousand ideas are selected, and each student receives financial assistance of ₹10,000 to develop their project.

Selected students receive mentorship and training and get the opportu-

nity to participate in district, state and national-level exhibitions. Ultimately, the best city projects are awarded at the national level. Such programmes nurture a spirit of scientific inquiry and innovation among students from a young age.

Experiential learning also has a strong social orientation. Many students are now developing projects that address real-life problems, such as low-cost water purification systems, solar-powered devices and innovative methods for environmental protection. These projects help students realize that science is not merely theoretical knowledge but a powerful tool for social development and sustainable progress.

Such learning helps shape young individuals not only as knowledgeable citizens but also as innovators who can contribute meaningfully to society. Teachers play a crucial role in this process. Today, they are not merely transmitters of knowledge but mentors, guides and sources of inspiration for students. Teachers assist students in designing projects, conducting experiments and refining innovative ideas.

Therefore, it is essential that teachers receive regular training in modern teaching methods and emerging scientific technologies. Only when teachers continuously update their knowledge and skills can they effectively guide students.

At the same time, disparities remain in many rural and remote schools in India, where modern laboratories, technological resources and trained teachers are still limited. Addressing this gap is essential. If experiential science education can be expanded equally across all schools, students from every corner of the country will have equal opportunities to innovate.

This new education system will play a crucial role in shaping India's future. The country is already making rapid progress in areas such as space research, artificial intelligence, technological innovation and sustainable development. To achieve these goals, it is essential to inspire students to think creatively and innovate.

If science fairs, innovation labs and similar initiatives continue to expand in schools, a strong culture of innovation will emerge across the nation. Such a culture can build a robust scientific society in the years to come.

Thus, experiential science education will help shape India's new generation not only as skilled professionals but also as creative thinkers and true innovators. Their ideas and innovations will undoubtedly play a vital role in guiding India towards becoming a progressive, technology-driven and knowledge-based nation.

Supreme Court is set to review its 1978 Judgment on the definition of industry

By: T.N Ashok

There is something almost poetic about India's Supreme Court being forced, in 2026, to sit nine judges deep and argue about what exactly constitutes an "industry." Not because the question is trivial. Precisely because it is not.

The definition they are wrestling with is nearly half a century old. It was written for a country that no longer exists—a nation of factories and furnaces, of public sector behemoths, of workers who punched in, punched out, and knew exactly who their employer was.

That India is gone. In its place stands a country where your grocery arrives in twelve minutes via an app, your cab driver is technically a "partner," your HR manager works from a laptop in Pune for a company headquartered in Singapore, and an artificial intelligence tool has replaced three junior associates at a Delhi law firm. And yet, the legal architecture governing all of this labour—all of this human economic activity—still rests on a judgment delivered in 1978, when Indira Gandhi's India was still trying to figure out what socialism meant in practice.

The question now before the Court is blunt: Does any of this count as "industry"? And if it does, who is responsible when it all goes wrong?

The Original Sin: A Definition Built for a Different Republic: The 1978 judgment—Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage

Board vs A. Rajappa—was a product of its ideological moment. Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, one of the Supreme Court's most brilliantly activist minds, crafted a definition so expansive it could swallow virtually any organised human activity. His "triple test"—systematic activity, cooperation between employer and employee, production or distribution of goods and services—was a deliberately wide net. Hospitals qualified. Universities qualified. NGOs qualified. Government welfare departments qualified.

The philosophy was unambiguous and unapologetic: labour protection must follow the worker, not the ledger. In a country where capital had historically crushed labour underfoot, this was a corrective of historic proportions. It was also, from the vantage point of 2026, a definition with no expiry date stamped on it—and that omission is now causing a constitutional crisis in slow motion. Enter the Algorithm Economy; Consider what India's economy actually looks like today.

Swiggy and Zomato employ—or rather, "partner with"—hundreds of thousands of delivery workers who ride through monsoons and summer heat carrying other people's lunches. These workers have no fixed hours, no employment contracts in the conventional sense, no designated workplace beyond the streets of Indian cities.

Are they employees of an industry? Are Swiggy and Zomato industries at all, in the 1978 sense? Their product is convenience. Their factory is an app. Their assembly line is an algorithm that pings the nearest available human being.

Ola and Uber present an almost identical puzzle. The company insists it is a technology platform. The driver insists—when he bothers to—that he is effectively an employee, subject to platform-dictated pricing, platform-dictated performance metrics, and platform-dictated termination.

Amazon India warehouses goods, yes—but also intermediates between millions of third-party sellers and hundreds of millions of buyers, using predictive logistics, drone delivery trials, and AI-powered inventory management. Is it a shop? A factory? A marketplace? A tech company? The honest answer is that it is all of these simultaneously, and existing labour law was built to handle exactly none of them. These are not edge cases. They are the Indian economy.

Parliament's Spectacular Abdication; Here is where the story takes a particularly damning turn.



Parliament was not oblivious to this problem. As far back as 1982, lawmakers recognised that the Rajappa definition had become unwieldy and passed an amendment to the Industrial Disputes Act that would have narrowed it. The amendment was sensible. The amendment was passed. The amendment was then simply never notified into force.

For over four decades, a legislative fix sat gathering dust—unused, inert, legally meaningless. Courts continued to interpret the 1978 definition, producing wildly contradictory outcomes. A forest department in one state was classified as an industry. An identical department in another state was not. Different benches of the same Supreme Court arrived at incompatible conclusions about the same statutory language. The doctrinal chaos accumulated, unresolved, year after year.

The result of Parliament's inaction is that nine Supreme Court judges must now do the work that legislators refused to do—except that judges are constrained by precedent, by statutory text, and by the institutional limits of the judiciary in ways that Parliament simply is not. They are being asked to retrofit a half-century-old definition onto a 21st-century economy using tools designed for neither.

The Sovereign Function Trap; One of the sharpest tensions in this case involves the government itself. The 1978 ruling brought state welfare activities within the definition of industry. In theory, this meant that workers in government hospitals and public universities

had labour law protections—an admirable goal. In practice, it created an absurd situation where sovereign state functions could become subject to industrial disputes, strikes, and litigation. Today the stakes are exponentially higher. India runs massive digital welfare programmes—direct benefit transfers, employment guarantee schemes, digital health missions. If these are classified as industries, every administrative dispute becomes a potential industrial strife. Every government functionary acquires the legal standing of an industrial worker. The state becomes simultaneously regulator, employer, and party to every labour dispute it is supposed to adjudicate.

This is not a hypothetical concern. It is a structural contradiction at the heart of the case—and the Court must somehow resolve it without either gutting worker protections or paralyzing government administration. The deeper truth is that no definition crafted in this courtroom will be truly adequate. The economy will continue to mutate faster than any legal test can track. AI systems are already performing tasks that, a decade ago, required human employees. The "employer" of the future may be a machine-learning model that nobody fully controls.

What the Court can do—what it must do—is establish a framework flexible enough to absorb these disruptions without collapsing. The binary of "industry or not industry" may itself be the problem. A more honest legal architecture might acknowledge gradations: platforms as a distinct category, gig workers as a class deserving sui generis protections, sovereign functions as categorically separate from economic activity.

But flexibility cuts both ways. Every grey area in labour law is an invitation for exploitation. Every ambiguity is a gap through which a platform company will cheerfully drive a truck—arguing that its workers are partners, its operations are intermediation, and therefore none of this is its legal problem. The workers who will bear the consequences of this ruling are not abstractions. They are the Swiggy delivery rider in the Chennai rain, the Uber driver calculating whether this week's earnings cover fuel costs, the contract worker at an AI company who was never quite an employee and is never quite protected.

India's Supreme Court is not merely interpreting a statute. It is deciding, for the next half century, whether the law will see these people—or look through them. That is what is actually at stake in the ghost of 1978. (IPA Service)

Situation improves after recent violence; internet curbs lifted

Meghalaya CM briefs Guv on violence-hit Garo Hills situation



SHILLONG, March 19: Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma on Thursday briefed Governor CH Vijayashankar on the prevailing law and order situation in violence-hit Garo Hills region. Sangma was accompanied by Deputy Chief Minister (in-charge of home) Prestone Tynsong and senior officials.

The CM told the governor that the situation in the region has improved considerably with only

sporadic incidents reported, a senior Lok Bhavan official said. "The situation has eased, people are now moving forward with their daily lives. After reviewing the situation, we have also lifted the internet suspension. However, we are closely monitoring the developments and remain alert to ensure that the situation returns to normal," the CM told PTI.

He said a detailed account of developments in Garo Hills, where

protests over participation of non-tribals in the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) elections had escalated into violence in recent weeks was provided to the governor. During the meeting, Sangma told the governor that he had camped in Tura for almost two weeks. "During this period, we have been in constant touch with the governor over the phone, but I felt

it was important to brief him in person on the current situation and the sequence of events that led to the disturbance of law and order," Sangma said.

On arrests made in connection with the violence, Sangma said it was the responsibility of the police to take action based on evidence. Law and order situation in Garo Hills suffered a major blow after protests erupted following a notification by the GHADC barring non-tribals from participating in the tribal council elections slated for April 10.

A non-tribal candidate, Estamur Mominin, who is also a former MLA, was injured when he was attacked while attempting to file his nomination papers.

Two persons died in the clash that erupted after this, even as property were damaged in arson attacks and violence spread to other parts, including Williannagar in East Garo Hills district, forcing the government to impose curfew and withdraw mobile internet services. The government also postponed the April 10 elections and removed the council chief before extending the GHADC term by six months. (PTI)

Sikkim govt hikes DA, DR by 5 pc for employees, pensioners

GANGTOK, March 19: The Sikkim government has announced a 5 per cent hike in the dearness allowance (DA) and dearness relief (DR) for its employees and pensioners, respectively, an official notification said.

The hikes will come into retrospective effect from July 1, 2025.

As per the revised rate, the DA for employees and DR for pensioners drawing pay under pre-revised structure have been raised from 252 per cent to 257 per cent, the financial department circular issued on Wednesday said. For employees and pensioners under the revised pay structure, the DA and DR rates will go up from 55 per cent to 58 per cent, the circular added.

The DA at these rates will also be admissible to the employees appointed on a contract basis. (PTI)

TMP likely to join hands with BJP for Tripura tribal council polls

AGARTALA, March 19: Senior Tipra Motha Party (TMP) MLA Ranjit Debbarma on Thursday said the party plans to forge an alliance with the ruling BJP for elections to the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC).

The TMP is part of the Manik Saha-led coalition government in Tripura, but does not share power in the tribal council.

"Party supremo Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma, who is currently in Delhi, is engaged in talks with BJP leaders like BL Santosh and Sambit Patra. We are of the view that it will be good for both TMP and the BJP to jointly contest the elections to the tribal council,"



he told reporters.

Elections to the 28 seats of TTAADC are scheduled on April 12, while counting will take place on April 17.

(Ranjit) Debbarma said the

party chief will soon hold a meeting with the BJP's top leadership to finalise seat-sharing arrangements for the tribal council elections. In the 2021 elections, the TMP had won 18 seats, while the BJP, which contested in alliance with the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), secured nine seats in the 30-member council.

Two members are nominated by the government.

On recent differences between the two partners on different issues, the rebel-turned-politician said, "Such things happen in politics. Fighting and friendship are part of politics. We do believe that fighting the elections jointly is the need of the hour". (PTI)

Mizoram govt making efforts to bridge gap between Mizo communities worldwide: Lalduhoma

AIZAWL, March 19: Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Thursday said that his government is working to bridge the gap between Mizo communities worldwide. Addressing the Thangram Cultural Meet at Rompur in Assam's Karimganj district, the chief minister said that political boundaries would never supersede ethnic kinship, according to an official statement released here.

Themed "Unau Kan Ni" (We Are Brethren), the event was organised by the Thangram Indigenous Peoples Movement (TIPM), representing six Mizo-sub tribes of Singla and Langkai or Longai valleys in collaboration with Mizoram's apex student body, Mizo Zirlai Pawl. Lalduhoma traced the history of the region, noting that these Mizo clans had settled in Langkai and Singla valleys as early as 1490 AD.

"History shows that though administrative lines may be drawn by governments, ethnic boundary is invisible and unbreakable... Whether we reside in different states or different countries, our identity as one people must remain our greatest strength," the statement quoted the CM as saying.

Lalduhoma emphasised that his administration is actively working to bridge the gap between Mizo communities worldwide. He highlighted the establishment of the Mizo Diaspora Cell within the Chief Minister's Office, an initiative designed to provide a support system for Mizo communities or diaspora living outside Mizoram's borders.

Addressing the specific challenges faced by the indigenous Mizo communities in the valleys, Lalduhoma said Mizoram has acknowledged the aspirations of the ethnic communities.

"We are aware of how you have stood up for your brethren and raised your voices through the press and community action. The people of Mizoram are grateful. We will do everything within the framework of the law to support you. We will not leave you as orphans," he said. Hailing Lalduhoma's visit as a "red-letter day", TIPM president K Vana Chhorei hailed and noted the significant psychological impact of the chief minister's



presence.

"For too long, we felt isolated. Today, our neighbours see that we have parents, a guardian state that watches over its children," Chhorei said.

The cultural meet featured a vibrant array of traditional dances and was attended by leaders of MZP, including its president Dr C Lalremruata.

The Mizo communities of Singla valley and Langkai valley have been demanding a merger with Mizoram since 2020 and they submitted memoranda to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah expressing their desire for the merger in 2021. The TIPM leaders claimed that over 30,000 people of various ethnic Zo tribes live in Singla and Langkai valleys, which cover over 180 square miles. The area called 'Thangram' (Western part) covers around 24 villages and it shares borders with west Mizoram's Mamit district, they said.

The leaders also claimed that the Thangram area has been occupied by the Mizo or Zo indigenous tribes from time immemorial and was part of Mizoram before it attained statehood in 1987.

They alleged that the area has been neglected by the Assam government, as they hardly receive development and other welfare schemes. (PTI)

Refreshment facility, managed by local Monpa women

TAWANG, March 19: With an aim to promote community development and sustainable tourism in remote border areas, a refreshment facility managed by local Monpa women was inaugurated at Zemithang in Arunachal Pradesh on Thursday. The Border Brew Cafe stands as a unique initiative having been constructed on a decommissioned Bailey bridge over the river Nyamjang Chu.

This innovative concept makes it one of its kind in the entire north-eastern region, blending heritage infrastructure with modern utility and tourism potential, an official release said.

Developed with a vision to create livelihood opportunities and enhance local engagement, the cafe is poised to emerge as an iconic pit stop of Zemithang, attracting tourists, visitors and travellers exploring the region. The Indian Army completed the construction of this project in a record time of just 31 days under the Operation Sadbhavna project, demonstrating exceptional planning, dedication and execution capability, the release said.

The project underscores the ethos of Operation Sadbhavna, aimed at fostering goodwill, strengthening civil-military relations and contributing meaningfully to the socio-economic upliftment of border communities, it said.

Lt Gen RC Tiwari, GOC-in-Chief Eastern Command, lauded Army's Gajraj Corps for establishing the Border Brew Cafe at Zemithang. (PTI)

Woman among 3 militants arrested in Manipur

IMPHAL, March 19: Security forces arrested three militants, including a woman cadre, belonging to different proscribed outfits for allegedly indulging in extortion in Manipur, a police statement said on Thursday.

An active cadre of KCP (PWG) was apprehended from Kongba Laishram Leikai in Imphal East district on Wednesday.

Another 43-year-old woman cadre of the outfit was arrested from her residence at Kongba Makha Uchekon in Imphal East district on Wednesday.

A 25-year-old insurgent belonging to PREPAK was also apprehended on Tuesday from Thoudam Laishram Leikai in Thoubal district, it said, adding two cartridges were seized from his possession. (PTI)

Nagaland police advisory for public travelling to Assam



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 19: The Dimapur police commissionerate on Thursday urged the public of Nagaland, particularly those travelling to Assam, to remain vigilant and strictly adhere to all applicable rules and regulations and exercise due caution to avoid unnecessary inconvenience or legal complications.

The commissionerate issued the advisory because of the enforcement of the model code of conduct in Assam for the ongoing election process in the state.

The advisory said the election authorities and law enforcement agencies have intensified surveillance and checking at inter-state borders and other strategic locations to ensure free, fair and transparent conduct of elections.

It noted that there are many instances where otherwise law-abiding citizens have faced difficulties due to lack of awareness of election-related restrictions.

The police asked the public to avoid carrying excess cash, as carrying large amounts of cash without valid proof may lead to detention, questioning, or seizure by authorities.

The advisory said gold, silver or other high-value items should be accompanied by valid bills/invoices to avoid seizure or inquiry.

It also asked the public not to carry political materials such as pamphlets, posters or any campaign-related materials without proper authorisation, which may result in legal action.

It said carrying arms/ammunition without valid license and necessary permissions is strictly prohibited.

The police further urged the public to be prepared for checking of vehicles at multiple points, adding travelers should cooperate fully and carry valid identity proof and relevant documents.

Nagaland's first-ever forest officers' meet calls for joint forest management



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 19: The first-ever Nagaland forest officers conference since Nagaland attained statehood in 1963 called for community participation through joint forest management at Chumoukiedima police complex on Thursday.

Forest officials from across the state gathered at the conference to deliberate on key issues concerning forest management and environmental conservation.

The conference underscored the unique challenges faced by the state, particularly its complex land-holding system, where the department directly controls less than 5% of the land.

Despite this limitation, the officers of the department were urged to act as "custodians and soldiers" of the environment.

Key focus areas included forest management, biodiversity conservation, soil and water protection and the urgent need to adopt modern tools such as GIS for data-driven decision-making.

Officers were asked to engage directly with communities, promote awareness and implement scientific practices in forestry.

Speaking at the programme as the special guest, environment, forest & climate change CL John underscored the government's commitment to environmental protection and the need for innovative approaches to tackle emerging

challenges in forest conservation and climate change.

He highlighted a range of pressing issues, including human-elephant conflict, hunting and forest conservation, while calling for urgent and coordinated action.

He also raised concerns over indiscriminate tree felling and asked the forest department to strengthen monitoring and regulation of forest resources.

In addition, John proposed proactive measures such as promoting plantation drives, suggesting that Anwar plantation be undertaken in lowland areas to enhance green cover and restore ecological balance.

On environmental degradation, he strongly called for an end to forest burning practices, urging both the public and authorities to act responsibly.

Noting that hunting is a major threat to biodiversity, John termed it as one of the most dangerous issues facing the state and called for stricter enforcement and a complete ban.

He stressed that the forest department must take greater accountability in preventing such activities and safeguarding forest ecosystems.

He underscored the importance of public awareness and education, advocating for initiatives to teach communities how to protect and conserve forests effectively.

Election observer for Nagaland bypoll reviews preparedness

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 19: Election observer for the forthcoming bye-election to 28 Kokrajing assembly constituency in Mokokchung district Dr Neeraj Shukla on Thursday reviewed the overall scenario and the preparations for the bypoll.

Shukla reviewed the poll preparedness at a meeting with the district administrative officer, returning officer, assistant returning officer, sector magistrates, sector commanders, police officials, magistrates of all flying squad teams, assistant expenditure observer & accounting team, control room nodal officer, media monitoring team, video surveillance team and video viewing team at the Mokokchung DC's conference hall.

Mokokchung DC and district election officer Ajit Kumar Verma gave a brief description of the electioneering machinery set up in the district for the smooth conduct of the election.

SR SP Vesupra Kezo briefed the observer on the security setup for the election in the district.

BJP to surely win Dharmanagar Assembly bypoll, opposition unsettled: Tripura CM

AGARTALA, March 19: Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Thursday exuded confidence about the BJP's victory in the bypoll to the Dharmanagar Assembly seat, asserting that it would be a one-sided affair since the opposition was "unsettled".

The bypoll is scheduled for April 9, with the BJP fielding Jahar Chakraborti for the contest that has been necessitated by the death of Assembly speaker Biswabandhu Sen on December 26 last year.

"In the 2023 Assembly polls, the Congress had an electoral understanding with the Left Front. The BJP won the elections. This time, the Left Front fielded Amitabha Datta as its candidate and it doesn't have any electoral understanding with the Congress. We are 100 per cent sure of winning the seat," the chief minister said.

Saha said that bypoll candidate Jahar Chakraborti, a BJP state committee member was among the few veteran leaders in the entire North Tripura district. "He is a suitable candidate for the party," Saha told the reporters outside his office in the state Assembly.

Claiming that the victory for the BJP in the by-election was "inevitable", the chief minister said the

electoral battle would be a "one-sided affair with the opposition looking unsettled".

On the polls to village committees in Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), Saha said the state election commission (SEC) in an affidavit in the Supreme Court, submitted on Wednesday that the polls to 587 village committees -- akin to village panchayats -- would be completed by June.

"Actually, we wanted to conduct elections in the village committees during September because the monsoon normally arrives in the state in June. But the SEC informed the apex court that the village committee elections will be completed by June.

"If the monsoon starts at its normal time, the Supreme Court will review the schedule and take a decision. It (elections) may be deferred to September," he said. Leader of Opposition in the Tripura Assembly, Jitendra Chaudhury, took a potshot at the BJP-led government over the issue.

"It is unprecedented that the BJP's ally Tipra Motha Party had to seek the Supreme Court's intervention to hold elections to village committees," he said. (PTI)

Sikkim film festival begins

Govt committed to promoting creative economy: CM

GANGTOK, March 19: Calling cinema a powerful medium that transcends borders, Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang on Wednesday said the inaugural Sikkim International Film Festival marks a significant step towards positioning the state as a vibrant hub of art and culture.

Addressing the opening ceremony at Manan Kendra, Tamang said the festival aims to establish Sikkim as a meeting point for cinema, creativity and cultural exchange, while also creating opportunities for the youth.

"As Sikkim proudly celebrates 50 years of statehood, this Golden Jubilee marks a moment of immense pride and reflection. On this historic occasion, we are honoured to host the first-ever Sikkim International Film Festival," he said.

The festival, organised by the state's Information and Public Relations Department in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the National Film Development



Corporation was formally inaugurated by Governor OP Mathur.

The CM said the festival will celebrate storytelling while encouraging dialogue, collaboration and innovation.

He added that participation from international partners, including the European Union, would further strengthen cultural ties and broaden perspectives.

atives such as the Creatorpreneur Policy, support for artists and incentives for filmmaking in Sikkim," he said, adding that these efforts aim to empower youth, preserve cultural heritage and make the state a preferred destination for filmmakers.

He also spoke about a proposal to establish a Nepali Film Certification Board in Sikkim to ease logistical challenges for filmmakers and support the growth of Nepali-language cinema.

"With its breathtaking landscapes and rich cultural identity, Sikkim holds immense potential in the world of cinema. Through initiatives like this festival, we aspire to place Sikkim firmly on the global cultural map," he said.

Filmmaker Susan Lamjal won the short film competition at the festival for his film 'Dokoko Chahari'. The competition saw around 36 entries from across regions.

The winner was awarded a cash prize of ₹ 3 lakh by the chief minister during the programme. (PTI)

Frustration is tempered by discovery: Steve Boyes on quest to find mythic Ghost Elephants in Angola



South African explorer Steve Boyes, who has spent years obsessively searching for mysterious, elusive herd of Ghost Elephants in the highlands of Angola, says there were many moments of frustration but they were always tempered by the excitement of new discovery.

Boyes is obsessed with finding these elephants, the potential living descendants of the largest land mammal ever recorded and long believed to be a myth.

Renowned filmmaker Werner Herzog joined him to make a documentary on his elusive quest. The documentary, titled "Ghost Elephants", is slated to premiere on National Geographic India on Friday.

"You can smell them. You can sense there are elephants here. You just can't hear or see anything," is how Boyes describes his search for these creatures.

"It's the most extraordinary thing. That's why locals call them ghosts. They will say, 'Yeah, if you go down in the valley within a day or two, you will find dung and signs of elephants'. But

if you would like to see these elephants, you will have to live down there," he told PTI in an interview.

On these expeditions, Boyes said they found 25 to 100 new species to science though the search for the ghost elephants continues because a face-to-face encounter with the 12-foot-tall bull elephant ended in disappointment when the animal turned and fled. Undeterred, Boyes has made two more trips to Angola since that first sighting of the bull in 2024.

"Everything that is there is unique to this place. You're starting to understand from traditional leaders, from the kings, the vice kings, meetings and audiences with them, that these elephants are incredibly important to their culture and to the mythology of who they are. So the magic of the elephants is always building. You remain interested in that. But frustration is tempered by discovery. And it keeps you going," Boyes added.

Herzog, who has documented Boyes and his expedition in the documentary, has a storied career, not just in films but

also in documentaries. His most famous non-fiction work include "Encounters at the End of the World", "Grizzly Man", "The Look of Silence", "Into the Inferno", "Cave of Forgotten Dreams" and "Into the Abyss".

How did Herzog decide to join Boyes in his quest?

Boyes said their friendship grew out of an introduction to a friend and dinners and lunches. They soon started talking about the "extraordinary landscape in the Angolan Highlands" and "the ghost elephants and then Henry".

Henry is an 11-ton African bush elephant mount that has been the centerpiece of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History since 1959. Standing 13 feet 2 inches tall, it is one of the largest elephant specimens ever recorded.

Boyes said when Herzog heard about his quest for Henry's descendants, the German director told him, "This is an important story if you're searching for the descendants of that elephant."

"I said, 'In three weeks' time, we're going to go to Namibia. We are going

to live with the master trackers. And after a month, we will go up to Angola with them and do a search and this is all of it. We've got the best trackers on earth with us and we will stay up until we find them. And he was like, 'Well, then I have to come'. And within two days, Werner was just so focused on the story that he could see," he said.

The acclaimed director has directed, narrated and written which had its world premiere at the Venice International Film Festival in August 2025.

"I'd shared some books with him, some poetry and some things for him to digest, but he really came in open.

Within two days, he had consumed enough. He was meeting our characters, our team members and the trackers. But the first thing he would ask is, 'What would a world without elephants be like?', 'What do you dream of?' and 'What's your motivation?' And this doesn't come into the film... He knew and saw the story and pursued it passionately," he said.

A sixth-generation African of Indian

and British descent, Boyes said he considers himself African and for him, conservation is not about excluding people from the land but about drawing on indigenous knowledge.

"I use the word protection as a community activity... When I'm working at the sources of rivers, they are sacred to people, the forests associated with them are sacred to people, the animals associated, like these elephants, are sacred. And that is a far more powerful mechanism of protection than a gun, or a fence, or the vilification of a local person as a poacher," he said.

As someone who has undertaken many expeditions in some of the most remote parts of the world, Boyes said living on the edge feels normal now, even though the risks are many, and at times, life threatening.

"I've just come off an expedition. There's the concentrate of things like crocodiles that are bigger than our dugout canoes, an 18 foot crocodile is a

big thing. You see that spider in the film (the documentary), that's a wolf spider. You've got assassin bugs that are worse, we've got centipedes and they are crawling around all the time.

"You have spitting scorpions, we have malaria all the time in the team, flesh eating bacteria that we just can't get rid of," he said.

According to Boyes, if one doesn't take care of themselves, there's a "constant threat".

"Obviously interacting with elephants that are very cryptic and misunderstood has its risks when you encounter them. You're walking through minefields, landmines, constant threats," he added.

"Ghost Elephants" is produced by Herzog for Skellig Rock, Inc. and Ariel Leon Isaacovich for The Roots Production Service. (PTI)



'Sarke Chunar' singer apologises, says updated version will be out soon

Following the uproar over the vulgar lyrics of the song "Sarke Chunar", its singer Mangli has apologised, saying the team's intention was never to hurt anyone's sentiments.

In a statement posted on Instagram last night, the Telugu folk singer said the lyrics of the song have been updated and the correct version will be released soon.

"Out of respect for public sentiment, the song has been removed from all platforms. I sincerely apologise to each and every one of you for the unintended mistake. It was never meant to hurt anyone's sentiments, and we truly regret the oversight," Mangli shared in a post on Instagram.

"We assure you that such a situation will not arise again. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the makers of the film and music director Arjun Janya sir, for whom I have the highest regard," she said. The Hindi version of the song, released early in the week, caused a massive uproar for its sexually explicit lyrics and the matter was even raised in Parliament with the government saying the song has already been banned.

Actor Nora Fatehi, who features in the dance video of the song along with Sanjay Dutt, and lyricist Raqeeb Alam have distanced themselves from the controversy. Fatehi said she recorded the Kannada version three years ago and when she heard the Hindi version, she had already flagged the issue to the makers.

Alam said he too had warned the makers that Hindi lyrics were vulgar. Alam said he was told to do a literal translation from the Kannada version and that's what he did. The Kannada lyrics were written by the movie's director Prem. The makers pulled down the video soon after the furore that led the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to issue notice to the Information and Broadcasting ministry and the Censor Board, which in turn said it had nothing to do with the matter since the song was released on YouTube.

Samajwadi Party (SP) MP Anand Bhadoria brought up the song's vulgarity in the Lok Sabha during Question Hour. Unchecked content on OTT platforms and social media was a bad influence, he said.

Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said in his response that the song has already been banned.

"A ban has been imposed on the song. The framers of Constitution placed certain reasonable restrictions, and we should function within those limits. Freedom of speech cannot be absolute, it has to be in the context of the society and culture," Vaishnaw said. (PTI)

'Sarke Chunar' row: Govt says song banned, Nora Fatehi says she had flagged vulgar lyrics



The controversy over "Sarke Chunar" and its sexually explicit lyrics spilled over from angry discussions on social media platforms and elsewhere to Parliament on Wednesday with the government saying the song from the upcoming film "KD The Devil" has already been banned.

Actor Nora Fatehi, who features in the video along with Sanjay Dutt, distanced herself from the gathering storm, saying she had flagged the vulgarity of the Hindi version to the filmmakers. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) issued notice to the Information and Broadcasting ministry and the Censor Board, which in turn said it had nothing to do with the matter since the song was released on YouTube.

As the issue gathered traction, Samajwadi Party (SP) MP Anand Bhadoria brought it up in the Lok Sabha during Question Hour. Unchecked content on OTT platforms and social media was a bad influence, he said.

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"A ban has been imposed on the song. The framers of Constitution placed certain reasonable restrictions, and we should function within those limits. Freedom of speech cannot be absolute, it has to be in the context of the society and culture," Vaishnaw said.

"The way things are spreading rapidly today through digital medium, for the protection of the society, especially for the protection of children, women and deprived groups of the society, whatever hard actions should be taken, the government is ready to take them," he added.

The song was released on YouTube two days ago and quickly went viral for its shock value and lyrics that almost describe a sexual act, triggering outrage on social media. The video disappeared from the platform after the uproar.

"KD The Devil" is a Kannada film, dubbed in four languages, including Hindi. It will release on April 30.

Fatehi posted a video message on Instagram to say she was thankful for the backlash as it pushed the makers to finally remove the song from social media.

"I'd also request everyone to stop sharing the song because you're just giving it a platform unnecessarily. On a side note, I see some of you guys trying to use this as an opportunity to attack my character, it's unfortunate," Fatehi said, adding that she and her team will be more careful in future.

"However, I do want to reiterate that I had no idea about this Hindi song. I did not perform it and there was no permission taken to use it with my image," she said.

The actor-dancer said she agreed to do the song as it was part of a big film and featured a star like Dutt, and she had thought it was a remake of "Layak Nahi Khalnayak Hoon Main".

"I shot this song three years ago in a language called Kannada, which is a part of a different industry called Sandalwood. When I'm on set shooting for this song, I'm relying on the filmmakers to translate the song, and that is what I go by. When they're translating the song, nothing seemed inappropriate or vulgar," she said.

Fatehi also said the image showing her sitting on Dutt's lap, which appears on posters of the song's various language versions, is AI-generated.

"I knew we were going to have issues because at least I understand Hindi. I told the director, this is not going to be okay... I disassociated myself with the project. As you can see, I didn't promote it at all. I again flagged it to the director. I said, my image and reputation is on the line," Fatehi said.

The NHRC action came after it received a complaint alleging that the lyrics of "Sarke Chunar" contains "vulgar, sexually suggestive, and double-meaning" words which are inappropriate for public consumption, especially for children, according to the proceedings of the case on Tuesday.

Seeking the NHRC's intervention, the complainant alleged that the "increasing trend of explicit lyrical content in mainstream entertainment" contributes to "normalisation of inappropriate expressions among young audiences", read the proceedings.

It also sought a report from the certification authority concerned. The censor board, however, said content on digital platform is not regulated by them.

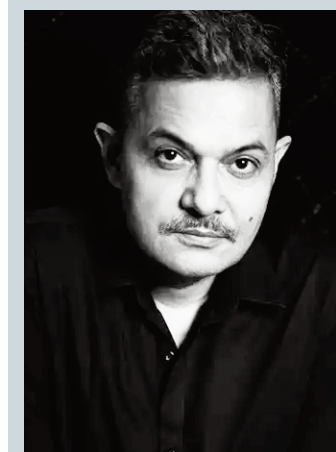
"This is to clearly state that CBFC has not received any application seeking certification for the song 'Sarke Chunar Teri Sarke' from KD: The Devil Film. It is to be noted clearly that content on digital platforms is not certified by CBFC," the censor board said in a statement.

The original Kannada version of the song is penned by the movie's director Prem. Raqeeb Alam is credited for the Hindi version of the song, which has since been pulled down. The music is by Arjun Janya.

On Tuesday, Alam also distanced himself from "Sarke Chunar", saying the track was a literal translation from the Kannada original and he had initially refused to write it.

"I have not written these lyrics. They were written by the film's director Prem in Kannada. When I was asked to write all this, I refused, saying such songs won't work, and will be censored too," Alam told HT City. (PTI)

Neelesh Misra releases new song 'Zameen Pe Taare' from upcoming independent album



Lyricist-storyteller Neelesh Misra has released "Zameen Pe Taare", the first track from his upcoming album of the same name, marking his second outing as an independent singer-songwriter.

Released on March 17, the song has been written, composed and sung by Misra, with music production by Mohit Shankar. It is currently available for streaming on platforms including Spotify, JioSaavn, Gaana, Amazon Music and Apple Music, as well as on his official YouTube channel.

"Zameen Pe Taare" is described as a meditation on love and quiet separation, drawing on imagery of fallen stars, scattered colours and a river that has lost its shores to trace the emotional arc of a relationship that has slowly changed.

"The lyrics explore a relationship that once felt as vast as the sky but now lies scattered like fallen stars on the ground. The song does not speak in anger or accusation; instead, it lingers in the pauses — in words that were never spoken and in the moments that slowly slipped away.

"With imagery of stars resting on the earth, colours scattered in memory and a river that has lost its shores, the song moves through the emotional landscape of love, loss and acceptance. At its core, it reflects on how relationships change people, leaving behind traces that remain even after the journey together ends," a press release said.

A music video accompanying the track, directed by Ritam Nandy and produced by Saumya Tandon, features Misra alongside co-actor Roshani Rawat. The video was shot by director of photography Abhishek Verma and edited by Bhuvan Chaudhary.

Misra's first independent album "Phir Milenge" had marked his transition from celebrated Bollywood lyricist and radio storytelling personality to a full-fledged recording artist. He is widely known for reviving Hindi storytelling on radio through shows like "Yaadon Ka Idiot Box" on BIG FM, where his fictional town Yaad Sheher became a touchstone for millions of listeners. He also hosted "Kahaani Express" on radio. (PTI)

Jay Chou's New Album 'Children of the Sun' Set for Release

Millions of music fans are eagerly awaiting another historic moment for Mandopop. After three years and eight months, iconic Mandopop artist Jay Chou is set to release his 16th studio album, "Children of the Sun." Pre-orders officially began at 13:00 on March 19 across Tencent Music Entertainment Group's three major platforms: QQ Music, Kugou Music, and Kuwo Music.

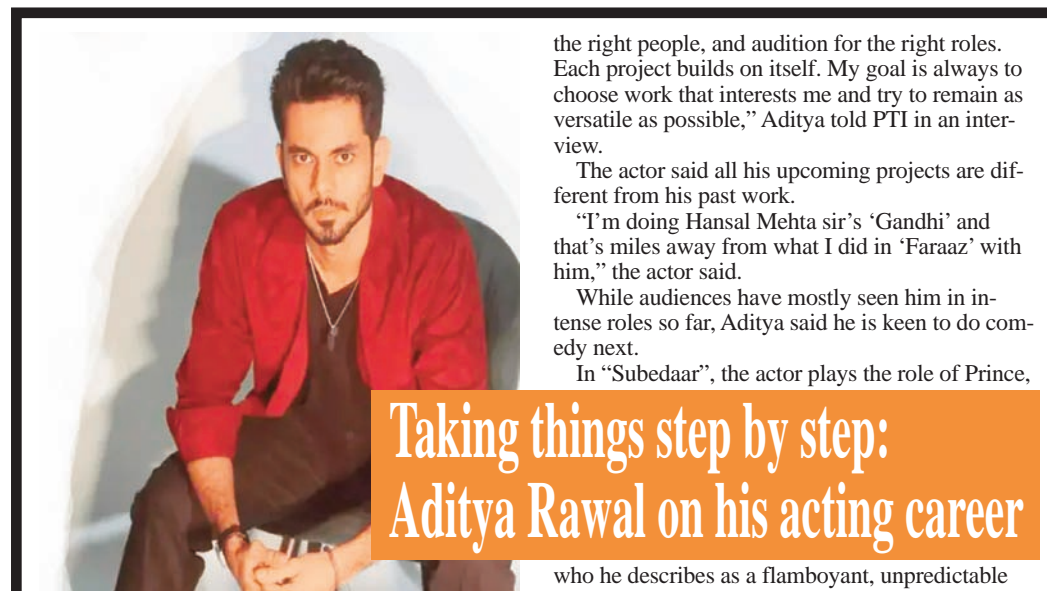
From youthful anthems to legendary status, Jay Chou now makes a monumental return under the title "Children of the Sun." While staying true to his signature style, he pushes musical boundaries with 13 meticulously crafted tracks that construct a complete narrative dimension. Each melody embodies warmth and power, further continuing the timeless legacy of Mandopop.

As the exclusive pre-order and collaboration platform for the album in mainland China, Tencent Music Entertainment Group is committed to delivering an un-



paralleled music experience for fans in return for their enduring support. QQ Music and Kugou Music have specially launched "Children of the Sun" SVIP Limited Bundles, offering two premium collectible editions: the "Commemorative Card Edition" includes two NFC collector's cards and physical lyric cards, seamlessly blending technology with ritual; the "Commemorative Medal Edition" features a physi-

cal medal marking the king's triumphant return, creating an exclusive music memorabilia piece with high collection value. Pre-orders are now open across Tencent Music platforms—QQ Music, Kugou Music, and Kuwo Music, with the official release scheduled for March 25. Join us in celebrating this timeless musical journey and witness the return of the king of Mandopop. (PTI)



Taking things step by step: Aditya Rawal on his acting career

Actor Aditya Rawal, who has garnered acclaim for his nuanced performance in Hansal Mehta's "Faraaz" and most recently in Suresh Triveni's "Subedar" opposite Anil Kapoor, says he is seeking versatility in his career. The 32-year-old actor, son of actors Paresh Rawal and Swaroop Sampat, debuted in 2020 with ZEE5 original film "Bamfaad" and was most recently seen in "Daldal", an OTT series and "Subedar".

"It feels great that people have liked my work. But I don't necessarily see it as carving out a niche (for myself). The idea is simply to take things step by step, choose the right projects, collaborate with

the right people, and audition for the right roles. Each project builds on itself. My goal is always to choose work that interests me and try to remain as versatile as possible," Aditya told PTI in an interview.

The actor said all his upcoming projects are different from his past work. "I'm doing Hansal Mehta sir's 'Gandhi' and that's miles away from what I did in 'Faraaz' with him," the actor said.

While audiences have mostly seen him in intense roles so far, Aditya said he is keen to do comedy next.

In "Subedar", the actor plays the role of Prince.

who he describes as a flamboyant, unpredictable and unapologetically attention-seeking man.

The audience response has amused him. "I've never enjoyed people telling me they hate me," he said, adding, he is also happy that his actor parents, Paresh Rawal and Swaroop Sampat have liked his recent work.

The conversations at home are more analytical, Aditya said. "We often analyse our work for hours after watching it. Like, my father particularly enjoyed my work in 'Daldal', while my mother loved 'Subedar'."

"Subedar" marks his second collaboration with director Suresh Triveni after the OTT series "Daldal", which released on January 30. (PTI)

Mohamed Salah sets up Liverpool against PSG showdown in the Champions League

LIVERPOOL, March 19: It has been a season to forget for Mohamed Salah. But the Egyptian icon fired Liverpool into the quarterfinals of the Champions League on Wednesday, scoring his 50th Champions League goal.

But this is still far from vintage Salah. He got a first-half penalty so wrong that it was hard to tell if he was trying an audacious Panenka chip or if it was simply a horrible mis-kick. Either way, it was an embarrassing moment just before halftime and all too typical of a campaign in which Salah's powers appear to have diminished.

That all changed after the break when he was at the heart of a Liverpool goal spree that sealed a 4-1 aggregate win over Galatasaray and set up a showdown with defending champion Paris Saint-Germain.

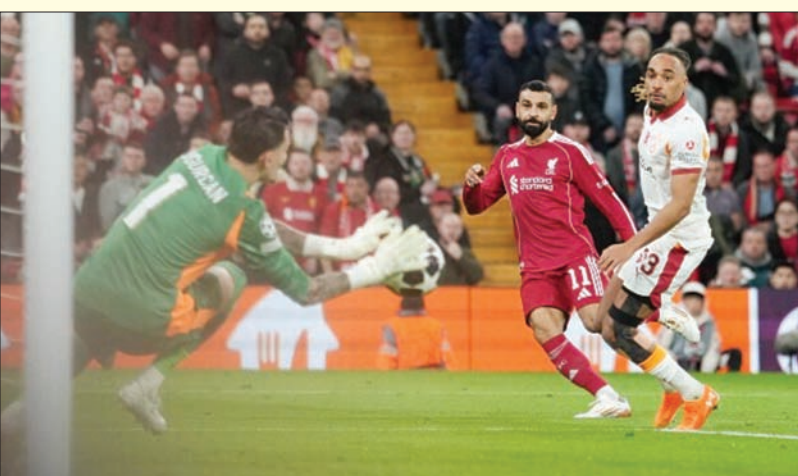
"That tells you about the mental strength of him," Liverpool coach Arne Slot said.

With Liverpool leading 1-0 at halftime through Dominik Szoboszlai's goal, Salah crossed for Hugo Ekitike to double the advantage. Two minutes later, his fierce shot was saved by Galatasaray goalkeeper Ugurcan Cakir and Ryan Gravenberch was there to turn in Liverpool's third on the rebound.

Then came the moment Salah — and the Anfield crowd was waiting for — cutting in from the right, he curled left-footed shot into the far corner from just outside the box.

A "trademark goal" was how Slot described it.

The home fans erupted — chanting their hero's name. He was given a standing ovation when he went off in



Salah should have left the field with another goal, but he fired against the bar from close range.

That was a reminder that he is still not at his lethal best and it is uncertain if he ever will be again at the age of 33.

His goal took his tally to 10 for the season — well down on the 34 he scored to inspire Liverpool to the Premier League title last term.

This time last year tensions were rising as he neared the end of his contract and a new deal was still uncertain.

The idea of losing him was unthinkable to many Liverpool fans after watching him help the club to a full set of trophies — including the Champions League and two Premier Leagues — since he joined in 2017.

The problem for Liverpool's hierarchy was whether to risk a lucrative contract extension on a player whose best years were behind him — even on the

back of such an outstanding season.

It was never likely he could repeat those feats again, but few would have expected the drop off that has been witnessed this term.

Then there was the very public row with coach Slot after he was dropped leading up the Africa Cup of Nations in December.

The fallout quickly passed, but Salah's form has remained short of his best.

It is still unclear what the future holds for him at Liverpool with one more year on his deal and whether he will see out the contract.

On Wednesday, however, was a reminder of what he can still produce. And in a year in which Liverpool's title defense has unraveled, it still has hope in the Champions League. (AP)

Saurav Ghosal appointed sports commissioner of World Premier Squash

NEW DELHI, March 19: India's squash icon Saurav Ghosal was on Thursday appointed as the sports commissioner of the World Premier Squash, a new global professional competition scheduled to be held later this year.

India's only male player to reach the top 10 in the PSA World Rankings, Ghosal boasts 11 titles, nine Asian Games medals, and two decades of elite competition.

He has also served as the men's president of the Professional Squash Association (PSA) and as co-chair of the joint Athletes Commission of the PSA and World Squash, the sport's global governing body.

"As Sports Commissioner for World Premier Squash (WPS), Ghosal will set and oversee the league's complete sporting framework, spanning competition formats, player qualification pathways, and officiating standards," said a WPS statement on the league whose inaugural edition will be held in August.

"WPS combines elite professional competition with an open global pathway using multimodal AI on the edge. Of the 24



players in the league, including reserves, eight will be elite professionals.

"Through AI-enabled challenges hosted on the Future of Sports Platform (FSP), competitors worldwide can qualify for up to 16 of the remaining spots — requiring no agents, no ranking history, and no geography. It is a direct, merit-based entry point," the release added.

Ghosal said the league has the potential to give the sport, which

Ai+ Smartphone partners with MI, KKR ahead of IPL 2026

NEW DELHI, March 19: Ai+ Smartphone will be the smartphone partner for Mumbai Indians and Kolkata Knight Riders in the upcoming IPL season, with both teams expecting the association to boost fan engagement. Through this association, Ai+ Smartphone, an India-built brand, aims to integrate across team platforms, fan experiences, and digital activations throughout the season, creating new opportunities for fans to engage with both the teams and the brand.

"For Ai+, the partnership represents more than brand visibility, it's when India comes together across cities, communities, and generations. By aligning with two of the league's most iconic franchises, Ai+ Smartphone aims to become part of those moments where competition, celebration, and collective excitement define the national conversation," said Ai+ Smartphone in a release.

Mumbai Indians are five-time IPL champions, while Kolkata Knight Riders have won the T20 tournament three times.

"Cricket in India brings together fans, communities, and shared moments at an unmatched scale. Our approach to partnerships is focused on creating meaningful engagement and delivering experiences that feel relevant and accessible to fans. With Ai+ Smartphone, we look forward to building initiatives that deepen this connection and add value to the overall fan journey," said Binda Dey, CMO, Knight Riders Sports.

"Ai+ Smartphone's focus on delivering accessible, high-performance technology aligns well with the evolving expectations of today's fans. We look forward to collaborating on initiatives that enhance how fans engage with the game," said a spokesperson for five-time IPL champions Mumbai Indians. (PTI)

Lens needs a favor from former striker Elye Wahi against PSG in Ligue 1 title race

PARIS, March 19: Lens is wishing for a big performance from club-record signing Elye Wahi against Ligue 1 title rival Paris Saint-Germain.

The problem is he plays for another team.

Still, Lens fans hope Wahi can help struggling Nice beat PSG on Saturday and do Lens a favor in the title race. Leader PSG is one point ahead of Lens with played one game less.

The signs are 23-year-old Wahi is finding the form that once made him among Europe's most promising young strikers and led to transfer fees totalling nearly 90 million euros (\$104 million).

Last weekend, he scored with a brilliant turn and lob from 40 meters for 15th-placed Nice against Angers, showing he's got his instinct and confidence back.

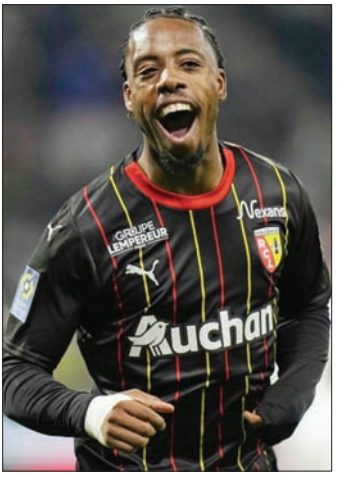
Three years ago, Wahi joined Lens from Montpellier for 35 million euros after scoring 19 league goals and turning down a move to Premier League side Chelsea. Although he was the player of the match against Arsenal in the Champions League, his form faded.

Lens sold him to Marseille for 25 million euros the following season. He didn't fit in at Marseille — just 13 league games later — Wahi joined Eintracht Frankfurt on a five-and-a-half-year contract. The German club paid 26 million euros for Wahi, getting one goal in 25 games in return.

Eintracht loaned him to Nice in January and so far he has four goals and an assist in seven games.

Key matchups

Lens needs a morale-boosting home win against Angers on Friday. Having a smaller squad than



PSG caused key players to look jaded in last weekend's 2-1 loss at Lorient.

According to Opta statistics, Lens crossed the ball 58 times in the match — a record in European soccer this season — and did not score from one of them.

Marseille is not playing well but still holds the cards in its bid to qualify automatically for next season's Champions League. Marseille is third under recently appointed coach Habib Beye heading into Sunday's home game with fifth-placed Lille.

But Marseille's fans are still raging about another trophyless season and the club's ultras did not encourage the players during the first half of last week's 1-0 win against Auxerre.

Monaco's resurgence, meanwhile, is bad news for Lyon ahead of their clash in Lyon on Sunday. While sixth-placed Monaco seeks a sixth straight league win, fourth-placed Lyon is winless in four games in Ligue 1 and six straight overall.

A Monaco victory would move it one point behind Lyon in the race for Champions League spots, so Lyon hopes 19-year-old Brazil forward Endrick can recapture his form after a lean spell.

Players to watch

Nathan Mbala, Metz. The 18-year-old striker is the latest player to come through Metz's respected youth academy and has scored twice so far for rock-bottom Metz, which is at Rennes on Sunday. Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, PSG. The star winger is peaking at the right time. After being surprisingly dropped by coach Luis Enrique, he responded with three goals in two games against Chelsea in the Champions League.

Out of action

Just after signing his first professional contract, 18-year-old Lyon forward Rémi Humbert sprained an ankle in the Europa League and faces six weeks out. He joins Lyon's long injury list.

PSG forward Bradley Barcola is out for several weeks after spraining his right ankle midweek against Chelsea.

Off the field

The match between Marseille and Lille, initially scheduled for Sunday evening, will instead kick off in the afternoon due to security concerns linked to the municipal elections in France. The far-right candidate is tied with the incumbent socialist mayor ahead of Sunday's second round and authorities fear that the result, expected in the evening, could spark tensions in the southern port city. Lille president Olivier Létang, however, remains concerned about security and would have preferred the match to be postponed to a later date. (AP)

CAF president defends controversial call to strip Senegal of its Africa Cup title



GENEVA, March 19: The president of African soccer's governing body has defended its integrity and impartiality after Senegal's government called for an international investigation into "suspected corruption" at the organization after it stripped the country of its Africa Cup of Nations title.

Patrice Motsepe, the president of the Confederation of African Football, sought Wednesday to explain the decision made by its appeals board on Tuesday that ruled Senegal had forfeited the final in January by walking off the field, turning its 1-0 win in extra time into a 3-0 default win for host nation Morocco.

"The CAF disciplinary board took one decision. The CAF appeals board took a totally different position. And I'm told that Senegal is going to appeal, which is very important," Motsepe said in a video published on the CAF website. "We will adhere and respect the decision that's taken at the highest level."

Motsepe said that CAF's disciplinary and appeals board members are chosen from names proposed by each of its 54 member associations.

"If you look at the composition of those bodies, they reflect some of the most respected lawyers and judges on the continent," he said. "These are people who have integrity and have a track record. ... the independence is reflected by the decisions that were taken by the two bodies."

Contrasting decisions

In January, CAF's disciplinary board imposed fines of more than \$1 million against the Senegalese and Moroccan federations together. It issued suspensions against the Senegal coach and several players. But it did not interfere with the outcome of the final.

CAF's appeals board on Tuesday ruled that Senegal forfeited the Jan.

18 final by leaving the field of play without the referee's authorization, and that Morocco should consequently be awarded a 3-0 win.

Most of the Senegal team left for almost 10 minutes while Senegal fans battled stewards behind one of the goals in protest against a controversial penalty call for Morocco after Senegal had a goal ruled out. The players returned, Morocco missed the penalty, and Senegal won the match by scoring in extra time.

CAF's legacy

"What happened in that final match is it undermines the good work that CAF has done over many, many years to ensure that there's integrity, that there is respect, that there's ethics, that there's governance, as well as credibility in the results of our football matches," said Motsepe, who said the incidents in the final had exposed the work CAF was doing to address suspicion and distrust.

"It's a legacy issue. When I became president one of the major concerns was the impartiality, the independence, and the respect of referees and match commissioners, and a lot of good, good work has been done," he said. "That there continues to be suspicions because it's a legacy issue, it's something that has been there for many, many years and we consistently deal with that because that's critically important."

Senegal appeals

The Senegalese soccer federation said it will appeal Tuesday's decision at the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne, Switzerland, and the Senegalese government slammed what it called a "manifestly erroneous interpretation of the regulations, leading to a grossly illegal and deeply unjust decision." (AP)

India to host 2028 World Indoor Athletics C'ships

NEW DELHI, March 19: India will host the prestigious World Indoor Athletics Championships in Bhubaneswar as the international body on Thursday awarded the hosting rights of the event to the country at its council meeting in Torun, Poland.

The decision was taken at the World Athletics Council meeting a day before the start of 2025 World Indoor Athletics Championships in the Polish city.

"India has been awarded the World Indoor Athletics Championships for year 2028," World Athletics vice president Adille Sumariwalla told PTI from Poland.

AFI had revealed its bid for the World Indoor Championships, earlier this year.

A two-member team from World Athletics had visited the state-of-the-art indoor facility at the Kalinga Stadium Complex in Bhubaneswar in January. (PTI)

Bayern goalkeeper Urbig returns amid injury crisis

MUNICH, March 19: A week after sustaining a concussion, Jonas Urbig was back in goal to guide Bayern Munich past Atalanta and into the Champions League quarterfinals Wednesday.

Urbig returned amid an injury crisis that nearly meant a chance for 16-year-old goalkeeper Leonard Prescott in the Champions League round-of-16 second-leg game. Urbig faced eight shots on target as Bayern won 4-1 to wrap up a 10-2 aggregate win. He kicked the post in frustration after Lazar Samardzic managed to head in a consolation goal for Atalanta in the 85th.

Bayern striker Harry Kane joked he was relieved not to be called upon to repeat his feat from 2014, when he had to step in as goalkeeper for Tottenham in a Europa League game when Hugo

Lloris was sent off.

"I had my time in goal and I'm one and done, to be honest," Kane told broadcaster DAZN. "Obviously, Jonas was looking good and it was great for him to be able to play for us today."

Urbig, normally Bayern's second choice in goal, sustained a concussion after colliding with an opponent when Bayern won the first leg 6-1 last week. Fellow goalkeepers Manuel Neuer and Sven Ulreich have injuries too and weren't in the squad. Urbig was named in the starting lineup just over an hour before kickoff. Prescott and the 19-year-old Jannis Bartl were on the bench. Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said Tuesday that Urbig's return would be a "purely medical decision" and he'd been training as normal. (AP)

Newcastle midfielder Tonalì injured

BARCELONA, March 19: Newcastle midfielder Sandro Tonalì went off injured against Barcelona in the Champions League on Wednesday, eight days before Italy starts its World Cup qualifying playoffs bracket. Tonalì appeared to hurt his left thigh chasing back to defend Fermín López and put the ball out for a corner.

It was 4-2 at the time early in the second half, and Barcelona forward Robert Lewandowski scored a header from the corner to all but guarantee the Spanish champion will advance to the quarterfinals. Barcelona was soon leading 6-2 at Camp Nou after the teams drew 1-1 in Newcastle last week. (AP)

From NIL deals to retirement at 35 JPMorgan aims to help athletes avoid bad money habits

NEW YORK, March 19: JPMorgan Chase said Wednesday that it will start building wealth advising services that help athletes who come into money as a result of their talents make that money work for them a long time.

The initiative is not aimed just at ultra-wealthy athletes of legend. The initiative is aimed at athletes across all sports, ages and income levels, from college athletes earning royalties from their name, image and likeness for the first time, to established athletes who have earned substantial sums but are now looking at retirement in their mid-30s and need to make those sums last for decades.

JPMorgan hopes to reach these athletes early, maybe as early as high school but certainly on college campuses, in hopes of teaching them good financial habits from the start.

"They are coming into a lot of money, and they don't know what to do with it," said Megan Rapinoe, the professional soccer player and Olympic gold medalist.

JPMorgan isn't doing this for charity. Those few who become professional athletes can end up millionaires many times over, and



the biggest stars can end up billionaires. Managing those funds through JPMorgan's wealth management arm could lead to millions of dollars in fees for the bank, and athletes' name recognition can bring future customers to the bank.

The stories are often the same: athletes come into tremendous wealth but are not given the education to make it last as long as it needs to.

Peloton Instructor Ally Love said she often felt embarrassed or scared to ask for financial advice, even after she found success with Peloton. She remembered one of her first meetings with a bank

where her interactions with financial advisers left her with more questions than answers.

"I was like, 'Who's Roy?' I thought Roy was spelled with a Y," Love said in an interview with The Associated Press. Only later did Love learn that "Roy" was not a person, but an abbreviation for return on investment, or ROI.

Love is one of nine athletes who will sit on JPMorgan's new Athlete Council. The council also includes Dwayne Wade, the two-time NBA Hall of Famer from the Miami Heat, Sue Bird, the WNBA champion, and legendary NFL quarterback Tom Brady. Other athletes and personalities include Jalen Brunson from the New York Knicks, World Cup Champion Alex Morgan, Kayvon Thibodeaux of the New York Giants, and A'Ja Wilson, the four-time WNBA MVP winner.

Love talked about how she often felt bankers talked down to her, and she felt intimidated.

"I just sat there for many years and I said okay and sure, and did a lot of head nodding, but I wasn't really being informed, wasn't really being educated and I was too nervous and too scared to ask for help."

The athlete financial health initiative was the brainchild of Kristin Lemkau, CEO of J.P. Morgan Wealth Management. Lemkau invited Love to be part of the program after they saw each other at a U.S. Open tennis match, and talked to Love about how banks all want to go after the biggest names in the business, but ignore those who probably need the most help.

"There is an underserved segment of athletes, whether they are young and in college, professionals, or retired," Lemkau said. "They're all different. And most financial services companies are going after the Ally Loves, the Tom Bradys and the Dwyane Wades, and 99.99% of athletes don't fit into that space."

Lemkau and Love joked that athletes, like anyone who comes into wealth suddenly, are going to want to be able to spend their money on luxuries. But after the handbags and jewelry and cars are purchased, it's just as important for those athletes to be able to live off what they've earned for decades to come.

"Enjoy the fruits, but also let the fruit last," Love said. (AP)

